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**HEART OF A PEACH**

**and**

**"ARE WE SUCH SAVAGES?"**

**MARY BECKETT'S FICTION AND THE FAILURE OF**

**SOCIAL MOBILITY**

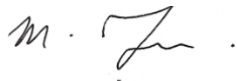
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**PhD in Creative Writing**

**The University of Edinburgh**

**2019**

I declare this thesis has been composed solely by myself and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'M' followed by a larger, more complex signature.

7th January 2019

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## ***ABSTRACT AND LAY SUMMARY***

*Heart of a Peach* and "'Are We Such Savages?'" Mary Beckett's Fiction and the Failure of Social Mobility' is a PhD thesis comprising two components: a novel and a critical essay.

My novel, *Heart of a Peach*, is structured in two chronological parts: part one is set in Ardoyne, a Catholic working-class area in Belfast, 1981, the year Bobby Sands died, and part two in a university in London, 2005, the year of the London bombings.

The two main characters are an ex-parachute regiment soldier who served in Belfast and who is now a porter, and a native woman of Ardoyne who is now an art history lecturer: both work at the same university.

Thematically, the novel is concerned with: emotional and sexual repression, surveillance and public space and the failure of social mobility. These themes are further examined in my critical essay. Formally, the work combines realistic storytelling with experimental methods, and is written in close third person through a continuous present tense.

The critical essay examines and discuss the work of Mary Beckett, (1926-2013), a Belfast-born writer whose small output of finely wrought short stories, radio plays and one novella make a shrewd contribution to the fictional narrative histories of Northern Irish working-class women. Beckett worked in Ardoyne, the same area of Belfast I write about in my novel. Looking at her two collections of short stories, *A Belfast Woman* and *A Literary Woman* together with her novel *Give Them Stones*, I address the overarching theme of the failure of social mobility in three chapters: 'Displacement', 'Desired Acts of Unfeminine Violence' and 'Shame and Belonging' drawing upon relevant fictional sources and first person oral history accounts from the period of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

There is currently little substantive research on Beckett's work, save for a few interviews and brief mentions in larger survey works of Northern Irish writing; it is my aim therefore that my research will provide new and original knowledge in this area.

# HEART OF A PEACH

*Now what is the reason that through the jaws of Mount Etna flames sometimes breathe forth in so great a hurricane,  
I will unfold.*

— *On the Nature of Things*, Lucretius

*But the hearts of small children are delicate organs. A cruel beginning in this world can twist them into curious shapes.  
The heart of a hurt child can shrink so that forever afterward it is hard and pitted as the seed of a peach. Or again,  
the heart of such a child may fester and swell until it is a misery to carry within the body, easily chaffed and hurt by the  
most ordinary things.*

— *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, Carson McCullers

*BELFAST, 1981*

The film ends with Oliver Reed as a werewolf. His face is really close up, filling the whole TV. Red and wet, his eyes look so sad. Frances imagines how it feels to kill again and again, made to, by bad blood. She's watching the film's credits with the sound turned down, having missed what happened because the Brits were searching her. Now they are allowing her to sit alone on the settee while they interrogate Mammy and her big sister Jackie. When the film finishes, and it's the end of the night on BBC One, Frances is glad the sound is turned down because she can't stand when they play the national anthem. Even though she's dead tired, she never falls asleep on nights like this, never falls asleep because she doesn't know where she might wake up.

Belfast from above is safer than Belfast on the ground. In a helicopter at night, with the soundproofing headset on all Ian can hear is himself, the inside of himself, guts squeezing, cramping, fizzing.

This is the third time he's been in the chopper, observing how the searchlight sorts the Ardoyne. He thinks this is a much better way to see Belfast: pavements, walls, hedges overexposed in the twelve-foot flooded circle, clean and orderly. His attention is focussed through the white wand of the searchlight: even from up this height, its throw is surer and more defined than he had imagined it would be. Terraced housing bookended with burnt-out houses. Dull slate roofs. The burnt-out houses are nearly always at the end of a terrace close to a peaceline, where a burnt-out house stands in the middle of a terrace that's where the taigs have done it themselves to get rehoused. Smoke licks fast through the attics of the crammed terraces but sneaks slowly down to the bedrooms. Ian's been told no one ever dies as a direct result of being burnt-out but sometimes the sprogs are suffocated by the smoke leaving one less for the taigs to drag up. The chopper shakes the rooftops below but only once do they knock a chimney into bits.

He doesn't get why the only area in the Ardoyne with any grass on it is called the Bone, a slope sliced flat on top, tarmacked at its peak and scattered with so much broken glass that it twinkles in the spotlight. The streets here are generally one level, rising only by necessity, like the Bone or where the Church is built to give the stupid fuckers something to look up to.

The searchlight is to be used in the dark to track spotters, rioters and Provo gunmen hiding in back alleyways. Crying shame, they're too late this time, there's no way they'll catch the shooter now, he'll be tucked up already in some taig's house.

In Belfast, it's dark at 1600 hours for most of the year. Ian and the lads practice using the spotlight by training the beam on girls walking alone. With a strong searchlight you can follow a girl the whole way as she's walking from school to her home. She need never once be in darkness.

Frances' school uniform is emerald green, a wool tunic, very old-fashioned looking, the exact same design as when the school was founded in 1947. Green is a dangerous choice for a school uniform in Belfast.

After passing her eleven-plus, Frances picked the school, a grammar school, all by herself without any help from Mammy or Jackie, Dominican College but everybody calls it Fortwilliam because that's where it is. She picked it because Missus Donaghy from Jamaica Street gave her a green gabardine. Frances is nearly twelve, the coat is for a much older girl, she'll grow into it. Just before she started at Fortwilliam last August, the school's strict uniform rules were changed a wee bit so that pupils are now allowed to wear black socks, Mammy was delighted, she explained to Frances: Black socks hide the dirt better. White socks need washed near every day but are much more harder to actually make look clean, no matter how much they don't smell. That's the way the rich ones does it.

Outside the front of Frances' house is blocked by a burnt-out number 80 bus as big and as bony as the whale's skeleton in the Ulster Museum. Stepping through the scraps of last night's riot on her way to school, she is free to use the street in whatever way she wants because there's no difference between the road and the pavement, for what's left over from the riot, what's scattered everywhere, makes everywhere on the street the same.

At primary school, they were taught the Green Cross Code and given another Tufty Club badge every year; the tin badges were all spoiled with rust, Frances didn't like to touch them without washing her hands straight afterwards. She could never understand why she was told about looking left and looking right when crossing the road, there are no cars in Ardoyne, only hijacked ones and buses that have been torched and used as barricades. Normal cars — like the ones Tufty is ascaired of — are like midges you clap dead inside your two hands. Brit Saracens and Peeler Land Rovers are another matter but, charging down the street, she makes sure she is nowhere near, not even on the

pavement. She can recognise which type of vehicle it is by their engine sound alone. All the youngsters round here know what you really have to be careful of is what the bomb squad drive. They're smaller than Saracens, go five times faster and kill youngsters more easy because they've got Felix the cartoon cat in a green helmet painted on the side. He's a bad'un, so he is.

Frances' house is on the corner of Etna Drive just across the street from the peaceline running the length of Alliance Avenue. She's never walked along on the same side as the peaceline — Mammy would skin her — and she never will. Not once, not twice, but many times, Frances has been hit by squibs lobbed over from the other side. She doesn't take it thick because she knows the Protestants can't see her specifically and are aiming at all Catholics.

The sick smell of burning rubber tyres is even more minging now than it was last night. It settles in her mouth, making her want to boke, she forbids it with her tongue, has to get to school, yes, has to get to school. Sticky smoke in the air attaches itself to her knees, socks and shoes. On days like these, she rubs furiously at the creases of her knees in the school toilets when she gets in, but no matter how much she scrubs with a wad of shiny paper toilet roll she isn't able to get rid of the smell of the burning rubber smoke. Frances can spend a whole day worrying about this.

There's no direct bus from Ardoyne to Fortwilliam, and she can't afford two bus tickets, so every weekday morning Frances walks the whole way to school. She doesn't mind the hour walk too much, not even when it's raining and usually it is raining. The thing she does mind is that she has to walk through a really Proddie area.

The top of the Westland Road near Cliftonville Circus is safe enough. Lovely big fancy houses with stained glass windows that aren't even smashed above the front doors. Three of the girls in her class live here. Christina Cranny is one; her Daddy owns the chemist on he corner. On the second day at school, Christina Cranny told Frances she wasn't wearing the right type of gabardine but Frances only has the one and she'll not be getting another. All the girls who live here get driven to school by their parents and even though they know she has to walk, because they drive straight past her every day, they have never offered to give her a lift.

Once Frances reaches the second half of the Westland, that's where the kerbs start to be painted red, white and blue. Even if she does walk on the slightly safer side of the road away from the Proddie estate and along the Waterworks, her green uniform marks her out clearly as being a Catholic: she shouldn't really be here.

Frances is a wee bit earlier than usual this morning, a quarter past eight, it's not quite light, the sky is royal blue, most of the streetlights have been shot or bricked out. She's walking beside the Waterworks, there's no fence nor nothing, the tarmac under her feet looks like it's just been poured over soil and flowers to make the pavement. A ruffle of something moving fast through the tall weeds — a bright white tail — Frances thinks it might be a hare, she's seen one here before. She trips over a breech in the tarmac where a tree root's growing through, when she looks up she sees them, three of them in Girls' Model school uniforms, not much older than her but massive: how are Protestants so big? Sparks fly out of her shirt collar. Didn't see them coming. Too busy trying to spy if it was a hare. Frances bows her head and aims to walk quickly in a straight line through the knot of them.

Where the fuck d'you think you're goin'?

She keeps walking.

Here, taig! This is our street so it is.

I'm just goin to school.

Look at the shape of the taig in its big long green skirt.

The girls let Frances walk through their group but they pick up her pace, one closes in at either side and the biggest one follows right in close behind her.

It looks like a fuckin oul woman.

Frances' school bag feels awful heavy.

Too snooty to talk to us?

The girls at either side are plucking at her gabardine.

Look at the state of it.

The one walking behind her is treading on the backs of her shoes and pushing in the middle of her shoulder blades in hard pokes. Frances has to shorten her steps so as not to fall forwards but she tries to keep a fair pace up. Nearly at the main road now.

Will yousons just leave me alone!

The three of them mimic her: Will yousons just leave me alone!

The one behind gives her a quare shove, Frances falls forward like a sack of potatoes, her school bag goes flying. They swoop on her, hooting. She tries to stand up, grinding her teeth, grit is embedded in the heels of her hands. Just as she is nearly getting her balance back, the big one shoves her again. She topples forward and curls up on the pavement to protect herself.

Have a wee think about that the next time you walk down our street.

They gob on Frances' face, on her hair, on her gabardine. She lies very still and takes it. She can see her school bag just on the road, not too far away.

Alliance Avenue, stupid name if you ask me.

No one is asking you, Coyle. Pipe down.

Another report of a suspect device in the post office on Alliance Avenue.

Why don't we just let the taigs blow themselves up?

The rest of the lads laugh.

Would save everybody a load of trouble.

They laugh again but the Lance Jack shakes his head.

Ian Coyle, you don't have a clue what you're talking about. I remember when we were welcomed in streets like these ones, we got given cups of tea, sandwiches, that sort of thing.

Ian's face is bright red, he's feeling a bit light-headed.

That changed quick. They turned on us. One of the houses near where we're headed, a taig threw a basin of boiling water over Paddy Ashdown's head, when he was serving in the mid-70s. I had to question her about it, stupid bitch, she thought Ashdown was the big ginger cat that pissed on her doorstep every night.

Lance Jack yanks at the chinstrap on his helmet.

Never heard the like of it. That's the sort of people we're dealing with *here*. We went in hard.

The Saracen thuds to a stop, Ian and the lads pile out.

Bomb squad are already there, parked the regulation 200 yards from the post office. Ian knows it's their vehicle because Felix is painted on the side; he wishes the Paras had a mascot like that, would make a corker tattoo.

They're informed that the proprietor received a telephone call at 1800 hours just as she was closing up, to say there was a device in her upstairs storeroom. They didn't identify themselves so she couldn't say whether they are Provo or UVF. She called 999, the RUC called bomb squad, who called Ian's lot.

Bomb squad are discussing how they are going to proceed. There's the one in charge, posh bloke, round gold-rimmed glasses, big waxed moustache, fuck he's even smoking a pipe! Who does

he think he is, bloody Biggles! He's saying he won't climb the stairs in the premises in case they're booby trapped, unless there's absolutely no other option. Lance Jack falls back.

Tick Tock's scouting. Ian sees him notice that the house opposite the post office has a top floor window facing the right way, Tick Tock leads Biggles over to show him. Biggles is carrying a long telescope thing, second-in-command bomb squad tells Ian to follow them. The old man that owns the house won't go back into the living room after he's let them in, he crouches on the bottom stair muttering. He smells like a rubbish bin, even though Ian's gagging with the stench it's easier just to let him sit there; now's not the time for extra aggro. Biggles charges down the stairs, heaving the old man out of his way with his knee, Tick Tock follows close behind, he's looking grimbo, Ian gestures towards the post office with his rifle.

What happened?

Tick Tock shakes his head.

The post office window is too dirty to see anything through. He's going to have to go in.

Ian's pleased, that *is* Biggles' job after all.

The old man gobs at them as they are leaving. Ian wonders why a man would gob inside his own house.

He stands guard while the proprietor is questioned about the layout of the premises, she explains it slowly to Biggles who is making a drawing of what she's saying, Ian shifts so he can get a better look — it's all arrows and X's. Finally, she warns Biggles how the shop counter has a funny wee latch that scoots down when it should scoot up to open, how the light switch on the stairs sparks but it does the job anyway and how she never gets around to binning all the old envelopes and packaging, and for himself to be careful not to take a tumble over the head of it. She blesses herself. Fat use that'll be. Biggles seems satisfied with what the woman has told him and shouts to his men to dress him in the kit.

Three bomb squad unload the kit from their vehicle. A giant padded khaki suit with a high thick collar, a heavy black breastplate — must weigh a tonne by the way he's carrying it — and what

looks like a massive riot helmet. Two of them are holding up the padded suit, Biggles tries to put it on like an overcoat, but the men step back and reverse the suit so he has to stick his arms in through the front. Ian smirks at Tick Tock, Biggles was trying to put it on the wrong way round, silly posh bastard! When the suit is on properly, one fastens it at the back and hooks on a walkie-talkie while the other one leans down, struggles to lift up the breastplate and, hugging it to his own chest, steps slowly forward, leaning in, trying to slide it down the front of the giant suit. Biggles pushes him back.

Not yet!

Biggles takes his glasses off. Third bomb squad who's holding the helmet jerks like a puppet and drops it, the helmet rolls into the gutter near Ian's feet, he grabs and studies it while he's got the chance. It's a lot heavier than normal ones, with a thicker visor held in place on each side by three chunky bolts: there's a microphone inside and a wire coming out of the back where the walkie-talkie must get plugged in. On the front, a shiny silver insignia with a crown on top, three parallel cannons in the middle and Royal Army Ordnance Corps written in fancy lettering along the outside. Nice bit of kit that. Looking embarrassed, bomb squad who dropped the helmet snatches it off Ian, he faces Biggles square on, connects the helmet's wire to the backpack walkie-talkie and switches it on, and then with effort, he pushes the helmet down over Biggles' head. Behind the visor, Biggles' eyes are squeezed shut — Ian wonders how Biggles will be able to see proper without his glasses on — and his nose is squashed flat like a pig's snout against the clear plastic until the helmet is finally nudged down into place. He spreads his arms like Jesus for the breastplate to be fitted; pushed down with force to fit snugly and when it's properly in he stands much straighter, chest lengthened at the front by the breastplate's hard structure. Ian thinks how uncomfortable his flak jacket is, the awful weight on his shoulders, fuck's sake. Biggles waddles into the post office holding the plan he's drawn up in front of his face in one hand and a flash lamp in the other, there's a ring of yellow rope wound around his shoulder.

They wait. Tick Tock prods Ian.

They can't use wheelbarrow on this one...

What the fuck is wheelbarrow?

It's the remote controlled robot for diffusing.

Why can't they use it then?

Cos of the stairs.

But why?

Cos it's like a Dalek.

Alright, clever Dick.

You're a right div!

Ian and Tick Tock stand scanning the street for any undesirable activity.

Second-in-command orders Tick Tock to evacuate the houses at the near end of Etna Drive.

He is shouting into his walkie-talkie.

A tyre? Yes, come out, we're ready.

Biggles walks slowly out trailing the rope behind him in his fist, he lays the end of it down near the post office door. Second-in-command tells Ian to pull the rope; Ian doesn't understand why but he does what he's told. Feels like there is a little weight on the other end of it, he pulls until the weight stops tugging against the rope. Second-in-command signals for Ian to drop the end of the rope and Biggles goes back in. Ian watches the proprietor scurrying away with another woman who has come to meet her; he can see just the tops of their heads cowering behind a telephone exchange box at the corner of Etna Drive.

Second-in-command nods at Ian and Tick Tock.

What's happening, Sir?

Ian's glad Tick Tock asked, he'd be worried about asking and looking stupid.

Recce shows old mailbags, paper, cardboard boxes piled up high against one wall with a tyre on top. Now we've pulled the tyre off with the rope, he's got to uncover as much as he can to see what's what. Then, if needs be, he'll lay a charge against it to diffuse it.

He shakes his walkie-talkie, steps back and starts talking to Biggles again.

Yes, Sir.

(Pause)

In a Woolworths' plastic bag?

(Pause)

A green paper package. Right. About five inches long, about three inches wide. Right.

(Pause)

Can you smell gelignite?

(Pause)

A grease stain on the outside of the package. Then yes, indications show there is definitely something in it.

You're placing the charge in front of the device.

Pause.

No, wait, Sir!

He thrusts his hand forward, palm facing towards Ian.

Get back, now!

Ian starts to walk backwards briskly, like they've been trained to. Where are the bloody fire brigade, they should've been here by now.

Get back! Get back!

Ian feels his body being tossed away from the post office in a gigantic splutter of air. Grips his rifle. Eardrums thump blood. A thousand foxes screaming. Gritty gust filling his mouth. High in the air to the other side of the street. Head part of the kerbstone. Something white whips at speed slicing his cheek. Nose crunches. Clouds of smoke like the Devil's breath: Ian's Mum warned him about that.

Frances carries the grey rubber mouse in her mouth, lightly chewing it, flooding the inside with spittle then sucking it out again to make a nice slabber wave. Her school bag is hanging across her body because she needs both hands to carry a heavy pressure cooker that's half-filled with cold stew, a chipped plate rattles on top: she's never known the pot to have a lid.

When that big Brit told her to leave the house quick because of the bomb scare, she quickly wrote a wee note for Mammy and Jackie telling them where she went. They're at Holy Cross novena for the hunger strikers that are dying, Frances hopes she'll get to go back to her own house later, if Mammy and Jackie are able to come to get her. If she has to stay at Missus Trainor's house all night she'll simply fold her school uniform over the back of the settee and sleep lying across the cushions in her vest and knickers; she can turn her knickers inside out in the morning before she goes to school, she's done it before anyway.

Nobody hardly ever answers their door in Ardoyne unless it's the Brits banging on it, Frances wraps twice on the bottom corner of front window beside the window sill so Missus Trainor knows it's her. Frances slips the toy mouse out of her mouth and shoves it wet into her gabardine pocket. Missus Trainor opens her front door a crack.

Come in quick, love. I'm busy here watching *Coronation Street*.

They are almost exactly the same height, which makes Frances feel older than she really is. Missus Trainor is wearing a pink flowery nightdress with a man's camel coat unbuttoned over the top, socks and slippers, and big silver hoop earrings dragging her ear lobes down almost touching the coat collar. She'll have been wearing all of that all week. Missus Trainor takes the pot of stew from Frances and carries it into the kitchen.

The house is cold, but no colder than Frances' own when the fire's out. One half of the living room is papered in shiny bronze flock wallpaper, the other half is bare pink plaster, bubbling out with the damp, making it look like the wall's got lots of babbie hungry mouths. Frances sits in her usual place on the settee and Missus Trainor sits in her's in the armchair. The TV is on with the

sound turned down. Frances can't help watching how Missus Trainor's black-pencilled eyebrows weigh every shrug, every chin nod and every narrowed eye of themens in *Coronation Street*.

Missus Trainor's budgie, Jack, is a loonie. Tommy brought her the budgie, before he got put in Long Kesh, for to keep her company, and the reason Missus Trainor is watching the TV with the sound turned down is because over the last while Jack's taken to cheeping really loud when there's anybody talking: Don't want to disturb wee Jack Junior. The budgie is named for JFK, for 1963, the year Kennedy was killed and the same year Missus Trainor's wee brother, also named Jack, died of appendicitis. She always says: JFK done a lot for the Irish. Despite treats, threats and cage-shaking Missus Trainor never learned the budgie how to talk. She reckons it's because Jack can't understand what she is saying. Sometimes Frances can hardly understand what she is saying because Missus Trainor had all her teeth taken out for her thirtieth birthday for to save paying the dentist, doesn't like the way the false ones rub, so never puts them in.

There are only two people in Ardoyne who had pets. Missus Trainor and daft Duckie. One Christmas day morning, when Frances was four and Jackie was ten they were chased down the street by daft Duckie's Dobermann. Jackie had been big enough to jump over the front gate, she had run into the house and slammed the front door behind her, leaving Frances scrambling behind. The dog bit Frances' bum, right through her red woolly tights, spoiling them. Mammy had slapped Jackie really hard, leaving a bright red hand print on her cheek. Later, before they went to bed, Jackie hit Frances in exactly the same way, pretending that she was Mammy. Daft Duckie's dog is dead now anyway.

Frances hates Jack. It's the sound he makes. Not just the cheeping, that's bad enough, but for the last few months, she's had to listen to him throwing his hollow bones against the cage too, never learning that the cage's bars, weedy as they are, will always be stronger than his own body. He keeps going at it for hours on end, barging the cage with a fury that never seems to go down. She has watched the budgie becoming more and more brittle, shedding near all of his feathers. The

budgie's feathers used to be a magic blue that Frances had never seen visit the sky in Belfast, a colour from somewhere exotic, somewhere she would like to go.

Jack just has to dull grey pocklie skin now, the same boring grey colour as her rubber mouse.

Do you want your dinner now, love?

Aye Missus Trainor, yes please.

Jack's winding himself up; they must be talking too much. Outside the grind of tyres on the road are comforting to Frances as she focuses on working out whether they are Saracens or Land Rovers. She's got to do her homework about Henry the Eighth, wishes she'd done it earlier. Homework's pointless, plus the Tudors are cat anyway.

I've run out of milk here, love, have to take a run over to our Anne's to get some.

Frances leaps to the door, Mammy's taught her always to be polite.

I'll go Missus Trainor, sure.

Ach no need love, I want to talk to Anne about somethin anyway, so I do.

Missus Trainor never has no milk no food no nothing like that in the house. She's no money. She relies on her sister and on Frances' family to give her enough to keep going for a bit. In exchange, Frances, Jackie and Mammy are relatively safe for the night, when there's trouble, because Missus Trainor's house is tucked away, by accident, right in behind a breeze-block wall, a wall built in the wrong place, a wall that stops bullets coming through, a wall that keeps them safe.

Thone stew's heatin through low. It'll be done by the time I get back.

Hearing the front door slam shut Frances puts the rubber mouse back into her mouth and bites it gently, enjoying the bouncy feel against her teeth. She turns the TV up. Jack screws his cheeping to a scream sharp enough to lift her scalp off. Frances drops the rubber mouse out of her mouth onto her palm, skips to the budgie's cage, locates and fixes Jack's eye. She squeezes the base of the mouse between her thumb and forefinger to make it more firm and easier to direct — she knows how best to control the toy like this — and makes sharp thrusts from all angles of the cage, patiently thrusting the rubber mouse through the cage bars again and again. The budgie clenches his

claws around the bottom bars of the cage, fluttering frantically, attempting to fly while holding himself firm. She keeps stabbing the toy in at him, reducing his space, forcing him to unclench his claws and cringe into a tiny corner. The budgie's shrieks skim off her. She pushes the rubber mouse too far into the cage, dropping it. Desperate, she tries to work out how to get it out quickly before Missus Trainor comes back. Jack cowers his head and begins to frantically peck out the little that is left of his feathers, they swing slowly side-to-side out through the bottom of the cage and down onto the living room carpet. The budgie makes no sound as his wee body empties of breath.

You're lucky that weren't your bollocks.

Tick Tock's patting the top of Ian's head. Ian's laughing, they stitched the cuts on cheek and nose, they can't do nothing about it being broke, heals itself.

Nobody talks, they all know what happened. Same on most patrols. They look forward to a bit of action: firing a round, getting a taig face down flat on the ground, spread eagling their legs with a polished boot, giving him a good kick in the bollocks. Often they get shot at. Sometimes one of them gets shot. Sometimes one of them gets blown to pieces. Ian's only seen that happening once so far, a car bomb near the City Hall that had already been checked by bomb squad, silly fuckers. Duff's body was hurled across the street through a glass shopfront, mincemeat in a uniform. Sarg took Duff's amo and gun before they zipped him up in a black bag. Ian got away lightly today: must be all the praying his Mum does.

Lying in the bunk above Ian's, Bobby is listening to his Walkman. It's the only Walkman in the barracks. He's got all the best bloody gear, maybe because he's from London. Got a sharp haircut too, longer at the front than the rest of the lads' hair, with a dyed blonde fringe. Ian doesn't ask him what he is listening to, tries to work it out from the tiny drumbeats leaking out of the headphones. The Police? Toyah? Warnock pulls the earphones out of Bobby's ears, tries to get them into his own, but his fingers are like Cumberland sausages, too thick to be able to handle the earphones properly, he tosses them back at Bobby. Ian reckons Warnock's got his eye on that Walkman, he's seen him fiddling with it before.

Warnock always takes it too far, Ian reckons he must be getting his hands on more than just booze, he gets on way too mental. Amazing he's not been court-martialled yet, always seems to wriggle out of the fucking stink he causes.

Rifles and bodies clean, they head for a session in the NAAFI bar. Navy Army and Air Force Institutes bars open until 2300 every night here: being a soldier is all about routine. Some decent squaddie has knocked a crate of Powers. They drink twelve bottles of whisky in two hours.

Warnock bets Bobby twenty quid that he can't take two minibar bottles up his jacksy. He takes the bet. Bobby's so out of it that Ian thinks he can't even know what he's agreeing to.

Warnock leads a small group of the lads into the makeshift gym, they're tanked up, bellowing, belching, falling to the ground. Ian wants to see what will happen. Warnock bends Bobby over a high bench, forcing his limp body into a soft U-shape, stripping Bobby's jeans down his white bony legs.

Tick Tock slaps Bobby's arse.

Look, no hair! Like a baby's bottom!

Warnock's pockets are clinking with minibar bottles, reckons he stole them from The Europa when he was there with some pricey tart. He takes a bottle out, unscrews it, swallows the rum down, gobs on the bottle, and slowly pushes it up Bobby's arse, holding the base of the bottle until it nearly disappears. Bobby heaves forward, balancing on his tiptoes, his left leg is trembling like a dog's. All the lads are making sore sounds like the bottle's gone up their arse instead of his.

Warnock takes out another bottle, face deadly serious, holding it up at arm's length above his head he bellows.

Who's fucking man enough as me to get it up there?

Tick Tock puts his hands in his pocket. The lads contract. Ian nods towards Bobby.

How much will he win?

A score. I said a score.

Warnock shakes the bottle in his fist. Ian steps forward and reaches up to take it from Warnock.

What share do I get if I get it up there?

Eh?

What share do I get?

No share!

No share?

No share, you fucking dickhead!

Ian shrugs, he wants to try anyway. Tick Tock moves towards Bobby and slaps his arse again before spreading the buttocks apart. Ian gulps down the rum from the bottle. Copying what Warnock did, he gobs on the bottle and jabs it into Bobby's arse-hole in short thrusts. The lads are roaring: YOU'RE NEARLY THERE SON! Ian doesn't know if they mean him or Bobby.

He sticks his tongue out of the side of his mouth to help him concentrate, keeps jabbing the bottle, feels the glass already inside Bobby crunch under the force. A flash of bright blood splashes over Ian's hand and wrist, he stares at it. Bobby retches streaks of golden bile onto the gym floor. Warnock leans in close to inspect, then shoves Ian out of the way. He uses his thumb to sink the base of the bottle into Bobby's arse, turning round to the lads with a wink.

The bastard'll be alright in the morning.

[please note this is an extract from *Heart of a Peach* not the full submission]

**"ARE WE SUCH SAVAGES?"**  
**MARY BECKETT'S FICTION AND THE FAILURE OF**  
**SOCIAL MOBILITY**

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

*Are we such savages?*

— Beckett, *Literary* 103

*For God's sake bring me a large Scotch. What a bloody awful country.*

— Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Reginald Maudling, following a fact-finding mission to Northern Ireland, 1st July 1979

Mary Beckett was a Belfast-born writer whose small output of finely wrought short stories, radio plays and one novel make a shrewd contribution to the fictional narrative histories of Northern Irish working-class women.

Beckett was born 28th January 1926 into a middle-class Catholic family, the daughter of a teacher. In an interview about surnames, Beckett notes that she inherited her own surname from her Protestant grandfather, and that it was her "Protestant-sounding" name that afforded her greater social and creative freedom; whilst this is clearly a personal matter for Beckett, sectarian bias, particularly as it pertains to social mobility, is also a theme which suffuses her entire body of work (Perry 63).

She followed her father's profession to teach for eleven years in Holy Cross, a Catholic primary school in the working-class area of Ardoyne in North Belfast where she recalls that class sizes ranged from forty to hundred pupils per class. Ardoyne is the same area of Belfast where I was brought up in the 1970s-1980s, and where the creative writing component of this PhD, my novel *Heart of a Peach*, is partially set.

Beckett cites the experience of working in the primary school in Ardoyne as a pivotal inspiration, and notably obligation, in her development as a writer in an interview with Megan Sullivan, "I had all these marvellous thoughts coming in the door at the school, and they had to be expressed" (*Irish Literary* 11).

Between the late 1940s to the early 1950s, Beckett had a clutch of short stories broadcast on BBC Radio Northern Ireland and RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann, the Irish national broadcaster). She was a regular contributor to *The Bell* (which published her story, 'A Farm of Land', that I discuss in this critical essay) and was featured as the only woman in their symposium 'The Young Writer' in 1951 at which she stated about Northern Irish people: "We don't have growing pains for the simple reason that we don't grow" (Beckett, *The Bell* 19).<sup>1</sup>

In 1956, she married and moved to Dublin. For the next twenty years, Beckett did not publish any further writing — a lengthy pause that is usually attributed, by the few commentators on Beckett's work, to her marriage and rearing of five children. It is interesting to note that Beckett does not herself make this direct correlation, but does reflect with notable rancour, in an interview: "If you're writing 'family stuff', which, to me, has the greatest importance, they'll send someone to talk to you, and they'll put a bit in the paper about your house and your children" (Sullivan, *Irish Literary* 10).

Writer, editor, and long-term supporter of Beckett's work, David Marcus, was instrumental in bringing her writing back to readers in the early 1980s, nearly two decades after he published the short story 'A Belfast Woman' in *The Irish Times* literary section. He went on to edit her stories to form the collection *A Belfast Woman* published by his own imprint, Poolbeg Press, in 1980.

Beckett resumed writing in later life, publishing three complete adult fiction works, sometimes including and reworking stories that had appeared in earlier contexts and forms from the 1940s and 1950s. She received a *Sunday Tribune* Arts Award in 1987 and was shortlisted for the Hughes Fiction award a year later. Latterly, she focussed on producing four children's books — *Orla was Six*, *Orla at School*, *A Family Tree* and *Hannah, or the Pink Balloons* — which are all also published by Poolbeg Press.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Bell*, the most influential Irish literary magazine of the mid-twentieth century, edited by Peadar O'Donnell, was published monthly from 1940-1954.

Commenting on Beckett's importance as a Northern Irish writer in her obituary in the *Belfast Telegraph* on 12th November 2013, Damian Smyth, Head of Literature at Arts Council of Northern Ireland said she was: "A new voice from a different place ... I go back to the 1980s when *A Belfast Woman* came out. It was the first time I ever saw the word Belfast on the front of a book. It was a very stark title ... Her work was very distinctive and her themes were very different; she was writing about ordinary people, about women." In their obituary, *The Irish Times* likened her greatest work to that of Henry James and in the recent edited collection, *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature*, Beckett receives a brief but interesting inclusion and is described as attempting: "to demythologize the ideologies behind the violence, portraying the inner conflicts of women struggling to forge meaningful lives for themselves in a sectarian society. Beckett's protagonists often fail to fit into stereotypes of womanhood and, as a consequence, live on the margins of society (Ingman and Ó Gallchoir 288).

I have chosen to focus solely on Mary Beckett's relatively small body of work for this essay because I feel her work succinctly demarcates the particular Belfast working-class Catholic characteristics, sensibility and mentality I recognise from my own upbringing. The atmosphere and socio-political concerns I will go on to examine in this essay, and which are the central foci of her work, are also crucial in my novel, *Heart of a Peach*. Her writing unpacks the complex, and complicated, range of emotions experienced by post-conflict 'survivors' of unrest such as the Troubles and the repercussions felt across generations. By examining Beckett's overarching, almost obsessively recurring, themes, together with her insistence on a female working-class Catholic narrator, delivered in sparse, yet precise, use of Belfast vernacular, I will attempt to balance the relative paucity in volume of Mary Beckett's published output with her ambitious, and in my view quite singular, literary project. Her writing is pioneering in its focus on and exploration of, in her words, "women's relationship to substantive forces in Northern Ireland: Republicanism, nationalism, socialism, the women's movements, literary and publishing traditions, unemployment, internment and education" (Sullivan, *Interview* 10).

As I have mentioned, Beckett did also produce four children's books; however I wish to discuss only her literature for adults, i.e. the two collections of short stories *A Belfast Woman* (1980) and *A Literary Woman* (1990), together with the novel *Give Them Stones* (1987), as I feel these works have most impact and relevance to this research project.

In the chapters which follow, I will outline the key structural tenets and textual tones of Beckett's work, placing particular focus on her almost exclusive focalisation of the (often domestically suffocated) Northern Irish working-class wife and mother as the main protagonist. I will argue that this seemingly narrow delineation of point of view is a political act as well as a thematic choice, reinforcing Beckett's own observation about her work: "I don't see myself as a writer for women, but I see myself as a writer about women ... If I am being honest, I have to write about women. The men can look after themselves. I would feel that the women need some one to speak up for them and to think of them" (Sullivan, *Irish Literary* 12).

As indicated in the title of the critical essay — "'Are We Such Savages?'" Mary Beckett's Fiction and the Failure of Social Mobility' — the overarching aim of this essay is to examine how Beckett's characters' long held desires for upward social mobility are achieved often through marrying into a different religion, i.e. Protestantism, but that the outcome is not quite as uncomplicated, or ultimately successful, as they may wish. I argue that this is, to a large extent, due to the social and cultural tethers that pervade not only their own lifetime, but also to recent Northern Irish history.

Taking care to explicate the subtle yet key differences between how Irish and Northern Irish citizens locate and self-perpetuate their specific national identities through iterative acts and social mores in Beckett's writing, I will acknowledge that whilst she incorporates characters from both sides of the Irish border Beckett does so to more precisely delineate the site and conditions of being a Northern Irish woman as someone who is always 'herself' despite context, whether this context be a Protestant housing estate, or a Dublin suburb. Sullivan writes: "In texts of Northern Irish women, the military and police apparatuses certainly figure, but it is the oppression and resistance connected

with another state and colonial institution that is more fully suggested" (*Women in Northern Ireland* 11). Beckett's writing is consistent with Sullivan's observation here about the complexity of oppression and the variety of sources that it is exerted from, which extend beyond the military and the police.

I develop the argument that Beckett's characters react, reflect and interact with political and cultural ideology on a quotidian level. The result of this is that the characters challenge traditionally accepted binaries of gender and political action — even whilst actual physical violence is never materially far from them — thereby demonstrating that they are "central women protagonists who are represented as being integral members of their community as opposed to aberrant observers or outsiders" (Pelan 133).

Chapter one, 'Displacement', discusses the short stories: 'A Belfast Woman' and 'A Farm of Land' from the collection *A Belfast Woman*, together with 'The Bricks are Fallen Down' from *A Literary Woman*. I examine the theme, which recurs across most of Beckett's work, of displacement and how her female characters' geographical relocations (usually due to getting married) affect them in emotionally negative and often socially confusing ways.

Madison Smartt Bell describes the writers of modular narratives, such as Beckett's short stories, as those who, "assemble the work out of small component parts ... to form what can be understood, at a greater distance, as a coherent, shapely image" (213). I seek to examine the "component parts" in Beckett's works, in relation to the theme of displacement, and to look at how and why Beckett's characters tailor their interior worlds to embody exterior political strife.

I posit that the main protagonists in the three stories — Mary ('A Belfast Woman'), Susan ('A Farm of Land') and Sheila ('The Bricks are Fallen Down') — attempt to assimilate into their new surroundings through observing what their neighbours do whilst simultaneously judging their neighbours and themselves. I highlight the plaintive 'exile voice' in Beckett's work as one which illustrates desperation, disappointment and isolation, suggesting the inner emotional impossibility of successful socio-political mobility, noting how her protagonists' attempts to become a seamless part

of their new locations are, at first, challenged and then thwarted by them reverting to the 'instinctual' behaviour that they have been brought up with: "but I never know what they will do or why they do it, the way I would with people from Belfast" (Beckett, *Belfast* 75).

In chapter two, 'Acts of Unfeminine Violence', I focus on three further stories: 'The Excursion' from *A Belfast Woman* and 'A Ghost Story' and 'Heaven', both from *A Literary Woman*, looking at how Beckett's main characters in these stories — Eleanor, Fiona and Hilary, respectively — secretly harbour, and indeed actually carry out, non-fatal acts of violence against their spouses.

Janet Madden-Simpson has observed that Mary Beckett's main characters often act in such a way as to "allow the currents of feminine revolt to come to the surface" (9). I look at how and why Beckett's characters construct their feminine identity through the restraint of their violent impulses, perceiving these as 'unfeminine' and retreating into passivity, "I wanted to smother him, to strangle him, but instead I praised him when he gloated ... 'Til the day I die I'll remember the loathing I felt" (Beckett, *Belfast* 43-44).

I locate Beckett's protagonists' hostility in a household frame but situate its nature within a larger discussion of the contested site of Irish domesticity and the perception of women's violence as 'unfeminine'; and I propose that her characters evoke and replicate their own domestic patterns by borrowing from the often 'troubling' and 'troubled' world outside. Although her characters' acts of embryonic defiance are in fact counterproductive, in that they perpetuate and sustain rather than work counter to the very brutalised patterns of control (both political and domestic) these women experience, I show that, through their inventive, adhocist forging of 'weapons' from within the domestic / private domain, Eleanor, Fiona and Hilary nonetheless demonstrate the beginnings of effective "female revolt".

Chapter three, 'Shame and Belonging', centres on Beckett's only long-form work, the novel *Give Them Stones*, which spans sixty years in the life of Martha Murtagh, a working-class Belfast woman. This chapter unpicks the often counter-intuitive and complex relationships between independent principles, daily compromise and procrastination, fear of peer judgement and/or

reprisal, and the shame resultant on unilateral action. I outline how an ordinary Belfast woman, such as Martha, survives emotionally and materially, enduring successive periods of civil unrest, but observe that her survival is run through with a stinging sense of shame. I argue that this shame is a shared cultural one, that pertains to poverty and, crucially, to the socio-political collective memory Martha partakes in. Delineating shame through three key texts on the subject I apply core foundational concepts, which are loosely, 'being out of place', 'self-criticism' and 'servitude and sovereignty', to key scenes in Beckett's book in which Martha's shame is most clearly, yet complexly drawn.

I locate and draw comparisons with the prescience of Beckett's character motivation and development with relevant, Northern Irish, books of sociologically observed data from the era of the Troubles. I will attempt to make connections not just with Beckett's accurate representation of the content of such books, but also with the complex emotional knots that people in violent communities experience, observing that Martha develops an ability to work through and (to some extent at least) transcend shame through her practical and inner resourcefulness, to improve her "day-to-day material conditions" (Sullivan, *Women in Northern Ireland* 40).

The lingering message throughout Beckett's three books that I include in this critical essay is: you will still be persecuted because of where you came from even if you left many years ago because, "There are no secrets in Ireland" (Beckett, *Literary* 87).

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### ***Displacement***

*Judy was never interested in rich foods; she had been reared in a household where dinner was meat, potatoes and vegetables, soup if the day was cold and dessert on Sundays. These expensive appurtenances, the obsequious waiters, the preening politician entertaining a model at a nearby table all gave her the same feeling of a displaced person that she had suffered for so many years after she came to Dublin.*

— Beckett, *Literary* 11

*You are so high among the highest, and I am low among the lowest, a mean thing. You never go away from us. Yet we have difficulty in returning to you.*

— St Augustine 138

Brian Friel's erudite character, Jimmy Jack in *Translations*, summarises the perils of traversing cultural and religious boundaries: "Do you know the word endogamein? It means to marry within the tribe. And the word exogamein means to marry outside the tribe. And you don't cross those borders casually — both sides get very angry" (cited in Storey 116). This chapter outlines and discusses just such perils, with reference to recurring themes of displacement and being watched by yourself and by others, which appear as interlinked motifs, (and often as plot drivers), throughout Mary Beckett's work.

Focussing on the short stories 'A Belfast Woman' and 'A Farm of Land' from *A Belfast Woman*, together with 'The Bricks are Fallen Down' from *A Literary Woman*, I trace the characters' geographical relocation as means of social failure.

#### ***A Belfast Woman***

The sixteen-page title story in Beckett's first collection, 'A Belfast Woman', is a tightly constructed, first person account of Mary Harrison's life, from being a child burnt out of her family home by

Protestants in 1921 to ending her days in her dead husband's house having been threatened with being burnt out again.<sup>2</sup>

In her analysis of this story, Chu He remarks "it is apt to see the trauma of burning inside and outside, at home and in the society", indicating the negative emotional imperative of geographical relocation (753).

The theme of Catholics being burnt out of their houses occurs systematically throughout historical accounts of Ireland, here evoked by Kenneth Griffith in his co-authored *Curious Journey: An Oral History of Ireland's Unfinished Revolution*: "My grandfather said, 'He had the roof of his house burnt out over his head in Ireland.' These words marked my memory forcefully" (xi). A characteristic of fictional works addressing this same history is noted by Robert Garrett in his work on trauma and history in the Irish novel: "These works feature ordinary people who try to keep their feet on the ground when terrible things are going on" (Garrett 5).

It's interesting to note here that the beginning of the Troubles proper is considered by many sources — including the historian William Maguire in his chronicle of Belfast's growth — to be the night of 14th August 1969, when Protestant militants attacked Ardoyne and the lower Falls areas of Belfast driving 3,500 Catholics from their homes; much of this forcible displacement was achieved through burning them out (Maguire 182). As mentioned in the introduction, Ardoyne is the area in which Beckett taught primary school children for eleven years, so her reader may assume an emotional link with the area's and the city's recent past. Beckett is quick to acknowledge this link, and her interest in scars both physical and metaphorical. In her interview with Sullivan, Beckett tells the story of how when she was a child a piece of skin was removed from her leg, leaving a scar the exact shape of Lough Neagh. Beckett casts this, with a mixture of whimsy and seriousness, as

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<sup>2</sup> 'A Belfast Woman' is a direct precursor, both in plot and characterisation, to Beckett's only novel *Give Them Stones* written some thirty years later. I will discuss this novel in chapter three.

Northern Ireland having "imprinted on her body" and says that "you can't detach yourself" from where you come from (Sullivan, *Interview* 11).<sup>3</sup>

Mary Harrison, the protagonist of 'A Belfast Woman', is precisely the kind of "ordinary" person Garrett describes with reference to the Irish novel. The driving catalyst of this short story is the threat to Mary's personal security and domestic stability by exterior, volatile political forces. The use of "A" in the title denotes that Mary is one of many, she is extremely "ordinary" in fact, negligible perhaps, and yet Beckett deems her story worth telling.

The story opens in the present day with Mary reading a poison-pen letter that has been posted through her front door, written "all in red bad printing and smeared." The letter simply reads "Get out or we'll burn you out." Mary's response is to sit quietly at her kitchen table, yet she says "I never made myself a cup of tea even": the use of the word "even" indicates that there has been a break in Mary's habitual action caused by receiving the letter (Beckett, *Belfast* 84). Chu He observes this break in composure, noting that Mary's flat, apparently unemotional tone, is not quite what it appears to be: "By looking further into Mary's understatements, we could see a deeply disturbed, agonised woman, under her calm uneventful narration" (759).

In this way, as with the other (sometimes) stereotypical character traits Beckett gives Mary, she is shown to be the exemplar of a Catholic 'stoic' working-class woman surviving the Second World War and the Troubles. Mary is unusual only in that she is married to someone who has Protestant relatives. The majority of her husband's family are Protestant but his mother was Catholic: "she died when William was a wee boy but they brought him up Catholic because it had been promised" (Beckett, *Belfast* 87). This respect for the mother's wishes demonstrates that William's family are not sectarian; Mary's describes his father as "a good man" and his aunt gifts him her house, which is on a Protestant street because she is herself Protestant. Although this marital match affords Mary greater economic stability and a higher standard of living than she had been

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<sup>3</sup> Lough Neagh is a large freshwater lake in Northern Ireland.

used to it means that she directly transgresses her mother's direct instruction — "Don't go into that Protestant street, Mary, or you'll be a sorry girl" — thereby indelibly setting her apart from her own kind (Beckett, *Belfast* 85).<sup>4</sup> William is not 'marked out' in the same way, for whilst he has been brought up Catholic, he is not perceived as such because he is shielded by his family's religion.

Over the course of the story, Mary's behaviour is gradually modified by, or perhaps more accurately, *through* her surroundings. By this I mean Mary's surroundings affect her and, in turn, she uses them to help her learn how to behave. In each instance of this in the story she begins by acting in a way that she has been used to, but is instructed to act differently by those who watch her:

We heard shots first and then the kind of rumbling, roaring noises of all the people out on the streets. I wanted to get up and run out and see what was wrong but William held on to me in bed and he said: "They don't run out on the street here. They stay in." And it was true. They did" (Beckett, *Belfast* 85).

The last two short sentences in the above quotation indicate a passing of time, and a reciprocal learning process on the character's part: not only is she observed, she is also observing; this is a social bind that Beckett returns to in many of her works.

The apparent gain of social mobility, of moving into a better house in a lower middle-class area, is spoilt by the 'stigma' of what is 'natural' to Mary, i.e. her Catholicism. She is consistently reminded of this stigma by her neighbours, in the ways they themselves habitually behave, which is perceived (by Mary's husband, among others) to be 'correct' and more obviously by the author of the poison-pen letter she receives, which is threatening her specifically because she is a Catholic. Yet also, and more importantly, the stigma is demonstrated through Mary's instinctual Catholic actions, (such as feeling she needs to go out on the street to see what is happening, as mentioned above), a cultural trigger which keeps coming back and which must be ignored because it is wrong. Beckett says of 'A Belfast Woman':

I had to have the whole life into a short story, and where do you start, and how do you get at it? To write it in the third person, from the writer's point of view, it's as if you're

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<sup>4</sup> Beckett's characters don't travel very far, to Dublin at the furthest, and yet they still experience social dislocation from those around them.

condemning her. So, again, you have to resort to the first person: She can judge herself (Perry 77).

The effect of Beckett's decision to write the story in the first person encourages the reader to lean in for a closer view of Mary's thoughts, and experience her feelings in a direct way. Clearly, Beckett is creating a narrative environment in which she, as the author, isn't seen to judge her character, and, I would further suggest that, by using the first person, Beckett is also signposting that Mary judges herself first, before anyone else gets the opportunity to do so. This 'auto-judging', (something that I am very familiar as a Belfast woman myself), is a key facet of growing up as a working-class Catholic in inner city Northern Ireland, and one I will go on to examine in more depth in chapter three with regard to how judgment is a key component of shame.

Margaret Atwood's eponymous Grace Marks in the historical novel, *Alias Grace*, speaks persuasively of the stigma of being Northern Irish and how this reflects negative social perception, and in her case influences actual criminal judgement against her:

I did indeed come from the North of Ireland; though I thought it very unjust when they wrote down that both of the accused were from Ireland by their own admission. That made it sound like a crime, and I don't know that being from Ireland is a crime; although I have often saw it treated as such (118).<sup>5</sup>

Mary is in a socio-political double bind; the corpus of working-class Catholic customs she has hitherto relied upon to survive has now become noxious. This is similar to how the philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy, describes his immune system in his short text, 'The Intruder' — as the fiercest, and most cunning, enemy of his new heart transplant: "within me, now suddenly roused and set against me" (9). I will return to this idea of illness and invasion later in this chapter. Discussing the concept of 'stigma' the sociologist, Erving Goffman, observes:

When, as in the case of divorce or Irish ethnicity, an attribute loses much of its force as a stigma, a period will have been witnessed when the previous definition of the situation is more and more attacked ... until it ceases to exert control over both what can be easefully attended, and what must be kept a secret or painfully disattended (163).

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<sup>5</sup> Atwood's character Grace is based on factual account. She is Protestant, but is treated equally with the historically documented contempt acted out upon many Catholic immigrants in Canada during the mid-1800s. Please note the grammatically incorrect use of the word "saw" in this quotation is present in Atwood's text.

Here, Goffman is suggesting that the power of certain stigmas may be reduced through the passage of time, but that, in order for this to happen, both the 'easy' and the more 'difficult' aspects of the stigma's effect on the individual must be taken into consideration. Mary attacks her own stigma. She compensates for her birth religion, and tries to fit in, becoming competitive with her Protestant neighbours; speaking of her own children she says, "There was no Protestant child better fed or better dressed than those two" and even though Mary's children might have the 'brand' of being Catholic, impressed upon them through the local knowledge of Mary's baptised religion, she is marking them out as being 'super-Protestants' who excel in the stereotypical characteristics of that religion.

This harks back to older, sectarian taxonomies as outlined by Catriona Kennedy in her essay 'Women and Gender in Northern Ireland': "[in] eighteenth-century political discourse, Catholicism was equated with servility, corruption and dependence and contrasted with Protestant virtue and manly independence" (363). Whilst Mary's children are, of course, too young to demonstrate their "manly independence", their "virtue" is asserted by Mary in how perfectly well-kept they are, chiming with John Wesley's well-worn phrase, 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness'.

But Mary's achievement of moving through class strata is at the cost of neglecting, and indeed deriding, her own mother and the working-class Catholic culture that her mother represents. Mary says snobbishly, "She came into my house one day with her shawl on and I was going to say I wished she'd wear a coat and not have my neighbours passing remarks" she continues, "she had a horror of my Protestant neighbours even though she liked well enough the ones she met" (Beckett, *Belfast* 88; 89). Mary's mother can never *pass*. Notably, later in the story when Mary has been involved in an altercation with a teacher, she dons her mother's black shawl, symbolically setting herself apart from the Protestant neighbours she is so careful around.

It is interesting to note Mary's daughter, Eileen, also 'discards' her own mother, that through Mary's attempts to create upwardly mobile children she is alienated by her own success; Eileen

"wasn't contented living where we did" so emigrates to Canada (Beckett, *Belfast* 91). Mary is fully aware of her role in this, ruefully observing: "It was the kind of life I had reared her for and dreamed of for her only I wished she and her children were not so far away" (Beckett, *Belfast* 93).

Similarly, Mary thinks that her body may be rejecting itself, thinking that a cancer is spreading through her womb, "Then I started having trouble. I looked as though I was expecting ... I could feel no life so I was afraid"; the invisible cancerous roots link imaginatively in Mary's mind with "all the long white roots and threads" dug up in her father-in-law's land (Beckett, *Belfast* 86; 87). Michael Storey, in *Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction* says, "the Troubles are a cancer in the body politic of Northern Ireland" (148). Beckett makes clear the link Mary perceives between past traumas, and a potentially traumatic future, by siting the imagined cancer in Mary's reproductive organs: her body is responsible for bringing children into an environment where they are witnesses of, but perhaps also future protagonists in the Troubles. However, in the second half of the story, Mary is diagnosed not to be sick; there may be hope after all.

Towards the end of the story, after her house has been ransacked, but not actually burnt, Mary faints in the street, and it is British soldiers who come to her aid, not those around her: "Not one of my neighbours came out ... not one of them knocked at my door" (Beckett, *Belfast* 97). Despite attempting to fit in, despite bringing up uber-Protestant children (as she perceives them), Mary is still ill-fitting in her surroundings: her displacement persists.

### ***A Farm of Land***

In his survey work, *The Plantation of Ulster*, Jonathan Bardon observes: "In seeking the origins of Northern Ireland's present discontents, historians and social scientists alike are again and again brought back to the British colonisation of Ulster in the seventeenth century" (6). Beckett's 'A Farm of Land' tells the story of Susan Lavery, a woman whose life has been apparently thwarted by her father's discontent and his need to own the fertile land he perceives to be rightfully his — land that has been taken away from "his" people two centuries before (during the period which Bardon is

discussing) and which has seeded a traumatic collective memory, to be passed on to Susan by her father in the same way that the poor quality land he has himself inherited is passed on to him from his ancestors. Living memory is re-enacted.

The story's opening line has an expansively judgemental quality: "The entire countryside was horrified last week when the news leaked out that Susan Lavery had sold her father's farm" (Beckett, *Belfast* 32). Told by a quasi-sympathetic neighbour who weaves their small community's viewpoints into one damning voice, i.e. "the entire countryside", Susan's personal history and her current actions are rendered across the brief story's eight pages in a cohesive and colloquial way: "This I heard from the country-women's gossip, not from Susan" — it seems her business is everybody's business (Beckett, *Belfast* 34).

Susan was "reared" in the Moss, a desolate area; her two male siblings died in the 1919 'flu epidemic, weakened by over-work and poverty, leaving her as the sole heir. Her father is a penny-pinching man with a mania for improving his lot through acquiring better land; he pursues this goal diligently and single-mindedly. Writing about Molière's miser Harpagon in *The Miser*, Henri Bergson notes of Harpagon's refrain "No Dowry Wanted!" (his only answer to the question of why he is forcing his daughter to marry someone she does not love) Bergson writes that "Behind this exclamation, which recurs automatically, we faintly discern a complete repeating-machine set going by a fixed idea" (24). Bergson's implication here is that a fixed idea, a desire, a goal perhaps — which is certainly the case with Susan's father and his goal to get better land — is the catalyst for obsessional behaviour that, once set in motion, keeps going by virtue of its own inertia. For Susan's father, his need to escape the Moss, to buy good land, to further accrue more good land through marrying Susan off, as we shall see later, is his very own "repeating-machine".

The key moment in Susan's development as a thwarted and frustrated woman is revealed halfway through the story, after we have already seen her actions and coldness towards to her father's beloved farm:

[Susan] won a scholarship to the Convent school and he wouldn't let her take it. It just didn't occur to him that she should take it. When she came home from school and told them about it he was delighted and praised her and told her what a grand girl she was, and that he was proud of her. The following morning he told them she couldn't take it. When she protested he brushed her aside impatiently. 'My God, girl, where do you think the money would come from for your bus and your clothes and your books? We'd never leave the Moss if I spent money on trifles like that' (Beckett, *Belfast* 34).

Her father's priorities are clearly motivated by his own aspiration and, crucially, his own definition of social mobility: to meticulously save all available money in order to buy a bigger, more fertile farm than his current one in the Moss, where "her father's and mother's people had lived since the time of the Plantations" (Beckett, *Belfast* 32). The father's motivation for social betterment is combined with a strong sense of socio-historic injustice, here demonstrated through the narrator's use of the phrase "the Plantations", which refers to 16th and 17th century confiscation of (predominantly Northern) Irish land by the English Crown and its subsequent redistribution to English and Scottish settlers, who had "long experience of building fortifications in hostile territory, of felling timber and of clearing the land for the plough" (Bardon, 6). Families who had previously been living there were allocated small, inferior plots of land to farm; Susan's relatives on both sides have been living for more than three hundred years on the same, poor, colonised land that their ancestors scratched a living from.

We can, therefore, empathise somewhat with the father's obsession with re-locating, albeit this comes at the cost of his daughter's own sense of social advancement. Conflict of class is foremost in Beckett's story, yet it is a conflict with rotting roots in barren soil. Sullivan notes in her post-Marxist feminist essay 'Women in Northern Ireland: Cultural Studies and Material Conditions': "In the texts of Northern Irish women ... it is the oppression and resistance connected with another state and colonial institution [that is explored]" (11). Susan's "other state and colonial institution" in this story is the persistent echo of the Plantations handed down to her from her own parents.

More broadly, Sullivan's comment speaks not only to 'A Farm of Land' but also to much of Beckett's other writing, most notably the short stories 'Theresa', 'Flags and Emblems', 'The Master and the Bombs', 'A Ghost Story' and 'Sudden Death', and the novel *Give Them Stones*.

Susan's father equates advanced social position with soil and livestock: "Well, Susan, hasn't it been worth it? Tomorrow we'll have our farm of grand rich land, and remember, Susan, it'll be yours in time too. Hasn't it been worth it?" (Beckett, *Belfast* 35).

Whilst less drastic, this brings to mind the cold-hearted, yet parsimoniously practical, avarice of John McGahern's paternal character in the short story 'Korea'. The father has witnessed executions of prisoners during the Irish uprising of 1919, and perhaps as a result of this, seems to be inured to death. He is attempting to persuade his son to enlist to fight in the Korean War, however the son has previously overheard his father discussing what would be gained by his son enlisting: "I heard they get two hundred and fifty dollars a month" and a lump sum if he gets killed in action: "They got ten thousand dollars ... They're buying cattle left and right" (McGahern, *Creatures* 48).

Susan radically disagrees with her father's rhetorical question "Hasn't it been worth it?" She equates advancement primarily with cultural capital — the grammar school education that her father 'steals' from her. Then, on top of this, he tries to arrange a marriage to the owner of the adjacent farm. Her life choices, at this stage, are very limited: marriage, or unpaid servitude: "The unmarried daughters of farmers could find unpaid employment in the family household or as a domestic manager for unmarried male relatives, but this role tended to be viewed as one of frustrating dependence" (Kennedy 370). Susan wants neither. She chooses instead to leave the farm altogether.

Her displacement to Belfast is initially liberating: she finds a job and develops a taste for a radically different kind of economic capital than her father, that is the acquisition of non-essential 'luxury' items, eventually marrying "a commercial traveller with little money which he splashed sky-high" (Beckett, *Belfast* 36). Her choice of a commercial traveller as spouse, someone who is not rooted to a particular place for his livelihood, is in notable opposition to her father's passion for land.

When Susan's father dies it is with an excess of macho physical effort. An old man, he heaves up a horse which has fallen awkwardly in its stable, with hubris: "Stand back there childher"

and dies almost immediately afterwards (Beckett, *Belfast* 38).<sup>6</sup> His death therefore is consistent with how he has lived, with a certain lack of personal foresight and a stubborn sense of character.

When Susan later acquires the farm, the very first thing she does is to sell it, but the sale gives her little pleasure: "Ten thousand pounds she got for her father's beautiful farm. She showed me the cheque with a gesture of vague dissatisfaction. I don't know why, unless she was thinking of rustling bank notes and shining gold sovereigns" (Beckett, *Belfast* 39). The narrator's tone here is spliced with some envy perhaps they would like to own the cheque themselves: they are refusing to appreciate how little the gain means to Susan given what she has been made to sacrifice in her life to get it. Yet the narrator is also referring to the materiality of Susan's father's obsessive money collecting, and the physical insubstantiality and 'meaninglessness' of the cheque in contrast with it.

Whilst the abuse Susan has suffered from her father is clearly not at the extreme end of the scale, her reaction to gaining and subsequently relinquishing ownership of her father's farm bespeaks trauma; for her, playing through her own "reconstruction of events through memories, flashbacks, dreams and hauntings is as important as the events themselves" (Garratt 5). While Susan's "hauntings" are of a class-based rather than a spectral nature, they are still unsettling and 'real' to her.

Susan's new wealth does not mean freedom, however, for, as the narrator tells us, even though she declared "she was sick to death of scraping and saving and she was going to live in comfort from then on. The strange thing is that she doesn't" (Beckett, *Belfast* 36). The financial gain afforded to Susan through the selling of her father's farm may have advanced her socially and materially but the same mentality of frugality her father instilled is still with her: Susan is stuck in her original social class.

### ***The Bricks are Fallen Down***

One of only two stories in which Beckett deals directly with the actual physical aftermath of the

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<sup>6</sup> The word "childher" appears here as it does in the original text.

Troubles, 'The Bricks are Fallen Down' is a seventeen-page narrative about physical and social disfigurement.

Sheila Ryan is a happily married Belfast-born housewife living in a semi-detached house in a quiet suburb in Dublin with her Southern Irish husband Donal, when two reminders of her past life in Belfast arrive in quick succession. Firstly, a poison-pen letter which is delivered to her home:

Mrs Ryan,  
We know why you left Belfast. You cannot hide from us. We can pick you out any time we like in Dublin but stay out of Belfast. If you go there you're a dead woman.  
The Watchers (Beckett, *Literary* 46-47).

Secondly, a phone call entreating her to travel to Belfast to visit an ex-boyfriend, who's been injured in a bomb blast: "I suppose he wants to talk about the old times" (Beckett, *Literary* 48).

Whilst no direct link is made between these two tethers to Belfast, they do have a causal relationship in the story, in that everything Sheila associates with Belfast is sullied and disquieting: "a grim deadly town" and again "a bit sordid" (Beckett, *Literary* 59; 48). She, by implication (by virtue of coming from Belfast herself), is also substandard. This is perhaps most clearly conveyed in the story's final line when Sheila embraces her husband when she gets back to Dublin but, in doing so, observes that her hands are soiled and have become so by simply travelling on the train back: "when she saw her fingers grimed from the journey gripping him, she deliberately slackened her hold for fear he should ever be pulled into the shade of those black northern cliffs" (Beckett, *Literary* 61). Sheila makes an imagistic link between dirt and death; she is sullied like Seamus Heaney's narrator in 'Blackberry-Picking' whose palms are "sticky as Bluebeard's" — both are somehow implicated in an act of violence that they can't possibly be culpable for (20).<sup>7</sup>

Before Sheila settles back into her life in Dublin, she must, of course, make her return journey to Belfast. She is travelling both on borrowed time and borrowed money: "the train fare today was a cause of guilt to her, she'd had to ask Donal for it" (Beckett, *Literary* 52). Donal claims

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<sup>7</sup> Heaney is evoking the guilt of Charles Perrault's eponymous character 'Bluebeard', a fairy tale in which he murders his successive wives.

he is not happy that she is visiting Belfast because of the poison-pen letter she has received, but perhaps the real reason is that she is going to see a glamorous ex-boyfriend. During her journey on the train, reflecting on her husband, Sheila thinks about her husband: "She didn't look at him because sometimes when she argued he looked pathetic, sometimes he glared at her with what would have passed for hatred" (Beckett, *Literary* 46).

Sheila is going to visit Paul Taylor, the man she loved before she was married, at the behest of his mother. She is anxious about how he will perceive her now and we begin to understand that, when she knew him, he was a haughty, critical man: "She'd had her coat cleaned in a one-day cleaner's but it didn't look new; it looked like an old coat that had been cleaned" (Beckett, *Literary* 52). Paul's mother welcomes Sheila into her home, bringing her into the room where Paul is. He is wearing dark glasses; his mother chides him, "Time was I wouldn't be let to meet Paul's friends but pride takes a fall. Isn't that right, Paul?" (Beckett, *Literary* 55). This friction between mother and son implicates Sheila as complicit in Paul's somewhat aggressive behaviour, through suggesting either that Sheila was not strong enough to make Paul allow her to meet his mother, or that she was too high and mighty to care.

The warring yet over-weaning relationship between Northern Irish mother and son features in two of Beckett's other stories, 'Saints and Scholars' and 'Failing Years'. It also appears in other works of fiction set in the same era and place as 'The Bricks are Fallen Down', i.e. 1970s Belfast, demarcating how men (particularly young men) are disempowered in the domestic environment and as a result seek violent outlet in the streets. This is exemplified by characters such as the sectarian killer, Victor Kelly, in Eoin McNamee's Belfast set novel, *Resurrection Man*. Whilst Beckett's character Paul is not stated in the story to have become involved in sectarian violence as a protagonist, he is situated within such violence through being injured in a sectarian bomb blast.

Sheila's reaction to such open antagonism in Paul's house is one of resentment: "she had grown accustomed to the Dublin way of keeping things pleasant on the surface" (Beckett, *Literary* 55). Whilst Sheila's manners have been polished in Dublin, Paul's have roughened in Belfast: he is

facially disfigured and too vain to walk because he has a limp, so is now housebound. He berates Sheila for not visiting him sooner, and taunts her chosen way of life with a husband and family, offering her a revised version of their past that she does not agree with: "you always were a very timorous person. You could have had a marvellous life — we could have gone to London, Paris, Amsterdam" (Beckett, *Literary* 56). Yet, as she sees it "Paul's glamour had come to nothing in the long run ... it was Donal she'd married ... it was Donal she loved ... He didn't tell her, as Paul had constantly done, that she'd be a marvellous person if only she'd do a dozen things that would make her entirely different" (Beckett, *Literary* 49).

Sheila's social mobility — her semi-detached house in Dublin, her Southern Irish husband, her children — is held in contempt by Paul; his cultural and economic currencies (or more precisely his past, lost currencies) of exotic travel, sports cars and fancy clothes attack her petite bourgeois lifestyle. Her self-exile to a better life has failed in his view. Sheila, however, retaliates, using the very lower-middle class weapons he has forged against him: "'I was told your injuries were slight. Then the children got measles and I forgot about it.' She told him the exact truth even though she knew it belittled him" (Beckett, *Literary* 56). Paul is very low on her list of priorities, lower even than measles.

There is a contrast drawn in 'The Bricks Are Fallen Down' between how (and where) male and female trauma is enacted. Chu He states: "Compared with the public, male experiences of trauma, the traumas that women encounter are more private, secret, and even invisible" (755). Beckett's characters Sheila and Paul suffer different types, and arguably scales, of trauma — Sheila, emotional and Paul, physical — the reader is shown that whilst these experiences subtly shift how they behave with each other, that their behaviour between each other is not radically altered. Reflecting on how physical trauma, geographical distance and class-based shift (on Sheila's part) into a different way of life and self-presentation to each other they still return, partially at least, their learned behaviour towards one another. Despite not being in a romantic relationship anymore, the

dynamics Beckett has told us existed in Sheila and Paul's previous relationship, such as feelings of inadequacy and class judgement, linger on.

The anonymous poison-pen letter is a recurring plot device in Beckett's collection *A Literary Woman*, appearing in five of its ten stories. It is unclear in 'The Bricks are Fallen Down' who has sent the poison-pen letter — it may be Paul himself as a way of testing her attachment to him. The malicious letters throughout the collection are signed by variations on "The Watchers" or "A Wellwisher" and indeed the ironically named literary woman of the book's title story is the actual poison-pen of many such letters herself. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, 'A Belfast Woman' and the novel *Give Them Stones* also feature this device.

The poison pen letter is a popular stratagem for engendering immediate unease: it can be seen being put to this use in English whodunnits such as Agatha Christie's *The Moving Finger*. Doubtless Beckett was also attracted to this function of the device; however, her poison-pen letters actually owe more to the class-based immorality of *The Littlehampton Libels*, an historic case in 1920s Sussex in which Rose Gooding, a working-class woman, is wrongly convicted of sending a multitude of highly offensive letters. The actual culprit is Edith Swan, an educated 'respectable' neighbour, who writes the letters in obscene vernacular slang — "All three want boiling in tar. Go and fuck your cunts you piss country whores" — disguising her guilt through the suggestion that as a respectable woman she couldn't possibly know any bad language (Hillard 134). Beckett's working-class, female protagonists are similarly lured into traps by poison-pen letters, traps that enmesh them both in their working-class pasts and their Catholic upbringings.

There is a resemblance between Beckett's recurring motifs of threatening letters and Catholics being burnt out of their houses by Protestants, which are parallel acts of violence across the majority of her work. It's interesting to note that whilst characters are actually burnt out of their houses and therefore geographically displaced, which impels them to relocate (as Sheila has herself relocated to Dublin, not because of being burnt out but after narrowly escaping being blown up) the threatening missives are impotent in that nothing that is threatened in them actually comes to pass.

Rather they are spurs allowing Beckett to examine her characters' compounded emotions of fear and self-loathing that comes from any relationship they have to Belfast.

By insisting on the continuation of threat, whether actual or implied, Beckett is describing the long tail of civil unrest and sectarian memory, which infiltrates every aspect of an individual's life. Reflecting on how socially insular her younger life had been and how this negatively shaped all of her life experiences, Sheila feels she was: "fit only for her mother's house or the houses of her close friends where they gathered in turn because the dangers in Belfast meant there was no social life in town" (Beckett, *Literary* 50). Sheila's use of "fit only" belittles herself and shows perhaps the "timorous" quality that Paul had accused of her of: the reader is not privy however to why he was attracted to it, or why she put up with him.

In this chapter, I have discussed how geographical relocation and social advancement does not necessarily result in the happiness or, crucially, the confidence of Beckett's main characters in the three stories considered, despite their ambitious desires for just such upwardly mobile movement; further, I have explored how this makes them feel displaced from their surroundings. Noting that the protagonists are often keen to cast a critical eye on their own behaviour before anyone has the chance to, in tandem, I have examined the complexity of how Beckett's characters learn to conduct themselves by observing how their spouses and neighbours act, and learn to check themselves — though they ultimately to fall back on their instinctual modes of behaviour in periods of peak stress. In the next chapter, I will develop the wider social displacement and unease I have identified in Beckett's characters here examining how this is played out within the domestic-scaled environment, and the resulting familial implosions.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### ***Acts of Unfeminine Violence***

*She didn't hate him all during her pregnancy.*

— Beckett, *Literary* 34

*Gender roles, the structure of the family, and female sexuality became the sites on which many of the 'major battles between tradition and innovation' were fought.*

— Catriona Kennedy, *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland* 375

In her study of marginalised Irish women writers, Katie Donovan states: "Beckett's women live in a given world of suffering, but their capacity to endure their trials gives them a strength and conviction ... [she] hinges her stories on small and unexpected acts of defiance perpetrated by her characters within the limits of their domestic lives" (32). For whilst Beckett's female protagonists are firmly situated within the emotional and logistical framework of the Troubles, their own intimate interaction with actual violence most often occurs in the domestic arena over which they have, at least, some control.

It is essential to view Beckett's protagonists' desires and sometime actions through a wider historical lens. Writing about women and gender in modern Ireland, Catriona Kennedy observes:

A theme in Irish culture from the eighteenth through to the late twentieth century has been the coupling of an often idealised notion of domesticity with a belief, voiced by both contemporaries and historians, that Irish domesticity has been repeatedly frustrated or undermined at various points in the country's history (362).

Domesticity has been idealised, and simultaneously frustrated. This duality produces potential for action, in relation to feminine violence as enacted in the household, because the domestic space itself is therefore contested and unstable. Kennedy goes on to say:

The dangers of such 'maternalist' rhetoric were sharply exposed by the Irish feminist Hannah Sheehy Skeffington who denounced the national movement for only recognising

Irishwomen's importance in their capacity as 'mother and housewife, not as individual citizen' (371).

Beckett's women vent their anger, frustration, spite and impotence across most of her work to, "allow the currents of feminine revolt to come to the surface" (Madden-Simpson 9). It is this very range of supposedly negative emotions as survival aids that I argue interests Beckett, as she says about her life in Dublin in an interview, "There were a lot of very nice women around here for the past thirty-five years that I've been in this house ... who never complained about their children, who never complained about their husbands, who developed breast cancer and they died. The nasty ones are left" (Perry 69). Beckett utilises violence, and the desire to commit violence, as proof of her character's frustration and just maybe also their redemption.

In this chapter, I centre my argument on three short stories: 'The Excursion' from *A Belfast Woman* together with 'A Ghost Story' and 'Heaven', both from *A Literary Woman*. I show how Beckett's characters harbour intense desires to commit acts of violence against their spouses and how their attitudes towards these impulses have been coloured by a wider historical perception, within Ireland, of violence as essentially unfeminine, for example as remarked here in relation to the aftermath of the 1798 United Irishmen Rebellion:

Women's involvement was seized on by conservative commentators as emblematic of the rebellion's unnatural, perverse character. The women of 1798 — in the loyalist historian Samuel McSkimmin's account — were likened to the bloodthirsty fishwives and 'unsexed amazons' of the French Revolution (Kennedy 365).

And further: "To tell a woman to behave in a more feminine way is to reify aspects of gender in a way that seems connected to the inferior and denigrated status of women" (Nussbaum 292). I go on to discuss how Beckett's characters utilise adhocist methods in their plans to carry out their aggressive desires, by drawing on what is to hand in their domestic environments; by dreaming up heterogeneous uses for average household objects; and by being frugal in their violence.

### *The Excursion*

The seven page story 'The Excursion' is a concise study of silence and repressed resentment. It won a BBC short story award in the late 1940s which had been set up with the aim of finding a new fresh voice, of which Beckett said that when she submitted her work: "I was very careful not to have a Catholic or anything suggesting it in that story because I thought, I'm not going to shoot myself in the foot. My name, Beckett, is a Protestant name, so I could sail through under false pretences" clearly indicating that Beckett saw sectarianism in the prevailing cultural climate (Perry 67).

The story's main character, Eleanor Teggart, is an isolated wife who is desperate to go on the excursion to Dublin that the local Young Farmers' Club has organised: "It would be perfect just to sit back in the train passing fields of crops she needn't worry about and lines of washing someone else had done" (Beckett, *Belfast* 6). Her husband, James, usurps both her place on the excursion and her ability to ask his permission to go by announcing that he himself will be going before she can get out the request she has spent the day carefully formulating. Eleanor decides to rescue any crumbs she can, by resigning herself to the fact that although her husband is going in her place he will have gossip and news that she can eke out in lieu of actual conversation: "She might even manage to stretch it out for four or five days or even a week if she didn't ask too many questions at once" (Beckett, *Belfast* 8).

Eleanor's matrimonial match to Jack was one founded on the promise of financial gain: she married him on the basis of this false promise, and "That was her father's fault. He had always kept on saying, 'Money's power, me girl, money's power.'" But she finds Jack's wealth is neither forthcoming nor particularly useful in the face of his sullen detachment and stubbornness: "It was only on account of his money that she had married him at all. And what good had it ever done her?" (Beckett, *Belfast* 5). Notably, Eleanor informs us that no children have come, suggesting that one of her primary functions as a wife has not (perhaps cannot) be fulfilled. This classes Eleanor, as Beckett observes in an interview, as others might unfairly class her as, "wasted ... and past all use as women."

The psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, suggests, "We cannot understand ourselves or others if we subtract our motives and intentions" (28). As noted in chapter one, the lure of financial gain and betterment upwards through class strata is consistently neither as straightforward, nor as successful as Beckett's female characters might wish, this produces resentment in the characters discussed in this chapter because, as the reader is shown, they are only partially aware of their own "motives and intentions", it is their desires which drive them.

Beckett delivers her tense narrative across the course of the day Jack is away in Dublin. Eleanor brews her bitterness, disappointment and anger whilst hiding in burning embarrassment inside her own house: "she didn't want people to see that she had been left behind" (Beckett, *Belfast* 8). The violence Jack has done to her is domestic in range but public in affect, for it reinforces Eleanor's belief that she has been hamstrung by her nearest and dearest by ensuring she has no voice and therefore no agency: "She knew all the time that she would never have managed to go" (Beckett, *Belfast* 6).

The control that enforced silence wields is powerful. Just like Chuckie Lurgan, a central character in Robert McLiam Wilson's Belfast-based novel *Eureka Street*, Eleanor "couldn't remember when [she and her husband] had last had a conversation of more than a minute's duration. It was a miracle in a house as tiny as the one they shared" (48). Beckett's own linking of improbable silence with smallness of domestic scale indicates to the reader just how claustrophobic and morose this relationship is: for even though they live closely together, negotiating intimate physical inhabitation room-by-room, they are not actually intimate. Eleanor notes: "each year it was getting harder and harder to talk to him at all" (Beckett, *Belfast* 7). She is alienated from him, from her rural community and ultimately from herself. In his philosophical theory of the voice, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar observes:

The absence of voices and sounds is hard to endure; complete silence is immediately uncanny, like death, while the voice is the first sign of life ... in isolation, in solitude ... it can be that this is when another kind of voice appears, more intrusive and compelling (14).

Although Eleanor cannot speak in an average conversational sense, she can perhaps speak with "another kind of voice" more effectively; she can do this through her actions.

There is a community of sympathetic Northern Irish voices on the subject of sublimated fury and self-inflicted damage, which share Beckett's interest in these areas. Brian Moore's eponymous heroine in his novel, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, has, like Eleanor, her own particular vehemence, one that is spurred on by her being unmarried, and by her plummeting social circumstances. Towards the end of the book, Judith is both engulfed and freed by her emotions, allowing herself to indulge in excessive consumption of both fury and alcohol: "the rage had started inside her, the pleasant urgency to open it, to fill a glass and sip it slowly, to feel it do its own wonderful work" (112).

Eleanor's actions when Jack does finally return home are similarly embittered. He has spent the whole day in Dublin drinking in a pub right beside the station, seeing nothing of the city, and is so inebriated that he can't manage to walk and needs to be "half carried" by two neighbours. They observe Eleanor's mortification and attempt to ameliorate it with convenient excuses on behalf of Jack: "Don't worry about him. We were all hot after the train ... He's not used to the drink — that's why he's so far gone" (Beckett, *Belfast* 10). Eleanor thanks them "coldly and politely". She is, in her peaked moment of absolute disdain, similarly empowered by the "rage" that Judith Hearne allows to flow bitterly:

As she [Eleanor] watched him her numbness gave place to a violent choking rage... He staggered towards the fireplace, groping blindly for the mantelpiece. She watched him, tight-lipped, and then a wild urge made her push him furiously in front of the fire. He threw up his hand, grabbing at the mantelpiece as he fell, and pulled himself into the chair (Beckett, *Belfast* 10).

If "the greatest enemy of authority ... is contempt" Eleanor's victory over Jack should be complete: even though she did not manage to actually shunt him into the blazing fire, she acted forcefully with surging contempt as her fuel (Arendt 45). However, propriety and cultural context quickly get the better of Eleanor; she doubts her actions and ultimately even her own mind, for immediately after

the act "Her legs felt weak and she sat down slowly, one hand on her cheek and the other holding the table. She couldn't look at him anymore" (Beckett, *Belfast* 10).

When Eleanor questions her own rage — "What had possessed her to try and push him into the fire? That was murder — she might have killed him" — we, as readers, may find it slightly irritating, as Beckett's portrayal of Eleanor's life is so bleak and frustrating that we have sympathised with her violent impulse, even though it is not morally right. Eleanor chastises only herself, not her husband's behaviour and is shocked: "That was what she had come to — murder. Or maybe she imagined it all" (Beckett, *Belfast* 10). Eleanor's doubting of what did, or did not, actually happen is notable. In the rest of the story, she does not display an uncertain hold on reality and yet Beckett introduces such uncertainty here. I would suggest this questioning of reality shows the reader that Eleanor is attempting to erase the potential of what she is actually capable of. And, simultaneously, she is preparing herself to return to the drudgery of her normal life, by replacing what did happen with what *might* have happened.

It's interesting to compare Mary in 'A Belfast Woman', which I discussed in chapter one, who does damage only to herself when she loses her temper and attempts to attack her child's (Protestant) teacher — "My arm stuck in through the glass panel and I pulled it out with a big deep cut from my wrist to my elbow" (Beckett, *Belfast* 90) — with Eleanor, who physically attacks her husband, simultaneously attacking herself, in an emotional sense. Writing of 'A Belfast Woman', Chu He observes: "By scarring herself, Mary actually engraves on her body an immortal memorial ... it is not only a scar of shameful violence but, more importantly, a scar of generational trauma" (767). Eleanor's expression of this "generational trauma" is arguably more shocking than Mary's, in that she wants to burn her husband, a man that, according to social codes, she should be caring for; in this way, it reinforces the historical view quoted earlier in this chapter of feminine violence as the domain of the "unsexed".

In her study of 'literary feminisms' in Northern and Southern Ireland, Rebecca Pelan says: "This sense of life being held barely 'under control' is a prominent feature of much of the women's writing from Northern Ireland, wherein there is a sense of impending eruption kept in check by the frailest of social mores" (56). Finally, Eleanor finds herself guilty because that is what her community expects of her, and because she must find herself guilty first, before they do. Her desire to violence is at least partially consummated with a shove.

### ***A Ghost Story***

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela Carter's feminist reappraisal of the Marquis de Sade's work, she states:

We do not go to bed in simple pairs; even if we choose not to refer to them, we still drag in there with us the cultural impedimenta of our social class, our parents' lives, our bank balances, our sexual and emotional expectations, our whole biographies — all the bits and pieces of our unique existences (9).

'A Ghost Story' is an unusual work by Beckett in that the protagonists, Fiona and Fintan, are a young, apparently extremely modern, newly married couple in 1980s Belfast, whereas most of Beckett's other stories feature married couples that either are, or feel like they are, from a much older era.

"Love, in Beckett's stories, always poses a moral dilemma" (Matthews 105). The couple in this story are no exception and are shown across the twelve pages of the story to be from radically different backgrounds, both financially and socially: "It was their economic approach to life that provided a series of surprises for both of them. Even though they earned similar salaries, prices meant entirely different things to each" (Beckett, *Literary* 19).

We meet them as they argue about buying their first home together. Fiona's wealthy, builder father has offered to buy them a big house as a wedding present, but Fintan will not "sponge" off his father-in-law and instead locates a cheap house that is affordable because, as the estate agent tells him, it is haunted by two old ladies: "But since Fintan was a modern young man who wouldn't heed such womanish nonsense he could pick up a bargain" (Beckett, *Literary* 18). Further, Fintan reasons

that, as the house is relatively newly built, the old ladies (if they did indeed exist at all) could not possibly still be haunting it, which is of itself a strange sort of logic. After some persuasion Fiona reluctantly agrees, but she quickly feels hemmed in by the small scale of the house.

After an unsuccessful house-warming party where the guests get drunk and won't leave — "Fiona was annoyed because things didn't turn out as she had expected" — and where she has felt slighted by Fintan's best friend, Philip, they begin to argue (Beckett, *Literary* 20). Their dispute is about knocking down an interior wall in the house to make the space appear larger, and it is then that they experience the first visitation of the ghosts via an unplugged television set that is transmitting a clear image:

She was a fine-looking old lady with white straight hair brushed back into a bun ... and a black shiny apron with a black frill all the way around it ... Opposite the rocking chair [on which the old lady was sitting] was a wing chair and a figure in it practically hidden (Beckett, *Literary* 22-23).

When the image fades they both realise "It was a man. In the big chair it was a man," not another old lady as they had been led to believe (Beckett, *Literary* 22-23). This discrepancy, in the ghosts being supposed to be two old ladies but turning out to be an old man, may be because the ghosts shift form to match the identities their co-residents. After this first encounter, Fintan is jubilant and Fiona is terrified. The second time they argue about knocking down the same wall, the television once again flickers into life, this time showing the old woman on her knees, distraught, trying to fix her broken rocking chair, while the man stands beside her, watching without helping. The old lady's sobs rise to an unbearable wail. Fintan is shaken; Fiona is furious.

Ghosts occur across a body of Irish writing — such as Anne Enright's *The Gathering* — as unpredictable commemoratives to the country's political struggles, "displacing politics into metaphysics and treating the violence as an irruption of dark, atavistic forces" (Kennedy-Andrews 246). The 'ghost' of the story's title is portrayed by Beckett to be real, i.e. to manifest as something that living beings can experience, but crucially, Beckett is convening the ghost couple to reflect the

ill-starred relationship between Fiona and Fintan: Beckett's ghosts are looking forwards into the marriage, not backwards towards history.

*The Stone Tape*, a 1972 BBC Two play written by Nigel Kneale, tells the story of a research team who, using the new form of technology they are testing, inadvertently discover an age-old evil recorded, literally, in the stone walls of the facility they are working in. The walls' recording is an aural palimpsest of unhappiness. Similarly, Fiona and Fintan's new marital home has curdled over time, and this is expressed through the hauntings they experience.

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed writes: "How one answers the question 'What's wrong?' matters. A wrong that is made personal (what's wrong with you) can be shown to be a matter of how a person inhabits an environment (it is wrong for me)" (125). Fintan and Fiona inhabit their environment in radically different ways which, concurring with Ahmed's observation, leads each of them to classify the other's actions, and thereby also their intentions, as "wrong".

In her introduction to *The Vibrant House: Irish Writing and Domestic Space*, design theorist, Rhona Richman Kenneally, emphasises the 'agency' of the house in Irish writing "owing to its material and spatial properties — its design, materials, contents, geometry and distribution, capacity to hold or propel atmospheric conditions such as warmth or light, and contextual relationships with landscape or resources" (15). In a practical sense, i.e. that the house has agency, Fiona and Fintan are led to argue all the time, and further, in an extra-narrative way, it shows the reader what Beckett thinks is "wrong", which is the whole environment itself.

Philosopher and literary critic Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* explores the philosophical and poetic significance of different kinds of places. In the chapter 'House and Universe' Bachelard discusses how the hitherto restful and safe place of the home can change poles, leading to "events [being] sustained by the combatant house" ultimately "the house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body" (46). Because the questions Fiona and Fintan ask each other — even banal questions that pertain to house renovation — are accusatory, they are perhaps summoning ghosts from within the very fabric of the "combatant" house: a house which Fintan,

wrongly it seems, believed not to be old enough to sustain the supernatural. The corpus of the house is split between Fintan and Fiona's physical and moral energies.

During the next month, subsequent transmissions of the wailing old woman finally come to a head when Fiona takes matters into her own hands:

[She] rushed into the kitchen and came back carrying a stool ... she whirled the stool at the television set, smashing it through the screen and dealing it blow after blow. Fintan felt outrage at the ugly look on Fiona's face and at the wrong use of the sturdy little pine stool with 'Made in Poland' printed in black under the seat ... When she turned triumphantly to him, still brandishing the stool, he felt frightened for a moment that she meant to attack him. Instead she said, 'There! That's settled it. How long would you have stood there before you realised some action was called for? The active sex! God almighty!' (Beckett, *Literary* 24).

There are two notable, and somewhat odd, features to Fintan's thought process in the above passage. First, he considers the possibility of violence being done to him by Fiona: he is more afraid of her than he is of the ghosts (I will come to explore Fintan's fear of Fiona's physicality later). And second, he is perturbed by "the wrong use" of the stool, even noting the stool's country of manufacture. A dual reading may be made of Fintan's second response here: perhaps, he cares more about things than people or perhaps, his sense of groundedness is rocked by the violent misuse of an honestly made "sturdy little pine stool" — after all stools are for sitting on, not for smashing televisions with. He may also be calling to mind the broken chair that the old woman ghost was trying unsuccessfully to fix. Fintan berates Fiona for destroying the television because it was rented, which reinforces their class-based attitudes towards money and objects: for Fiona, the broken television is not monetarily significant, whereas for him it clearly is:

'The set was rented. How are we going to pay the company?' Fintan said.  
'Money again. I'll pay if you're so upset.'  
'You just may. You broke it.' (Beckett, *Literary* 24).

Fiona is unrepentant about having destroyed the television. Her action, a small yet decisive act of violence, frees them both from the ghosts. But on reflection, over the coming weeks she "was careful to be gentle, having frightened herself with her demonstration of violence. She acquiesced in

whatever Fintan wanted" (Beckett, *Literary* 24). Whilst Fintan is scared of Fiona, she is now only scared of herself.

Intermittently throughout 'A Ghost Story', Fintan remarks negatively about how large Fiona's body is. He compares his wife to her mother, "hoping Fiona would fine down eventually and look like her" (Beckett, *Literary* 27). Any request, any expressed desire from Fiona is met with derision and then attention-seeking, as with the father of Ottessa Moshfegh's alcoholic protagonist Eileen, "The one time I'd dared to ask him not to pick on me, he burst out laughing, then feigned a heart attack the next morning" (161). This leads the reader to wonder if in fact Fintan's fear of Fiona smashing him repeatedly with the stool is some form of premonition. Her larger body, her advanced financial and social status are seen by Fintan as being threatening and undermining. Fintan displays disgust towards Fiona, comparing wealth, scale and comparative grandeur to a form of captivity, just like Robert McLiam Wilson's eponymous protagonist, Ripley Bogle's observation, "Her house was fucking massive, like an army barracks" (*Ripley* 269).

Fiona has demonstrated Fintan's inadequacy by 'killing' the ghosts but Beckett goes to show us how she seemingly exercises her feminine 'violence' elsewhere: "He didn't feel like protecting Fiona. She was a big girl, clever, rich ... when she found him inadequate [sexually] he felt like slitting her throat" (Beckett, *Literary* 21-22). Fintan's hate-filled language here seems out of proportion with what we are being told: what personal "impedimenta" is he bringing into their conjugal bed? Pelan's observation about the realistic representation of the diversity and complexity of female Irish identity in short stories is useful here: "In Northern Ireland, this has meant challenging an imposed and dichotomous view of what it means to be female and Northern Irish by introducing the category of gender into existing, entrenched binaries of identity" (132). Fintan sees Fiona as being stronger than him (the reader is not given any proof of this however), so if she can kill ghosts, what could she do to him?

Their life resumes as normal — unhappy silence punctuated with rancorous arguing — until one night Fintan goes to see his friend, Philip, who had previously insulted Fiona at their

housewarming party. Fiona asks Fintan to stay at home but he refuses: she is wounded by Fintan taking Philip's side against her, as she perceives it, once again. When she is alone the eerie wailing starts again, louder and even more distressed than before.

This is the first time in the story that the visitation happens only to one of them, indicating that, if the "combatant" house has indeed absorbed something 'essential' from them, that it no longer requires both of them to be present; the house has what it needs. Frank O'Connor notes in *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* that, in narrative development "an ideal action [is] worked out in terms of verisimilitude" (13). The house and the house's ghosts have absorbed Fiona and Fintan's anger, grief and disappointment and given it voice, making it into an "ideal action". Fiona 'killed' the ghosts just temporarily. Beckett draws a clear parallel between the old woman's inability to fix her broken rocking chair and Fiona's inability to fix her marriage: they are both wailing.

They move out of the house and separate until, when Fintan is offered a job in Saudi Arabia, Fiona agrees to go with him to try to save their marriage.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that their environment must radically change for their relationship to survive, a change so radical that it entails travelling thousand of miles.

On the last visit to their old home, Fintan is filled with regret, mourning for "the brightness gone so rapidly from their lives" (Beckett, *Literary* 28). Like John Lennon, as fictionally portrayed by Kevin Barry, Fintan is also "attended by ghosts but they are his own" (64). We see just how Fintan is haunting himself; his hand becomes smudged with paint and:

When he saw a black stain on the palm of his hand he scrubbed at it in panic. Once he has shut himself into the security of his car he wondered had Fiona felt like this during previous emanations, while he didn't, and if so was she in this way and, who knows, perhaps in other ways a protection to him" (Beckett, *Literary* 28).

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<sup>8</sup> It's interesting to note (but perhaps coincidental), that Beckett chose Saudi Arabia as the destination for the couple's relocation, in the period of 1980s when the story is set, when the country was undergoing dramatic social change through burgeoning conservative Islamic laws, and where Fiona would enjoy much less mobility and status as a woman.

The gendered contrast between superstition and logic defined by Fintan, at the beginning of the story, in relation to the notion of the house being haunted as being "womanish nonsense", is reversed. He is hallucinating, or more accurately projecting, a black stain of guilt onto his very hand, which leads him to reconsider his relationship with his wife, and to suddenly see Fiona as some sort of human talisman draining psychic, and as he says, perhaps other sorts of, danger away from him.

Despite Fintan's disapproval of Fiona's physical size and her single act of directional destruction, he realises by the end of 'A Ghost Story' it is the potential of her violence that is keeping him safe.

### ***Heaven***

If as Hannah Arendt suggests "violence always needs implements" then what might be the domestic implements of choice for Beckett's violent women? (4)

'Heaven' is an eleven page story, humorously parabolic in tone, which illustrates a simple moral lesson: a lesson learned by both its main character, Hilary, and by the reader: in the story's opening line Hilary is discovering the joy of being alone: "To Hilary in her sixties, heaven was an empty house" (Beckett, *Literary* 107).

We are quickly introduced to Hilary, a married woman with four sons, a perfectionist who takes extreme pride in excelling at domestic tasks, particularly those most visible to her competitive neighbours: "She had appeared always as a devoted mother ... The nappies on the line were white and square like a television advertisement. The standard in the district was high ... but Hilary was out on her own" (Beckett, *Literary* 107). It is interesting to note Beckett's use of the word "appeared" here: who is Hilary's appearance for and to whom is she advertising? I would suggest that she is acting both to and for herself primarily, yet that she thinks she requires an audience to witness it in order for it to be correct, for there to be a point to it: "But how can housework be made into a creative activity? The minute we apply a glimmer of consciousness to a mechanical gesture ... we sense new impressions" (Bachelard 67).

But "the effort of all this perfectionism drained her each day" (Beckett, *Literary* 108). Hilary is wound tightly in her own domestic trap; as Simone Weil observes "We are drawn towards a thing because it is good. We end by being chained to it because it has become necessary" (45). Hilary is aggressively perfect.

When her children grow up and leave home, Hilary's intense focus shifts to honing her own sense of serenity, solo in her picture-perfect house while her husband is out at work: "Gradually she realised that this was not an occasional luxury, this solitude, but a routine. So she fixed a time every morning to sit and relish the quiet ... She began thinking of heaven. She imagined great silence" (Beckett, *Literary* 110). This is Hilary's 'heaven' of the story's title, an earthly, home-based vision, a state of secular grace. As anthropologist Mary Douglas notes in *Purity and Danger*: "In a chaos of shifting impressions, each of us construct a stable world in which objects have recognisable shapes, are located in depth, and have permanence ... the most acceptable cues are those which fit most easily into the pattern that is being built up" (45). Hilary likes constructing permanence in the domestic arena, but has an eye on eternal permanence too.

It seems that, in later life, Hilary is freed a little from her previous need of being observed in the act of being ideal by her neighbours: she is in heaven in her solitary domesticity, is reading her house's "cues" and is creating a peaceful routine to stabilise them. To preserve her heaven, Hilary refuses to look after grandchildren, even though her son and his wife "did not forgive her" for this (Beckett, *Literary* 112). Beckett adds "the woman in 'Heaven' also didn't want the grandchildren because she was afraid of becoming a perfectionist with them" (Perry 80). In trying to break one routine, Hilary replaces it with another.

There is a clear motif emerging across Beckett's three short stories cited in this chapter of the oscillation between order and disorder. With Hilary, the excess of one seems to make it morph into the other. We see this trait also in Eleanor and with Fiona playing out across the anger and disappointment created by a change in routine, while at the same time some sort of an opposite desire, however inchoate, is also expressed. Whilst some of these 'symptoms' may be associated with

mental health conditions such as OCD, I am not necessarily suggesting that Beckett is attempting to foreground domestically-bound, arguably gendered, disorders, but rather that the various domestic circumstances that the women in these three stories find themselves in creates in them somewhat obsessional behaviour. It seems possible that Beckett would have created characters who displayed these 'symptoms' for the purpose of suggesting that their circumstances impact on them adversely, generate (or kick into action and perpetuate) disorders in them. Clearly at her time of writing, much less would have been known clinically about these such disorders, and even less said publically, consequently, there may be a subtlety (and insightfulness) to Beckett hinting at what would now be widely recognised as mental health issues in various of the stories, or on the other hand, maybe she didn't think about it that way at all, perhaps she was just conveying what she observed. It's impossible to be sure though from what is explicated in the stories themselves.

Whilst Hilary may no longer feel the need to be seen by her neighbours, one of them feels the need to see her, and sends a poison-pen letter (one of Beckett's preferred devices as we have seen in chapter one) accusing her of hurrying home, "without talking to her neighbours and shutting herself in the house" because she is an alcoholic. Hilary is dismayed not by the accusation of being alcoholic but that "the letter-writer had mistaken the object of her addiction" (Beckett, *Literary* 112-113). Her addiction, less socially recognised or frowned upon, but to Hilary equally troubling, is the heaven that the now peaceful house bestows.

When her (unnamed) husband retires, however, her peace is shattered by his persistent presence and, as Hilary perceives it, overweening need for her companionship. She resumes the obsessive domesticity that she practiced when rearing her sons. But now, her house, her heaven is contaminated by her husband's constant presence: "The refuge shrinks in size ... From having been a refuge, it has become a redoubt" (Bachelard 46). The house is turning toxic: "The smallest sound impinged on her — the gentle bong of a Venetian blind upstairs at an open window" (Beckett, *Literary* 115). Beckett is careful here to impute, through her use of the adjectives "smallest" and "gentle", that Hilary's pain is as unreasonable as it is apparently unbearable, leading the reader to

both empathise and to question her suffering. The story's key scene comes one year after her husband has retired:

Before the winter set in she [Hilary] told the priest at her monthly Confession, 'I have feelings of hatred for my husband, murderous feelings. I am afraid I will do him an injury. I have carving knives and heavy casseroles in the kitchen.' The priest told her to pray about it ... 'But' he warned her ' don't let hatred enter your soul or you'll be fighting it until your dying day.' She was afraid then of losing her peace in heaven as well as the peace in her home (Beckett, *Literary* 115).

Hilary has clearly been calculating not only an act of violence towards her husband, but also how she will technically achieve it by using the accoutrements of domesticity — i.e. "heavy casseroles" — for a new purpose. Hilary's admission is darkly comic; it "evokes laughter but not liberation, insight but no sense of hope" (Storey 114). It's useful to note here the 'ideal' of the confessional is that the confessant is agreeing not to repeat the behaviour/thinking, by telling a priest, by repenting, by doing penance, by praying. Again, then, Hilary displays one of Beckett's classic dichotomies, discerning (and briefly nurturing) an urge to violence within herself then swiftly attempting to purge herself of it.

Hilary's beloved patterns of behaviour have been hopelessly broken. Her desired act of violence, confessed to the priest, articulates not only her anger towards her husband but also, and crucially, the violence she does to herself through the highly suffocating nature of her 'patterns', which are arguably as much of a problem as her husband is. I would suggest the mores of domesticity that have developmentally been enacted upon Hilary (by herself and by the society of which she part) are the cause of a large part of her highly internalised anger and simultaneously provide her with the tools with which to externalise it.

What follows are three descriptions of adhocism. In cultural theorists Charles Jencks' and Nathan Silver's seminal textbook, *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*, they outline how adhocism "basically involves using an available system or dealing with an existing situation in a new way to solve a problem quickly and efficiently" (9). In his essay on object and human agency, 'A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans', sociologist Bruno Latour suggests that new tools are created by

humans (and indeed by other animals) who are frustrated. Designer George Nelson's sinisterly entitled 'How to Kill People: A Problem of Design', discusses the often adhoc nature of making weapons from what is easily at hand, suggesting "the handle [of a broom etc.] made a good club, recalling the mace of earlier times" (51). Combined, these three descriptions aptly describe Hilary's fantasy plan to murder her husband: resourceful (Jencks and Silver); born of resentment (Latour); brutal (Nelson).

It's interesting to note that the term 'femme', defined by Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer in 1978, within the visual art context, as an activity "practiced by women using traditional women's techniques to achieve their art — sewing, piecing, hooking, cutting, appliquéing" was looked upon within mainstream art criticism somewhat disparagingly as a domestic and ephemeral form of creation, as against say casting in metal or painting on canvas. By contrast, Hilary's use of materials is inspired and potentially fatally permanent. "It is impossible to forgive whoever has done us harm if that harm has lowered us. We have to think that it has not lowered us, but has revealed our true level": Hilary is elevated to the status of a creative inventor, albeit a potentially murderous one, by her husband who has done her 'heaven harm' (Weil 5).

Hilary's conscience, and her common sense of course, prevent her carrying out her fantasy. So she devises another, much more benign, scheme to free herself from her husband, inviting her five toddler grandchildren to play in her house every afternoon, where her husband "Apart from collecting and delivering [the children] took no interest in them". Finally, he absents himself on a daily basis with a like-minded grandfather he has met at the playschool (Beckett, *Literary* 116).

Through sacrificing her desire for domestic perfection, Hilary finally succeeds in ousting her spouse, and freeing herself from the domestic patterns to which she was addicted; she thereby negotiates a sliver of her domestic heaven and the spiritual one to come: "Now and again, she did catch a distant glimpse of calm corridors and vaulted roofs all soundless and it gave her a feeling of great sweetness in anticipation" (Beckett, *Literary* 117).

In this chapter, I have discussed how Beckett's female characters in 'The Excursion', 'A Ghost Story' and 'Heaven' secretly harbour, and sometimes carry out acts of violence. I have drawn a link between Beckett's protagonists experiencing conflicting feelings about the fury they feel, and the historical perception of violent tendencies of some Irish women as essentially unfeminine; observing, however, that the instability of the changing Irish domestic sphere across the twentieth century provides, in the stories, not only a potential site for such desired violence to take place, but also the tools with which to enact it. Speculating on the resourcefulness of Eleanor, Fiona and Hilary, I've thought through how they utilise adhocist methods to carry out their violent acts; in the case of Hilary an act she does not actually do, but one that she deems unsettling and viable enough to confess to a priest. Noting a motif across the three stories of obsessional behaviour and how this manifests in the alternation between order and disorder, I argue that, in large part, such obsessions are caused by the damaging expectations of domestic and marital perfection. Expanding on these complex, (and for the characters often confusing), emotional attributes that Beckett gives her protagonists. In the next chapter I will focus on her novel, *Give Them Stones*, examining the multi-layered feeling of shame as experienced by the main character, Martha Murtagh, as an individual and as an Northern Irish citizen.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Shame and Belonging*

*I must go round the people I know in this town and impress on them that Matthew had nothing to do with endangering their children. They know he hadn't, but they might have doubts.*

— Beckett, *Belfast* 82

*Birds sing not from pure joy, but to mark and defend their territory ... such a pressure might include the song of shame; a shame at making a noise which must become bearable — in that both the shame and its transforming noise can be borne ... my own aim is to finally 'convert' shame into a bearable sadness.*

— Denise Riley, *Shame and Modern Writing* 72

*Give Them Stones* is Beckett's only long-form work, a novel published in 1987. The book's story is told in the first person, past tense, from the viewpoint of Martha Murtagh — another of Beckett's ordinary working-class Catholic women — and spans sixty years of her life in Belfast. Whilst it shares many thematic concerns and dramatic incidents with Beckett's short stories, most notably 'A Belfast Woman', this book presents significantly more developed characterisation and durational narrative. Martha is a partial and emotive witness to most of the important events in the recent history of Northern Ireland. In *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature*, a recent collection edited by Heather Ingman and Clíona Ó Gallchoir, Ingman writes of *Give Them Stones* that it is a "guarded and ironic account of a woman's life in West Belfast from the 1950s to the era of the Troubles" (270).

In this chapter, I examine how an ordinary woman like Martha survives, both materially and psychologically, in a hostile environment through social compromise and small-scale entrepreneurship. As a result of her accrued experiences, she becomes party to the sense of shame that is associated with her poverty-bound class — "One of the most stigmatised life-conditions, in all societies, is poverty. The poor are routinely shunned and shamed" (Nussbaum 282). Crucially,

shame has also leached into the socio-political collective memory of which she is one small part: "We normally think of shame as a private emotion, one that we have on our own ... a shame that we share with others, with members of our group, of our nation" (Morgan 2).

Literary theorist Astrid Erll, in her work on cultural memory, states that one cannot observe memory itself only "through concrete acts of remembering situated in specific socio-cultural contexts"; rather that certain other conditions (emotional etc.) are required to summon it effectively (28). I will examine Martha's perception of her shared "cultural memory" and how this combines with the nuanced exposition of shame in the novel, through Martha's "socio-cultural" context, along with her hope for 'her people', which she clearly expresses when she says, "and the Catholics wouldn't be despised any more and we could have a bit of confidence in ourselves" (Beckett, *Give* 131). My argument concurs with and develops some observations made in Kelly Matthews' short study of shame, guilt and gender in Beckett's early short stories. For example, when she says that: "Beckett's characters are more concerned with the judgment of their closest neighbours and family members ... this technique underscores the power of shame in her character's lives" (Matthews 102). Additionally, I will go on to situate Martha's fictional life within actual historical testimony from Northern Irish women from the same period of the Troubles, comparing the convergences of Beckett's fictional portrayal and those of eye-witnesses.

Shame is obviously a complex concept, one I will not attempt to exhaustively define here. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I will begin by bringing together three clear descriptions of shame, which are useful touchstones for my discussion of Beckett's novel and the approach taken to the construction and depiction of Martha's character.

In the introduction to literary historian Barry Sheils' and psychoanalyst Julie Walsh's edited collection, *Shame and Modern Writing*, they write: "The first and quite obvious observation ... is that shame can be deployed as a noun and a verb" they continue, "I am ashamed when I find myself delineated or differentiated by being out of place ... there is a sense that shame cannot 'belong' to anybody despite being very much about the problem of belonging" (5). The problematic question of

who shame 'belongs to' is relevant within the context of the twentieth-century Northern Irish history that Beckett is writing about (and within) suggesting, as it does, that one can never really own one's shame and must therefore have 'inherited' it from somewhere else — somewhere "out of place": this is Martha's cultural memory.

In psychologists Mark Leary and June Tangney's preface to *Handbook of Self and Identity*, they remark, "Shame involves self-criticism. It does not aim at an action per se but rather at the self who feels it" (3). This suggests that an individual's agency is self-reflexively attacked and degraded by shame, regardless of what they have done or what is being done to them. We shall see later in this chapter how Martha plays such self-reflexive shame out through her actions.

And thirdly, philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his chapter 'Shame, or On the Subject' from *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, states: "Shame is what is produced in the absolute concomitance of subjectification and desubjectification, self-loss and self-possession, servitude and sovereignty" (107). He explains "subjectification" as the process by which human behaviours are controlled and modified by "apparatuses"; such apparatuses may include state, societal and gender conventions (Agamben, *Apparatus* 14). The co-existence of seeming opposites that Agamben suggests produces a disorientating pull-push effect, which is seen playing out in the novel when Martha is experiencing shame. She is consistently unable to settle on one side of her own personal (or for that matter political) argument, despite her nationalist proclivities; however, she does not let this impinge upon either her innate sense of "sovereignty" of self or her ability to act.

The reader is told that Martha is "reared very gently" by her father, who "minded us because he couldn't get work" (Beckett, *Give* 11). He looks after the household and his children sensitively but is embarrassed about doing certain domestic tasks — he "washed the floor ... [but] didn't do the semi circle on the pavement outside the front door ... he washed dishes and clothes but he wouldn't go messages" — going so far as to instruct the child Martha "Don't tell any of the wee girls I washed

you. Sure you won't" (Beckett, *Give* 11; 12; 14).<sup>9</sup> Her father's concern about doing household chores which are not 'manly' (combined with his willingness to undertake certain 'hidden' domestic tasks) is interesting, in that it shows his perception of 'gender-expectation' to be mapped outwards onto the society he is part of; as Louis Althusser states "it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that 'men' 'represent to themselves' in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is related to them there" (257).<sup>10</sup> Her father's influence is substantial, in terms of day-to-day domestic responsibilities, as we have seen, and also in terms of Martha's political awareness, which he instils in her through storytelling about his younger days, such as the informal history lessons he gives her whilst climbing the Cave Hill in Belfast:

And not so long ago Wolfe Tone had addressed a meeting of the United Irishmen up these [hills] and told them Ireland was going to be free. I didn't like the stories about tribes attacking or being besieged but I loved listening to how Ireland was going to be free" (Beckett, *Give* 18).

There is a low-key social aspirational quality to Martha's character, which is nurtured by her doting father. She is academically advanced at school, "a clever wee girl who learned her lessons all by herself", yet is held back by her teachers who give preference to the children from "better areas"(Beckett, *Give* 14).

A key means by which Beckett delineates Martha's character, and her associated aspiration, is through her use of dialect words and syntax. In *Give Them Stones* both are used more regularly and consistently than in any of her other works — for example, phrases like "them seedy sodas" and "give my head peace" (Beckett, *Give* 30; 102). Martha tells her own life story in her own way, but can speak 'properly' when she chooses to; she has taught herself to do this at school: "We used to pitch our voices high and think we were getting rid of our Belfast accents. 'Talking swanky' was what we called it" (Beckett, *Give* 14).

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<sup>9</sup> "Messages" are shopping.

<sup>10</sup> It's troubling to note that although Althusser's observations about the ideological performance of being a man are interesting, that he fatally strangled his wife, H el ene Rytman in 1980.

In the 1973 documentary, *A Place Called Ardoyne*, one bittersweet scene features a schoolgirl reading out the poem she has written about how she feels about the violence surrounding her. She fluffs the reading over and over again because she keeps trying to read it out in her "swanky voice". Her own emotional experience and embodied knowledge of what it is like to live her life in Ardoyne bleed through her young voice, making her experience shame, so that she cannot talk swanky.

Martha's deliberate shift across speech registers demonstrates a more nuanced understanding and self-awareness of her position in society than the majority of characters in Beckett's other works. This idea is illustrated when Martha attains a scholarship for a grammar school; she makes the decision not to take it "because I thought we had not enough money" (Beckett, *Give* 22). In this way, Martha has more agency and arguably self-awareness than, for example, Susan's character in 'A Farm of Land', discussed in chapter one. Martha demonstrates positional dexterity through her ability to switch speech patterns — to be chameleonic — as suits the situation and her needs, in contrast this with the inability to do so of the young girl in *A Place Called Ardoyne*.

After the first Blitz bombing Martha is evacuated from Belfast, with her brother and sister, to the countryside to live with two kindly old aunts.<sup>11</sup> When her other, more rambunctious siblings are sent back to Belfast, Martha stays and it is this location that fortifies her character through the technical (baking) and societal skills she acquires from the elderly women — women whose observed customs differ from those she has been previously used to. Interestingly, traditional gender roles from Martha's city life are subtly subverted in the country: she sees a boy knitting a red jumper and women, one of whom is wearing a man's panama hat, doing hard manual labour in the surrounding fields; the potential role of exposure to these alternative gender models arguably influences her self-formulation later in the novel.

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<sup>11</sup> After London, Belfast was the most heavily blitzed city during the Second World War largely because of its shipbuilding and industries. 745 people died, thousands were injured and a quarter of the population was made homeless (Maguire 183).

Beckett outlines the major happenings in Martha's life during her stay in the country in broad strokes, including the internment and ultimate death of her father. The internment of her father, on the suspicion that he used to be in the IRA in his youth — "He was taken away by the police early one morning shortly after that with Uncle Jimmy and other men" — is significant in that internment, for Catholics only, returns to Northern Ireland in the early phase of the Troubles, in 1971, presuming the criminalisation of one side of the community; this presumed guilt leaks into Martha, as we shall see later in this chapter (Beckett, *Give* 29).

When both of her aunts die, Martha happily returns to Belfast's community, with a somewhat idealistic cast of mind: "I was glad that I was back living in Belfast with rows of houses and the smoke tugging parallel black out of all the chimneys and everybody keeping everybody warm" (Beckett, *Give* 104). Agamben writes: "To be ashamed means to be consigned to something that cannot be assumed ... Rather, it originates in our own intimacy; it is what is most intimate in us" (105-106). What Agamben pinpoints here as the source of being ashamed, and therefore of shame itself, is the intimate self. For Martha, what is "most intimate" is not fully disclosed by Beckett — Martha is not given to excessive introspection or lengthy speeches, tending to act rather than discuss her actions. The reader, however, is shown that her hometown, Belfast, is one key element which is "most intimate" in her through her happiness at returning to the city despite despite the safety, peace and growing independence she has experienced while living living in the countryside.

Further to this, the reader is reliant on testing Martha's intimate actions against her context. In his essay 'The Novel and the Northern Troubles', Elmer Kennedy-Andrews writes that Martha's character is "priggish" and "coldly detached" (240). Contrary to this, I would suggest that Martha is a product of her religion and her restrictive social class, her character, (as many of Beckett's characters do): "probe[s] the psychological attitudes of the region, portraying ... Northern Ireland as a harsh, repressed society" (Ingman and Ó Gallchoir 288). This aspect of Martha's character follows Agamben's logic by suggesting that she cannot "assume" herself within the context she lives in and

that, due to the "intimacy" of shame, these aspects of her identity and circumstances combine to make her inner life opaque, perhaps even to her.

A good example of such opacity is when Martha visits her — previously dearly beloved — father in hospital, where he is fatally ill with TB. From this episode, we discover that he has been figuratively been "cold and dead" to Martha for some time, despite her nurturing childhood relationship with him. Martha does not openly state how her feelings towards her dying father have changed, or indeed *why* they have changed. Rather the reader is guided towards this conclusion through Beckett's linkage of the past and the present of Martha's life up to that point: when Martha confuses the local priest's words in a sermon about parishioners being "interred" with them being "interned", she subconsciously links death with imprisonment (Beckett, *Give* 61).

To a certain extent, Martha is 'freed' by her father's death, in that she is made even more independent than before, both personally and also historically in the novel as Sullivan observes in her essay on Marxism and materialism: "Scholars are familiar with internment in Ireland's history but consistently fail to examine women's relationship to it; Beckett forces this examination" (*Materialist Politics* 237). Earlier in the narrative, Martha's mother is similarly 'freed' when her husband is interned in that she has more agency over her day-to-day life, even though she has to take on extra work to provide for her children; this shown by Beckett to be a simple fact of her mother's life (and many other women's lives) at that time rather than an extraordinary hardship.

After her father's death, Martha's acquisition and saving of money begins a motif that runs throughout the novel, as it does in some other Beckett works discussed in this essay. The difference with Martha, however, is that she has her own money — a small but not insignificant amount, bequeathed to her by her elderly aunts. At first, Martha protests, not wanting to take the money (while simultaneously acknowledging her own, understandable, hypocrisy): "But even while I was saying it I was beginning to think how comfortable it would be to have a bit of money by me" (Beckett, *Give* 56).

It's interesting that Martha keeps secret the money given to her by her aunts, telling no one, not even her mother, that she has it, "I felt guilty borrowing money from my mother when I had three hundred pounds with that solicitor in Lurgan" (Beckett, *Give* 99). Whilst clearly an act of financial self-preservation, it denotes Martha's complicated emotional relationship with money, a relationship which ranges from bitterness over the fact that her siblings were given more material opportunities than she was — "I never cost any of them anything" — to shame and self-loathing, for example regarding her contribution, as a pupil, to a small fund enabling her schoolteacher to buy a set of maps: "like the poor mean-spirited cowed people we were, we brought in our pennies" (Beckett, *Give* 59; 26). Though differently inflected, both these responses to money are shame-based and further exhibit meaningful parts of "what is most intimate" in Martha. Alongside its role in illustrating shame, Martha's nest-egg works in the opposite direction — as a means of furthering her potential independence — her keeping quiet about it is part of the self-preservation that ultimately allows her to survive in the harsh environment of which she is part. The reader is shown that whilst she feels conflicted about it, Martha has the sense to remain circumspect about disclosing what she owns.

As the Troubles begin in earnest, and "the simmering tensions in sectarian relations" develop, Martha's nationalism — and her concomitant desire for a united Ireland — is developed by Beckett (Storey 116). She witnesses how people like her are treated: "The Falls Road curfew happened at the beginning of July 1970 ... The people in those wee streets just like ours were shut in and not allowed out for any messages while the soldiers searched all the houses for guns ... They broke up the houses"; "When the explosions began I took them as my protest. They happened at night. Nobody was hurt. They showed we were disgusted at the way things were turning out. There were shops and factories that were nothing to do with us". She states "the thought of the border's like a nail sticking up in my shoe" (Beckett, *Give* 121; 118). This is the first instance in the novel where Martha uses 'we' rather than 'I', identifying directly with 'her' community: "I was crying, first

with vexation and then with pride when a whole army of women with bread and milk came marching" (Beckett, *Give* 121).

Whilst Martha is no raving Republican, she is shown by Beckett to be honing her political focus: "Women nationalists raised the question of priorities, an interesting question in examining the portrayal of women in the stories of the troubles" (Storey 181). Beckett reveals Martha to be questioning and readjusting her "priorities" in the wake of what she is witnessing; her priorities of being a nationalist and of needing to work to earn money. Sullivan suggests: "Here Martha becomes aware not only of the specific effects of oppression upon women, but also of the specific resistance women will demonstrate ... Martha recognises that women will resist the curfew by bringing food to their neighbours" (*Materialist Politics* 236). Martha's comment that "there were shops and factories that were nothing to do with us" is worth further consideration in that she is suggesting a sectarian divide in who owns what: she is suggesting that such enterprises are Protestant and, as such, are distanced from her and her kind: her own home baking initiative is small-scale and independent.<sup>12</sup> This chimes with Beckett's own observation about sectarianism in the cultural industries, referenced in the introduction to this essay.

One aspect of how sectarianism was played out on a daily basis in Northern Ireland during the Troubles was that names and naming were crucial. For example, there were, and to a certain degree still are, Catholic and Protestant names which clearly indicated what 'foot you kicked with'. Whilst not impossible, it was very unlikely that a working-class Catholic family in the 1970-1980s would have named their child William or Rhonda for fear that, "A confusion of tongues gives way to the buzz of sectarian violence" (McNamee 138). While in Anne Devlin's short story 'Naming the

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<sup>12</sup> A report, produced by the London School of Economics, states that by the 1980s, 50% of the Belfast population was unemployed and that this figure was largely due to industrial decline. Employment thereafter became dominated by public sector jobs located in the greater Belfast area "in order to even up the skewed overall employment patterns in industry, services and professions that had traditionally favoured Protestants" (9).

Names', as her young IRA woman, Finn, is being interrogated, she repeats the street names of the area she has grown up in, demonstrating that names can be used as a shield as well as a weapon.

It is significant, therefore, that Beckett calls her character, Martha, which does not firmly signify a Catholic or Protestant identity. Interestingly, forefronting this ambiguity is an approach that Beckett admits to using herself (as her surname is Protestant) in terms of safeguarding her work from censorship, working "under false pretences" as she puts it, also referred to this in the introduction to this essay.

This use of a relatively indefinable name may well suggest Beckett intended to give her protagonist a certain ambiguity and therefore more mobility than someone with a more traditionally Catholic name. Martha is shown — throughout most of her life — to avoid coming down firmly on any one side, in spite of her somewhat romantic desires for a united Ireland and her desire for 'her people' to be free from shame for "a person in a guilt-orientated society may suffer intensely" (Matthews 101). Beckett highlights the equivocal in Martha's thoughts and actions, as partly indicated by her name, and by doing so allows Martha to be more of an active participant in her own life despite the immense contrary weight of cultural memory.

Importantly, Martha is described in the Gospels of Luke and John as Lazarus' sister and as one of the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection: "But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things'" (Luke 10:41-42). Martha is a witness to what is going on around her, a witness who is not unaffected by what she sees; yet she continues to think for herself.

Martha calls herself by only by one 'name', that of a home baker, for her ability to bake, and to sell her bread, is the key to her independence and resourcefulness, and is therefore intrinsic to her identity. Despite being called different things by different communities — a "Teague" by her Protestant neighbours, a "Republican" by a British soldier, a "traitor" by IRA men — she insists on

this one nomenclature for herself: "Are you a Republican? he asked and I shrugged.<sup>13</sup> I was going to be a heroine but instead I said, 'I am a home baker '". Elsewhere, she remarks that, "If I am not baking bread I am nobody and nothing" (Beckett, *Give* 123; 147). Being a home baker is the only thing that is indisputable in Martha's life, so much so that she chooses her husband on the basis of it, "I knew I wanted to marry Dermot when I saw his gas cooker. I'd never had an oven. There came into my head all the things I could cook" (Beckett, *Give* 76). Sullivan observes: "As a home baker or female wage earner, she will bake her bread for the working-class women around her, thereby disrupting nationalist ideology and state intervention and complicating the terms of class analysis for women" (*Materialist Politics* 245). Martha is taking control of her own fate in the face of "ideology and state intervention" by being a provider buoyed on by the women she has seen distributing food in the early days of the Troubles, as mentioned above.

Throughout the novel, again emphasising the source of Martha's name, Beckett evokes biblical imagery for the everyday; for example, when the river near Martha's house breaches, she says, "Was it a punishment on me when the flood came higher that year than it had ever come before?" (Beckett, *Give* 107).

Crucially, the book's title is taken from Nathaneal West's 1933 fiction *Miss Lonelyhearts*: "When they ask for bread don't give them crackers as does the Church, and don't, like the State, tell them to eat cake. Explain that man cannot live by bread alone and give them stones" (5). This passage in its entirety is quoted in the novel by her father's friend, Joe, who has read it in "one of my father's books" and "was never done saying it" (Beckett, *Give* 15). This explicitly links with Sullivan's observations outlined above about how Martha is "disrupting nationalist ideology and state intervention" through her actions as a home baker, but that it disrupts only in a small scale way.

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<sup>13</sup> More commonly spelt 'Taig, "Teague" is a derogatory term for Northern Irish Catholics. In the novel, Martha relates that Protestants jeer at her, saying the word is the Irish word for rat, which it is not; it is a corruption of the Irish masculine name Tadhg.

Additionally, Beckett, via West, is referring, in an inter-textual way, to Matthew's description of 'The Temptation of Jesus' when Satan taunts Jesus to change stones to bread but is chastised for his over-literalness and reliance on material things (Matthew 4:4). Beckett said of her choice of title: "I thought that terrible cynicism and bitterness fits in so beautifully with those out-of-work men sitting in Belfast — that they'd realise they're not the only people in the world in this pitiable state" (Perry 71).

The title's provenance also undercuts the apparent simplicity of Martha's self-esteem, exposing a complicated core within it. This is because, as we have seen, although Martha is proud to be a home-baker the bread she bakes — bread that is happily purchased and consumed by her neighbours, IRA men and British soldiers alike — cannot fill the moral and social void propagated by the Troubles. It is here, within this complicated core, where I identify Martha's shame along with the shared shame of her community: "I'd think wouldn't it be lovely if it was really our own country that we could be proud in" (Beckett, *Give* 18). Martha may make bread that fills her neighbours' stomachs (and, to some extent, fills her own pocket), but physical sustenance is obviously not enough to adequately satisfy Belfast's loss of 'self' through increasing violence. This ambiguity in Martha's character, her shame about being (Northern) Irish, is captured in Edna O'Brien's 1976 memoir, *Mother Ireland*:

When you are Irish you know both sides and you are curiously uneasy with both. Uneasy with the outsiders who expect their version of you to manifest — jolly with roisterings, even more uneasy with the natives who want you or anyone to lift them corporally out of their mire and degeneration and bring them straight to heaven in a chariot (38).

Martha and her home city of Belfast are entangled: "Shame is an acutely painful emotion that is typically accompanied by a sense of shrinking or 'being small,' and by a sense of worthlessness and powerlessness" (Leary and Tangney 13). The "powerlessness" of shame is a powerful, yet sometimes confusing, motor for action. Through Martha, Beckett renders that complex of action-in-response-to-powerlessness, something I recognise from working-class Belfast women I grew up alongside, very well.

Bryony Reid observes in her essay 'Creating Counterspaces: Identity and the Home in Ireland and Northern Ireland in Environment and Planning' that:

Because of the intimate nature of the Troubles, houses have been on the frontline of violent struggle used as boltholes and weapon stores by paramilitaries, the carriers of political symbols of assertion of resistance such as flags; as the objects of invasion and search by the army and police, often the site of their inhabitants' murders ... private family homes in Northern Ireland have been made full participants in the public world in ways specific to the province's history and politics (943).

Beckett's representation of the 'counterspaces' that Reid frames is most fully formed in *Give Them Stones*, which embodies the (often nefarious) variety of ways in which domestic space are used, as well as the intrinsic link the spaces — and by association their inhabitants — have with what is going on in the world outside: that forces itself inside.

Beckett's interior and exterior worlds are entirely consistent with oral history testimonies.<sup>14</sup> To illustrate this, I will highlight observed group characteristics from two key books presenting real interviews about daily life at the height of the Troubles (with interviewees who are predominantly Catholic working-class women), *Strong about it All* and *Beyond the Silence: Women's Unheard Voices from the Troubles*. What follows, I argue, is an emblematic example of how such women express shame through the figure of the 'raid'.

The raid — a full house search made by the British Army — was a key occurrence in many working-class Catholics' lives on a regular basis during the Troubles. "Terror", as Hannah Arendt remarks, "is not the same as violence; it is, rather, the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power, does not abdicate but, on the contrary, remains in full control" (55). The raid was particularly terrorising because it radically smashed the boundaries — literally and figuratively — between private and public space, thereby controlling how communities lived not only on the streets, but also in their own homes: this is a confusing and troubling notion in relation to the concept of home: "I headed home towards my no-go area" (Burns, *Milkman* 81). As

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<sup>14</sup> I am not suggesting Beckett would have had access to such oral testimonies of the time, rather that she would have been familiar with the same sort of personal histories.

one young girl, living in North Belfast, who was interviewed for *Do You See What I See? Young People's Experience of the Troubles in their own Words and Photographs* stated (about her neighbours and the security forces alike): "They're fightin' to show that they have power and control, you know. It's really stupid, like" (quoted in Dyer 106).

Both Harris and Healey's and Campbell's edited collections of oral histories place strong emphasis on the raid: "Many women would have gotten into the habit of cleaning up every night in anticipation of a raid so as 'not to give them [British soldiers] anything to talk about'" (Harris and Healey 55); "We were raided every morning for years. We felt like hostages every day, with Brits in and out of our house constantly, going through everything we owned ... We were made to get up early, make the beds, make sure everything was spotlessly clean, and, 'Give those British bastards nothing to say about us'" (Campbell 121).

This obviously anomalous action of cleaning a house that is just about to be 'broken' embodies Michael Morgan's definition of shame as, "an emotional state that overcomes us when certain kinds of circumstances occur" (2) together with Mark Leary and June Tangney's observation that "Shame punishes immoral behaviour, as it is felt when individuals violate (or anticipate violating) important social standards"(13). The key word here is "anticipate" for it is on anticipation that the workings of shame pivots; Martha, like the women quoted above, comes to expect a certain type of judgement and resulting treatment. This could be said to be true for many of Beckett's other characters, including those I have discussed in the previous chapters, for the slippery concept of shame plays a part in displacement and feminine violence also.

The physical and figurative smashing of the inside and the outside boundary, through the action of the raid, is important within Beckett's fictional worlds (and indeed within gendered accounts of the Troubles), because the outside, the Catholic streets, are identified with men, those who are being "lifted" and those who "were out at night ... taken away and tortured and murdered ... all shot and flung in entries ... some stabbed and cut and crosses carved into them" (Beckett, *Give*

132).<sup>15</sup> By exposing the traditionally perceived male and female domains, by this forcible collision of both the private and the public, "shamed people feel exposed" (Leary and Tangney 13). That the one space kept as sacrosanct and controlled — the home (which happens, in Beckett's world to be the woman's domain) — being invaded and trashed is exposing and profoundly destabilising. It is this exposure that creates such counter-intuitive behaviour outlined earlier as the tidying of the house before the soldiers come to wreck it.

Kennedy-Andrews suggests that female writers "enforce" separation between the inside and the outside in order to stereotype the sectarian male as a mortal threat to the "superior 'feminine' world of personal feeling and relationship" (225). I would contest that Beckett's novel disproves this assertion. For whilst Martha is shown to be trying (but often failing) to preserve the differentiation of space, and to keep the home interior uncontaminated by the violence going on around her, she is fully aware that the border between the interior and the exterior is already fractured, porous and therefore not of itself enforceable. Martha does not define herself by asserting Kennedy-Andrews' "world of personal feeling and relationship"; rather, as Sullivan suggests: "Martha insists upon defining herself as a worker rather than as a nationalist or Republican ... she insists upon her status as an independent woman worker", thereby asserting her distance from an over-interiority (*Materialist Politics* 234).

In Michael Mollon's essay, 'The Inherent Shame of Sexuality', he writes: "Societies need to protect the spaces within which people imagine and explore themselves, even when their imaginings are perceived as shameful, whether by themselves, or by others" (297). A raid — particularly when raids are carried out repeatedly and systematically — makes it impossible to secure a personal space for self-discovery, and further, derides the individual's ambition to imagine without shame: there is literally nowhere to even protect, and yet "shame causes hiding", leaving the subject of both the raid and the shame in an impossible situation (Nussbaum 296).

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<sup>15</sup> 'Lifted' is a colloquial Belfast term for being arrested.

Martha's thoughtfulness (i.e. her proclivity for thought), added to the fact that she keeps her thoughts on important matters largely to herself, is significant here in terms of her ability to begin to overcome her shame, in that it affords her privacy and, concomitantly, imaginative scope, particularly in relation to money and her business. She sets up a small bakery business, running it from her house, an action which itself confuses the public/private space of home, "I worried about the way we had the door opening all the time during the day" (Beckett, *Give* 101).

This blurring of boundaries is more forcefully emphasised when Martha's home is invaded by soldiers, at first somewhat benignly — they want to buy bread from her but have not considered that, by selling it to them, she places herself in danger with the IRA: "Two young fellas that I had never seen before called into my shop one day that summer and told me I was not to sell any more bread to the soldiers." Subsequently, as relations worsen with the soldiers in the area:

By night-time a lot of frightened wee British soldiers were walking up and down all the streets ... I had to keep bread under the counter for my regular customers and there was a bit of nastiness about that when I'd tell the soldiers that I was sold out ... They shouted bad language at me — words I had never heard although I had seen them written up on walls (Beckett, *Give* 119).

The diminutive use of "wee" and Martha's refusal to serve the soldiers bread despite their protestations show her understated defiance. She exercises her latent nationalism in everyday ways, not through violent or emblematic acts. Soon after this "a crowd of young soldiers" shoot rubber bullets inside her house, destroying her possessions (Beckett, *Give* 122).

Later, however, her home is also invaded, in a sense, by the IRA, who select her front door as the site to kneecap a teenager. When the violent act takes place "up against [her] wall" Martha is compelled to act, explaining:

When they had all gone I brought out buckets of water and a yard brush and washed and washed at the place although there was little sign that anything had happened ... I'd have no respect for myself if I didn't let *them* know what I thought (Beckett, *Give* 9-10. Italics mine).

Martha's slight equivocation here, although passionate about what is happening around here, denotes her inability to adhere dogmatically to any singular narrative. This ambiguity (as discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to both Martha's name and her seeming emotional opacity to

herself) is, I suggest, how she survives. Her 'unsettledness' on this front is an enabler, an indicator that she is able to exceed 'group-think' and to think for herself: she is working, determinedly, to be an individual. This is partly indicated by Beckett's use of "*them*" which can be read primarily as the IRA members who have kneecapped the teenager and secondarily, but also importantly, as her neighbours; she must ensure her neighbours do not suspect her of being complicit.

An essential part of punishments (such as kneecappings) in Belfast during the Troubles was the element of 'spectacle', which aimed to insure against future infringements on paramilitary law — hence why such acts were carried out in public. Because Martha's house has been chosen, she must be careful to be clear that she neither invited nor sanctioned it, for "Paramilitary involvement in social control is tolerated, even demanded, but communal support is conditional" (Cavanaugh quoted in Knox 166). Public Policy scholar, Colin Knox's article 'See no Evil, Hear no Evil: Insidious Paramilitary Violence in Northern Ireland' clearly outlines how, "the alternate system [that of the paramilitaries] is a graduated scale of sanctions escalating from threats or warnings, through curfew, public humiliation, exile and punishment beating, to kneecapping" (173). He goes on to say, "victims can be summoned to be kneecapped and duly present themselves, by appointment, to the paramilitaries to take their 'punishment' — not keeping such a meeting will only result in harsher treatment" (174). Knox's second point is key to understanding why Martha must publically disavow the violent act, because if the act has been pre-arranged to take place at a certain time in a certain place, then that location could, potentially, be known to others, could therefore be known to Martha, implicating her in the crime. The victim who is perhaps not ashamed (or even guilty) of the actions the paramilitaries are accusing them of nonetheless is shamed by the punishment, in a double sense. Firstly, because they may well be perceived to be guilty by those around them and secondly, even if they are not guilty the implication of knowing that they cannot escape the punishment and of being punished 'stains' their public character (as outlined in one of the three definitions of shame earlier in this chapter, where Sheils and Walsh state that the shamed person is

"delineated or differentiated by being out of place"). Both the punished and the one who has witnessed the punishment are therefore shamed.

Martha's action of scrubbing at a near invisible stain therefore is acting out her own shame-based response, even though she knows it is not physically necessary, given that there is no visible stain; this demonstrates Martha's duality in relation to her own shame, and concurs with Agamben's observation that the living being is unable "truly to separate innocence and guilt — that is, somehow to master its own shame" (94). Martha cannot entirely master her shame, for she is scrubbing not only the teenager's blood but the entire squalor of the political situation in which she finds herself: "I was ashamed of the dirty protest. We knew the Protestants always said 'Teagues were dirty pigs'" (Beckett, *Give* 140). Later, after the incident, when Martha is alone and trying to sleep, she tries to rationalise why the teenager was kneecapped:

In bed I wasn't so brave and I thought that maybe he had been tormenting old people, this boy, and maybe with no police in the district it was the only way to deal with trouble-makers. If they had shot him once I might have persuaded myself of that but I lay awake with his crying in my head" (Beckett, *Give* 10).

Beckett signals Martha's shame here, "I wasn't so brave", indicating that she is judging herself first before she goes on to judge the IRA shooters, and perhaps also that she doubts her way of seeing things, since it's independently formulated rather than sanctioned by a shared communal perspective. This self-judging is, as I have discussed in chapter one, a recurring feature of Beckett's work, the most relevant comparator here being the character of Mary in 'A Belfast Woman'.

Martha resolves to refuse to pay any further protection money in protest at the kneecapping, feeling herself complicit through contributing to the IRA's funds: "I'd tell them they were getting no more from me in their weekly collection and I'd tell them why" (Beckett, *Give* 10). Witnessing the act has both challenged and, arguably, deepened her understanding of her personal identity as a Northern Irish nationalist; Martha is demonstrating Jeff Nuttall's statement in his counter-cultural treatise, *Bomb Culture*: "disaffiliation is a prerequisite of protest" (37). The IRA return, burning her house because she won't pay them protection money, saying: "'We have to do what we're told. You

know that" Martha stands "out in the street and [watches her] livelihood and habitation disappear in flames" (Beckett, *Give* 144). This is the first time in any of Beckett's work that it is not Protestants who are doing the burning, marking a shift in the portrayal of sectarian violence in Beckett's work regarding who does what to whom.

The novel ends, domestically, with Martha in bed with her husband, planning to rebuild her bakery business after having been burnt out, and confessing: "After all, maybe I don't always face the truth about myself" (Beckett, *Give* 152). This shows the reader Martha is experiencing the lucidity of self-realisation, moving on positively from her relative opacity in earlier sections of the novel: she is in a period of positive transition.

In this chapter, I have discussed and illustrated how Beckett activates the complex and alienating concept of shame across *Give Them Stones* in relation to cultural memory, sectarian violence, social and material gain and how an individual may negotiate their place within this claustrophobic context.

Reading through three definitions of shame — drawn from across a number of disciplines — I've applied these ranging views to attempt to understand why and how the novel's main character, Martha Murtagh, acts as she does. I've seen that she has an ambiguous and sometimes opaque emotional response to the violent events around her which is shown by Beckett to be both a coping mechanism and a survival tactic, and how this is linked to the provenance of Martha's name.

I've compared the historic detail and complicated emotional response of Martha to actual testimony from the Troubles from working-class Catholic women and noted how accurately and sensitively Beckett depicts the figure of the home invasion and the seemingly counterintuitive response it elicits from those who are being invaded.

In this novel, her most ambitious work not only in size but also in both complexity and reach, Mary Beckett succeeds in evolving a credible and inspirational female protagonist who offers positive models both in adversity and for the future. In this way, Martha is both ordinary and extraordinary. By the novel's close, the shame she has carried within her throughout the novel is not

gone but is pointedly diminished. She is looking towards the future rather than dwelling on her troubled past: wars, deaths, floods, ashes.

## **CONCLUSION**

*It's not their fault, they seem kind enough, but I never know what they will do or why they do it, the way I would with people from Belfast.*

— Beckett, *Belfast* 75

*Thus it happens that those who have force on loan from fate count on it too much and are destroyed.*

— Weil, *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* 15

In this critical essay, I have examined seven different pieces from Mary Beckett's relatively small oeuvre of writing. I began with a biographical outline of Beckett's life, which explains my initial interest in her work: I am a Catholic working-class Belfast woman from Ardoyne greatly affected by having grown up during the Troubles. Whilst Beckett was middle-class and worked in a school in Ardoyne, rather than living there, I feel her explicit focus on portraying working-class female characters is unusual, and inspiring, in its dedication and accuracy. Through my consideration and discussion of Beckett's work, I have highlighted a number of key themes which resonate with the creative writing component of this PhD and this study has actively contributed to the development of my own novel *Heart of a Peach*.

This essay is framed by my opening statement about the failure of social mobility and how this persists throughout Beckett's work, despite her protagonists' desires for a smoother and more fruitful passage upwards through class strata. In each chapter, I have focussed on what may be generally considered to be negative concepts or attributes — displacement (chapter one), feminine violence (chapter two), shame (chapter three) — and have seen how Beckett uses such adverse situations and characteristics to articulate not only her characters' inner lives but also the intrinsic relationship that exists between their inner lives and their socio-political contexts, as well as to question what is acceptable and to whom: "There was a phrase they had in England about our Troubles, 'an acceptable level of violence'" (Beckett, *Give* 140).

In chapter one, 'Displacement', I addressed the geographic and emotional displacement of the main characters in 'A Belfast Woman', 'A Farm of Land' and 'The Bricks are Fallen Down'. Situating the stories alongside the resonant, and persistent, documentation of historic accounts of Irish citizens' geographical relocation — often precipitated by an act of forcible displacement, such as being burnt out — I noted Beckett's protagonists' frustration with, and sometime bewilderment about, the prevailing social conventions they enter due to being displaced or displacing themselves, and how these practices are at odds with their 'natural' instincts (instincts which Beckett usually identifies as being quintessentially Catholic). I discovered that the characters' keen sense of emotional displacement is often meted out by themselves to themselves, as a perceived tactic of self-preservation, and how sometimes, as in the case of Sheila in 'The Bricks are Fallen Down', that displacement is put to further use as a weapon against a previous relationship, whether this be an interpersonal relationship or indeed the relationship with the past itself.

This sense of displacement is strongly experienced by my novel's main characters, Frances and Ian. They are drawn together because of their persisting (albeit differing) relationships to formative time spent in Ardoyne, and in Belfast more generally; and whilst arguably social mobility has swung in different directions for them — Frances is now a university lecturer, a professional who hides under her desk; Ian is a security guard, at a loss without his rifle to enforce order on those around him — they are displaced from their primary instinctual behaviours. Both often revert to these behaviours in the course of my novel's narrative in irrational and visceral ways.

I began chapter two, 'Acts of Unfeminine Violence', by situating my overarching argument about the perception of female violence as essentially unfeminine within a broader historic discussion about such aggression and its link with the changing roles of women following the 1798 United Irishmen Rebellion (as well as through successive nationalist uprisings across the last few hundred years in Ireland). I tested this against a parallel argument about the changing nature of repressive domestic spaces and women's place within them, homing in on how Beckett's protagonists impulsively seize the potential in such ongoing domestic instability to vent their

frustration through violent actions. In each of the three stories I examined — 'The Excursion', 'A Ghost Story' and 'Heaven' — I identified a key moment of individual personal rebellion (in the last story, 'Heaven', Hilary fantasises rather than performs her plan of doing fatal injury to her husband), where each character is modified, albeit temporarily, by *being bad*. In this way, the characters act out shared obsessional behaviours that have been caused by the pressure of social and marital expectation.

Further, I related these three characters' behaviour to 'ad hocism', proposing that Eleanor, Fiona and Hilary might be classified as 'inventors' within the domestic realm, because they repurpose what is at hand for uses other than that which was intended: Beckett, I suggested, thereby depicts her characters as creatively subversive.

My own character, Frances repurposes the rubber bullet she has kept throughout her life in one of the novel's key scenes — a bullet which is symbolically rich because it is the one that was fired through the front window of her house at the very same moment as she was being born — in the novel's final sexual encounter between Frances and Ian. Frances' explicit ad hocism is not prompted by the brutalisation of domestic strictures, as Beckett's protagonists' are, but rather by the brutalisation of her and Ian's shared political history. More broadly, my examination of Beckett's work through the key themes that I identified and explored across the critical essay as whole — such as the messy interplay of the public and private and the troublesome relationship between power and control — has helped me clarify these distinctions in my own writing, going on to develop and perhaps even modernise Beckett's motif of 'creative subversion' in female characters.

Chapter three, 'Shame and Belonging', considers Beckett's novel *Give Them Stones*. My overarching aim was to examine how Beckett portrays the complexity of shared and personal shame experienced by her main character, Martha, and to unpack the means by which Martha survives this. I looked at the role of "collective memory" in the formation of both Martha's worldview and that of those who surround her: her family, neighbours, IRA men and the security forces. I saw how

Beckett develops Martha's singularity and her independent thinking, despite pervasive social pressure — for example Martha's ability to modify her accent, to "talk swanky" depending on context — and how Martha's attributes contribute to the novel's success as an examination of an independent and robust working-class Catholic female *survivor*. I contested one critic's description of Martha as "coldly detached", insisting that her opacity is a symptom of the type of hostile environment Belfast propagates.

Beckett's very specific rendering of the complexity, and emotional necessity, of opacity been extremely useful to me in understanding, and developing, the seeming opacity Frances exhibits due to having been brought up during the Troubles in Ardoyne. She is certainly wilfully emotionally blank at particular times, such as in her university work; but my suggestion, as with Beckett's about Martha, is that what is "most intimate" in Frances is often unrecognisable to herself. This is in sync with Beckett's characters that I have discussed in this essay. Frances' behaviour is directly affected by the confusing shaming cultural memory of which she is part, and which she is trying to blank out through attaining upward social mobility but which leaks into her (irrational) desire for Ian: her actions are veiled to herself through the fug of such cultural memory. This is particularly evident in *Heart of a Peach* in the encoded sectarian usage of language, such as Frances' use of "Ardoyne" (what a Catholic would say) and Ian's use of "the Ardoyne" (what a member of the armed forces or the RUC would say).

I noted Beckett's excellent attention to historic detail from the period of the Troubles and compared this with two key publications that document actual testimony from women in areas such as Ardoyne; and I discovered that the shame-based response to being raided by soldiers and by the IRA Beckett attributes to Martha is entirely consistent with these testimonies, demonstrating her exact and considered representation of a particular historic moment.

To offer a final conclusion, this essay builds upon the existing, small body of scholarship around the work of Mary Beckett. My novel has a synergetic relationship with her key thematic interests, with the specific geographical location of her writings, and with the recent socio-political

history of Belfast. This study of a selection of her work has been invaluable to the writing of my novel in terms of suggesting an effective emotional timbre and presenting fictional realisations of the motivation behind the means by which shame and collective memory are acted out.

A troubled and troubling location, or, as I would have called it when I was growing up Ardoyne, "a bad area", is essential to both Beckett's and my own work, because: "Belfast is, in Maurice Leitch's words, 'the city that always made you pay for your dreams'" (Hughes, 148).

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please note this bibliography is for both components of the PhD

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