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‘That baby is a Fenian’: Gothic Violence, Gender, and Nationality in Two Plays of David Ireland

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‘The oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown’, claimed author H.P. Lovecraft. The relationship between fear, knowledge, and paranoia is a common theme in many Gothic texts, such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, in which fear is generated by information withheld or obscured. In this paper I ask: can an understanding of Irish gender and nationalist conflict be found in the Gothic? Contemporary playwright David Ireland uses Gothic techniques to address community violence, national identity and gender. In their depictions of violent paranoia, sinister disguises, and psychological unravellings, David Ireland’s plays depict social unrest linked to conflict on the island of Ireland. In this paper I will take his plays *Cyprus Avenue* (2016) and *Ulster American* (2018) as key texts through which to view Gothic presence in modern Irish culture, analysing the ways they address conflict regarding gender and national identity. This analysis will be guided by the conceptual frameworks of feminist and queer theory, in particular Jack Halberstam’s *Skin Shows* (1995) and Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993). I will make the case that in these plays we can view fear of the unknown as a defining feature of conflict in modern Ireland.

'That baby is a Fenian': Gothic Violence, Gender, and Nationality in Two Plays of David Ireland

Anna Devereux

> 'Everything is upside down. Nothing is what it claims to be. It's like you just said a minute ago. Chaos is majesty. Love is degradation. And the world has become a travesty.'[1]

Maternity and nationhood; Protestantism and Catholicism; masculinity and femininity: in the plays of David Ireland, the conflicting identities of modern Ireland go to war on stage. *Cyprus Avenue* (2016) and *Ulster American* (2018) centre on characters driven to extremes by conflict. In the former, a grandfather plots the downfall of his baby granddaughter. In the later, a playwright disfigures her starring actor. At the core of these conflicts is the lurking unknown, the threat of what we are and are not told about each other, and the political and personal ramifications of secrecy.

'The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear,' believed writer H. P. Lovecraft, 'and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.'[2] This 'fear of the unknown' that Lovecraft names was not limited to his fiction but also played a significant part in his personal life. S. T. Joshi documents in his biography (2001) Lovecraft's white supremacist views, exposing how the writer was fundamentally afraid of and angered by people he considered alien (not Anglo-Saxon American). Lovecraft's own wife spoke of the writer's hatred for the 'alien hordes' of multi-racial New York City, stating that 'whenever he would meet crowds of people- [...] wherever he happened to find them, and these were usually the workers of minority races- he would become livid with anger and rage.'[3] Looming unknowns from outside of the perceived norm that appear to threaten a traditional way of life are myriad in Gothic fiction. There is a creeping dread in the narrative of *Dracula* (1897) long before the actual revelation of vampirism, and in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) secrecy and suppression lead to a glut of faintings, ghost sightings, and near-ruined-romances. Just as with Lovecraft, the fearful plots in these classic texts have been recognised as stemming from contemporary societal upheaval and fears. Paula R. Backsheider associates the height of Gothic drama in late-eighteenth century Europe with the French Revolution and political unrest in Britain, while *Dracula*

[1] David Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016), p. 7.

[2] H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature: And Notes on Writing Weird Fiction* (Read & Co. Great Essays, 2020).

[3] S. T. Joshi, *A Dreamer and a Visionary: H P Lovecraft in His Time* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), p. 222.

has been read as an allegory for Victorian paranoia regarding immigration and sexuality.[4] Sheridan Le Fanu's story 'Carmilla' (1872) used a vampire narrative to explore female sexuality and feminine dispossession. Katie Mishler defines the Gothic in 'Carmilla' as a site of resistance with the potential to destabilise patriarchal institutions, wherein women 'rewrite and reframe' their history through acting 'outside of the confines of patriarchal relationships'.[5] Unlike his literary successor Lovecraft, who used his racial prejudices to justify English colonialism in Ireland as a matter of 'racial superiority', Le Fanu was a supporter of Irish home rule, and his real-life commitment to Irish freedom alongside his novel's engagement with land dispossession and the treatment of women brings us closer to an alignment of Irish history with the Gothic.[6]

In their depictions of violent paranoia, sinister disguises, and psychological unravellings, David Ireland's plays depict social unrest through the mode of the Gothic. The unrest in these plays has a specific link to conflict on the island of Ireland regarding gender and national identity situated in a long history of violence, othering, and fear. In *Skin Shows* (1995), Jack Halberstam identifies paranoia, unravelling, and disguise as key elements that communicate fear in Gothic literature, saying that the emergence of this genre in the eighteenth century 'metaphorized modern subjectivity as a balancing act between inside / outside, female / male, body / mind, native / foreign'.[7] Following the Gothic tradition, and within the specific context of Irish conflict, Ireland interrogates what can occur when a person is confronted with something they consider other.

I: The Island of Ireland's Gothic History

David Ireland's work is directly in dialogue with The Troubles.[8] Each of the plays we shall be discussing feature prominent Northern Irish characters living in a post-conflict reality, struggling to overcome a traumatic past and/or an unstable present. Given the brief nature of this paper I will limit myself to providing some key historical context to show

[4] Paula R. Backscheider, *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 149; Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 97.

[5] Katie Mishler, 'Reclaiming the Matrilineal: Marital Disinheritance and the Irish Female Gothic in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla" and James Joyce's "the Dead"', *New Hibernia Review*, 24(2), (2020), 71–87, p. 87.

[6] Ed Power, 'The Hatred of Hp Lovecraft: Racist, Anti-Irish Bigot and Horror Master', *The Irish Times* (2020). (<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/the-hatred-of-hp-lovecraft-racist-anti-irish-bigot-and-horror-master-1.4326744>) [Accessed 26.03.2024].

[7] Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 1.

[8] The conflict commonly known as The Troubles took place between 1968–1998 mainly in Northern Ireland, with violence also erupting in the Republic of Ireland and in Britain. The official conflict came to an end with the Good Friday Agreement voted in by referendum on 22 May 1998.

why we may view the island of Ireland as a Gothic space, rather than explain in detail the long and deeply contested shared history of the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Britain.

The asylum is a key example of the mistreatment of othered bodies – those that did not fit the expectations of their society – in recent history. Begun as colonial social policy during British rule, Ireland's asylum system grew to have the largest population globally by the mid-Twentieth Century, as vulnerable people were locked away in towering buildings: historian Damien Brennan finds that 'The level of institutional residency outpaced that of England, Wales and Scotland during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and during the 1950s Ireland had the highest level of bed availability internationally'.[9] A specific kind of religious institution was formed to manage women, the Magdalene Laundry, where "fallen women" were incarcerated and subjected to abuse.[10] These institutions were originally founded by Anglicans in Britain, and brought to Dublin in 1765 by Lady Arabella Denny, with the purpose of reforming protestant women who had worked as prostitutes or were destitute.[11] By the twentieth century they had come under the remit of the Catholic church, by which time historian Clara Fischer observes 'women's virtue [became] entangled in ideas of nationhood and national identity' as the newly formed Irish Free State grappled with its identity.[12] 'Given the ubiquitous threat posed to the national imaginary by nonadherence to national (read: Catholic) moral norms,' Fischer explains, 'women's sexuality and social behavior were subjected to intense scrutiny'.[13] In this institutional landscape we can see many Gothic tropes: fears regarding 'other' bodies, paranoia relating to social unrest, secrecy and shame leading to oppression. This complex history of institutionalisation shows how violence proceeded from both without and within the island, passed from coloniser to free state, complicating where to place blame and whom to fear.

Although the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 meant Ireland was now partitioned, the six counties making up Northern Ireland remaining with the United Kingdom, the island retained a shared culture of policing reproductive bodies. This ingrained practice of gendered shame and punishment lead to painful experiences

[9] Damien Brennan, *Irish Insanity: 1800–2000* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), p. 2.

[10] 'About the Magdalene Laundries', *JUSTICE FOR MAGDALENES RESEARCH*, <http://jfmresearch.com/home/preserving-magdalene-history/about-the-magdalene-laundries/> [Accessed 12.02.2024].

[11] Miriam Haughton et al., *Legacies of the Magdalen Laundries: Commemoration, Gender, and the Postcolonial Carceral State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), p. 4.

[12] Clara Fischer, 'Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame: Magdalen Laundries and the Institutionalization of Feminine Transgression in Modern Ireland', *Signs*, 41 (2016), p. 821.

[13] Ibid., p. 823.

across borders, such as the criminalisation of abortion. People seeking reproductive healthcare across the island have been forced into secrecy, travelling to England and further afield, or risking serious legal repercussions by buying abortion pills on the internet.[14] In 2013, a mother who procured abortion pills online for her daughter was threatened with five years in prison after her GP alerted the police; it took six years and the decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland to get her acquitted.[15] Such instances show how reproductive medical needs have been silenced and often exported abroad to be dealt with by international campaign groups or countries with more lenient laws. Eric Olund explains this well: ''Secret shame' framed women's experiences of Ireland's many ideological and material constraints on their bodies, [...] and when all else failed, the export of those who fell short of Ireland's double standard'.[16] Olund's identification of secrecy as being central to the shaming – and thereby control – of reproductive bodies in Ireland marks the experience of those on the wrong side of such 'scandals' as Gothic. Those seeking help and support in relation to abortion have been routinely and cruelly silenced, creating a reality of shame, secrecy, and fear.

The emergence of abortion rights campaigns, particularly in the build-up to the 2018 referendum in the Republic, brought long-ignored community traumas into public discourse.[17] Suddenly, conversations which had been supressed for decades were frontpage news. For instance, the headline of Róisín Ingle's article 'Why I need to tell my abortion story' took over the front page of *The Irish Times Magazine* in 2015 in unignorable bold pink letters.[18] The opening up of conversations on abortion stories in the mainstream led to a discourse that revealed the colonial and Gothic nature of reproductive care. The posters used to campaign by the 'Save the 8th' (anti-abortion) group during the referendum provide a strong visual example of this. One prominent poster read: 'In

[14] Sarah Bardon, 'Fact Check: Have More Than 170,000 Irish Women Travelled Abroad for an Abortion?', *The Irish Times,* (2018). <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/fact-check-have-more-than-170-000-irish-women-travelled-abroad-for-an-abortion-1.3481581> [Accessed 06.02.2024]; Catherine Smyth, '700 Ni Women Went to England for Abortions in 2016', *BBC News*, (2017) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-40263723> [Accessed 06.02 2024].

[15] Rory Carroll, 'Woman in Northern Ireland Abortion Pills Case Formally Acquitted', The Guardian, (2019). <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/nov/05/northern-irish-woman-abortion-pills-fights-prosecution> [Accessed 06.02.2024].

[16] Eric Olund, 'Repealing a 'Legacy of Shame': Press Coverage of Emotional Geographies of Secrecy and Shame in Ireland's Abortion Debate', in *After Repeal: Rethinking Abortion Politics*, ed. by Kath Browne and Sydney Calkin (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 174–88, p. 174.

[17] Lisa Smyth, 'Northern Ireland after Repealing the 8th: Democratic Challenges.', in *After Repeal: Rethinking Abortion Politics*, ed. by Browne and Calkin, pp. 239–54, p. 242.

[18] Róisín Ingle, 'Róisín Ingle: Why I Need to Tell My Abortion Story', *The Irish Times*, (2015). <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/roisin-ingle-why-i-need-to-tell-my-abortion-story-1.2348822> [Accessed 12.02.2024].

England 1 in 5 babies are aborted. Don't bring this to Ireland'.[19] The use of 'bring' and the insinuation that abortion is English, as opposed to Irish, implied abortion rights were invasive to Irish culture, that in repealing anti-abortion laws voters would be inviting an alien, colonial threat 'to Ireland'. Invasion, othering, secrecy, shame: these Gothic motifs littered the debate on abortion, as they litter Irish gender history. While abortion has now been legalised across the island, the process of shifting from this patriarchal Gothic culture takes time, and the marks of this history can still be seen in the culture. In his plays, David Ireland explores how intimate violence can erupt in an atmosphere wherein a wounded culture is confronted at once with the trauma of the past and the potential of the new. Reckoning with such legacies of secrecy and shame, Ireland's style is unflinching as he shows his audience how violence can grow from such confrontations.

II: Collapse of Boundaries

In true Gothic style, fear and violence stem from a core paranoia in Ireland's plays: his characters experience a confrontation with the unknown, the other, something or someone they consider the antithesis of themselves. *Cyprus Avenue* follows Eric, a Belfast protestant unionist scarred by the Troubles, whose paranoias grow into the genuine belief that his baby granddaughter Mary-May is ex-Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams: 'This baby… this fucking… this "baby"… does not look like a Unionist!'[20] Eric is disturbed by the boundaries crossed in a post-conflict Northern Ireland. The staunch anti-Catholic brand of Unionism to which he adheres is no longer the hegemony of his country and Eric mourns the loss of this discriminatory culture. With an understanding of the political changes in Northern Ireland at the time the play premiered – abortion rights and the rise in support for Sinn Féin made headlines in 2016 – we can read Eric's mistrust of his surroundings as a paranoia stemming from the changing culture upon which he has based his identity. Halberstam says that Gothic is 'the crisis occasioned by the inability to "tell," meaning both the inability to narrate and the inability to categorize. Gothic […] marks a peculiarly modern preoccupation with boundaries and their collapse'.[21] Paranoia, too, has a strong association with nationhood. In his seminal essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' (1964) Richard Hofstadter defines the style thus: 'the feeling of persecution is central, and

[19] Sarah Bardon, 'Fact Check: Does One in Every Five Pregnancies in England End in Abortion?', *The Irish Times*, (2018). <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/fact-check-does-one-in-every-five-pregnancies-in-england-end-in-abortion-1.3480584> [Accessed 30.01.2024].

[20] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, p. 25.

[21] Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p.23.

it is indeed systemized in grandiose theories of conspiracy'.[22] For Hofstadter, paranoia is 'a common ingredient of fascism, and of frustrated nationalisms'.[23] Eric has lost his ability to 'tell' in terms of understanding his local culture, and projects this onto his home life by adopting a 'grandiose conspiracy' in refusing the categorisation of Mary-May as a Unionist or even as a baby. Eric's sense of reality and acceptable behaviour declines because of fears and traumas relating to his external surroundings, to what he sees as boundaries collapsing, frustrating his strict Ulster nationalism.

Eric's daughter rejects his sectarianism: 'Protestant or Catholic. Whatever. We're Northern Irish. We're Irish. What's the big difference?'[24] Her refusal to put stock in being able to 'tell' the 'difference' signifies crisis for her father. For Eric this is a collapse of societal boundaries which, traumatised and isolated, causes the breakdown of his personal boundaries and allows him to entertain 'grandiose' conspiracy theories. Socio-political changes blur Eric's ability to 'tell' and categorise his surroundings, spurring a fascistic paranoia that centres on violence against women and Catholics. To Eric, his daughter's words justify a severe shift in behaviour. Eric has lost the ability to 'narrate' in that his beliefs are not aligned with a modern Northern Ireland. He no longer lives in a country wherein the halls of power mirror his beliefs about the subjugation of women or the core badness of Catholics.

In *Ulster American* (2018), the ability to 'tell' and 'narrate' are also central to a paranoid conflict. This play centres on a meeting between Jay, a Hollywood actor with Irish roots, Leigh, an English theatre director, and Ruth, a Northern Irish protestant playwright. As the three learn more about each other in the run up to rehearsals of a play, they find their world views are irredeemably conflicting. This descends into violence when Ruth threatens to send a tweet detailing misogynist comments made by Jay, and the men conspire to stop her. At the play's outset, Jay and Leigh await their playwright and, while alone, trade grandiose statements which reveal their arrogance and ignorance regarding Northern Ireland and gender. For example:

> Jay: Only a woman could write with this kind of relentless compassion.
>
> Leigh: She is a woman.
>
> Jay: I love that she's a woman. To hear a woman tell this kind of story. And this important moment in history. When women's voices are crying out to be heard.
>
> Leigh: I think it's true we need to do more for women. Create more opportunities.

[22] The original iteration of this essay appeared in Harper's Magazine in 1964. The version I have quoted from in this paper is a revised version, published in *The paranoid style in American politics, and other essays* (2008). Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), p.4.

[23] Ibid, p.7.

[24] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, p.61.

> Jay: Agreed.
> Leigh: Etcetera.
> Jay: Well fucking listen to them for once.
> Leigh: Yep.
> Jay: Allow *them* to be heard. Learn from our mistakes. This is where we're at as a culture.[25]

Having established the usefulness of Ruth and her play's cultural capital for their own ends, Jay and Leigh are undermined when Ruth enters and can speak for herself. Ruth is, quite literally, an invasive subject, as she is the only character who enters the play's single setting of Leigh's flat from the outside world, and the only one to have contact with the outside once she arrives.

This power to enter and exit the world of the play gives Ruth a privileged knowledge compared to the men. Her singular ability to cross this boundary contains her disrupting power and polluting potential. She invades the sphere they dominate – the flat, the theatre – and in so doing collapses their perception of the world. The relationship between these three, falsely deepened by a sense of artistic connection, unravels at the realisation that the men are not in control of knowledge: 'Jay: Wait, wait, wait. Wait. [...] Is she a protestant? [...] I kinda feel like I've been lied to here.'[26] Jay positions Ruth's identity as a 'lie' because it exposes his ignorance regarding Ireland. Subsequently, the boundaries 'collapse,' intensified by Ruth's defiance and Jay and Leigh's realisation that Ruth's knowledge is a threat to them. Her contact with Northern Ireland, for example, undermines their arrogant soundings off: 'You've never even been to Ireland. So why is it absurd for me to call myself British? But it's not absurd for you to call yourself Irish?'[27] As powerful men, Jay and Leigh are used to the narrating and categorising that Halberstam refers to, but isolated in the flat and faced with a woman who systematically rejects them, the audience is witness to a collapsing of boundaries based on their diminishing ability to 'tell' or to control the narrative.

III: The Monstrous Feminine

By culminating his violent conspiracies in matricide and infanticide, Eric shows us that his fears are gendered. For Eric, his country, his home, his family, and his daughter's womb are one and the same: his territory. The world is 'upside down' because he has

[25] David Ireland, *Ulster American* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2018), p. 9.
[26] Ireland, *Ulster American*, p. 42.
[27] Ibid., p. 44.

lost control of 'his' territory. Eric declares, 'as a family and as a people, as a nation, we are under siege'.[28] Beverly I. Strassman et al find the reproductive body to be a site of patriarchal fear, resulting in the regulation of female sexuality to secure paternal power using 'the dual strategy of social control in the public sphere [...] and the fear of divine or supernatural punishment'.[29] Eric's fears are located in the reproductive body, he sees the womb of his daughter as an invasive threat, something with the intention to pollute: 'She carries my heritage. And there are things that I am not being told'.[30] Eric's paranoia regarding his daughter's reproductive capacity is a profound delusion, but it does mirror language and tactics used across Ireland by groups campaigning against reproductive justice, such as that of 'Save the 8th': his use of 'under siege' and his focus on 'heritage' insinuate the same invasive threat as the poster previously mentioned. The fact that Eric's psychotic event is focused on birth and family locates it in the centre of religious and national identity conflict. He cannot 'regulate' his world without controlling the reproductive potential of his daughter.

In *Ulster American*, danger looms when the precarious, fragile belief in a national identity is threatened. Ruth undermines Leigh's unevidenced assumptions of what an artist should be: he calls her a socialist, she informs him she is a Conservative; he decries Brexit as a tragedy in the North, she tells him she voted for it. Leigh fights to maintain his ability to 'tell' and 'categorise' amidst this onslaught of knowledge: 'I know you only said that to hurt my feelings. I get it. I've hurt you. I've betrayed you. Now you're pretending to betray me'.[31] Ruth will not allow the men to 'narrate' the situation, she forces them to look at the facts, rejecting secrecy for supreme honesty. Just as Mishler says the sexuality of the female characters in *Carmilla* enables them to 'rewrite and reframe her own unique personal and erotic history outside of the confines of patriarchal relationships', so too does Ruth's brutality disrupt the patriarchal structure she faces in the alliance of Jay and Leigh.[32] She bats away each delusion and, in making them look at the truth and discard cultural assumptions, Jay and Leigh unravel. Just look at Jay's escalation in a matter of sentences when Ruth challenges his misogyny:

> I can't believe this is happening! I am one of the nicest people in this business. Ask anyone! I love women. I respect all women. My manager's a

[28] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, p. 26.

[29] Beverly I. Strassmann et al., 'Religion as a Means to Assure Paternity', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 109 (2012), 9781-85, p. 9784.

[30] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, p. 25.

[31] Ireland, *Ulster American*, p. 68.

[32] Mishler, 'Reclaiming the Matrilineal: Marital Disinheritance and the Irish Female Gothic in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla" and James Joyce's "The Dead"', p. 72.

> woman. A black woman! I respect you, Ruth, as a woman and as an artist, but if you don't apologise to me right now, I will make it my life's work to destroy you like the cunt you are.[33]

When challenged, Jay moves from disbelief to defence to persecution to violence. Jay and Leigh unite against Ruth because she will not be what they want her to be. They make her abject and other from them: she is 'fragile', doesn't know what she's talking about, she won't notice their changes to the play, she's a 'cunt'.[34]

Eric gives himself permission to enact extreme violence in the name of Unionism by allowing his paranoia to make his wife, daughter, and granddaughter abject. He relocates these women from family to national threat, as he confesses to his therapist, describing the murders: 'I never knew I'd be capable of such heroism'.[35] Similarly, Jay employs conspiracy theory-like reasoning and his American brand of Irish patriotism to make Ruth an abject threat:

> I feel that I was approached with this project on the understanding it was a story about the struggle for Irish freedom, written by an Irish Catholic. And now I find it's a story about the murder of Irish Catholics written by a British Protestant, written by someone I would consider a traitor to the cause of Ireland.[36]

Like Eric, he appropriates the language of conflict to make Ruth what Barbara Creed calls the 'Monstrous-Feminine'.[37] Creed employs Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject in her exploration of motherhood and reproduction: she reads the female body as othered, as an abject thing which 'must be 'radically excluded'', as something which threatens our understanding of 'the self'.[38] Creed describes the location of fears regarding the reproductive body as centring on 'polluting objects' which are either 'excremental, which threatens identity from the outside; and menstrual, which threatens from within'.[39] Jay must 'radically exclude' Ruth in order to retain control of this micro-society and neutralise the 'polluting' threat of the unknown that she represents to him. Ruth threatens the men's identities by offering them the truth: the shallowness of Jay's patriotism, the complexity of Northern Irish politics, and the violent misogyny which lies dormant within Jay and Leigh until they are faced with a female threat.

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[33] Ireland, *Ulster American*, p. 58.

[34] Ibid., p. 64.

[35] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, p. 82.

[36] Ireland, *Ulster American*, p. 42.

[37] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Oxon: Routledge, 1993).

[38] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 8.

[39] Ibid., p. 12.

IIII: Disguise

So far, we have interrogated Gothic themes in David Ireland's plays, how his characters experience fear and act upon their paranoias, and where these feelings come from in a social sense. But there is also a physically Gothic element to both plays: costume and disguise. In these plays, the introduction of a costume provides an opening for boundary crossing, unravelling, and violence.

Eric accuses his daughter of 'dissembling', but it is he who utilises disguise to shape reality. He uses a black marker pen and Build-A-Bear glasses to dress his granddaughter up as Gerry Adams. Crucially, Eric believes that his granddaughter's appearance is the disguise, and that once the resemblance is forced upon the baby with this costume his suspicions of her identity will be confirmed. According to Halberstam, 'We might almost say that the grotesque effect of Gothic is achieved through a kind of transvestism, a dressing up that reveals itself as costume'.[40] With this costume, Eric allows his fears regarding the paternity of his granddaughter to escalate to a genuine belief in that he feels it has 'revealed' her babyish appearance as a costume. Eric now has the confidence to interrogate his enemy: 'What's going on that you look like a dirty wee Fenian? My wee girl, eh? Come on, talk. Talk. There's no broadcasting ban anymore, Gerry. You can talk as much as you want. So talk. Talk. TALK!'[41] Using costume enforced on the baby, Eric's monster has become real, and his suspicions turn to frightening delusion. Although Eric's aggressive language has upset his family, it is not until he experiments with costume that the 'grotesque effect' of the Gothic reveals the danger he may be to them. Through disguise and costume, Eric's fantasies can be made real, and his monstrosity can be justified.

Ulster American's Jay is obsessed with putting on the costume of his imagined stereotypical Irish Provo. He asks Leigh, 'Do you think I could have an eyepatch? I think it would be a great metaphor for my character's moral decay'.[42] Ruth's arrival immediately after the introduction of the eyepatch is forbearing – it signifies that her presence, by interrupting this awkward interaction, will change the nature of the meeting. It also marries her presence to the suggestion of Jay's 'moral decay.' To Halberstam, as well as literal costume being a key aspect of the genre, Gothic itself is the 'perverse costume that the realist story is dressed up in'.[43] David Ireland dresses up realism – conflicts big

[40] Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 60.
[41] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, p. 19.
[42] Ireland, *Ulster American*, p. 20.
[43] Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 61.

and small about national identity and gender in Northern Ireland – in the costume of fantastical monstrosity. In a final act of gore, when Jay tries to strangle Ruth, she stabs a pencil into his eye: 'Now you can wear a fucking eyepatch!'[44] She has given him what he asked for and turned his body into a battle-scarred space. Ruth rejects Jay's fantasies – about Ireland, about women, about himself – by forcing them into violent, bloody reality.

Conclusion

The monstrousness in David Ireland's plays is enacted through conflicts of national identity, gender, and trauma. The characters, made paranoid by secrecy and shame, unravel in front of us, their boundaries collapsing until they are capable of extreme violence. To justify their violent means, Eric, Jay, and even Ruth, use costume and disguise to enact their will and manipulate reality. The audience is witness to theatrical struggles to regain control of narrative, to reinstate power, and to enforce hegemonies. This is reflective of the history of gendered violence across the island of Ireland, where societal displacement and unrest has been followed by a rise in patriarchal and religious control.

Monster-ising the female body allows the men in Ireland's plays to enact vicious gendered violence. Jay, when he understands that Ruth's agency is a threat to his perception of himself as well as to his public image, strangles Ruth to disempower her. By reducing Ruth to a 'cunt' and enacting violence against her, Jay thinks he can regain his status in their conflict. In *Cyprus Avenue*'s disturbing penultimate scene, Eric methodically murders his daughter, his wife, and his granddaughter. He can call it an act of heroism because he genuinely believes the feminine to be monstrous. By murdering the women in his family, Eric has enacted his Gothic desire of 'radically excluding' their monstrous bodies and has ended their 'polluting' potential. In destroying them, he has shored up the corrupted boundaries of his territory, and thereby defended Ulster and his family, even if he is the only one left to enjoy the security. Violence against women is a key tool for these men to strengthen their power and defend their way of life.

David Ireland shows us how monstrosity – centred on gender, power, and nationhood – is not the reserve of one group, whether that be the Catholic Church, the UVF, the IRA, or the London theatre hierarchy. In every setting where knowledge is

[44] Ireland, *Ulster American*, p. 71.

withheld or manipulated to control othered bodies we will recognise the same marks of the Gothic. What Ireland tells his audience is that these violent conflicts between opposing sides are not past, they are present and ready to bubble up into bloodshed. He demands that his audience not look away, Ireland wants us to face the truth: we do not all agree, we are not all alike, and ignoring these uncomfortable truths does not stave off unrest, but rather creates another Gothic culture of silence.

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