



Born into the Troubles: Deirdre Madden's *Hidden Symptoms*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine Deirdre Madden's *Hidden Symptoms* (1986) analysing how, in a city affected by the Northern Irish strife, attitudes towards the conflict seem mostly motivated by the personal connection of the characters with it. Thus, although the main protagonists have all been born into the Troubles and are suffering the effects of them, they have —if any— distinct political positions and religious tendencies and they cope with the situation in different ways. Throughout this article I will explore, along with other aspects, the insecurity in people's lives, violence, and religion as oppressive forces.

KEYWORDS: Deirdre Madden, *Hidden Symptoms*, the Troubles, Northern Irish literature

But what can we do? Inexorable rime: often it was too late to do anything. (Madden, 1986: 19)

Contemporary Northern Irish society is unquestionably divided among clashing and differing traditions that, for decades, have generated a violent conflict. Since its outbreak, in the late sixties,¹ several cultural areas —such as literature, cinema, music, dance or painting— have

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¹ Specifically, in 1969, when the British Army was sent to Northern Ireland to make peace between the opposing communities —Protestants and Catholics— at a moment of sectarian turmoil. However, it is worth pointing out that the conflict in Northern Ireland existed before that time and that its oldest roots are in the Plantations of Ulster that took place in the seventeenth century.

reflected the situation, and, in so doing, have shown the significant role that politics, religion and education, among others, play in the region. In the present literary scene, a great success has been achieved with a new production that, coining the euphemistic term used to refer to the situation itself, has been called "the Literature of the Troubles", and it has been applied to drama, fiction and poetry. In this vein, poets such as Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon or Paul Muldoon, novelists such as Robert McLiam Wilson, Deirdre Madden or Bernard Mac Laverty and, among the dramatists, Brian Friel, Martin Lynch or Anne Devlin, are some of the authors that have produced works about the situation.² Among the topics explored by this literature, which has developed from a realist to a more satiric and challenging mode, we find violence, exile, fear, sectarianism and bigotry. With this in mind, in this article I will focus on Deirdre Madden, who is one of these significant voices in contemporary Northern Irish writing.

Madden is a Belfast-born writer who studied at Trinity College Dublin and the University of East Anglia. To date, she is the author of six novels — *Hidden Symptoms* (1986), *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* (1988), *Light and Stone* (1992), *Nothing is Black* (1994), *One by One in the Darkness* (1996) and *Authenticity* (2002). These have made her an established novelist in the Irish literary world. Madden's narratives explore, along with other topics, women's deepest sorrows and pains, caused by the loss of people, and their emotional and spiritual struggles to cope with them. They also deal with the daily upsurge of violence — as they are conceived at the time of the Northern Irish strife — and with how such violence irredeemably permeates and conditions the lives of the people living in the region. Cultural identity is another important theme in Madden's work, in which characters have to find their distinctiveness inside a world that is broken up among fixed identities. Taking all this into account, the aim of my study is to examine Madden's first novel, *Hidden Symptoms*, a work that obtained the 1987 Rooney Prize for Irish Literature.³ The topic of this discussion will be the analysis of the Troubles, with a special emphasis on the effect they have caused the two main characters and the strategies developed by them.⁴ If we consider the way that the literature of the Troubles has been classified, this novel would be included in the group of narratives that centre on the consequences the conflict has had on the individual — in the same vein as, for instance, Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* — or, following Corcoran's categorization, in the group of realist prose, with Jennifer Johnston's or Bernard Mac Laverty's works (1997: 154).⁵

Contrary to what happens in other contemporary novels that reflect the strife — such as the realist *Cal* (by Bernard Mac Laverty) or the satirical *Eureka Street* (by Robert McLiam

For a detailed study of the substantial body of literature produced see, among others, Kirkland (1996), Corcoran (1997), Ormsby (1992) or Pelaschiar's studies (1998).

³ Over the years, Madden has won several literary awards, including the Hennessey Literary Award, in 1980; the Somerset Maugham Award, in 1989; and the Kerry Ingredients Book of the Year Award, in 1997.

⁴ Although there are three main characters, the focus of attention will only be placed on two of them

⁵ For further references on the categorization of the Northern Irish prose, see Smyth (1997), Morales (2000), Patten (1995) and McMinn (1980).

Wilson) — *Hidden Symptoms* neither seems to focus on history nor does it attempt to offer any explanation of why violence pervades Northern Irish society. This is the opinion maintained by Patricia Craig when she criticises Madden's work, alluding to its lack of political motivation. In Craig's words, her narrative "purports to treat the sectarian conflict in the North of Ireland, while cutting out history, politics, atavistic allegiances (aside from one outcry against Orange marches)" (1996: 26). Similarly, Smyth points out that the attention is on individual insight, while the characters "engage with the 'Troubles' only to emerge with perspectives that are essentially apolitical or ahistorical" (1997: 119). My argument is that, although I agree with the previous statements, I do so only partially because the Troubles appear in the novel. Although they might be presented in an oblique way, there are examples of political loyalties in the narrative.

Hidden Symptoms is set in Belfast, some time after the eruption of the conflict, and narrates the story of three young characters — Theresa, Robert and Kathy — who have grown up in the middle of the turmoil and are engaging with the situation in different ways. Their attitudes are deeply motivated by the level of victimization they have suffered as a result of the strife. Although their behaviour might appear different, they have all experienced the traumatic results of the troubled times and, in the end, their position seems to be comparable. Characters in the novel exemplify some of the possible positions that have been adopted by people in Northern Ireland during the last three decades. Together with the main protagonists, some of the minor characters also provide good examples of people's ways of dealing with the situation and their stances towards it. Moreover, the city is another victim of the conflict and it suffers, as the characters do, the consequences of the terrible situation.

Theresa Cassidy, fatherless and brotherless, is a Queen's University student who lives with her mother in West Belfast, a Catholic area.⁶ Her father "died before she was old enough to remember him" (1986: 68),⁷ and now the photographs of him fill the space of the parental figure she is lacking. The main issue of the novel, which is slowly unveiled, is the recent loss of her brother.⁸ This is much more complex, since it has affected her deeply inside, and it is essential for the reader's understanding of her present painful and insecure situation. Francis, her twin brother, was kidnapped and tortured and killed. The murder, as the newspaper reported, was

⁶ Belfast district distribution marks identity. Thus, West Belfast has been traditionally linked with the Catholic community and East Belfast with the Protestant. In the novel there are references to the Falls — West Belfast and Catholic — and to Protestant Sandy Road which is in South Belfast. In this respect, it is very important to point out that the place where one is in Northern Ireland — say a Catholic or Protestant, a nationalist or unionist area — most of the times conditions people's future level of commitment with the situation, and the faction you are for and associated with. Class also occupies a very important role when trying to understand people's attitudes. Segregation is more persistent among the working class, and it is here that involvement in violence is found more frequently and that both republican and loyalist organizations tend to have their roots.

⁷ The edition I am using is *Hidden Symptoms* (1986, Boston-New York: The Atlantic Monthly). Further references are to the same edition and will be included between brackets.

⁸ Theresa's cause for her grief is not revealed at the beginning. In fact, the reader has to make sense of it through her fragmented memories.

depicted as "brutal" and "purely sectarian" (1986: 132); a view shared by Theresa who opines "they just killed Francis because of his religion" (1986: 42). Thus, coming from a Catholic upbringing is the only reason she finds to explain the murder, but she cannot understand it and has difficulties coping with its terrible cost. The awful consequences of this event in her life—continuous distress, pain and confusion—appear to be at the very core of the novel, and are essential to understanding her attitude towards the Troubles.

Theresa's bereavement and anger are exposed throughout the novel, mainly when she is with Robert, a character who witnesses her pain but is unaware of the tragic event. As a victim of the conflict, she believes that in a society like Northern Ireland, which is strongly divided, it is difficult for people to remain aloof and to be impartial. Individuals have been brought up and educated within the divide—whether religious, political, or both—and it is hard not to be involved in it. She affirms that, as far as she is concerned, people might or might not believe in God, but they always have their own loyalties. Hence, it does not seem to be a question of religion, a question of faith, but of tribal affiliations. She firmly exposes her belief to Robert when she says to him the following: "Just tell me this: if you were found in the morning with a bullet in your head, what do you think the papers would call you? An agnostic? No, Robert, nobody, not even you, is naïve enough to think that. Of course you don't believe: but there's a big difference between faith and tribal loyalty, and if you think that you can escape tribal loyalty in Belfast today you're betraying your people and fooling yourself." (1986: 46) Theresa considers that it is not possible to understand and support both sides of the conflict and feels strongly that people have their own political inclinations and culture with which they identify. However, she also acknowledges the complexity of the circumstances and thus declares: "Nobody understands. Some people say that they can see both sides, but they can't. You can only ever see one side, the side you happen to be on." (1986: 106) Considering Theresa's real situation, White comments that Madden is attempting to show that the fact of being brought up a Catholic "does not lead people toward clarity [...] but instead assures their terminal alienation" (1993: 452).

Her position is obscured and interlaced with the religious background she comes from. She has been brought up a Catholic, a fact that causes her significant problems when she tries to cope with the loss of her brother. As a believer, she has to forgive those who killed him and continue to trust the God who has allowed that horrible event to happen. Although religion should provide her with the calm she needs in order to cope with the terrible loss, she realises it does not. In this vein, she has an argument with Robert who, despite his lack of faith, considers religion ought to offer comfort in people's lives in order to make their afflictions more tolerable. Theresa, whose experience has shown her the opposite, asserts her stance with the subsequent statement: "Comfort? Why do you miserable atheists always say that about your religion? You don't know what it's like to suffer and believe. [...] I loved Francis as dearly as I loved my own life, but he was taken from me and tortured and killed. I have to go on living without him, and I have to go on believing in God, a good God, a God who loves and cares for me." (1986: 137-38) Although she believes in God and proclaims herself a Catholic, it is undeniable that she has

doubts about Him —and even questions His existence—, which leads to the distress that makes her life tragic and unbearable. As the novel shows, she is constantly exposed to a permanent psychological and spiritual suffering that both surpasses emotions and is intermeshed with moral and religious matters.

Apart from religion, the protagonist makes use of another tool which heightens the complexity of her situation and the difficulties she encounters in coming to terms with the consequences of the loss of Francis. I am referring to the imagination, which is invoked by Theresa in order to create a picture of the time when her father was still alive and the Troubles had not yet begun, and which in this way enables her to overcome her current inner struggle. As the novel shows, her suffering was terrible and "it was impossible for her to continue living without him [Francis] [...] she needed him as she needed the air", so she was "at the mercy of her own memory and imagination" (1986: 33). However, this strategy does not fulfil her aspirations and the pain remains. Thus, when she returns to her origins she realises the "little access it yields" and the "little consolidation it engenders" (Parker, 2000: 86).

Robert McConville is the other young protagonist in the narrative who, like the previous character, has been bom into the Troubles. He is a writer who graduated from Queen's and lacks a father and mother as well. He is involved in a relationship with Kathy, another girl studying at the same university who is Theresa's best friend.⁹ From the very beginning of the novel, his stance towards the ongoing turmoil appears to be the opposite to Theresa's. Hence, the girl's partial position is set against Robert's independence from his sectarian origins, detachment and impartiality towards the conflict. In this respect, although he has been educated in a Catholic family —the same as Theresa—, he now rejects this religious upbringing.¹⁰ It seems that all started at the moment when he grew up and "he found it increasingly difficult to live with his mother. He did not understand her. He did not understand the strange, intense religion which dominated her life. [...] By the time he left school he did not believe in God, nor did he want to." (1986: 38)¹¹ His progressive indifference towards Catholicism is rooted in his failure to understand religion and he thereby exposes his atheism (1986: 46) and feels there is "a thick wall

◦ Although for the purpose of this discussion I will not focus on this character, I consider that it is worth mentioning something of her background and role in the novel. This character has climbed the social ladder and that is why she lives in a quite elegant house with her mother, Mrs O'Gorman. She also lacks a father, a fact that has produced in her an inferiority complex (23) and, in order to fill this space, she has replaced it with Theresa and Robert's friendship. Later in the novel, she learns that her father is not dead, but alive and with two small daughters in London, and that her mother has in fact been a liar all her life. Thus, this identity crisis becomes the centre of her grief and the main issue that helps the reader to understand her alienated position.

¹⁰ Religion, as happens in Northern Irish society, is very important in the text. The novel is Catholic-oriented because both protagonists have been brought up in a Catholic background and the criticism towards Protestantism is evident throughout. However, *Hidden Symptoms* also shows the negative sides of Catholicism when characters cannot rely on it and, also, when it is associated with violence.

¹¹ There is a moment in the novel when there is a confrontation between Robert and his mother because she has discovered that he has got contraceptives. Furthermore, she is dissatisfied when she learns he will not marry a Catholic girl.

of glass" between himself and Theresa (1986: 129).¹² But it is not only that he proclaims to be an atheist; he also despises his working-class background.¹³ He dislikes the place where he was brought up—West Belfast, now inhabited by her sister Rose, her husband Tom and his nephew Tommy—and thinks, whenever he visits them, that "the very sight of [their] little red-brick terraced house always oppressed him and filled him with a powerful sense of the need to escape" (1986: 15). The remaking of his position and the attempt to introduce himself to the bourgeois world gradually estranges him from Rose, and from his family in general, a fact that, as pointed out above, upsets Theresa enormously.¹⁴

On the other hand, and to pursue the question of the antagonism to Theresa, he adopts an impartial attitude towards the conflict by embracing an intellectual mode of life that attempts to separate him from the everyday violence affecting Belfast. Higgins considers that "Robert's pseudo-intellectualism and his status as a writer make him an unwitting target for Theresa's suspicion of reality and its representation" (1999: 153). He is not interested in the Troubles, does not understand them and finds the Northern Irish political issue wearisome and boring (1986: 76). Robert is not a direct victim of the strife—in the sense Theresa is—and recognises he can cope with the situation as long as it does not affect him (1986: 30). He only knows about the murder at the end of the narrative,¹⁵ and most of the confrontations with Theresa, then, should be considered in this light. He is a character who evades the conflict by adopting a position of non-committal. He does not criticise the bigotry behind the Orange parades that take place every summer as the girl does, and prefers to remain aloof. Considering this apparently differing attitude, it is not surprising that Robert describes Theresa as "a bloody, raving fanatic" (1986: 47). Apart from his lack of understanding regarding her position, he does not like his brother-in-law's continuous speeches on politics, his pro-republican tendencies or hatred of the British (1986: 75-76). Clearly, his strategy to deal with the crisis Northern Ireland is undergoing is that of evasion and escape, but the reader cannot deny that he is a victim, despite his efforts to stand apart.

The Troubles in Northern Ireland should not be reduced either to religious terms—Protestants and Catholics—or to politics—unionists and nationalists—, since it would mean simplifying a very much more complex conflict in which other different factors are subsumed. In my opinion, the novel tries to show the inextricability of both religion and politics, at the same time as it very subtly pinpoints other factors that have played an important role in the Northern Irish situation. A very good example appears in the reference Theresa makes to the Stormont

¹² However, there are times in the novel when his forthright lack of belief is questionable. See for instance the moment at his niece's baptism (1986: 126-27).

¹³ Theresa has also been educated in a working-class area and cannot understand or justify Robert's denial of his background.

¹⁴ When Theresa visits the house of Robert's sister, she does not feel alienated as Robert does.

¹⁵ As Higgins sustains (1999: 158), the revelation of this murder is as disruptive as violence itself.

Government, the Government in place from the partition of Ireland, in 1921, to its derogation, in 1972. During these years, Unionists and Protestants essentially ruled Stormont and did not allow the minority of the population —the Catholics— to stand for Government posts.¹⁶ The novel shows this discrimination when Theresa unleashes her anger in the following allegation: "You must have really enjoyed life under the Stormont Government. Do you feel that people hate you because you're a Catholic? Well, you ought to, because they do. [...] They don't care how many of us are killed, because we breed fast, and so the numbers go up again." (1986: 47)

Similarly, the hatred of the nationalist community towards the Orange parades that take place every twelfth of July —to commemorate William III of Orange's victory over the Catholic James II— shows this connection between politics and religion.¹⁷ In the text, Orangeism is associated with power and with anti-Catholicism and bigotry, clearly an attempt to reflect the atmosphere in Northern Ireland, particularly during the summer. Parker, pursuing this idea, thinks that "[i]t is not accident that most of the major scenes take place in July, the month in which the marching season and civil disturbances are at their height" (2000: 94). Once more, there is disagreement, regarding this event, between Robert and Theresa. Whereas for Robert the processions are "a bit of folk culture" (1986: 45) and "harmless" (46), for the female protagonist the Orange Order is "first and foremost, an anti-Catholic organization" (1986: 46). Finally, another instance of affiliation is revealed through the attitudes towards the news, a medium that indubitably serves as a direct representation of the turmoil, where, by observing people's reactions, we can perceive their political inclinations. The reader can notice this in Theresa and Tom's response to the same news: the funeral of a RUC reservist. While Theresa wishes to change to another channel "before the screen could show the flowers, the hearse, the coffin, the widow" (1986: 14), Tom reacts by saying: "Good sauce for the bastard (1986: 16), showing happiness and satisfaction with the event. Both attitudes, together with others previously mentioned, are essential to prove the existence of loyalties in the text.

Characters live within the insecurity and fear of a troubled city, at a time when sectarian violence takes place daily and people are ignorant of their future design. It is also worth pointing out that Belfast is described in the novel as "self-destructive" (1986: 81), "dull and tedious" (1986: 101) and even claustrophobic (1986: 77). In this vein, Theresa acknowledges that her justified fear "was not an illogical fear, for Francis had been killed and Belfast was small: it might well happen again" (1986: 50). Every person can be a murderer in the city and each individual the following random victim. On the other hand, Robert, even if he wants to remain impartial and detached from the situation, is afraid "that his own innocent body might be destroyed violently and quickly" (1986: 31). This quote clearly demonstrates the impossibility

¹⁶ It is well known that Catholics endured discrimination during the Stormont Government. The disadvantages were perceived in several areas, which included housing, the random division of electoral boundaries —known as gerrymandering— or the distribution of public and private employment, along with others. For additional information on discrimination at that time see Whyte's article "How Much Discrimination Was There Under the Unionist Regime 1921-1968?" (1983).

¹⁷ For a detailed study on the tradition of the Orange parades and the nature of these political rituals see Bryan (2000).

of escaping from the threats of the situation, even if people want to remain detached.

Throughout the analysis of these two major characters, and following White's argument, we can appreciate that Belfast is "populated by people with very clear, unmovable ideas about the state of the world around them" (1993: 452). However, whether they show their anger and dislocate their irritation primarily with their words or pretend to be impartial and bored with the whole situation, it seems obvious that they are both examples of paralysed individuals in the middle of a society full of hatred and bigotry. They might theoretically defend their view but, in practice, they are not really committed to it; indeed, they "fail to remain consistent to the views they voice" (Parker, 2000: 94). For instance, despite Robert's aversion to Tom's republicanism, he by no means faces Tom's pro-paramilitary loyalty¹⁸ or condemns his nephew's sectarian jokes. Robert is used to living with and seeing the violence and evil, and accepts them both. Similarly, as far as Theresa is concerned, although she attends Mass regularly, we never appreciate her tribal loyalty in any way (Parker, 2000: 94), except verbally, in the anger she expresses. Theresa "did nothing, for she did not know what she could do that would be of help; there was nothing possible but to sit and feel this pain of her loss and loneliness wander through her soul" (1986: 49).¹⁹ In general, the impasse of violence has created a city with citizens that are passive and paralysed with fear, insecurity and confusion, and the reader is left without a final solution.

To conclude, Madden has reflected in her novel a bleak view of life in Northern Ireland through the creation of characters that are certainly suffering the dramatic consequences of the conflict. Affected at different levels, they are, as a result, coming to terms with it through distinct procedures that can be appreciated both in the dialogues they maintain with each other and in the inner thoughts the author offers to the reader. Thus, some of the characters' attitudes include anger, confusion, irritation, discontent, alienation and evasion. The path towards rationalisation and partiality —Theresa's case— or escape and impartiality —Robert's—, illustrates that the novel, as Smyth affirms, is "about knowledge and perception rather than action" (1986: 18). Madden, therefore, has focused her attention on the individual effect, rather than searching for reasons that elucidate the situation. In so doing, she has attempted to demonstrate that although responses to and consequences of the violence might vary, people, at the end, are paralysed in the claustrophobia of a city like Belfast, bombed and filled with terror and fear. Moreover, she has exemplified that in this society, religious, personal and political issues intermingle and complicate people's designs, and that loyalties are essential and inescapable. Madden does not offer any solution to the insecurity and hollowness of the city and to the individual painful conditions —since violence continues and religion confuses more than clarifies—, a fact that unavoidably informs the ambiguous tone that pervades the novel. The private clashes with the public, and the future of the people and of the region is uncertain for all. Finally, the hidden symptoms the title refers to, the character's personal condition and the hatred towards the other

¹⁸ Examples of this attitude are clear in some passages. For instance see pages 16, 75 and 76.

¹⁹ Even other minor characters that clearly show their loyalty, mainly Tom, only confirm it through words. We do not see them acting, they are also paralysed and passive.

community, persist in being the foremost factor of the Northern Irish people's suffering and of the city's misery.²⁰

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