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Master in English

**Living Otherwise: A Humorous World to Revisit and Resist Sectarian
Violence in Northern Ireland as Seen in Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018)**

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'Yet I live here, I live here too,' Seamus Heaney

Abstract

The present work focuses on a stylistic analysis of humour in Anna Burns' second novel *Milkman*, published in 2018 and celebrated with the prestigious Booker Prize that same year. This thesis explores the narrator's unique voice and construction of humour to shed light into the sectarian violence that reached its peak in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. For that purpose, Agnes Marszalek's (2012) model of a "humorous world" is employed. The linguist proposes a cognitive stylistic analysis of the construction of humour through the use of a Humorous Mode, Repetition and Variation and Disruptive Schemata. This world will offer the potential to revisit the longstanding issues of sectarian violence, while at the same time present a refreshing perspective in the context of a war.

Key words: stylistics analysis, humour, "humorous world", Humorous Mode, Repetition and Variation, Disrupted Schemata, sectarian divide, *Milkman*

Abstract

Este trabajo se enfoca en un análisis estilístico del humor en la segunda novela de Anna Burns, *Milkman*, publicada en 2018 y celebrada con el prestigioso premio Booker Prize ese mismo año. Esta tesis explora la voz narrativa y la construcción del humor que permiten arrojar luz sobre la violencia sectaria que alcanzó su pico en Irlanda del Norte durante el Conflicto (*the Troubles*). El modelo de análisis estilístico y cognitivo que propone este trabajo es el de Agnes Marszalek (2018). La lingüista trabaja con la construcción de un "mundo humorístico" compuesto por un Modo Humorístico, Repetición y Variación y Esquemas Disruptivos. Esta propuesta ofrecerá el potencial de visitar los problemas de violencia sectaria de larga data en el Norte de Irlanda, mientras que presentará una perspectiva novedosa y fresca en un contexto bélico.

Palabras claves: análisis estilístico, construcción del humor, Modo Humorístico, Repetición y Variación, Esquemas Disruptivos, violencia sectaria, *Milkman*

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most symbolic sectarian conflicts of the twentieth century involved Catholic republicans and Protestant loyalists in Ireland. The first half of the century was marked by the Irish War of Independence that culminated in 1921 with the partition of Ireland into two areas: on the one hand, the Catholic and independent Republic of Ireland, and on the other, a Protestant Northern Ireland, province to the UK. After partition, the tension between these two communities grew and continued well into the twentieth century, reaching its peak with the Troubles (1968-1998). After thirty years of war, the Troubles were settled with the Good Friday Agreement signed by both the leaders of the Republic of Ireland and the UK. Although the treaty might have committed the parties to make efforts to keep peace, civil unrest recorded in 2021 reveals that the social and political divide persists in the area¹. Furthermore, Brexit has brought the complications of Separatism back on the discussion table since it has impeded the free flow of people and goods, and angered those who still wish to see a united Ireland.

The world of literature has also played its part in reigniting the conversation around long standing issues of violence and Separatism in Northern Ireland. In 2018, Northern Irish writer Anna Burns published her second novel *Milkman*, set in Northern Ireland's bloodiest conflict. Burns' work was acclaimed by critics and audiences worldwide: "original, funny, disarmingly oblique and unique" (Claire Kilroy, Guardian), "Extraordinary. It's frightening, hilarious, wily and joyous all at the same time" (Lisa McInerney). In the same year of its publication, it received the Man Booker Prize and the judges stated that '*Milkman* is stylistically utterly distinctive'. Additionally, the chair of the judges, philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, commented "None of us has ever read anything like this before"². All this praise sparked my curiosity and motivated the research into discovering what makes *Milkman* such an original narrative and how Burns manages to bring excitement and enjoyment to a wartime tale.

The main purpose of this study is a stylistic analysis of Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018) in terms of how her first-person original narrative creates a humorous world to expose and

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/12/world/europe/Northern-Ireland-Brexit-Covid-Troubles.html>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/16/anna-burns-wins-man-booker-prize-for-incredibly-original-milkman>

resist the violence of Sectarianism in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. *Milkman* is centred around the life of a teenage girl, middle sister, who belongs to a Catholic portion of the community in what appears to be Londonderry during the 1970s in the span of two weeks while she is stalked by an older paramilitary stranger. The story is an up-close and first-hand narration of her experience as recalled later in life. Her recollection portrays how she felt during those days and how she perceived the reality around her. Her refreshing and original rhetoric reveals the violence and hypocrisy in her surroundings, especially in her own community. Although the context of Separatism and guerrilla warfare is highly limiting in terms of free speech, middle sister creates a stream-of-consciousness type of tale that allows her freedom for revisitation and hope.

Burns' discourse will be studied with some of the insights that Stylistics offers to analyse the construction of narrative humour. In section 2, Theoretical Framework, the concept of humour will be explored together with a brief overview of three main theories on the study of humour. The Release theory will provide a framework for the understanding of the need of humour and its effect in the novel, while the Theory of Incongruity will be central for the linguistic analysis of humour in the novel. The main contributors to the Incongruity theory are Victor Raskin (1985) with his Semantic Script Theory (SSTH), Attardo *et al.* (1994, 2001), and Paul Simpson (1993, 2001, 2004). Finally, Agnes Marszalek's (2012) cognitive stylistic model for the study of humour will be adopted for a qualitative analysis of Burns' story. Marszalek states that the possibility of experiencing amusement is only possible if the building blocks that compose a text are analysed in context. Her framework is based on the premise that a text may be received with humour if a *humorous world*, one in which its parts, even when they are not inherently or exclusively humorous, add to the humorous nature of a story and create 'schemata refreshment'. The key building blocks of her model are a Humorous Mode, Repetition and Variation, and Disrupted Schemata. Together with the creation of humour for revisitation, this thesis will explore the elements that symbolise hope in Burns' narrative. Finally, some concluding remarks shall attempt an integration of the ideas explored in this study and some considerations for further studies.

1. HYPOTHESIS AND OBJECTIVES

1.1 Hypothesis

This study is based on the following hypotheses:

- a) *Milkman* is set in Londonderry in the context of the Troubles.
- b) Although a fictional piece, the novel illustrates several instances of Sectarian violence taking place during that period.
- c) Burns presents said violence through the construction of an original humorous text.
- d) Marszalek's model of a 'humorous world' is suitable for the analysis of this novel.
- e) Such presentation serves the purpose of revisiting the violence occurring during the conflict.
- f) Even if set in a context of oppression, Burns' novel also rescues hope.

1.2 Objectives

In an attempt to prove the aforementioned hypotheses, the objectives of the current work are detailed in the following two subsections.

1.2.1 General Objectives

To offer a descriptive stylistic analysis of *Milkman* and thus contribute to the study of the original construction of humour as means for revisitating and resisting violence in the context of the novel.

1.2.2 Specific Objectives

- 1) Identify the peculiarities of violence taking place during the Troubles.
- 2) Identify linguistic strategies for the construction of a *humorous world*.
- 3) Identify narrative techniques to challenge sectarian stereotypes and violence.
- 4) Identify narrative devices to rescue hope in a context of repression and violence.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Humour is not an easy concept to define in a clear-cut manner because it is one of those phenomena that is deemed universal yet highly subjective and context-bound. Several definitions of humour have been established since its first formal appearance as an entry in the Oxford English Dictionary in the 16th century with the connotation that we attach to the word today. The OED defines humour as “the quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech”.

Humour in literature is a different concept from the general idea many people have of comedy. ‘Comedy is popularly used to denote any media that is light-hearted and funny, usually with a happy ending’ (Triezenberg, 2008). Thus, funny television shows are called situational comedies or sitcoms, pleasant romances are called romantic comedies, and funny people who perform live are called stand-up comedians. This popular usage of the word comedy and its derivatives (comic, comedian) is usually carried over into the discussion of literary humour, where it often causes confusion. For literary studies, humour embodies ‘the classical meaning of comedy, which in ancient times was as a story about the powerless vs. the powerful, or the little man vs. the big man, or even about the perils and pitfalls of social pretence’ (Triezenberg, 2008, pp. 524-525). It is common in literature, therefore, to see humour being employed for the treatment of social and political issues, especially in contexts of repression.

The study of humour as a literary device has got a long history. The Superiority Theory is the first approach to a systematic study of humour. This theory covers the ages of Plato and Aristoteles and is centred around ‘the object of laughter, in what, or rather who, we laugh at, in the attitudes of those who laugh, and in laughter’s good or evil, aristocratic or plebeian nature’ (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p.4). As the years progressed, the interest around literary humour shifted towards the effect that humour may have on a reader and thus the Release Theory emerged in the late 19th century. Those philosophers and writers who ascribed to this branch believed that “humour lightens the load of everyday living” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017). Humour is seen as a strategy to process difficult or traumatic situations. Finally, the most contemporary line of study is the Incongruity Theory. This approach focuses on “the rhetorical mechanisms that may cause amusement and develops an interest in the cognitive processes involved in humour”(Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 6). As most researchers in the field of humour agree, there is generally some degree of overlapping among these theories and studies can be carried out combining them. Each historical period builds on and adds new insights to the theories received from previous ones. This is

particularly so in the 20th century, when psychologists, sociologists, and ultimately, linguists became seriously interested in a systematic and more holistic study of humour.

In *Humour* (2019), Terry Eagleton explores the essence of the Release Theory and discusses the benefits that readers might obtain when reading a drama that is rendered in a humorous tone. Most specifically, the Release Theory focuses on stories that comment on power abuse or on the limited capacities of characters in contexts of injustice. “We laugh because we are able to free ourselves from the straitjacket of convention and vicariously indulge our glee in the chutzpah of cheeking a figure of authority or being abominably rude” (pp.55-56). In *Milkman*, humour is key for accessing the story because the context is particularly violent and of a totalitarian nature. With her intimate tale, the narrator is able to create a relaxing microcontext of freedom to talk about what happened to her during those two weeks she was stalked by a paramilitary man, and also comment on the behaviour and hypocrisy of her community during the war. This will be dealt with more in detail in the study of a Humorous Mode in the Analysis, section 4.

Michael Bakhtin’s development of the carnivalesque can be framed within the line of study of the Release Theory. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (1984) develops an analysis of folk humour. He employs the analogy of carnival to describe how this celebration is seen as an opportunity for enjoyment, heterogeneity, and resignification of order. One textual manifestation of the carnivalesque is the Menippean satire. A Menippean satire, like *Milkman*, is ‘a seriocomic genre, chiefly in ancient Greek literature and Latin literature, in which contemporary institutions, conventions, and ideas were criticized in a mocking satiric style that mingled prose and verse.’³ In the carnivalesque, hierarchies are overturned and rules challenged. As Bakhtin (1984) referred to the origins of carnival, he stated:

all these forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter- [...] are sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom’ (p.6).

Accordingly, the carnivalesque is the genre that better describes the essence of *Milkman*’s originality and disruption to contest long established ideas, while never sacrificing its spirit of joyfulness and hope.

A complementary framework to look at humour from a different perspective is the Incongruity Theory. Firstly, Eagleton (2019) states that incongruity is ‘[...] a sudden shift of perspective, an unexpected slippage of meaning, an arresting dissonance or discrepancy, a

³ <https://www.britannica.com/art/Menippean-satire>

momentary defamiliarising of the familiar and so on. [...] It also involves the disruption of orderly thought processes or the violation of laws or conventions' (p. 46). He develops the idea that incongruity can be helpful in the creation of the effect that the Release Theory is after, at the same time that it provides the main strategy for the linguistic analysis of the humorous quality in a text. In the quote below, Eagleton (2019) describes the benefits of incongruity and its key role in inviting readers to willingly suspend disbelief for the enjoyment of a dramatic piece:

[...] humour happens for the most part when some fleeting disruption of a well-ordered world of meaning loosens the grip of the reality principle. It is as if for a moment the ego is able to relinquish its grim-lipped insistence on congruence, coherence, consistency, logic, linearity and univocal signifiers, ceases to fend off unwanted meanings and unconscious associations, allows us to revel in a playful diversifying of sense and causes us to release the psychic energy conserved by this bucking of the reality principle in a smile or a snort of laughter (p. 58).

Narrative incongruity can be manifested at a semantic, syntactic or morphological level, and it is the main guiding principle for the theories of Stylistics that we shall examine next to study humour in *Milkman*. The many rhetorical strategies that Eagleton (2019) mentions as connoting incongruity are 'irony, bathos, puns, wordplay, ambiguity, deviation, black humour, misunderstandings, iconoclasm, grotesquerie, out-of-placeness, doubling, absurdity, nonsense, blunders, defamiliarisation, quick changes and hyperbole' (p. 57). Most of these strategies will be looked at in the Analysis section of this thesis. For the study of *Milkman* we shall focus on a combination of the perspectives offered by the Release and the Incongruity theories; the Release Theory is the framework to understand the need for humour in a tale such as *Milkman*, while the Incongruity Theory will provide the linguistic analysis for the construction of humour in this novel. Marszalek's model of "humorous worlds" that I have chosen for the present analysis combines the concepts elaborated by both theories.

In the 20th century, the field of Stylistics developed a stronger interest in the relation between the use of language for humour in literature. According to linguist Paul Simpson (1993), "Stylistics, first of all, normally refers to the practice of using linguistics for the study of literature" (p. 2). Accordingly, the analysis of language as central to creative expression is key in Stylistics. The reason why language is so important to stylisticians resides in the various forms, patterns and levels that constitute linguistic structure because they become key to index the function of a text. For Simpson (2004), the text's functional significance as discourse acts in turn as a gateway to its interpretation. "While linguistic features do not of themselves constitute a text's 'meaning', an account of linguistic features nonetheless serves to ground a stylistic interpretation and to help explain why, for the analyst, certain types of meaning are possible" (p. 3). Moreover, Stylistics is interested in "language as a function of

texts in context, and it acknowledges that utterances (literary or otherwise) are produced in a time, a place, and in a cultural and cognitive context” (Simpson, 2004). These extra-linguistic parameters are inextricably central for the interpretation of a piece of discourse.

For most stylisticians today, linguistic incongruity is the essence of literary humour. Firstly, Simpson (2001) defines humorous incongruity more generally as “(i) any kind of stylistic twist in a pattern of language or (ii) any situation where there is a mismatch between what someone says and what they mean.” The second principle is that incongruity can be situated in any layer of linguistic structure. He states that “just as style is a multi-levelled concept, the mechanism of humour can operate at any level of language and discourse, and it can even play one level off against another” (p. 32). The stylistic analysis of humour therefore involves identifying incongruity in a text and pinpointing whereabouts in the language system it occurs in. There is a significant difference between jokes and longer comic narratives, as jokes are much more easily marked as humorous discourse. Narratives do not share jokes’ recognisable structure, length or key phrases. Writers, therefore, must find their own ways of signalling to their readers that the text requires a humorous interpretation.

With an interest in developing humorous incongruity and finding when or where the linguistic disruption or mismatch may take place, Victor Raskin presented the Semantic Script Theory (SSTH) in his 1985 publication *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. His contribution has become one of the most renowned semantic approaches explaining how semantic incongruity works to potentially result in humour. His theory was initially illustrated with the following joke: “Is the doctor in?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. “No,” the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered back, “Come right in!” (p. 97). The SSTH claims that any joke, like this one, is fully or partially compatible with two different scripts, and those scripts are opposed in a certain way. Scripts are presented as structured chunks of information about the world. Raskin’s formula reads: “A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the following conditions are justified: i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts, ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite” (1985, p. 99). The SSTH holds that scripts, lexical and non-lexical, are connected by links. The links can be of different semantic natures (synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy, etc.), and correspondingly labelled. The set of scripts in the lexicon, their links, plus all the non-lexical scripts, their links, and all the links between the two sets of scripts form the “semantic network” which contains all of the information a speaker has about their culture, including stereotypes, for instance. Their function is to combine all the possible meanings of the scripts and discard those combinations that do not yield coherent readings. The breaking of those

links to create new and unexpected ones is the core feature of humour and schemata refreshment in Burns' story.

Regarding his choice of joke, Raskin (1985) explains that going to a doctor is an organised sequence of actions, complete with preconditions and effects, and including a sequence of actions (in the joke, calling ahead was clearly omitted). Similarly, having or starting an affair with a married woman also involves a series of actions, including the secrecy from her husband (Raskin 1985). According to the SSTH, Script 1 represents the act of going to the doctor and the world it often triggers (a doctor, hospital, an appointment, a check up, recommending certain treatment, prescriptions, etc), while Script 2 represents the connotations of an affair (a young and pretty woman as a secretary, whisper, entering the doctor's office while the doctor is not in, etc). The joke tries to illustrate the type of surprise and ensuing clash of worlds that creates the possibility of humour. It is worth mentioning that a joke of this nature may cause rejection in an audience today for the way in which it reinforces gender stereotypes. The author remarks that this is a joke from the 1930s and agrees that it does represent certain fixed ideas in connection to gender roles and cultural stereotypes. Regardless of the distaste this joke may provoke, it serves as an example to understand the importance of context for receiving a joke. Even though some scripts are shared in many cultures, this joke exposes that scripts are culture-bound. The fact that scripts are culturally constructed should be born in mind because *Milkman* is set during a war featuring certain characteristics (setting, time, motif, opponents, methods, history, etc) and to attempt an understanding of how the narrator opposed pre-established ideas and challenged stereotypes is only grasped with an understanding of the context. We shall see script oppositions more in detail in the Disrupted Schemata section of the Analysis. Also, we shall see the context of the Troubles more in detail in the next section.

Continuing Raskin's work, Salvatore Attardo (1994, 2001, 2017) made significant contributions to the Script Based Theory with his General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH). Together, Raskin and Attardo continued the work initiated by the former and expanded on the linguistic levels where incongruity may take place. Attardo (1994) stated that humour is a competence and also agreed that the key element that brings about humour in discourse is incongruity. To the SSTH, Attardo (1994, 2001, 2017) added a list of criteria to further study what type of creative instances of language use can add to incongruity for amusement. He created the Knowledge Resources List (1994), including Script Opposition, Logical Mechanism, Situation, Target, Narrative Strategy and Language. We shall not go in depth into all the categories but it is worth noting that his contribution was the starting point to understand another aspect of incongruous humour: incongruity may happen not just at the

semantic level but at the Narrative Strategy level (coherence) or Situation or Target (contextual factors) or Language (diction and register), thus expanding the concept of incongruity and, at the same time, demonstrating that humour is a competence, and in an extended narrative, it needs to be analysed as a whole. Attardo adds that incongruity might occur also at the level of register, which Attardo labels as “register humour”, i.e., “humour caused by an incongruity originating in the clash between two registers.” Registers may be pre-theoretically defined as “language varieties associated with a given situation, role, or social aspect of the speakers' experience” (1994, p.239). Moreover, he introduces the notion of the “range of appropriateness” which is a probabilistic function that connects linguistic features and situations. In the light of this notion, humour arises when writers subvert expectations and disrupt ideals that the readers might have as to, for instance, what language should be used or not in certain situations, especially for in-group or out-group identification. His work on the notions of diction and register shall be present in the study of a Humorous Mode in the Analysis section. Raskin's and Attardo's contributions influenced the linguistic work of Marszalek (2012), which will be employed in this thesis as the main model for the analysis of humour in *Milkman*.

Inspired by the work of Raskin and Attardo, Czech linguist Agnes Marszalek continued a more comprehensive analysis of humour in extended narratives in her cognitive analysis of humour (2012). Her discussion starts with the premise that incongruity alone is not synonymous with humour, since there are textual instances where incongruity takes place but not necessarily triggering amusement in the audience. She states that the unexpected alone does not account for humour in a text. Thus, Marszalek (2012) explores what other elements apart from incongruity add to the creation of humour. In her 2012 thesis, she designs a model for the analysis of humorous extended narratives.

Marszalek posits that narratives that manage to spark humour in readers could be better understood as complex and interconnected constructions. She calls these constructions “humorous worlds”:

One particularly interesting aspect of humorous novels is that their humour may be constructed in a manner that makes it exceptionally difficult to communicate to someone unfamiliar with the wider context of the narrative. [...] Some narrative worlds are constructed in a way that elicit a general impression of humour, thus enhancing the humorous effect of the elements which appear in them' (2012, p. 22).

Accordingly, in the context of her cognitive stylistic approach, Marszalek (2012) perceives humour as a construction and claims that its building blocks should not be examined out of their context. Most specifically, in her model, she focuses on three areas that work as world-building elements of humorous texts: **Disruptive Schemata, Repetition and**

Variation and a Humorous Mode.

Firstly, Marszalek focuses on Disrupted Schemata, which are entities that have the potential to surprise readers. They presuppose a clash between stereotypical representations that we possess in our minds and new data. The idea of disruption that she discusses is grounded on the ideas of incongruity previously explored by Stylistics. Disruption may appear in any linguistic aspect of the text or element of the novel such as character, plot, rhetorical devices, etc. Regarding the effects that disruption may cause, Marszalek includes Cook's (1994) notions of *schema disruption* and *schema refreshment*, which state that a distortion of a particular schema (disruption) can lead to something as powerful and long-lasting as a change in the reader's mind (refreshment). Cook argues that "the primary function of certain discourses is to effect a change in the schemata of their readers. Sensations of pleasure, escape, profundity, and elevation are conceivably offshoots of this function" (1994, p. 191) Marszalek (2012) wonders how these schemata are disrupted to achieve a humorous effect. Also, what has been deformed, what has been exaggerated, and what has been switched around in the text that attracts enough attention and might evoke new realisations and emotions in a reader.

Secondly, Repetition and Variation refer to the idea that familiarity lessens the tension provoked by new and unknown stimuli. This phenomenon might be linked to the idea of humour processing as a mental challenge which is only satisfying when it is difficult enough. According to Ermida (2008, as cited in Marszalek, 2012), the Principle of Recurrence is one of the necessary conditions for a narrative to be considered humorous. This principle refers to "the instantiation of the individual scripts along the textual axis: infra-scripts recurrently evoke (activate) the supra-scripts, thereby leading the recipient to make predictions and to create interpretative expectations" (Ermida, 2008, p.172). As far as repetition and variation is concerned, "the fact that we are presented with a *similar*, but not identical element to what we have previously encountered, will increase the cognitive effort needed to process it and lead to more satisfaction" (Marszalek, 2012, p. 63). The script system proposed by Attardo and Raskin (1985) can also shed light into the effect that the many instances of obsessive lexical repetition, listing and piling of synonyms that feature in *Milkman* may have in a reader.

Finally, Marszalek (2012) joins her ideas of disruption and repetition and variation with an element she believes is key for the perception of narrative humour: a Humorous Mode. She argues that humorous narratives are most effective when they are interpreted in a "playful state of mind which encourages a non-serious manner of interpretation". In this mode she makes reference to the distance, or lack thereof, and tone established by a narrator as well as the choice of point of view, which is absolutely key for a more comprehensive

analysis of a piece of literary work. *Milkman's* point of view is focalised in this teenage female narrator and is a pure stream of consciousness riddled with insights that allow the reader a view of her community in a unique and fresh manner. According to Marszalek, the crucial point about the “secret communion” that is established thanks to lack of distance is that “it may enhance the humour inherent in the narrative world by establishing rapport between the writer and the reader” (2012). The stylistic choices of the narrator are also key for the creation of a humorous mode.

This section has dealt with the main ideas that frame the stylistic analysis of *Milkman*. Next, we shall look at an overview of the novel's historical period, which is key for attempting an understanding of incongruous humour in this novel.

2.1 Historical Context

As stated in the Introduction, the political and religious conflict in Northern Ireland is a lengthy and complicated one. The most intense period of warfare in this area was the Troubles, which started in 1968 and lasted, officially, until 1998. During these years, Separatism intensified, and played a key role in uniting Protestant Unionists on the one hand, and Catholic Republicans on the other, at the same time that it forged their sense of identity. Simultaneously, Separatism moulded the idea of ‘the enemy’, the other that threatened their freedom and rightful claim to sovereignty. In this section we shall take a look at some of the main features of this confrontation as it is the setting for *Milkman*.

Some writers place the beginning of this conflict back to the twelfth century when Britain started a colonisation plan in Ireland. The tension between these two communities, the Catholic Republicans on the one hand, and the Protestant Unionist on the other, continued for centuries, reaching momentum with the Irish War of Independence. When the war finished, in 1921, Ulster was divided and the Republic of Ireland was born. The six counties in the north of the island remained part of the UK as Northern Ireland. The point of contention of this deeply-rooted conflict remained compressed and contained in this small northern territory because some of the population was already Catholic and Republican while the majority was Protestant and Unionist. After partition, coexistence and the integration of both communities in Northern Ireland became an impossible challenge, culminating in the Troubles, also known as “the Longest War”.

During this war, Separatism, which is the practice of “physically dividing territories along ethno-religious lines as a solution to communal strife” (Dubnov & Robson, 2019, p.12), intensified. In this section, we shall review the in-group and out-group peculiar phenomena

that escalated due to Separatism during this conflict, mainly the mechanisms of spying and infiltration, gossiping and paranoia, and the power of language choice. Going over this behaviour is intended as context to later interpret a stylistic analysis of humour of Burns' novel.

The Troubles revealed and intensified the unresolved issues of nationality, religion and power between the Republicans and Unionists in Northern Ireland. The Irish claimed that the North of Ireland, as many refused to call it Northern Ireland, belonged to the Republic, while the British contended it belonged to the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Partition was problematic first of all because it was a political agreement that, like many others that have taken place in history—such as the Israeli-Palestinian, just to name one—did not fully satisfy both parties involved. The majority of people in Northern Ireland were Protestant and many of the Catholics that remained faced discrimination, lack of political representation and freedom of speech. In *Making Sense of The Troubles* (2018), David McKittrick and David McVea state that “the Unionist establishment, which was to run the state on the basis of Protestant majority rule, actively discriminated against Catholics in the allocation of jobs and housing, over political rights and in other areas” (p. 14). Accordingly, and with the intention to keep peace, the British government implemented official acts to ban the display of Irish emblems, the use of Gaelic or the displays of public celebrations or commemorations (McKittrick & McVea, 2018). Some of the Catholics that remained worked to resist British power in Northern Ireland, which, in their view, was occupying the territory. The prevailing attitudes were aptly described by Ulster Unionist party leader David Trimble in his speech accepting the Nobel peace prize: “Ulster Unionists, fearful of being isolated on the island, built a solid house, but it was a cold house for Catholics. And northern nationalists, although they had a roof over their heads, seemed to us as if they meant to burn the house down” (McKittrick & McVea, 2018, p. 15).

The aftermath of partition was coped with violence in different forms, especially as guerrilla warfare developed to counterattack, in the eyes of the dissidents, British occupation. This type of warfare is “fought by irregulars in fast-moving, small-scale actions against orthodox military and police forces and, on occasion, against rival insurgent forces, either independently or in conjunction with a larger political-military strategy”⁴. This type of

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/guerrilla-warfare>

confrontation deepened the divide between the two communities and intensified the practices of Separatism. With a very clear enemy in sight, the Catholic community united to resist occupation and created a people's army. The practices of Separatism are closely linked, among others, to the creation of a mob mentality: secrecy, gossip and paranoia are key elements in the creation of a system of beliefs that kept the communities united.

For several reasons, a herd mentality is instrumental in a guerrilla type of fighting. Firstly, secrecy and disguise, and its derivatives such as infiltration and spies, traitors and collaborators, were of paramount importance for colonial resistance in this context. The most popular underground group of paramilitary soldiers in the period was the Irish Republican Army (IRA), a paramilitary organisation that had been crucial in the Irish War of Independence. Paramilitary fighters disguised their status for survival reasons and one way for Catholics republicans to fight British rule in Northern Ireland was to unite in an underground web. Like all paramilitary affiliations, the IRA was a banned organisation, and admitting to being a member was grounds for arrest. Thus, the group was fanatical about secrecy even among family members. In *Say Nothing* (2018), Radden Keefe talks about an instance in which father and son, both members of the IRA, would remain silent about it and when the son needed bullets he would ask another member of the organisation to act as an intermediary. If the police or the army broke down the door to interrogate them, the less they knew, the better. "It may not have been the most efficient way of doing business, but it meant that *certain things could be left unsaid* [emphasis added]" (p. 24). Knowing or expressing as little as possible was another way of fighting this war and surviving in this environment.

In addition, infiltration was a phenomenon that widened the community divide. Historians who specialise in this conflict describe many instances of operations aborted or groups dismantled thanks to people having infiltrated on each side. Therefore, utmost alertness, silence and mistrust were key for the communal unity and survival. This aspect of the historical context is key when analysing *Milkman*. Common objects such as a phone or a place like a hospital became synonymous with infiltration. During the early years of the Troubles, many homes in Northern Ireland did not have their own telephones. "If they did have a phone, it was generally a shared line, upon which prying neighbours could eavesdrop—not a great solution for communicating with a clandestine informant" (Radden Keefe, 2018, p. 112). In theory, the tout could use a pay phone, but virtually all the pay phones in wartime Belfast had been destroyed by vandals, and "in the event that the tout was lucky enough to find one that functioned, some nosy acquaintance was liable to happen by, spot him in the phone box, and demand to know who he'd been talking to" (Radden Keefe, 2018, pp. 112-113). Similarly, an empty, unattended car in the streets of Belfast became, all

by itself, a source of terror “that could prompt people to flee the area and authorities to descend, whether the car actually contained a bomb or not” (Radden Keefe, 2018, p. 57). It is also well known that since the IRA was a “people’s army”, all those willing to volunteer joined the war effort even by simply providing the rebels with a place to stay for one night or playing the role of milkman, among many others. A milkman was a code name for those who carried explosives in milk bottles or messages from one group of members to another.

Furthermore, gossiping was another double-sword way of uniting the community. Both Protestants Unionists and Catholic Republicans strengthened their bonds with their own people and, in so doing, villainised the other. Even before the Troubles, the civic culture of the place was clotted with unsubstantiated gossip. In *Say Nothing* (2018), Radden Keefe centres his revisitation of the Troubles on the disappearance of Catholic Jean McConville in Belfast. One night the paramilitaries stormed into her house and took her away in front of her ten children. The author explains that this type of event was common during this conflict and that the neighbours understood her disappearance as confirmation of her betrayal to the cause. “Almost as soon as Jean McConville had disappeared, rumours began to circulate that she had not been kidnapped at all – that, on the contrary, she had absconded of her own free will, abandoning her children to shack up with a British soldier” (Radden Keefe, 2018, pp. 49-50). Her disappearance, like that of many, was naturalised and maybe thought deserving due to the rumours circulating that Jean was having an affair with a British man. This is a very symbolic case because the veracity of the rumour could never go on trial. Nobody heard from her for twenty eight years when her children received information from a paramilitary group that had taken part in her kidnapping and gave the children the coordinates to find Jean’s body. Her son Archie McConville would later conclude that “all that pernicious whispering amounted to more than just salt in the wound. It was a kind of poison, he decided, an attempt to wreck our minds” (Radden Keefe, 2018, p. 49). In *Milkman*, Burns exposes how gossip works in middle sister’s community and it reveals how, despite any value as a social bonding practice, and far from being a frivolous activity, in the context of guerilla warfare, gossip can be toxic and often lead to devastating consequences.

Moreover, the war intensified the power of language to preserve identity and to resist assimilation. In terms of linguistic choices and communicative behaviour there are some points to highlight in this context. To begin with the basic fact that Gaelic is the inherited language of the Irish, and that the British speak mostly English. However, both languages coexist in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, the language that people choose to adopt and/or resist is part of this conflict. Just as a way of example, Londonderry is the name British people go by for the city in Northern Ireland while the Irish

call it Derry, in an attempt to eliminate any British ties to the territory. Republicans resist occupation by calling Northern Ireland, the North of Ireland. Similarly, proper names, cultural artefacts and political affiliations are points of contention and elements to reinforce Separatism. In *Milkman*, and since free speech is seldom welcome in contexts of oppression, the narrator makes a conscious effort not to mention anybody by their proper name. She even ironically refers to a list of forbidden names in her community, as they sound too British.

Another by-product of the Troubles was a culture of silence. Due to fears of a Catholic uprising, a draconian law, the Special Powers Act, which dated to the era of partition, had created what amounted to “a permanent state of emergency: the government could ban meetings and certain types of speech, and could search and arrest people without warrants and imprison them indefinitely without trial” (Radden Keefe, 2018, p.15). Local residents resented incursions by the authorities, and the presence of armed and uniformed representatives of the British crown only reinforced the impression that Belfast had become an occupied city. In *Say Nothing*, the author refers to instances of evasion as a form of resistance. On one occasion, IRA volunteer Dolours Price travelled to Italy to speak in Milan and help to spread the word about oppression of Catholics in Northern Ireland. She lectured about ‘the ghetto system’ and the lack of civil rights. When asked whether she had taken active participation in paramilitary action, she responded “If my political convictions had led me to take part in murder, I would confess without hesitation,” she told an interviewer, employing the sort of deliberately evasive syntactical construction that would become typical when people described their actions in the Troubles. She went on, “If I had been commanded to go to kill an enemy of my people I would have obeyed without the slightest fear” (Radden Keefe, 2018, p. 29). The use of the subjunctive mode is one discursive way of disguising her participation in the guerrilla war. This type of evasive survival speech is a key discursive feature of *Milkman's* narrator.

In addition to the Special Powers Act, an Internment and Detention Without Trial Law was reintroduced as an emergency measure in 1971. It allowed authorities to detain and incarcerate any person suspected of being a terrorist. During Operation Demetrius, as it was known, three hundred and forty two people were incarcerated in the span of four days and two civilian people killed in the process. This law was controversial because it was later known that detainees, who had not been legitimately processed, were tortured and pushed for information. The idea that talking and giving away information may jeopardise someone's life or risk the life of any member of a person's community is central in this historical context. During Operation Demetrius, one motto gained the popularity of a slogan: ‘Whatever you say, say nothing’. It was part of the war paramilitary propaganda posters or graffities on the

contentious border encouraging any person that if forced to talk, managed to say nothing of substance. This idea of not revealing information is not new to this conflict. It was part of the propaganda of both World Wars. However, it gained momentum with an official operation carried out to force people to reveal any information about the slippery identity and work of paramilitary volunteers, the enemy in disguise. In 1975, the Irish writer Seamus Heaney wrote a poem titled 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing'⁵, which encapsulates the idea that if a person was made to talk (if 'gagged'), managed not to give any important information away. The importance of saying nothing of relevance as a survival mechanism is present in his poem, as well as in *Milkman*:

[...] Yet for all this art and sedentary trade
I am incapable. The famous
Northern reticence, the tightgag of place
And time: yes, yes. Of the "wee six" I sing
Where to be saved you only must save face
And whatever you say, you say nothing.[...]

Historians reviewing this difficult period in Northern Ireland list many other ways of evasion as a means of protection. If incarcerated, some detainees would deny their own names, as was the case of IRA leader Jerry Adams who spent days denying his own name so the confession process could not advance from that stage. Irish heritage did not help either because of their tradition of giving most male family members the same proper name as their forefathers, so identities were tricky to determine and suspects difficult to spot. Volunteers were trained not to get tattoos, to change their hair styles, occupation and residence as a means to keep their identities slippery.

We have seen in this section an attempt to overview some aspects of the Troubles for the background of the study of *Milkman*. We shall keep present for the analysis the idea that this war conditioned the behaviour of the people of Northern Ireland, on both sides. Secrecy, gossip and evasiveness are the strongest concepts we have reviewed and that will provide a background for the linguistic analysis of the novel. In the Analysis section we shall examine the construction of humour in *Milkman* and its effect together with the goal of detecting how secrecy, gossip and evasiveness are violent means to alienate the communities affected in this conflict.

⁵ <https://allpoetry.com/poem/11014161-from-Whatever-You-Say-Say-Nothing-by-Seamus-Heaney>

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Description of the Corpus

As stated in the Theoretical Framework, *Milkman* is a Menippean satire. The events that move the story along are not of great suspense or excitement. The focus of this novel is on the thought processes and feelings of middle sister during the two weeks she is being stalked by the milkman. The novel opens with a rumour that has been circulating in her community that she has been having an affair with an older paramilitary man, known as the milkman. The narration follows his stalking, including three very brief encounters in which the milkman gets close to middle sister and tries first to give her a ride, then talks to her in a park, and finally coercively asks her out. In the meantime, readers learn about the political and social turmoil in her district, the violent practices that dictate her community behaviour, her family, her neighbours, the gangs in her community, her maybe-boyfriend, the French class and teacher, the running sessions with third brother-in-law, among others. On the day the milkman is to pick her up, he is shot by the state police and some sort of order is reestablished: middle sister goes back to her normal life.

3.2 Selection Criteria

I have chosen to work with *Milkman* because I am interested in exploring how Burns designs a humorous novel. I would like to identify some of the narrative techniques and linguistic devices that may create humour in this story. In addition, I believe *Milkman* reignites necessary conversations on violence, patriarchy, language and power. Such conversations are not only relevant in relation to the Troubles, they are still of importance today.

3.3 Methods for Analysis

The present work will adopt a qualitative, corpus-driven, content analysis that has language as its main focus. As presented in the previous section, the main framework of study is Stylistics and Marszalek's model of a "humorous world". I have decided to employ Marszalek's model because it encompasses a holistic view on how narrative humour might be achieved and it integrates previous valuable research on the field of verbal humour, such as the pioneering studies of Ruskin and Attardo. Furthermore, Marszalek bases her model on Triezenberg's work on humour enhancers, which I consider relevant for this analysis.

However, I have grouped them for brevity and clarity. In addition, I have changed the order of Marszalek's model, mainly because I am focusing on only one text, which has a specific humorous mode as entry point for the analysis. Marszalek, on the other hand, focuses on eight different novels in her 2012 analysis, therefore some unity or narrative linearity was probably not a priority for her analysis. Additionally, I have also considered grammatical structures and register choice which she does not elaborate on, but I understand to be relevant for a stylistic analysis of this novel. All the elements examined in the Analysis section are inexorably connected and influencing each other throughout the text. It is a challenge to separate them, but at the same time, a necessary step for a closer look into the building blocks that create humour in Burns' novel.

4. ANALYSIS

This section is dedicated to the analysis of *Milkman* in the light of Marszalek's proposal of a "humorous world". The linguist suggested that humorous texts are a construction made of a Humorous Mode, Repetition and Variation and Disrupted Schemata. Accordingly, we shall be looking at how this humorous construction in *Milkman* exposes how violence and issues of identity, religion, and power dynamics, created the idea of the enemy and separated the communities in this conflict. In addition, we shall see how this textual world rescues hope for a female teenager in a context of oppression and bigotry.

4.1 A Humorous Mode

This section focuses on a stylistic analysis of Burns' narrative style and the strategies she employs to create a humorous mode in *Milkman*. According to Marszalek (2012), a Humorous Mode refers to "a non-serious, playful manner of interpretation of a text which encourages a humorous reaction to it" (p. 90). It is necessary that a reader suspends the practical, analytical or problem-solving mechanisms that are activated in everyday communication in order to perceive and receive humour. Raskin (1985) states that literary language can either be "earnest, serious, information-conveying, [...] a *bona-fide* mode of communication, governed by Grice's Cooperative Principle, or *non-bona-fide* mode, which is used not to convey any information [...] but rather to create a special effect" (pp. 100-101). When a reader perceives that a humorous mode is expected from them, the processing of dramatic or violent episodes can be received with what Raskin calls 'humorous amusement' instead of "puzzlement or negative emotion" (1985).

In general, a joke is easily introduced with formulaic starters such as 'Have you heard this one?' However, extended narratives do not have such structures. There might be paratextual features introducing a novel as humorous, such as the cover or blurbs, but those alone do not anticipate the actual language that will set the humorous tone in the narrative. In Raskin's compilation on humour research, *The Primer of Humor Research* (2008), Triezenberg states 'humour enhancers' can establish a humorous tone in an extended narrative. She says that

a humour enhancer is a narrative technique that is not necessarily funny in and of itself, but that helps an audience understand that the text is supposed to be funny, that warms them up to the author and to the text so that they will be more receptive to humor, and that magnifies their experience of humor in the text" (pp. 537-538).

Triezenberg lists such enhancers as: diction, shared stereotypes, cultural factors, familiarity, repetition and variation, openings, manipulating distance, and manipulating point of view. For the present analysis, I have decided to choose and group the most relevant enhancers for the context of this analysis. The enhancers are **opening and diction, point of view and distance, and register**. As these elements help create a humorous tone, they also help build the framework from which the story is accessed. As the narration unfolds, and following Marszalek's proposal, this frame will progressively combine repetition and variation and disrupted schemata to create a potentially humorous text.

4.1.1 *Opening and Diction*

According to Marszalek (2012), openings are crucial for setting the tone in an extended narrative piece: "it is the initial segment of the text that will lead the interpretation of what follows—experimental research in psychology suggests that primacy overrules recency in impression formation" (p. 107). In the light of Marszalek's words, let us look at the very first line of the novel: "The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died" (Burns, 2018, p. 1). Readers are unequivocally introduced to a violent and frightening anecdote, however, the appearance of the nickname Somebody McSomebody breaks the seriousness of the narration. The full capitalisation of the nickname, as if it were official, and the fact that both name and last name emphasise that this person is a complete nobody or that he believes himself to be so important, might already signal the reader that although the story introduced is alarmingly violent ("put a gun to my breast, called me a cat and threatened to shoot me"), it is expected to be received with some disposition for amusement. A reader might already feel something incongruous between the presentation of the behaviour of an aggressive attacker but that is identified by such a silly name as "Somebody McSomebody".

The rest of the first paragraph develops the rumour that will structure the story and continues to introduce relevant elements for this analysis. Diction now being a tool to establish an evasive type of style that, achieved with several strategies that shall be studied later, the narrator will maintain throughout:

(1)

He had been shot by one of the state hit squads and I did not care about the shooting of this man. Others did care though, and some were those who, in the parlance, 'knew me to see but not to speak to' and I was being talked about because there was a rumour started by them, or more likely by first brother-in-law, that I had been having an affair with this milkman and that I was eighteen and he was forty-one. I knew his age, not because he got shot and it was given by the media, but because there had been talk before this, for months before the shooting, by these people of the rumour, that forty-one and eighteen was disgusting, that twenty-three years'

difference was disgusting, that he was married and not to be fooled by me for there were plenty of quiet, unnoticeable people who took a bit of watching. It had been my fault too, it seemed, this affair with the milkman. But I had not been having an affair with the milkman. I did not like the milkman and had been frightened and confused by his pursuing and attempting an affair with me' (Burns, 2018, p.1).

The diction of the opening paragraph signals the importance of gossip in this story: "in the parlance", "rumour", "being talked about", "having an affair", "there had been talk". In addition, the narrator stresses the referents who are doing the talking: the community, the nosey people and the presence of the media. Also, being vague or evasive, as seen in the epithets "Others", "some were those who 'knew me to see but not to speak to'", "by these people of the rumour", "quiet unnoticeable people" is key to her narrative style, given the terrifying context she is in and her effort not to reveal anybody's identity in case it might jeopardise her own life or theirs. The idea of 'the other' becomes strong from the offset of the narration and a clear distinction between her experience and the collective mindset is established. From the start, it is possible to detect incongruity between middle sister's experience (being the victim of an attack) and how she is targeted by her community (as starting an affair and fooling an older married man). In excerpt (1) not only is diction introduced but also a key characteristic of middle sister's discourse: the notion of 'I' versus 'Them', which shall be studied in the following section.

4.1.2 *Point of View and Distance*

A choice of narrator and point of view are central to the construction of an incongruous and potentially humorous text. We shall see how these two elements work together in *Milkman* to create the possibility to amuse, at the same time that they help construct an intimate and free space to look at Separatism from a critical standpoint.

4.1.2.1 *Point of View*

Point of view is a much discussed element in literary studies. It is believed to be crucial for storytelling since, in the words of Simpson (1993), "it is the angle of telling, adopted in a story" (p. 2). It includes the ways in which things are 'made to look' in language. He focuses on language as representation, as "a projection of positions and perspectives, as a way of communicating attitudes and assumptions" (p. 2). In the context of narrative fiction, point of view refers, generally, to the psychological perspective through which a story is told. It encompasses "the narrative framework which a writer employs, whether this be first person

or third person, restricted perspective or omniscient perspective, and accounts for the basic viewing position which is adopted in a story” (Simpson, 1993, p. 3).

Milkman's narrator is first-person and point of view is the perspective of middle sister's at a very intimate, raw and free space. This possibility is established thanks to a stream-of-consciousness type of technique. Stream of consciousness is a term that comes from the field of psychology and when applied as a literary device is used as a figurative means to present the flow of a subject's consciousness as the screen in which a narration is presented. In the words of Humphrey (1954), “stream of consciousness contains a studied element of incoherence, that is, references and meanings are intentionally vague and unexplained, and there is [...] an element of disunity, of wandering from a single subject’ (p. 2). He also adds that this type of narrative presentation reveals the most intimate and unconscious thoughts of a character:

Consciousness indicates the entire area of mental attention, from preconsciousness on through the levels of the mind up to and including the highest one of rational, communicative awareness. This last area is the one with which almost all psychological fiction is concerned. Stream-of-consciousness fiction differs from all other psychological fiction precisely in that it is concerned *with those levels that are more inchoate than rational verbalization—those levels on the margin of attention* [emphasis added] (pp. 2-3).

Stream of consciousness aids in the construction of a text that, although chaotic and incoherent at first sight, frees a character of contextual limitations. It can be a means for a character to process trauma or information that is yet not on a conscious level. In this context, it could be said that stream of consciousness is also a tool to represent what was later known as “The Belfast Syndrome”. “It was a malady said to result from living with constant terror, where the enemy was not easily identifiable and the violence was indiscriminate and arbitrary” (Radden Keefe, 2018, p. 30). Doctors found, paradoxically, that “the people most prone to this type of anxiety were not the active combatants, who were out on the street and had a sense of agency, but the women and children stuck sheltering behind closed doors” (Radden Keefe, 2018, p. 30). The unfiltered outpour of information—already perceivable in the first paragraph of the novel (Excerpt 1)—allows middle sister to disrupt narrative and linguistic expectations and conventions. As the analysis progresses we shall see why setting the scene with a stream-of-consciousness type of presentation is crucial for middle sister's free and humorous retelling.

4.1.2.2 Distance

Although middle sister is a very close first-person narrator, she forges a marked distance in her retelling. To begin with, even though her narration centres around the two weeks the milkman stalked her, she is telling this story 20 years after the events have taken place. There is also distance because as a character she is not very communicative. She states “all this sudden talking I was doing, this gabbling, splurging [...] was in marked contrast to my hardly ever opening my mouth to defend or shield myself” (p. 106). For the three hundred and forty eight pages that the novel covers, her active participation, the instances she utters any words, fills only two pages (see Appendix (1)). Also, a closer look into the nature of her utterances show how succinct and to the point they are. This distance she creates between herself and her community is key for the neutral symbolic place she represents. She is what Bal (2017) calls a narrator-witness. According to the author, a narrator of this sort can prove to be crucial for the possibility of humour and bonding to take place as it “can convey compassion, irony, or other affective responses to the reader” (p. 20). Even though her participation as a character is minimal, as a stream-of-consciousness narrator she is definitely verbose. This intimate space of freedom, in opposition to a very repressive and limiting context, allows middle sister to be ironic, dissident, and most of all, to develop such a rich description of events that opens the possibility for a critical revisitation of her surroundings. Middle sister is detached from events and other characters but very close to her audience as a narrator. This gap is central for the creation of incongruous humour.

Distance in *Milkman* can be looked at by the difference middle sister creates between her voice and the collective voice of her community. Her voice is her rhetoric and point of view, her sense of humour and implied criticism of her community. The collective voice of her community are the ideas, values and ideologies upheld in her Catholic Republican district, most of which expose the underlying controlling ideas of Separatism. This differentiation is a difficult one to delineate because both voices are in constant conversation and “the impossibility of being neutral is one of the founding assumptions of dialogism” (Holquist, 1990, p.12). However, it is worth pointing out a difference because I believe that middle sister makes a conscious effort to position herself differently in reference to her surroundings.

4.1.2.2 Middle Sister's Voice

Middle sister's voice represents the somewhat partial voice of the individual. In a context of bigotry and mob mentality, middle sister is considered a 'beyond-the-pale'. Middle

sister explains “[o]ften the pales [the beyond-the-pales] were said to flout convention, to move things not reasonably on one as everybody else did, but unapproved, unannounced’ (Burns, 2018, p. 219). Additionally, she is different because she does not express any religious or political allegiance, does not speak her native language (“that street [...] was really called something or other in my native language which I didn’t speak and also called [...] in the translated language which I did speak” (Burns, 2018, p. 43), goes to college and is taking French lessons and spends most of her free time reading classical 19th century novels. Unlike most of the women in her community, she has not settled down or has had any children, and with the emergence of the rumour that she is having an affair with a paramilitary man, she has become a target for prejudice and bigotry. Most people in her area, including her own family, blame her for this supposed affair. One reason she is easily made a target is that she does not speak much as she does not feel safe to speak freely. She states “I wasn’t confident that a sunset was acceptable as a topic to mention to anybody. Then again, *rarely did I mention anything to anybody. Not mentioning was my way to keep safe [emphasis added]*” (Burns, 2018, p. 44). This quote evidences the idea that speaking was hazardous in her context. However, as it has been stated, she is definitely verbose and close to her audience in her retelling. Nonetheless, the fact that readers access middle sister’s point of view and consciousness does not mean that is just her voice revealed in the text. The following section deals with the dialogical quality of her discourse.

4.1.2.2 *The Collective Voice*

In reference to the novel as a genre, Bakhtin (1982) stated that “the novel as whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice. In it the investigator is confronted with several heterogeneous stylistic units, often located in different stylistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls” (p. 261). The dialogic and heteroglossic nature of the novel evidences, among other features, the many voices and the conversations that can be established in it. Although *Milkman* presents a stream-of-consciousness type of narrator, middle sister’s discourse also displays other voices. Linguist Joe Bray states that “[...] free indirect thought can do more than represent a solitary individual consciousness in isolation, and that it is in fact ideally suited to the contemporary novel’s depiction of the conflict between the individual and the vast impersonal and institutional forces of our current age” (Burke, 2014, p. 222). To this idea, Pomoroska (1984, Foreword in Bakhtin, 1984) adds that ‘we are actually dealing with someone else’s words more often than with our own. “[...] [I]n

each case someone else's speech makes it possible to generate our own and thus becomes an indispensable factor in the creative power of language" (p. 9).

The main strategy through which middle sister incorporates the collective voice in her narration is by including the gossip that originates and circulates in her community. Gossip might be one of the oldest of social practices, however, and as introduced in section 2.1, Historical Context, during the Troubles, gossip was not just an innocent practice. It was a way of holding a community together, but also a means of constructing the idea of an imagined enemy in the context of Separatism in Northern Ireland. She first states that "as for the rumour of me and the milkman, I dismissed it without considering it. Intense nosiness about everybody had always existed in the area. Gossip washed in, washed out, came, went, moved on to the next target" (Burns, 2018, p. 5). Middle sister does not take part in gossiping, and as a general rule, she does not seem to stand in neither the Us nor Them category. She does not express sympathy for neither her group nor the community 'across the border' (the Republic of Ireland) or 'across the water' (the UK). What is more, since her retelling has her as the main target of a rumour, she resignifies the Us/Them to an I/Them type of tension. The novel originates and is organised around a rumour that she has been having an affair with an older paramilitary man and the tension that the rumour creates is held throughout. It is only when the milkman is killed that the rumour ends, and so does her nightmare as a target.

As seen in the first paragraph of the novel (1) and until the end of the narrative, middle sister manages to include 'what others have been saying'. Most importantly, as the narration progresses and the rumour escalates, she describes what the community has been saying in more detail:

(2)

As for the community, and my affair with the milkman according to this community, I was now well in it, that being the case whether I was or not. **I was put about** I had regular engagements with him, rendezvous, intimate 'dot dot dots' at various 'dot dot dots' places. In particular we frequented our two favourite romance spots which were the parks & reservoirs and the ten-minute area, though also we were partial, **it was said**, to spending time, just the two of us and presumably all the people who were spying on us-[...] Ever so confidently, ever so arrogantly, I stepped into his flashy cars, **it was said**, for yes, many people had seen me. [...] 'Already he's married, you know,' **whispered people** and, 'Already he's covering her', **whispered back other people**. 'Mark our words,' **said people**, and again all this made sense within the context of our intricately coiled, overly secretive, hyper-gossipy, puritanical yet incident, totalitarian district (Burns, 2018, pp.171-172, my emphasis).

A stylistic look into the paragraph above reveals some of the most characteristic narrative and linguistic strategies to represent gossip. The phrases in bold above mark the linguistic constructions to introduce the voice of others, such as reporting or indirect speech. In addition, hedging, which is underlined, helps the tentative quality of the rumour ("As for the

community”, “according to the community”, “presumably”, “whether I was or not”). However, this tentativeness contrasts with the categorical expressions or amount of detail included in the narration (“regular engagements [...], rendezvous, intimate”, “I was now well in it”, “Ever so confidently, ever so arrogantly”). The fact that the rumour is a fabrication but it is rendered in such detail can be confusing for a reader. However, it is fair to say that this incongruity helps create humour through irony. A reader can detect the mechanisms of gossip; a rumour emerges, and as it is passed on, the speakers keep on adding details and it is reproduced until it has become an unquestionable truth.

In this novel, it is never clear whether any of those reported lines were actually ever spoken. It seems quite unlikely, given the amount of detailed reporting throughout. Similarly, it is difficult to believe that a person can quote so many instances of gossip to the letter after twenty years have passed. Most likely she is imitating that type of speech and exaggerating some ideas that circulated in her community, using exaggeration for the purpose of humour but also to attract attention to the bullying or violence involved in holding and reproducing certain false ideas or rumours. She might imply that the members of her community would much rather invent and safely hold on to ideas or rumours to spot a target than to speak frankly and find out what is really going on. After all, the communities involved in the Troubles had been used to having an ‘enemy’ living next door. In this respect, it is possible to see how this novel sheds light into the way ‘the other’ has historically and collectively been construed in Northern Ireland, especially highlighting how that idea is mostly inherited through a mob mentality and maybe never examined or given a second thought. The exposure of how gossip is naturalised and becomes the tool through which a community judged others might explain why middle sister does not feel at ease even in her own district. She is an adolescent, victim of the stalking and encroaching from an older paramilitary man, but alone in her predicament. Nobody is focusing on her vulnerability, let alone lending her a hand, which probably pushes her to withdraw even more.

Another stylistic choice that adds to the gossipy quality of the text in (2) has to do with grammar and diction. On the one hand, the use of the passive voice to avoid signalling responsibility (“I was put about”, “It was said”,) and the use of active voice with vague referents employed repeatedly (as seen also in (1)) “people”, “the people of the rumour”, “the people who were spying on us”, reinforce this type of speech. What is more, repetition is key to gossip, but it will be discussed more in detail in section 4.2, Repetition and Variation. Furthermore, one peculiar choice of diction in (2) is the ‘dot dot dot’ construction. It seems to be convenient for gossiping because anybody could fill in the dots with any information. It is a

linguistic construction, a sort of template to be used for any rumour. It is a device that middle sister's mother used on several occasions during the narration (see Appendix (2)).

The question of defining whose consciousness we have access to in an experimental novel that plays with many consciousnesses, voices and time frames is a challenge. Bray mentions the words of Alan Palmer, who claims that “[c]urrently, there is a hole in literary theory between the analysis of consciousness, characterization, and focalization.[...] [A] good deal of fictional discourse is situated precisely within this analytical gap” (Burke, 2014 p. 225). I consider that part of the beauty of a text like *Milkman* is the disorientation a reader may feel as to who is really speaking at any given point in the story and how much of that discourse is actually ‘true’. This type of carnivalesque bafflement is instrumental to an incongruously humorous and free tale. In fact, it is through chaos that asymmetrical orders are challenged and tension is loosened. Moreover, if ideas of a wartime tale were objectively reproduced, the result could be far from fictional enjoyment.

4.1.3 Register

The choice of register is another tool for speakers to align with or distance themselves from a speech community. Registers are marked by a variety of specialised vocabulary and turns of phrases, colloquialisms and the use of jargon, and a difference in intonation and pace (Yule, 1985). Depending on grammar, syntax, and tone, register may be extremely rigid or very intimate. In *The Study of Language* (1985/2020), linguist George Yule describes the function of jargon as helping “to create and maintain connections among those who see themselves as 'insiders' in some way and to exclude 'outsiders'” (p. 176). Similarly, Eagleton (2019) adds that “[i]f the solidarity humour generates is indeed dependent on exclusion and antagonism, then humour is at odds with the cosmic sense of the comic, which embraces the whole of reality in its tolerant, benevolent style. [...] [W]here there is an Us there is also typically a Them” (pp. 85-86). In the two fragments analysed in the previous section ((1) and (2)), the tension between, in this case, the ‘I’ and ‘Them’ is problematised and one way of achieving this differentiation for middle sister is to play with the linguistic choices at her disposal.

In terms of register, it is fair to state that middle sister's discourse is rich and diverse. On the one hand, she displays a certain formal or archaic repertoire in her retelling. Her language use is a reflection of her voice (discussed more in detail in 4.1.2), given that she enjoyed nineteenth century novels, learned French and was a ‘beyond-the-pale’ in general terms. In addition, her narration is temporarily displaced, which means that a

thirty-eight-year-old narrator may have a richer linguistic repertoire to choose from than an eighteen-year-old one. For instance, in the excerpts below, middle sister employs very old-fashion and formal words for common, domestic, everyday situations: (3): moving in together, (4): sexual encounters, (5): diversity:

(3)

[...] he thought I should consider us living together, because we'd been nearly a year now into our 'maybe' capacity, so feasibly *we could forward on proper coupledom by cohabiting* [emphasis added] (Burns, 2018, p. 43)

(4)

The community was keeping her abreast, she said, which meant she knew I met him regularly for *immoral trysts and assignations* [emphasis added], (Burns, 2018, p. 54).

(5)

For yes, even though I was downtown, which meant outside my own area, which meant outside my own religion, which meant I was in a class containing people who really did have the names Nigel and Jason, that didn't mean *disorders, disharmonies, and beyond-the-pales* [emphasis added] couldn't go on here as well' (Burns, 2018, p. 71).

In addition, her advanced communicative competence can be appreciated in the use of complex grammatical structures for emphasis and hypothetical thought. In the example below, such grammatical structures are underlined and lexical items in bold:

(6)

I thought might prove a **deterrent** to the milkman. Should he take exception to brother-in-law **accompanying** me, he'd **encounter** not only the **opprobrium** of the entire local community, but his **reputation** in it as one of our highranking, **prestigious dissidents** would plummet [...] (Burns, 2018, p.13, my emphasis).

Her very sophisticated use of language is marked in comparison to the lexical choices of middle sister's neighbours. In the following extract, she makes it explicit that choice of language had political implications in her district. The extract comes from a scene when the boy she is dating, maybe-boyfriend, wins a Bentley supercharger and the neighbours go to his house to see this new and exciting piece of machinery:

(7)

'Extraordinary!' someone said- which meant it must have been for *that was not a word ever to be used in our lexicon* [emphasis added]. As with others like it -'marvellous', 'tremendous!', 'stupendous!', 'stunning!', 'sensational!', 'topper!', 'super!', 'crickey!', 'let's!', 'smashing!', 'diamondiferous!', 'bizarre!', 'exceedingly!' -even 'however' and 'indeed'- it was an emotional word, too much of a colourant, too high-flying, too posturing; *basically it was of that quintessential 'over the water' language* [emphasis added], with '*quintessential*' being another one of those words. Almost never were they used here without ruffling or embarrassing or frightening local people, so someone else said, 'Fuck, who would have thought!', which toned things down, being more in keeping with societal toleration here (Burns, 2018, pp. 20-21).

When middle sister talks about “our lexicon” she acknowledges that there is a difference in vocabulary use between her community and the Protestant Unionists. However, in the intimate and safe place she creates with her retelling she employs many of the linguistic resources not allowed in her area for being too pompous and formal, ‘too British’. For instance, when she continues to narrate the voice of maybe-boyfriend’s neighbours, she then explains, in what could be said ‘plain English’, what the neighbours had actually meant:

(8)

‘Toe-rag. Twerp. Pishpot. Spastic. Dickhead. Cunning-boy-ballocks. No offence or anything but. I’m only sayin’ but. No harm to you like but’. These were some of the words said by maybe-boyfriend’s friends about *his troublesome neighbour* [emphasis added] after the neighbour and the others had gone (Burns, 2018, p. 33).

The act of displaying a different repertoire from her surroundings is another form of resistance for middle sister. As a narrator she has freedom of speech and linguistic choice, no one in her community can judge her for her narrative style. In addition, despite undergoing a war and having little to no financial means—just like everybody else in her community—, she is the only girl in her story who attends college, learns a foreign language and reads classical novels. Having a wide range of structures and vocabulary to choose from contributes to the marked difference between her linguistic competence and that of those around her. This advantage of hers is another stylistic contributor for incongruity to take place.

A contrastive sociolinguistic analysis into the importance of register choice in this novel could reveal its political implications in the context of the Troubles, but it would take a whole different thesis. In this study, register is mentioned as another strategy from the part of the narrator to separate herself from her surroundings and as a complement for the creation of a humorous mode.

4.2 Repetition and Variation

In addition to a humorous mode, Marszalek (2012) states that repetition and variation is another key contributor for the creation of humour in a novel. Triezenberg (2008) also adds that this technique is the mode of exposition of incongruous elements that increases the likelihood of humour to occur. Triezenberg (2004, 2008) posits that repetition and variation is a means for an author to impress their audience with their craftsmanship and inventiveness by repeating the same joke over and over and magnifying its humorous effect each time.

Repetition could be conceptual (themes, objects, characters) or stylistic (diction, patterns, structures) (Marszalek, 2012). However, as it will be evident in the fragments analysed in this section, I argue that both conceptual and stylistic repetition are complementary in *Milkman*. Repetition might aid in the general aesthetic of middle sister's rhetoric, such as emphasising ideas that are important to her or as a means of reflecting a free speech that is intimate, unuttered, and unfiltered. In addition, such repetitive conceptual and stylistic discourse mirrors the essence of gossip, which, by nature, carries the quality of fragmented and oral, sometimes parroted, speech. Also, a stream-of-consciousness presentation of thoughts, together with an obsessive and repetitive discourse could be the means for middle sister to channel her trauma.

According to Havránek, variation has mainly to do with foregrounding (1964, as cited in Marszalek, 2012), which is a stylistic technique of drawing attention by fronting speech that would otherwise be in the background. In this way, language is defamiliarised so a reader's attention is drawn and a refreshing angle can be established. According to Van Peer (1986, as cited in Marszalek, 2012) there are two types of Variation: deviance and parallelism. Deviance corresponds to the idea of poetic licence and includes devices such as neologism, live metaphor, ungrammatical sentences, archaism, paradox and oxymoron, whereas parallelism includes repetitive structures such as rhyme, assonance, alliteration, metre, semantic symmetry. In this thesis parallelism is the manifestation of repetition and deviance variation. It is possible to find examples of most types of strategies for deviance and parallelism in the text, however, it would be too lengthy to illustrate each one of them, and the point at present is to show repetition and variation as another contributor to an overall effect of humour in the text.

4.2.1 Repetition

Repetition is a very common feature in *Milkman*. The most repeated items in middle sister's narration are adjectives, which are mostly presented in groups of threes, and often escalate to an implausible state. The first examples shown below are connected to the importance of respecting the rules for the choice of a name, which is a sensitive issue in middle sister's area. A choice of name in her community is a political stance in itself, and in her Catholic and Republican community, certain names are forbidden because they have connotations with the Unionists. The repetition of adjectives reinforces the ridiculous or extreme nature of the rule and helps middle sister reveal her thinking through irony:

(9)

Every resident was supposed to know what was permitted based on what was not permitted. You gave your baby a name and if you were *adventurous, avant-garde, bohemian, simply an unforeseen human factor going out on a limb* [emphasis added] to try a new name that wasn't an already established, legitimised name even if not on the banned list, then you and your baby would find out in due course whether you had made a mistake or not (Burns, 2018, p. 24).

(10)

The banned names were understood to have become infused with *the energy, the power of history, the age-old conflict* [emphasis added], enjoined and resisted impositions as laid down long ago in this country by that country, with the original nationality of the name now not in the running at all (Burns, 2018, p. 23).

The choice of name is such a serious business in the narrator's community, middle sister talks about a couple who kept a list of the banned names:

(11)

The keepers of the banned list were two people, a clerk and a clerkess, who *catalogued, regulated and updated* [emphasis added] these names frequently, proving themselves efficient in their clerkiness but viewed by the community as mentally borderline aberrational for all that (Burns, 2018, pp. 22-23).

(12)

Their endeavour was unnecessary because we inhabitants instinctively adhered to the list-abiding by it without going deeply into it. It was also unnecessary because this list, for years before the emergence of the missionary couple, had been excellently capable of *perpetuating, updating and data-holding* [emphasis added] its own information itself' (Burns, 2018, p. 23)

The repeated notion of regulation highlighted in (11) and (12) ("catalogued", "regulated", "updated", "perpetuating", "updating", "data-holding") could be interpreted metaphorically as a means to portray the unspoken rule as having taken the status of a law, and its violation could have serious consequences (as in (9) "[...] then you and your baby would find out in due course whether you had made a mistake or not"). In addition, naming

had further limitations when it came to gender. Middle sister emphasises and magnifies this phenomenon with the use of hyperbolic repetition:

(13)

As for girl names, those from 'over the water' were tolerated because the name of a girl-unless it should be Pomp and Circumstance-wasn't politically contentious, therefore it had leeway with no decrees or edicts being drawn up upon it at all. Wrong girl names did not connote the same *taunting, long-memory, back-dated, we-shall-not-forget, historical-distaste reaction* [emphasis added] as was the case with wrong boy names (Burns, 2018, p. 24).

Part of the reason middle sister's rhetoric is so original is that her unique repetitive descriptions escalate to a point of implausibility. This may seem random at first but when considered in context, her escalation serves to bring ironic humour to a situation that, in fact, is a dead end in an oppressive environment:

(14)

[...] no matter too, that for us, in our community, on 'our side of the road', the government here was the enemy, and the police here was the enemy, and the government 'over there' was the enemy, and the soldiers from 'over there' were the enemy, and the defender-paramilitary from 'over the road' were the enemy and, by extension - thanks to suspicion and history and paranoia - the hospital, the electricity board, the gas board, the water board, the school board, telephone people and *anybody wearing a uniform or garments easily to be mistaken for a uniform also were the enemy* [emphasis added] (Burns, 2018, p. 114).

In excerpt (14), the repetition of who the enemy was or the many enemies her community had is symbolic in this novel. Humour may arise from the fact that since it was impossible to identify who the enemy was, especially due to spying and infiltration, then anybody became one, just in case. The problem was that once an 'enemy' was identified, they could either become a target for the renouncers-of-the-state (paramilitaries) or the state forces.

Furthermore, repetition also appears as a manifestation of syntactic excess, or surtaxis (Korwin-Piotrowska, 2015, p. 131). In the excerpt above (14), the narrator's stream-of-consciousness monologue repeats the embedded syntactic constructions introduced with the conjunction 'and'. The repetition of the clauses stresses the many enemies that could be spotted in middle sister's context.

The extracts below also display syntactic excess to expose violence in middle sister's context. In excerpt (15) she repeats clauses introduced by the adverb 'not' to emphasise that no death could be from natural causes in middle sister's district, it had to be for political ones. In fragment (16), middle sister introduces the many instances of gender-based violence perpetuated to women in her district by repeating the many instances of violence with the conjunction 'or':

(15)

[...] you couldn't just die here, couldn't have an ordinary death here, not anymore, not of natural causes, not by accident such as falling out a window, especially not after all the other violent deaths taking place in this district now. It had to be political, [...] (Burns, 2018, p. 146)

(16)

[S]o now it was your turn to have the hard time so he hits you. Or having your bum felt as you're walking along. Or having loud male comments passed upon your physical characteristics as you're passing. Or getting molested in the snow under the guise of some nice friendly snowfight. Or getting hang-ups in the summer about the summer because if you didn't wear much clothes because it was warm, if you wore a little dress, that would bring upon you all that general summertime street harassment (Burns, 2018, p. 162)

4.2.2 Variation

In addition to repetition, generally happening in threes for middle sister and escalating to an implausible stage, she also employs what Triesenberg called 'defamiliarisation' as variation. According to Eagleton (2019), "[d]efamiliarisation is a type of incongruity, in which one holds in tension a common meaning and a circuitous version of it" (p. 55). For the carnivalesque, defamiliarisation provided "a temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank that was manifested also in the use of language as [...] a type of communication impossible in everyday life" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities (Bakhtin, 1984). Defamiliarisation is indeed one means of creative language use that represents resistance in this context. Middle sister's varied, peculiar and free discourse is one way of expressing her individuality and identity, an act that gains further relevance in a context of oppression.

Throughout *Milkman*, middle sister defamiliarises language as she makes peculiar combinations and alterations to everyday language use. In section 4.1.3 Register, the mixture of lexical choices of middle sister was introduced. Her sophisticated, at times anachronic, linguistic choices allow middle sister to establish her own original style.

In addition to a display of mixed register, middle sister develops a peculiar style of mentioning serious issues in a very casual style. For instance, on their second encounter, the milkman tells middle sister he knows the names of the members of her family, where she works and the bus she takes. She retells this interaction by saying:

(17)

Also, he made the pronouncement that I never caught this bus home. This was true. Every weekday, *rain or shine, gunplay or bombs, stand-off or riots* [emphasis added], I preferred to walk home reading my latest book (Burns, 2018, p.5).

In excerpt (17), appositive noun phrases enhance middle sister's style of repeating and varying information, while continuing to depict her violent surroundings. In (17), she plays with and resignifies the well known idiom 'rain or shine'. Appositive phrases help her style of casually dropping comments of grave importance in her context. In the following example she is casually describing maybe-boyfriend's house:

- (18) Maybe-boyfriend had three brothers, *none of whom were dead* [emphasis added], none either, living in this house with him' (Burns, 2018, p.35).

Similarly, she employs an appositive phrase to inadvertently introduce her sister's ex husband:

- (19) Sister's dead ex, *the one who cheated on her then got killed in his car when sectarian workmates of the opposite religion planted a bomb underneath it in the factory carpark* [emphasis added], had been a plumber not a motor mechanic. (Burns, 2018, p.110)

In the act of accumulating adjectives or descriptive noun phrases, she also created unfamiliar hyperbolic combinations. For instance, when middle sister describes her dad's mental health struggle, she says:

- (20) 'After the war,' said ma, 'even after we married, for years until his death, and especially when the sorrows started, all you'd get would be him burying his head in them dark things.' She meant his newspapers, his tomes, his logs, his collecting and collating of everything to do with the political problems; meeting up too, with like minded friends exactly as *brooding, obsessive and overhung with cliffs, crags, ravens, crows and skeletons* [emphasis added] like him. (Burns, 2018, p. 86).

- (21) She meant depressions, for da had had them: *big, massive, scudding, whopping, black-cloud, infectious, crow, raven, jackdaw, coffin-upon-coffin, catacomb-upon-catacomb, skeletons-upon-skulls-upon-bones crawling along the ground to the grave* [emphasis added] type of depressions.[...] Of course at that time they weren't called depressions. They were 'moods' (Burns, 2018, pp. 85-86).

The example above (21) is interesting because the narrator goes to great lengths to describe how bad her dad's mental state was. However, in her house, they were referred to just as 'the moods'. A reader may notice the allusion between this understatement and the way that the war came to be referred to as 'the Troubles', when in fact it was a 30-year confrontation.

The type of defamiliarisation through poetic licence that middle sister employs is another reason why her narrative is so unique. The text is packed with examples. Below I will

include a few that are unique in figures of speech, including intertextuality. They shall not be analysed here due to length constraints, but I believe that they can further illustrate middle sister's unique style:

(22)

The political problems, for the duration of these minutes, seemed in comparison with this area to be naive, clumsy, hardly of consequence. It was that the ten-minute area was, and always had been, *some bleak, eerie, Mary Celeste* [emphasis added] little place.' (Burns, 2018, p. 81)

(23)

But they said I was ungenerous in my facial expression, [...] Near-expressionless too, was what they said. It was near-arid, near-solitary, near-deprogrammed.[...] At first they said they weren't sure if *I was displaying an unmiable Marie Antoinetteness* [emphasis added] by being stuck-up, by thinking I was above them. (Burns, 2018, p. 179)

(24)

'It's your turn, middle sister, to read to us.' At this they produced story books which I hadn't noticed till that moment they were holding.[...] Weird, wee sisters, I thought. *Too many Shakespeares* [emphasis added]. Real Milkman's right. Must have a word with ma about them. (Burns, 2018, p. 233)

(25)

After completing the *Jean Paul Gaultier kiss* [emphasis added] , and oblivious still of us, the audience, third-brother swept his true wife off her feet and up into his arms. (Burns, 2018, p. 276)

There came further sounds then, intimate, from within the kitchen, moans suggestive of, at the very least, further *Gaultier* [emphasis added] behaviour. (Burns, 2018, p. 295)

Another way of understanding the phenomenon of repetition and variation is by looking at middle sister's style from the perspective of Pragmatics, which is a branch of linguistics that deals with language use in context. One prominent study in this field is that of Paul Grice. The purpose of this paper and its scope do not allow for a deep analysis of *Milkman* in the light of Grice's Maxims—that could take an entirely different dissertation. However, there is one basic aspect examined by Grice that considers repetition and variation and its presence in communicative acts. Grice developed the Cooperative Principle, which is the notion that speakers are "to make [their] conversation contribution as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [they] are engaged" (Grice, 1989, p. 26). Even though the principle clearly considers a communicative exchange, it can be, and it has been, adopted for the analysis of a piece of discourse. In the light of this theory of Pragmatics, if a person is communicating a message, they are expected to comply with the Cooperative Principle, even if it is a one way discourse, like a novel. If the main linemants of cooperative communication are flaunted that attracts

attention to the discourse (Grice, 1989) and Grice has stated that flouting the maxim of quantity, (saying more than necessary: repetition), and quality (being obscure: variation) may have to do with “a desire to avoid expressing a message straightforwardly or an attempt to be funny” (p. 35). Both possibilities seem fitting for the interpretation being offered in this thesis.

4.3 Disrupted Schemata

This section is concerned with the elements that help construct a humorous world. Following Marzsalek's (2012) proposal, these world-building elements include disrupted settings, characters, objects and situations. Some examples will be selected from the novel to show how these instances create a humorous disruption in the narrative, at the same time that they have the potential to reveal the oppressive environment in the town of Northern Ireland where this story takes place. The power dynamics revisited in this section are connected to religion, patriarchy, and guerrilla warfare.

As it has been discussed in the Theoretical Framework, our schema is all the background knowledge we possess and the one that helps us process cognitive activities. Linguists Schank and Abelson explain that our schema is made of subsets of scripts. A script is a “predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that define a well-known situation” (1977, as cited in Marszalek, 2012). This mental representation integrates communicative experiences and the language that is employed in certain fixed situations. On a macro level, it is in charge of building associations and expectations in certain scenarios. Koestler coined the term “bisociation”, which became pivotal to this theory. The pattern underlying the appreciation of jokes, he explained, is “the perception of an entity (either a situation or idea) in two “frames of reference” or “wavelengths” or “associative contexts”. When the idea or situation is perceived in two frames, it is “bisociated,” i.e., linked to two associative contexts, which normally are incompatible” (Koestler, 1989, p. 35). Raskin's (1985) notion of ‘script opposition’ in verbal humour is that a joke is a piece of discourse that is compatible with two different scripts, one which “describes a certain ‘real’ situation and evokes another ‘unreal’ situation, which does not take place and which is fully or partially incompatible with the former” (p. 108). The incongruous events that we shall analyse in this section are classified into disruptive settings, disruptive characters, disruptive objects and disruptive situations. Following Raskin's analysis of disrupted schemata (1985), the associative context or

schemas will be signalled as Script 1 against Script 2 in each example, so the association and opposition can be better visualised.

4.3.1 Disruptive Settings

One example of disruptive settings in this story is an area called 'the red-light street'. This street, located in the Catholic community, has gained its nickname due to the increasing number of unmarried young people moving in together. The area itself is personified as a threat to the religious values of the group:

(26)

[...] it was called the red-light street not because red-light things went on in it but because it was where young couples went to live together who didn't want to get married or conventionally settle down [...] it had been on the news recently as *threatening to spill over into the next street* [emphasis added] (Burns, 2018, p.41).

Middle sister ironically personifies the area as "threatening to spill over into the next street" possibly to show how breaking with traditions meant a menace to the identity of the Catholic Republicans. In a conflict constituted by multiple factors, such as ethnicity and inequality, religion remains one of the central dimensions of social difference and control. Its political significance derives from some overlapping sources. First, religion is integrally bound up with power relationships in Northern Ireland as churches continue to cooperate with politicians to represent the unionist and nationalist political mainstream. Secondly, religion is the dominant boundary marker and the basis of widespread social segregation. As such, religion provides a variety of resources to distinguish in-group from out-group members (Dubnov & Robson, 2019). This is why religion is so deeply rooted in political and social culture in Northern Ireland.

The following examples include the narrator's use of repetition and variation to emphasise the threatening power of the street:

(27)

Meanwhile, in that area, not just in the red-light street, normal people, meaning married couples, were moving out. Some weren't against the red-light aspect, they said. It was just they didn't want to hurt older relatives' feelings, such as those of *their parents, their grandparents, their deceased forebears, their long-deceased fragile ancestors possibly set in ways easily to be affronted* [emphasis added], especially by what the tenor of the media was calling 'depravity, decadence, demoralisation, dissemination of pessimism, outrages to propriety and illicit immoral affairs' (Burns, 2018, p. 42).

(28)

'Next', said another couple, loading up their removal van, 'there'll be one-and-a-half- red-light streets, then there'll be two red-light streets, then the whole district will be red lights with *menages-a-trio* popping up everywhere' (Burns, 2018, p. 42).

The script opposition for the red-light street could be represented as Script 1: Catholic married couples and Script 2: young unmarried couples; the traditional vs. the modern couples in the area. The traditional are Catholic and 'decent', and by way of religious affiliation also loyal to the idea of a Republic independent from the UK. Whereas Script 2 represents modern couples that break with traditions. They are 'indecent' (the area takes its name from the Red-light District in Amsterdam), and by association, they are at odds with the political idea of a Catholic united Ireland. What the examples also oppose is the fact that the way young people must live has been traditionally dictated and choosing otherwise is being a traitor. This opposition is religious but invariably political too, as it is the case with most issues presented in this historical context.

In addition to being a dangerous place, the 'red-light street' reveals the hypocritical attitudes of some of its inhabitants:

(29)

'I don't want to judge,' said another, 'but holding no wedlock has to be judged and judged harshly [emphasis added], then condemned, for is this what we're coming to? Whoredom? Animal passions? Lack of chastity? Is this what we're fostering?' Again, there was more on depravity, decadence, demoralisation, dissemination of pessimism, outrages to propriety and illicit immoral affairs (Burns, 2018, p. 42).

The ironic exaggeration with which the narrator describes this area (as seen in (27), (28) and (29)) works as criticism for the discriminatory behaviour of religious fanatics, their lack of empathy for people they do not know, and their hypocritical double-speak.

Another meaningful disruptive setting in this novel is the hospital. For instance, when middle sister's brother reunites with tablets girl and she starts to show signs that she has been intoxicated, the sensible thing to do is to take her to the hospital. At that moment, the narrator refers to what hospitals mean in this community:

(30)

'Shouldn't take her to the hospital,' murmured the crowd. 'Hospital's wrong, entirely wrong. There's nothing so wrong as a hospital. There'll be forms to fill in. Questions asked on who poisoned her. Then the *Schutzstaffel* will be sent for and them two will be forced into Informership (Burns, 2018, p. 275).

The fragment above describes the reality for most Catholics during the Troubles as they mistrusted institutions because of a general fear, on the one hand, of British authorities they did not feel represented by, and on the other, of paramilitary groups. The need for filling

in registrations and official records for admission in a hospital could make patients accessible to either the state forces or paramilitary groups. However, even though excerpt (30) carries the general collective imaginary when it comes to hospitals, the seriousness of the matter is somehow lessened through the use of humour, which can be perceived in the script opposition and the choice of words.

Fragment (30) mentions two institutions that are supposed to represent safety and care for a community. However, the narrator shows them in opposition, representing the general idea circulating in her context, especially with Internment Without Trial taking place at the time. Script Opposition may be Script 1: institutions for safety and care, such as the police and the hospital against Script 2: "Informership" and treachery. The choice of diction also adds to humour and the fact that the situation is not to be taken literally. She does not refer to the police, she mentions, what probably was, the most infamous nazi force, the *Shutzstaffel*, which did not operate, at least not officially, during the Troubles. The hyperbolic implausibility of the situation may cause humour, however, it does not mean that abuse of power did not take place in her context. She exposes this phenomenon in section 4.3.3, Disruptive Situations.

4.3.2 Disruptive Characters

Many characters in *Milkman* conform to the stereotypes of the two sectarian communities involved in The Troubles. For instance, a Catholic "defender of the state", such as middle sister's mother, complies with many scripts of the group. She is a devoted Catholic, and not just devoted, in the eyes of middle sister she exaggeratedly so. She prays five times everyday at home and later in the day with a group of ladies that middle sister refers to as "The Pious Women". Like every devoted Catholic in the area, she urges middle sister to get married and have children. She is highly judgemental of any behaviour or ideas against the political or religious practices of her group. She represents Script 1: a devoted Catholic Republican housewife. However, this stereotype is disrupted as the narration unfolds and she becomes Script 2: a heretic, or "ex pious" in the eyes of middle sister. When the real milkman (not the paramilitary that stalks middle sister) is shot, it is revealed that middle sister's mother had been secretly in love with him for many years, even when she had been married. After the incident, she reconnects with him and undergoes a type of age regression. She stops praying and attending church services and starts occupying her time worrying about ageing, the way she looks, and what to wear. She swaps religious hymns for romantic songs and becomes hostile to the other pious ladies because they happen to want the real milkman too. As a result of this dispute, this group eventually becomes "The

Ex-pious Women” for the narrator and further division in the society emerges, although it is fair to say not a serious one. The following excerpts exemplify mother’s transformation in the eyes of the narrator. This incongruous disruption may lead to humour as mother’s religious devotion dissipates for “[mother’s] distraction with her heart issues” (Burns, 2018, p. 281):

(31)

Ever since her turnaround, this falling in love with real milkman - or not pretending anymore not always to have been in love with real milkman- she kept looking in the mirror and not liking what she saw. She had taken to frowning, holding her breath, pulling her stomach in, then letting her stomach out when she had to because she’d needed to breathe again. Then it was sighing and scrutinising every physical detail and I thought, she’s fifty. Far too old to be behaving like that. And there were my clothes (Burns, 2018, p. 315).

(32)

That was how the raids started. [...] I came home early from work and there she was in my room, sampling away. My wardrobe was open, my chest of drawers was open, my shoe boxes open, my jewellery box open, my make-up case empty with all its contents on her face or else dumped out on my bed, [...] so all of us sisters were finding this real milkman affair revolutionary (Burns, 2018, p. 316).

(33)

As for her long-term pace-praying, her clock-praying, according to wee sisters, ‘She puts Leo Sayer and “When I Need You”, and “I Can’t Stop Loving You”, and “You Make Me Feel Like Dancing” on the record-player instead (Burns, 2018, p. 317).

Another disruptive character in this novel is tablets girl’s sister. As well as middle sister, she is a “full-on, ostracised, district beyond-the-pale” and accused of being “too shiny” for her context. This incongruity is present throughout the text: any positive, bright or happy person in this historical context is targeted as a traitor. Middle sister states “the only person though, in my own neighbourhood who was unanimously agreed upon to be one of the rare shining was the sister of our district poisoner, tablets girl” (Burns, 2018, p. 90). She was “hard to deal with the threat she posed by going about completely holding her own” (Burns, 2018, p. 90).

She is disruptive for her context but becomes even more so when a letter she had written to be read in the event of her death is found. In it she dares to explicitly voice criticism about her own Catholic Republican group. The letter (Appendix (3)) makes reference to encroachment and its unspoken effects on the members of her society. The style of the letter is incongruously inverosimile rendered with similarly obsessive exaggeration and repetition as middle sister’s. She writes “[i]t is incumbent upon us to list you your fears lest you forget them: that of being needy, of being clingy; of being odd; *of being invisible; of being visible* [emphasis added]; [...] of failure; of loss; of love; *of death. If not death, then of living* [emphasis added] [...]’ (Burns, 2018, p. 263). There is a clear opposition of fears presented in her letter, Script 1: fear of invisibility and Script 2: fear of visibility. Also, Script 1: fear of

death and Script 2: fear of living. This incongruity arises especially from mentioning the opposites as alternatives. The subtext might be that there is no escape from fear in this oppressive context and choices are illusions. The letter expresses the ironic paradox that middle sister has expressed in her own retelling too: in a context of oppression exercised either by a colonial power or by the paramilitary mob mentality a person is out of choice. The letter concludes: “Nine and nine-tenths of us think we are spied upon, that we replay old trauma, that we are tight and unhappy and numb in our facial expression” (Burns, 2018, p. 263).

4.3.3 *Disruptive Objects*

Some objects, which bear a highly symbolic meaning in this context, are presented as disrupting the general script they adhere to. For example, as it may be generally thought, a telephone facilitates communication. It is a useful object that most people have had since it became available in the household or as a portable device later on. However, in this historical context of secrecy and paranoia, a telephone is synonymous with spying. Middle sister states:

(34)

Mainly though, [telephones] were not trusted because of ‘dirty tricks’, unofficial-party-line, state-surveillance campaigns. This meant ordinary people didn’t use them for private things, meaning vulnerable romance things. Of course the paramilitary-renouncers didn’t use them either, but I’m not talking about them here. So phones weren’t trusted; (Burns, 2018, p. 240).

(35)

Indeed we only had one because it had been in the house when we moved in and ma was wary to have it removed in case the people who came to remove it weren’t really telephone wiremen but instead state spymaster-infiltrators in disguise. They’d take the phone away, warned neighbours, but in the process they’d plant other things, things evidential of us being tight-in with renouncers when we weren’t tight-in with renouncers (Burns, 2018, p. 242).

The two excerpts above reveal what a simple telephone meant in this historical context. Script 1: telephone for communication against Script 2: telephone for infiltration. The narrator describes this element in a way that contrasts with the general purpose and use one might connect the object to, thus creating the possibility of incongruous humour.

Another simple item that is presented as disruptive is the Bentley supercharger that maybe-boyfriend wins in a raffle. The problem with this piece is that it had “the bit with the flag on”, the flag that either represented the “country over the water” (UK) or the “community

over the road” (the Protestant Unionists in Northern Ireland). When the neighbours find out that he has such a “treacherous piece”, the offended gang of neighbours go to maybe-boyfriend house to confront him. One neighbour stated “I wouldn’t deign to legitimate such an ensign of oppression, of tragedy, of tyranny” (Burns, 2018, p. 27). However, In the midst of this tense confrontation, one of the neighbours makes an effort to cool things down and suggests maybe-boyfriend placed a sticker over the flag instead:

(36)

cover the flag with a bomber aircraft sticker, or a Superfortress *Girl Dressed In Not Very Much* sticker, or a sticker of Minnie Mouse or Olive Oyl or the planet Pluto or even a wee photo of your ma or a bigger one of Marilyn Monroe?” (Burns, 2018, p. 28)

Excerpt (36) provides some amusement as the neighbour goes to great lengths to provide alternatives that seem ridiculous. In this fragment middle sister shows that, in her district, absolutely *anything* would be preferable over the sight of the Union Jack. Regardless of the effort of the pacifist neighbour, after much exchange, maybe-boyfriend and the rest start a fight.

The script opposition for the supercharger may be Script 1: having a Bentley Blower supercharger and Script 2: being a traitor. In this context of Separatism, and no matter how inoffensive and private an object may be, if it carries a flag “not allowed”, it automatically becomes an event of public interest that may lead to threats and confrontations.

4.3.4 Disruptive Situations

In *Milkman*, certain disruptive events are presented most especially through situational irony. For instance, the issue of rape. With the eighties approaching, the narrator ironically states that the renouncers (paramilitaries) felt the pressure “to catch up with the times” and address the issue of harassment and abuse of women, particularly taking place during the guerrilla warfare when social norms and basic human rights are largely abused or ignored. “What with female-orientation and female-amalgamation and women-this and women-that”, they could easily spark an international incident if they didn’t ‘at least make polite gesture to some of their hairbranded, demented ideas’ (Burns, 2018, p. 311). The narrator states that the renouncers tried their best to ‘please and include into the discourse our beyond-the-pale women’. These were the women who spoke up against sexual abuse during the Troubles, especially from state forces or the so-called paramilitary heroes:

(37)

At last they considered they'd done so by coming up *the invention of rape with subsections* [emphasis added]—meaning that in our district there could now be full rape, three-quarter rape, half rape or one-quarter rape- which our renouncers said was better than rape divided by two- as in 'rape' and 'not rape' which, they added, were the acceptable categories in most fiefdoms as well as in the burlesque courts of the occupiers. 'Streaks ahead therefore we are', they maintained, they meant in terms of modernity, of conflict resolution, and of gender progressiveness. 'Look at us', they said. 'We take things seriously'. *Rape and all that jazz* [emphasis added] was practically what it was called.[...]With that, one-quarter rape became our district's default sexual charge (Burns, 2018, pp. 311-312).

The incongruity is spotted when opposing a serious incident, Script 1: rape, and attempting to deal with it with Script 2: categories and subsections. This attitude attracts attention to this state of affairs and may spark humour for the ridiculous way in which the situation is handled and portrayed. The fact that middle sister is exaggerating her account with repetition and variation, adding the collective voice, and using ironic diction "rape and all that jazz" draws attention to the fact that gender-based violence is underestimated in her district. To have a "default sexual charge" ("one-quarter rape became our district's default sexual charge") to deal with different instances of abuse connotes the lack of seriousness in the treatment of the issue.

Another serious issue middle sister exposes is state violence. In *Say Nothing*, Radden Keefe (2018) makes reference to the fact that, in a desire for destabilisation, some undercover state operations during the Troubles were carried out in an irresponsible and immoral fashion:

'We wanted to cause confusion,' one MRF member recalled. If people believed the paramilitaries were responsible, it would erode their standing in the community and preserve the image of the army as a law-abiding neutral referee. This was particularly true in those instances where the MRF, seeking to assassinate a target, ended up inadvertently killing an unaffiliated civilian instead (Radden Keefe, 2018, p. 40).

For example, the day the milkman was shot, controversy arose as other innocent people had been killed by mistake. In the fragments below, middle sister talks about the British counter-insurgency unit being responsible for killing innocent people in their desire to get rid of the so-called paramilitary enemy:

(38)

Eventually the state responded by admitting that yes, *it had precision-targeted a few accidental people in pursuance of intended people* [emphasis added], that mistakes had been made, that that had been regrettable, but the past should be put behind [...] Most of all, in spite of target error and the unforeseen human factor, it reassured right-thinking people that they could rest easy, now that a leading terrorist-renouncer had permanently been got out of the way' (Burns, 2018, p.303).

(39)

'After they shot him, and the six unfortunates who'd got in the way of him, it was revealed that milkman's name really was Milkman' (Burns, 2018, p. 304).

The two fragments above reveal two scripts that when faced in opposition may result in situational irony. Thus Script 1: precision-target and leading terrorist-renouncer out of the way, Script 2: accidental people, unfortunates, the unforeseen human factor. Additionally, the use of the passive voice to avoid taking responsibility is employed to refer to killing innocent people by mistake and using the typical language of politics (“mistakes had been made”). Her diction is also key for the portrayal of situational irony, the “right thinking people”, who kill “by mistake”, are the ones in charge. This opposition sheds light on the hypocrisy of who the enemy to get protected from is. If in their pursue of ending terrorism the states forces kill innocent people by mistake, who protects citizens from the state forces random operations?

After all, the killing of milkman revealed one striking certainty in the story. After his death, his real name was revealed: it was Milkman. This situational irony is also highly symbolic of the chaotic carnivalesque created in this text because milkman was the nickname given to this man in middle sister’s community to refer to his role during this war, distributing milk bottles as deadly weapons. Now that people learned that his name was his role, is it possible that he was not a milkman (paramilitary) after all and targeting him had been a mistake, too? Knowing the proper surname of this person further created doubts regarding the side the man had belonged to:

(40)

‘Alarmists, meanwhile, continued to debate over the provenance of the Milkman name. Was it one of ours? One of theirs? Was it from over the road? Over the water? Over the border? Should it be allowed? Banned? Binned? Laughed at? Discounted? What was the consensus? ‘An unusual name’, everyone, with nervous caution, after great deliberation said. It broke bounds of credibility, said the news, but lots of things in life break bounds of credibility. Breaking credibility, I was coming to understand, seemed to be what life was about (Burns, 2018, pp. 304-305)

(41)

Had he been the chilling, sinister paramilitary everyone here had always believed him to be? *Or was it the case that poor Mister Milkman had been nothing but another innocent victim of state murder after all?* [emphasis added] (Burns, 2018, p. 305).

In this section of the analysis we have seen how a Humorous Mode, Repetition and Variation and Disrupted Schemata contribute to the creation and presentation of a chaotic, creative and humorous text that exposes the violence of Separatism during the Troubles.

4.4. Living Otherwise

Up to this point this study has explored how Burns constructed a humorous world for the revisitation of violence and discursive oppression in the context of The Troubles. However, I have stated in this thesis that *Milkman* also offers hope. Firstly, it is possible to understand middle sister's retelling as the first act of hope. Rendering her traumatic adolescent experience in a humorous tone can be interpreted as a subversive and liberating act. Although she is critical and ironic throughout, I consider that her tone does not bear the arrogance or bleakness of the postmodern mood, she manages to present moments of humanity, beauty and tenderness in the narration of a difficult experience. As Bakhtin (1984) stresses '*the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time [emphasis added]*' (p. 11).

In addition to the symbolic nature of middle sister's sharing, there are characters, together with their universe, that also symbolise hope for middle sister. It is fair to say that hope can be perceived in the light of a metaphorical interpretation, as these characters can be said to inhabit a middle ground, a third option to the divide.

4.4.1 *The French Teacher*

Middle sister attends French lessons and readers are on one occasion taken to the class when a discussion on the colours of a sunset is taking place. As a literary passage is being read, students are presented with a description of a multi-coloured sunset, which the students reject as 'unreal'. Consequently, and in a desire to show them otherwise, the teacher takes her students to a window nearby and invites them to observe that a sunset is not just blue, as they say. Metaphorically, she is urging her students to open their mind to possibility and to look beyond their immediate limiting context. After that class, middle sister states:

(42)

I stood and walked away again because that French class had been nice. I'd enjoyed it, as always I enjoyed it- the eccentricity of the teacher, her talk of that 'still, small voice', of 'living in the moment', of 'abandoning what you think should happen for what then might happen. There was too, her 'Change one thing, class, just one thing, and I assure you, everything else will change also'- and to say that to *us*, to people who were not only not into metaphors, but not into admitting to what patently was there. But it felt valuable. *She felt valuable, and I didn't want to lose that feeling [emphasis added]* (Burns, 2018, p.101).

4.4.2 *The International Couple*

Maybe-boyfriend parents are a famous couple who one day abandon their children to pursue their dream of becoming international champions of ballroom dancing. This behaviour is highly criticised in the community, however, the artistic nature and beauty of this couple's endeavours eventually shadows the criticism:

(43)

They were world-class, spectacular, blindingly focused and, owing perhaps to their charisma, their sparkles, and to the international kudos of stardom they were attaching to their country- though which country, 'over the border' or 'over the water', was tactfully never referred to-before long, *and most successfully, they were reaching across that treacherous political divide* [emphasis added]. This meant they were one of those exceptions- as with the musicians here, the artists here, the stage and screen people and also the sportspeople, all those in the public eye who managed to rise above winning the complete approval of one community whilst bringing down upon themselves the disapprobation and death threats of the other community. This couple, as part of the chosen few, had everybody's approval (Burns, 2018, p. 40).

(44)

[...] all the little girls had taken to dressing up and dancing about, not just in our street but in every street or in the area-even across the interface road in defender areas, [...] All these little girls-'our side', 'their side'- were dressed in long clothes and high heels and were falling over as they played the international couple, *proving this couple meant very much more here than mere ballroom dancing champions of the world. They had achieved that outstanding status of straddling the sectarian divide* [emphasis added], [...] which inside equated with the most rare and hopeful occurrence in the world (Burns, 2018, p. 314)

4.4.3 *The Real Milkman*

This character is a real milman, one "who did take milk orders, who did have a proper milk lorry and who really did deliver the district's milk" (Burns, 2018, p.140). He is a mysterious man who appears once to give middle sister a ride while she is walking alone at night. Readers later learn that he had been a school mate of her mother and that middle sister's mother had been in love with him all along. Not much is known about his personal life and he is dubbed with the nickname 'the man who didn't love anybody', as he had never gotten married and lived alone. He was not popular with the renouncers because "he voiced dissent over their local rules and regulations;" (Burns, 2018, p. 141). He is one of middle sister's district's official beyond-the-pales. In the example below, middle sister describes the real milkman's warm disposition, which she compares to that of maybe-boyfriend and her French teacher:

(45)

It seemed, and again, I liked this, that this exchange was taking place in that '*How can we get this done?*' manner, that same manner of maybe-boyfriend, also of teacher, not the prevalent '*What's the point, nothing is of use, it's not gonna make any difference is it?*' and this surprised me. *Real milkman, solemn, austere, yet here he was, giving me his time, bringing me hope, listening to me, taking me seriously* [emphasis added]' (Burns, 2018, p.144).

4.4.4 *Third Brother-in-law*

This character is one of the few middle sister is fond of. She says “I liked him. [...] he never gossiped, never came out with lewd remarks or sexual sneers” (Burns, 2018, p.11). At the very end of the novel, after the milkman is shot and with ‘normality restored’, middle sister resumes her running with third brother-in-law. She describes this moment with good anticipation and it is the first time in all the narrative that she feels the need to laugh. This is the last paragraph of the novel:

(46)

Meanwhile, we two resumed our stretching then brother-in-law said, ‘Right? Are ye right?’ and I said, ‘Aye, come on, we’ll do it.’ As we jumped the tiny hedge because we couldn’t be bothered with the tiny gate to set off on our running, I inhaled the early evening light and realised this was softening, what others might term a little softening. Then, landing on the pavement in the direction of the parks & reservoirs, *I exhaled this light and for a moment, just a moment, I almost nearly laughed* [emphasis added] (Burns, 2018, p. 348).

This final moment may symbolically represent middle sister’s realisation or “moment of being”, as Virginia Woolf coined it. In her writing manifesto *Moments of Being* (1985), Woolf reflects upon existence and writing. Woolf employed a stream-of-consciousness technique in the novel to follow the inner and very intimate journeys of her protagonists during their ordinary daily lives until they experienced a moment of vision or an epiphany. She stated that most of our reality is made of moments in which we seem to live as if we had “cotton wool” over our eyes; layers protecting us from reality and making us act as if we were numb. A “moment of being” is an instant in which the meaning of life becomes clear to us and, at least for a brief moment, we feel present and alive.

5. Concluding Remarks

Milkman is a powerful book celebrated with one of the most prestigious awards in the literary world for its fresh insights and originality to address the social turmoil in need of revisitation in Northern Ireland, where terrorism still looms. It was only in March 2019 that the New IRA adjudged the death of journalist Lyra McKnee in a Londonderry shooting⁶. This recent event shows that violence continues to be a means to express discontent over Separatism and coexistence is still a challenge in Northern Ireland. In times of war, physical violence becomes the common and obvious denominator. In the context of The Troubles, which was a terrorist and guerilla type of confrontation, the enemy was not so easily detected. Naturally, recognising a more complex and subtle type of violence perpetrated by one's own community represented a greater challenge. Burns' ability to expose the many ways in which Sectarianism organised and reigned the Catholic Republican community, while making the journey somewhat pleasurable and exciting, is a remarkable achievement.

The analysis of this work was carried out with the theoretical framework presented by Stylistics for the study of humour. For styliticians, humour stems from incongruity occurring at several levels of discourse: scripts, diction, register, among others. Manifestations of incongruity call for attention, surprise the readers and challenge them to draw the connection between the worlds the writer is opposing, thus leading to schemata refreshment, which is a chance of looking at a situation from a non-traditional or different perspective. Inspired by the Incongruity Theory, Marszalek (2012) frames her model of a "humorous world". Nonetheless, she posits that incongruity alone does not result in humour. Point of view, choice of narrator, diction, repetition, defamiliarisation, among other techniques, are also crucial for the presentation of a humorous text. In addition, she argues that cultural backgrounds are as relevant as the language employed to tell a story. If that was not so, how can readers spot incongruity or irony in the presentation of events in a novel such as *Milkman*? It is impossible to understand revisitation and hope and enjoy the satirical nature of *Milkman* without a grasp of its historical context.

Further studies into *Milkman* could shed some light into relevant social and linguistic aspects in the novel that were not explored in this study. For example, given the colonial history of this setting, *Milkman* could be studied with a postcolonial reading in mind. Complementarily, a sociolinguistic analysis into the language choices in this particular setting

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48018615>

could address the political and socioeconomic divisions in the context of this text. In addition, a focus on how Gaelic Irish influences the use of Irish English for this narrator could help explore questions of identity and colonial resistance. Furthermore, I have pointed out in the Analysis that Pragmatics and the famous Cooperative Principle could guide the study into the ways and the reasons for breaking the Cooperative Principle in middle sister's retelling. In addition, the notion of humour as a perlocutionary act together with a reader-response perspective could prove interesting in addressing what other variables are at stake for humour to take place and how much of a reader's horizon of expectations influences or hinders such a phenomenon. Furthermore, instances of conforming to gender roles have been mentioned in this thesis as part of the violence exercised during this historical context. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to focus further on the role of unique female characters that challenge gender stereotypes in this narration, such as the exceptional wee sisters or the girl who is "too shiny", tablets girl's sister.

In this study, we have seen how Burns managed originality in her narrative construction and linguistic presentation. Firstly, choosing a stream-of-consciousness type of narration opened up the narrative for freedom. Furthermore, the creation of a carnivalesque type of freedom allowed for the defamiliarisation of language, the use of incongruous diction, the playing with expectations, with order, with register, with repetition, among others. It is no surprise, then, that in this outpour and chaos, a reader might feel overwhelmed, but strongly surprised when a mesmerising event is casually exposed. Another reason middle sister's rhetoric is unique is that she stands in a more neutral and free ground to depict the incongruous and violent behaviour on both sides of this conflict, especially offering more insight into the ironies, hypocrisies and limitations of her own community. As a result of her impartiality and freedom, she offers a refreshing perspective in the intimate and hilarious space she creates with her retelling.

Revisiting the Troubles through middle sister's presentation may allow a reflection upon the less overt or talked about mechanisms of violence in connection to this conflict, such as a mob mentality exercising a totalitarian power among the members of their own district. She also criticises the status of the heroic paramilitaries and the terrible effects that gang solidarity had on individuals. In reference to this lack of freedom, she states:

There was no getting away from views [...] It was that each was intolerant of the other to the extent that highly volatile, built-up contentions periodically would result from them; the reason why too, if you didn't want to get into that explosive upsurge despite your view which you couldn't help having, you had to have manners and exercise politeness to overcome, or at any rate balance out, the violence, the hatred and the blaming- for how to live otherwise? This was not schizophrenia. *This was living otherwise* [emphasis added]. This was underneath the trauma and the darkness a normality trying to happen (Burns, 2018, p.112).

“Living otherwise” may encapsulate the determination to resist what is being imposed as a single possibility for a life in a divided community. But resistance is not so effective if the source that is inflicting violence cannot be clearly detected. In the phrase *plurima mortis imago* (“death in countless forms”), Vergil nods in the direction of the philosophical view that violence annihilates identity and produces in the end a formless chaos. Thus, “the identities of friend and foe are confused, and accidents determine who is struck down and who escapes” (Grant, 2001, p. 6). In the midst of an overflow of words, stream of consciousness, linguistic disruption and exaggeration, Burns shows the discursive mechanisms operating on both sides, defenders and non-defenders of the state, family members and strangers, Catholics and Protestants. These communities’ dynamics forged the imposition of ideologies or agendas that resulted in the encroachment not only of the enemy next door but their own people, too. In the case of *Milkman*, it is middle sister who wants otherwise: a life for herself regardless and beyond what is politically determined and historically practised. She does not want to gossip, or spy or hate anybody in particular. She just wants to mind her own business: to read, study, go for a run, date whomever she wants and choose not to marry or participate in the political conflict, if that is her choice. In her immediate context she is encroached, but, by creating a “humorous world”, Burns manages to give middle sister some room to freely express herself and live otherwise.

When we think about wars, it is impossible not to regard them as annihilators of life in most of its expressions. In wartime, and for the interested parties involved, life seems to lose its value and its meaning. Not surprisingly, a war is one of patriarchy's most powerful statements, where competition, strength, and power are exercised not to lose face, to be proven right, to win. The somewhat impartial, critical and brave voice of a teenage girl in a context of this sort is not what we readers are accustomed to. We are not used to reading about the heartbreaking effects that guerrilla warfare had on so many individuals, on so many aspects of their ordinary lives. However, the fact that the story is set in a specific historical moment does not exclude it from offering a chance of looking at the mechanisms of violence in our immediate surroundings. In fact, it is a triumph everytime a marginalised discourse makes its way to the mainstream for us readers to further expand our horizons, enhance our experience and rethink History, while enjoying experimental and refreshing literature of our times.

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Appendix

All quotes taken from Burns, A. (2018) *Milkman*. Faber & Faber

(1) Middle sister's active communicative interaction in the story

'I'm walking', I'm reading', I said' (p. 3)

'Fuck off', I said. 'What's that mean - *been seen?* Who's been seein' me? Your husband?' (p. 4)

'New car coming?' (p. 35)

'She's your ma,' I pointed. (p. 40)

'He's a hefty toad, ma,' I said. 'Bastard of the first batch. Don't go listening to him' (p. 51)

'Gee-whizz, ma,' I said. (p. 51)

'Why', I asked (p. 73)

'OK', I said' (p. 74)

'What is the provenance of the eeriness of the ten-minute area?' I asked ma once. (p.83)

In response I found myself doing something out of character⁷. 'He didn't take that flag bit,' I said. 'There was no flag bit. That's being put about by the gossips of his area.' Then I contradicted myself by adding, 'Some guy from "over the road" at my boyfriend's place of work got the bit with the flag on' (p.106)

'I need to go somewhere and leave this or bury it, it's a cat's head' (p.143)

'Don't throw it away but. Will you not just take it and throw it away but? Don't wait till I'm gone then dash it in some bin or throw it to the ground somewhere. If you don't want to do it, to take care of it properly, I mean, then I'll do it, but please don't pretend.'⁸ (pp.143-144)

'I want to give it some green,' I said' (p.144)

'Thanks' (p.144)

'I don't know,' I said' (p.147)

'and I said, 'I don't know' (p.147)

'Thanks,' I fumbled,' (p.165)

'What about...' I began, 'things'. 'Things...', I said. 'You know...strapped to...strapped to...' '...undersides' 'What about...' I began again, '...bombs?' (170)

'So I said, 'Let them have it, maybe-boyfriend, because you must know anyway, because you can't not know, that if they want it, there's no way they're not going to take it,' (p.192)

'Why should I?' I said. 'It's not to do with them and anyway, I haven't done anything.'

'But I'm always only minding my business,' I said, 'doing my things, walking down the street, just walking down the street and—' (p.196)

'What did you say?' I said (p.199)

'But—' I said. [...] 'But—' I said. [...] 'But —' I said. 'But—' I said, 'I thought you meant in case of traffic, in case I walked into traffic.' (p.200)

⁷ On this occasion, middle sister observes that she was doing something out of character which was to lie, to call her 'maybe-boyfriend' a boyfriend and, thirdly, she says 'all this sudden talking I was doing, this gabbling, splurging [...] was in marked contrast to my hardly ever opening my mouth to defend or shield myself' (p.106).

⁸ Right after this quote she says 'These were many words to come out of me, also true words [...] I was surprised at my own forthrightness in speaking out to a male, to one of the elders' (p.144)

'Hold on a minute, I said. 'Are you saying it's okay for him to go around with Semtex but not okay for me to read Jane Eyre in public?' (p.200)

'Not cats' heads!' I cried. 'Cat's head! Only one head! Only once!' (p.202)

'OK. I'll stop doing it,' I said' (p.205)

'That's very attuned,' I said' (p.206)

'Not extra,' I objected. 'They're clocking and stopping me without previous stoppings because Milk—' [...] 'No,' I said (p.207)

'Oh, for fuck's sake, fuck off.' [...] 'Ach, it's that tablets girl' (p. 215)

'No wives, ma. No husbands. No affair with Milkman. No poison.' (p. 223)

'Okay. What's to eat then? Go and see and bring me something.' (232)

'Look, ma. She's not a wee girl. She's older than me. She's a woman!' (p. 236)

'Ma,' I said. [...] 'Ma! Ma!' [...] 'Tell me, ma,' I said. 'What else did you hear about tablets girl?' (p. 237)

'Is he dead?', I asked. [...] 'It's alright, ma. You go and do what you have to and I'll look after us and everything' (p. 248)

'Throwing chips away,' I explained then I said, 'Don't go that way. Men are fighting that way.' [...] 'I didn't kill your sister. Nor am I responsible for you being rejected by your true lover.' (p. 261)

'Well, go and have them then,' I shouted (p. 279)

'How'd you get my number?' (p. 282)

'She thinks you're someone else,' I said. [...] 'You'd better not push it, maybe-boyfriend. It's not my fault my ma has the whole six volumes going, that all of them have the six volumes going. There is no Milkman— well, there is Milkman but no me and— [...] 'Don't take your supercharger butcher's apron,' I said, 'out on me.' (p. 284)

'You cook,' I said. 'You do coffeepots and sunsets when not even women do coffeepots and sunsets. You replace people with cars. You keep a cramped house with challenging rooms and you talk about Lithuanian films.' (p. 286)

'Gimme them', I said' 'And you'd better not have been at my underwear drawer' (p. 316)

'No, ma,' I said. 'Wasn't wondering – and what chair? I haven't noticed any chair.' (p. 324)

'Your pals, ma,' I said, 'your praying pals, the ex-pious women. Is it likely, do you think, that they themselves are saying, "Oh, we must, simply must, step back and let her have him," meaning nuclear boy's mother? You think they'll be for giving up real milkman, for handing him over, for renouncing their possibilities with him, for her? Soon as you're out the road, ma, got out the door, easily too, by their emotional blackmail, that poor woman will be trampled under their first horse and carriage careering by. They'll regroup too, reconfigure and plot, this time to oust the next amongst them, after you, of real milkman's affections. But first it's you, ma,' I said. 'You're the highest in the running for the heart of real milkman, which is why you've had this nuclear-boy-mother card played so deftly and almost successfully upon yourself.' (p.331)

'It's okay, ma,' I said. 'Just keep the nerve, hold the faith, be on your mettle, attend bit by bit and obtain by quiet manoeuvres. Bear in mind too, what those women were like with Peggy. Their appetency and voraciousness that burst forth after Monk Peggy. You said yourself you were angry at them, yet here they are, doing the same again. Cunning women,' (p.332)

'It's me, eldest sister. This is about ma, [...] Ach aye yes, I said ' (p. 338)

'Whatever,' I said. 'Just not with chips,' (p. 342)

'But thanks, brother-in-law,' I said. 'Don't be thinking I'm not grateful because I am grateful.' (p. 346)

'Ach,' I said. 'Ach nothing,' he said. 'Ach sure,' I said. 'Ach sure what?' he said. 'Ach sure, if that's how you feel.' 'Ach sure, of course that's how I feel.' 'Ach, all right then.' 'Ach,' he said. 'Ach,' I said. 'Ach,' he said. 'Ach,' I said. 'Ach.' (347)

'and I said, 'Aye, come on, we'll do it.' (p. 348)

(2) The dot dot dot construction

'[Ma] was sure I was having [encounters] with heretical defenders at 'dot dot dot' places about town. Ma always call locations she disapproved of, or was sure she would approve of, 'dot dot dot' places which occasionally had my older sisters and myself speculating as to what, in her youth, she might have got up to in them once herself' (Burns 2018:47)

'A smaller number were living unmarried with their girlfriends in the 'red-light street' as the community called it and that 'dot dot dot' street as certainly ma, when she should come to hear of it, would call it' (Burns 2018: 51)

'The community was keeping her abreast, she said, which meant she knew I met him regularly for immoral trysts and assignations, knew too, of what we got up to in places too indecent even to give the 'dot dot dot' to. (Burns 2018: 54)

(3) The letter from tablets girl's

My Dearest Susannah Eleanor Lizabetta Effie,

It is incumbent upon us to list you your fears lest you forget them: that of being needy; of being clingy; of being odd; of being invisible; of being visible; of being shamed; of being shunned; of being deceived; of being bullied, of being abandoned; of being hit; of being talked about; of being pitied; of being mocked; of being thought both 'child' and at the same time 'old woman'; of anger; of others; of making mistakes; of knowing instinctively; of sadness; of loneliness; of failure; of loss; of love; of death. If not death, then of living – of the body, its needs, its bits, its daring bits, its unwanted bits. Then the shudders, the ripples, our legs turning to pulp because of those shudders and ripples. On a scale of one to ten, nine and nine-tenths of us believe in the loss of our power and in succumbing to weakness, also in the slyness of others. In instability too, we believe. Nine and nine-tenths of us think we are spied upon, that we replay old trauma, that we are tight and unhappy and numb in our facial expression. These are our fears, Dear Susannah Eleanor Lizabetta Effie. Note them please. Remember these points please. Susannah, oh our Susannah. We are afraid. Not to prolong or belabour, the biggest worry, the worry that we hold, and one that if only we didn't have it, even if we should retain all our other fears, still would we be indescribably happy, that which has condemned us profoundly, changed us negatively, stopped us surmounting trifles such as the fears already listed, and it is that weird something of the psyche – for do you remember, our Susannah, that weird something of the psyche? Of Lightness and Niceness that had got inside us, that was inside us and which, as you recall, possesses us still?

With love and very much worryies and concerneds for your present and your ever future safety, from, Yours, while still being really truly frightened, Faithful Terror Of Other People And Not Just On Difficult Days. (pp-265-266)