

*Politics of Disillusionment: Violence and Idealism in
Liam O’Flaherty’s “Civil War” and Frank O’Connor’s
“Guests of the Nation”*

*Políticas da desilusão: Violência e idealismo em “Civil War” de
Liam O’Flaherty e “Guests of the Nation” de Frank O’Connor*

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Abstract: *Having their formative years in the period right before the Irish revolution, Liam O’Flaherty and Frank O’Connor were deeply influenced by nationalistic propaganda. Inspired by Republican ideals, both writers-to-be took an active, though modest, role in the War of Independence and in the ensuing Civil War. The literature they produced when the conflicts had ceased, however, displays a very critical and contrasting perspective to the one that had driven them to support the revolution. Analysing the short stories “Civil War” (1924), by Liam O’Flaherty, and “Guests of the Nation” (1932), by Frank O’Connor, this essay explores why and how both authors resorted to stark, gruesome, and nihilistic approaches to the Irish revolutionary period instead of adhering to more romantic and idealistic perspectives.*

Keywords: *Irish War of Independence; Easter Rising; martyrdom; idealism; disillusionment.*

Resumo: *Vivendo os seus anos de formação no período imediatamente anterior à revolução irlandesa, Liam O’Flaherty e Frank O’Connor foram profundamente influenciados pela propaganda nacionalista. Inspirados por ideais republicanos, ambos os escritores assumiram um papel ativo, apesar de modesto, tanto na Guerra da Independência quanto na subsequente Guerra Civil. A literatura que produziram quando os conflitos cessaram, no entanto, apresenta uma perspectiva crítica e contrastante com os ideais que os tinham levado a apoiar a revolução. Analisando os contos “Civil War” (1924), de Liam O’Flaherty, e “Guests of the Nation” (1932), de Frank O’Connor, este artigo explora porquê e como ambos os autores recorreram a abordagens brutais e nihilistas para retratar o período revolucionário irlandês em vez de aderirem a perspectivas mais românticas e idealistas.*

Palavras-chaves: *Guerra de Independência Irlandesa; Levante da Páscoa, martírio; idealismo; desilusão.*

Liam O’Flaherty and Frank O’Connor, born in 1896 and 1903 respectively, grew up in an increasingly vibrant atmosphere of idealism and nationalistic fervor (Averil 107) that engendered a series of armed insurrections in the 1910s which, in turn, culminated in the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. Both writers, in spite of some minor political differences, were equally idealistic and took an active though modest role in this moment of radical change in Ireland’s history. From such fervent revolutionaries one would have expected a celebration for achieving the long-desired freedom after seven hundred years of enforced subservience first to Anglo-Norman rule and later to British Imperialism. What we find in their literature, however, is far from the effusive and laudatory spirit of Patrick Pearse’s discourses. O’Flaherty and O’Connor’s tone also differs from the Celtic Revival poets’ and dramatists’, favouring stark realism over romantic symbolism based on aristocratic tradition and folklore (Averil 15). O’Flaherty and O’Connor could have sought the representation of experiences in the likeness of the martyrdom of the Easter Rising, depicting the steadfast manner in which the Irish withstood insurmountable odds in their struggle for independence and underscoring Irish values and virtues advocated by nationalist propaganda. In their narratives, however, heroism is but an unattainable idea and noble deeds are never the outcome of the extreme and violent predicaments their characters undergo.

This article will demonstrate how the violence O’Flaherty and O’Connor faced, especially in the last stage of the Irish revolutionary period, far from an opportunity for symbolic transcendence through heroic feats as the Celtic Revivalists and the nationalist revolutionaries painted with romantic contours, had a deep psychological effect, challenging the ideals and Irish values that O’Flaherty and O’Connor had once championed. The gruesome, almost nihilistic tone that predominates in the short stories analysed in this essay, I will argue, is a response to the tragic fratricidal denouement of the successful revival of violence as a viable political means to enforce the Republican agenda (McGarry 121). The cultural and political context of these revolutionary years will be approached, highlighting the original ideological formation of both writers in order to contrast it with the prevailing values in the short stories “Civil War” (1924) by O’Flaherty and “Guests of the Nation” (1932) by O’Connor.

In “Civil War,” this article will examine how violence pushed the limits of idealism and civility, leading brother-in-arms to fight each other and how it interacts not only with the Civil War itself, but also with the Easter Rising. In “Guests of the Nation,” this essay will investigate how the meditations on the fratricidal struggle in the Civil War extended to the preceding War of Independence, blurring the boundaries of national identities at the same time as it deconstructs the infamous image of the Black and Tans, resulting in the psychological dilemma of killing an enemy turned friend in cold blood.

O’Flaherty’s “Civil War,” published just one year after the ceasefire of the conflict that gives the short story its title, provides a visceral and insightful depiction of the last stage of the revolutionary period. The literary value of this narrative is not restricted to its faithfulness to the actuality of the events to which it alludes nor to its acute representation of the mindset of the belligerents, i.e., the Republicans and the Free Staters. “Civil War,” despite being essentially an allegory for the fratricidal aftermath of the War of Independence, stands above the recentness of the denouement of the Irish Revolution and creates a keen and thoughtful symbolic image that comprises the entire period, directing its main criticism, as I will argue, specifically at the event that triggered the armed fight against Britain, that is, the Easter Rising.

The Alamo-like predicament narrated in this short story was not uncommon either in the Civil War or in the War of Independence, yet it consists of one of the most distinctive and iconic characteristics that, at a tactical level, defined and came always to be associated with the Easter Rising. In “Civil War,” the occupation does not last six days, as in the Rising, but only four and the story begins at the moment right before the last and decisive attack. The whole throng of Republicans were scattered, killed, wounded or hiding in the hills, and only two of them resisted in a public house taken as their headquarters: Lieutenant Jim Dolan and Quartermaster Tim Murphy. They crouched on the roof, with their pistols in their hands waiting for the soldiers to come. They knew everything was lost, but they would not surrender. This quagmire provides an ideal condition for making heroes out of mere soldiers, either by overcoming the enemy, or by dying valiantly. The romanticization of violence, either inflicted or suffered, constituted the main legacy of the Easter Rising and O’Flaherty’s critical take on the Irish Revolution is expressed through the uncivil, brutalized, and devoid of symbolical transcendence manner that Jim Dolan and Tim Murphy are portrayed in the extreme and violent predicament they undergo.

“The Irish Revolution,” writes Thomas Flanagan (154), “was probably the last rebellion to be fought along old-fashioned, romantic lines, with ample room for personal enterprise and with aspirations drawn from the rich nineteenth-century storehouse of liberal belief.” Of the leaders of the Easter Rising, Patrick Pearse, who drafted much of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, was the most aware that the Rising’s importance would lie in its symbolic rather than military impact (McGarry 176). Ferghal McGarry in his book *The Rising – Ireland: Easter 1916* states that “for the military council, the Rising was – above all else – an act of propaganda, intended to inspire the Irish people and win international support for their cause” (176). In order to achieve this goal, a “clean fight” was imperative. The Proclamation urged rebels not to dishonour their cause “by cowardice, inhumanity or rapine” (Pearse, 1916 *Rebellion Handbook* 10) For Pearse, the behaviour of the rebels was as

important as their achievements (McGarry 176). “The valour, self-sacrifice, and discipline of Irish men and women,” Pearse believed, would “win for our country a glorious place among the nations” (15). During Easter Week April 1916, around 1,600 rebels occupied a ring of prominent buildings including the General Post Office, fortified them, and awaited the arrival of the British soldiers whose superior numbers and firepower crushed their resistance after 6 days. It stands as the most significant uprising in Ireland since the rebellion of 1798¹ and the first armed conflict of the Irish revolutionary period. Sixteen of the leaders were executed in May 1916, but the insurrection, the nature of the executions, and subsequent political developments, as Pearse envisioned, ultimately contributed to an increase in popular support for Irish independence. The Rising was seen as a heroic fight by selfless patriots who had recklessly taken on the might of the British empire (McGarry 121) and the popular support it obtained led to the rise of Sinn Féin, the war against Britain, and ultimately, the independence of Ireland.

Seán Farrell Moran, in his article “Patrick Pearse and Patriotic Soteriology,” states that “Pearse promulgated an archetype of Irish republican martyrdom in which the Irish patriot re-enacts redemptive myth sanctifying not only the infliction of death and violence upon others but also the suffering of it by faithful nationalists” (9). Moran states that “Pearse’s language, in both writings and his speeches, couches violent romantic nationalist ideology in theological language that emphasizes martyrdom as a means of bringing about a new age” (17). It was Pearse’s ability, concludes Moran, to describe this conflict and its violence in theological terms that made them historically understandable and appealing to the Irish nationalistic culture (17):

we must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, to the sight of arms, to the use of arms. We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people; but bloodshed is a *cleansing* and *sanctifying* thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood. (Pearse, “The Coming Revolution” 99)

This excerpt from Pearse’s “The Coming Revolution,” published three years before the Rising, is a clear example of the use of theological terminology to inspire revolutionary violence. In Irish history, religious martyrdom has always been a feature of the struggle against England. Irish martyrs did not die solely because they were Roman Catholic but because they were Gaelic Catholic witnesses of a free and unconquered Ireland (Moran 18). In the Cromwellian era, for example, 258 Irish who died as martyrs defending the Catholic faith as a means to resist English Protestant rule were later beatified (Moran 17). Martyrdom, as a Republican revolutionary strategy, was first adopted by the Irish Republican Brotherhood in the nineteenth century. The Fenians, also known as the IRB, were founded in 1858 and had as its core belief the use of violence as the only effective means of ending British rule in Ireland.

Different from its early twentieth century counterpart, however, the Fenian Rising in 1867 had very little impact and obtained an almost irrelevant public support. Yet, the Fenian adoption of violence and martyrdom as a tool for achieving independence consisted of an essential contribution to the Republican cause, blazing a trail that the Easter Rising leaders followed and improved successfully towards their ultimate goal. From 1916 on, Irish Republicanism has consistently reaffirmed the Easter Rising's modality of self-sacrifice; choosing death over life rather than surrender or compromise one's faith in the Republican vision of a free and united Ireland (Moran 10). This ideology permeated with theological significance whose foundations could be traced back to religious martyrdom, has glorified self-immolation in the belief that it is a redemptive act that helps to bring about a new age of righteousness (Moran 10).

In "Civil War," Tim Murphy, driven by the revolutionary spirit enkindled by the Easter Rising, is determined to sacrifice himself in a desperate fight against his former brother-in-arms, the Free Staters: "Thirty rounds left. Then death. All was lost now. There was no further need to live. Death . . ." (184). Jim Dolan, on the other hand, who like Tim Murphy resisted for four consecutive days while his Republican companions were either killed or surrendered, now before an inevitable death, exhausted and deprived of sleep, is unable to muster enough mental strength to carry out his ideals to the very end: "He, too, wanted to surrender" (184). Different from the fighting conditions promulgated by Pearse, which exhorted noble conduct from the rebels, aiming at a symbolic transcendence, O'Flaherty's "Civil War" portrays a reality that is not fit for propaganda. The first approach to the collapse of the Easter Rising's fighting principles we read in the story is through Jim Dolan's experience which essentially consists of the moral and mental breakdown of a former zealous Republican whose ideals are sublimated in the face of an extreme physical predicament: "He only thought of her [his wife], because she represented the world as compared to this wilderness, where he was cut off completely from life" (185).

The pressure the situation exerts on him undermines his sense of identity and allegiance. He stops seeing the Free Staters as the enemy and gives up the cause he has been championing, not considering himself a revolutionary anymore (186). Not fearing the Free Staters and willing to surrender, Jim Dolan has in his remaining brother-in-arms his main antagonist: "Murphy had turned on him, stuck his pistol into his chest and roared, frothing, into his face: 'You bloody well stay with me. D'ye hear, you bastard?'" (184). The extreme predicament these Republicans find themselves in overturns the army hierarchy. Lieutenant Jim Dolan, who is officially in charge, is to all intents and purposes paralyzed and thus incapable of exerting his authority on Murphy. The Quartermaster, in turn, is effectively in command and decides to die taking Jim Dolan with him. This configuration leads to the

second and more profound level of the collapse of the use of violence as promulgated by the Easter Rising propaganda. If on the one hand The Proclamation urged the rebels not to dishonour their cause “by cowardice, inhumanity or rapine,” in “Civil War,” Dolan not only lose heart before the Free Staters’ last attack but is also unable to face Murphy and considers betraying him: “Why could he not turn his loaded revolver on the broad back of Murphy lying prone beside him and fire, fire, fire with clenched teeth and staring eyes ferociously, until six bullets had entered the devilish body?” (185). Extenuated, and afraid of facing his dead companions on the stairway on his way out of the building, Jim Dolan, again, is unable to muster enough strength to act and ends up effectively paralyzed in his position. Tim Murphy, on the other hand, who Jim Dolan considers a devil, is in turn enraged by the lieutenant’s inactivity, and after being shot twice and seeing that Dolan has not moved since the battle started, deems his lieutenant a traitor and a coward and decides to kill him.

The ultimate civil war in this short story is not the fight between Republicans and Free Staters, but the one fought between Lieutenant Jim Dolan and Quartermaster Tim Murphy. The tragedy, which none of the leaders of the Rising could foresee, was that the zealous revolutionary predisposition to inflict and endure a self-righteous violence enkindled by their heroic sacrifice would ultimately turn former brothers-in-arms against each other and that the casualties smitten by Irish hands would surpass the sheer number of lives taken by the British in the War of Independence (Cottrell 10). After the promulgation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which determined the newly formed Irish Free State as a self-governing dominion under the British Crown constituted of 26 of its original 32 counties, the Irish Revolution degenerated into a fratricidal cycle of terror and counter-terror as Irish combatants on both sides carried out illegal killings (Cottrell 19). One incident above all others evinces the hatred that prevailed amongst the rebels. At Ballyseedy Cross in Kerry a group of Free Staters tied nine Republicans to a landmine and set it off. Eight were blown to smithereens and it was said that for days afterwards the birds were eating flesh off the branches of the trees (McKeon 43). These were boys who only a couple of months before had stood side by side against the might of the British empire. The Easter Rising’s modality of self-sacrifice; choosing death over life rather than surrender or compromise one’s faith in the Republican vision of a free and united Ireland had fallen short from bringing about the envisioned new age of righteousness. The fratricidal conflict that ensued the Anglo-Irish Treaty was fought with bitterness, filled with retaliation and inhumanity, and was one of the darkest periods in Irish history.

It is the hatred of those who did not support their self-righteous vision and not the love for Ireland that drives O’Flaherty’s characters in “Civil War.” Even Jim Dolan, who comes across as a rather moderate Republican after his mental breakdown, vents his hatred which also

encompasses the civilians indifferent to their cause: “The same hatred throbbed in his brain; hatred of the people who slept; hatred of the soldiers who were setting the distant street on fire and would come creeping through the houses towards him when the daylight spread. But he didn’t want to die.” (184). Tim Murphy, who Jim Dolan often refers as a devil, realizing that he is weakened by his wounds and that the enemy outgunned them by bringing to the fray a Lewis gun, redirects his hatred towards his lieutenant wishing to kill him before he died: “He would finish him off now, the traitor. He felt himself getting very weak. Only one side of him was alive. Death was coming rapidly. He would get that bastard though.” (187).

The prominence of hatred amongst the rebels is an unwanted collateral effect and, to a certain extent, a distortion of the values propagated by the Easter Rising’s discourse. Tim Murphy’s unbending willingness to fight to the end could be taken, at first, as driven by a fervent, chivalrous, and selfless idealism – as the martyrdom of the Easter Rising leaders was seen by their contemporaries – but in fact his motivation is destitute of virtue, egocentric, brutalized, and ultimately, fratricidal. Tim Murphy does not die the death of a martyr. Driven by his uncontrollable hatred, he is shot dead by the Free Staters when he attempts to assassinate his brother-in-arms. Bloodshed in “Civil War” is not the *cleansing* and *sanctifying* thing through which a new age of righteousness would dawn in Ireland. Tim Murphy’s ordeal is not rewarded with any sort of heroic transcendence nor any other form of meaningful significance. Equally nor is Jim Dolan’s. After having got rid of the devil, he tries to negotiate his surrender, announcing that he is innocent and that he has not fired a single bullet. His attempt to appeal for diplomacy is of no avail. The same hatred that consumed the Republicans also throbbed in the Free Staters’ hearts: “Two cruel, cold faces, staring coldly at him. Gradually he saw the faces growing colder and more cruel, the lips curling into a snarl and the eyes narrowing. Then one man said: “Let’s give it to the bastard.” They both fired point-blank into his head.” (188). O’Flaherty’s depiction of the Irish Revolution depletes it of its most idealistic and heroic features and reduces the experience to an uncivil, brutalized, and rather nihilistic senseless butchery. “Civil War” expands the fratricidal dramatic core the author explored in his first prominent story “The Sniper” (1923) in which a Republican sniper, unknowingly, shot dead his own brother, a Free Stater sniper. In the following short stories and novels O’Flaherty furthered his perspective on the revolutionary period.

To Jennifer Malia, the representations of political violence in novels as *The Informer* (1923) and *The Assassin* (1928) reveal O’Flaherty’s disillusionment with political violence as a means to further a revolutionary cause (193). Malia argues that his lack of support for this cause is shown particularly by his grotesque depictions of terrorists who make a spectacle of blood violence and by his critical treatment of the public’s desire for sensational stories of

martyrdom.” (193). This demand for stories of martyrdom was, evidently, a collateral effect of the kind of ideological campaign waged by the Easter Rising leaders. It is in O’Flaherty’s refusal to supply this demand that lies his pungent criticism to the heroic romanticism incited by the Easter Rising leaders showing how such lofty ideas can decline into barbarism. McGarry states that “the difficulty of disentangling [the Rising’s] violence from that which followed, not only during the War of Independence but also the Civil War and the more recent Northern Irish Troubles can all be seen as consequences of the military council’s successful revival of the physical-force tradition.” (121). Seeing these events in hindsight, O’Flaherty overlaps the Easter Rising and the Civil War suggesting that what began with the intention of uniting the whole nation against a domineering enemy, ended up dividing the Irish in a conflict even more brutal and less virtuous than the one waged against Britain.

It is important to note that this criticism is not being made by a resentful Unionist nor by a pacifist who opposed the violence-driven Republican agenda. O’Flaherty, like O’Connor, was raised in an atmosphere of an increasingly effervescent idealism and nationalistic zeal enticed by political discourses such as Pearse’s and his predecessors. Like his father, who was an incurable rebel, a Fenian, a Land Leaguer and the first Sinn Feiner on the Aran islands (O’Brien 16), O’Flaherty became an ardent political revolutionary, organizing a corps of Republican Volunteers at school in 1913. In January 1922, just a month after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, O’Flaherty seized the Rotunda on O’Connell Street in Dublin with a group of one hundred and twenty unemployed workers, raised a red flag, and declared an Irish Soviet Republic (Doyle 21). The occupation, nonetheless, was short-lived and there was no bloodshed. After four days, besieged by Free State forces, this Communist branch of the Republican rebels surrendered. Later O’Flaherty took part in the Four Courts Rebellion, which marked the beginning of the Civil War, but again, his participation was short-lived. As a result of his involvement in these revolutionary activities, O’Flaherty developed an almost-entirely undeserved reputation as a violent revolutionary (Malia 191).

In his autobiography *Shame the Devil* (1934), O’Flaherty attempts to dispel his fame as a violent revolutionary. In spite of his effort in this book, any attentive reader minimally familiar with his fiction would perceive that O’Flaherty’s approach to violence as a political means is never idealized, being always portrayed as a gruesome endeavor deprived of any form of humanism whose outcome never transcends senseless butchery. This attitude certainly reflects the position O’Flaherty adopted towards the Revolution as soon as he perceived its inevitable conclusion. In the early stages of the Civil War, not only the tides of the political turmoil indicated that a socialist State – the only kind of Ireland he considered worth fighting for (Donnelly 72) – was an impossibility, but also the free and united one which the Easter Rising

leaders envisioned and inspired self-immolation as a means to achieve it. As a result, O’Flaherty quit and departed to England where he concentrated his efforts on his literature (Doyle 23).

If on the one hand the dramatic question in “Civil War” revolves around killing your own kind, in Frank O’Connor’s “Guests of The Nation” it springs from a hesitancy to execute the enemy. Out of the heat of the fighting, in contrast with the setting of “Civil War,” Frank O’Connor sets his characters in a farmhouse turned into a prison-of-war camp, and while the characters pass the time playing cards, a friendly relationship between English soldiers and Irish rebels emerges. Night after night, they talk about subjects other than the war itself, creating a suspension of the belligerent atmosphere that results in mitigation of their sense of Otherness. Frank O’Connor’s portrayal of the Black and Tans and their relationship with their Irish guards is very unlikely, though possible, and contrasts with the common view of this British paramilitary force that became infamous on account of the atrocities perpetrated against the Irish people in their attempt to suppress the Republicans’ insurgent activities. O’Connor’s humanization of the Black and Tans does not arise from a Unionist nor a pacifist leaning but rather, like O’Flaherty, from his own disillusionment with the revival of violence as a viable political means of enforcing the Republican agenda (Tomory 24).

Like Liam O’ Flaherty, Frank O’Connor also grew up in a vibrant atmosphere of nationalistic fervor but instead of his own father, who was not drawn to politics, it was another father figure who instilled in him the seeds of his political formation. In 1912, when O’Connor was only ten, he met at school Daniel Corkery, a sympathetic and approachable teacher who really cared about his students and happened to be a passionate nationalist and a competent novelist, poet and painter. Corkery taught the core tenets of the Republican cause as well as the importance of the political connotation of the use of the Irish language on a daily basis (Matthews 20). When O’Connor left school at fourteen, he continued to learn Irish and to believe in Corkery’s noble cause. With the same naïve fervour with which O’Connor plunged into languages and literature, he also took to revolution, and like his mother Minnie, he believed that he could make the world more palatable. When he was only sixteen, in 1919, he was a fully-fledged volunteer. O’Connor was impatient for action but was allowed only to linger on the fringes of rebel activity. Most young men who joined the Irish Volunteers were constantly involved in minor skirmishes with the RIC, popularly known as the Black and Tans, or engaged in other strategic hands-on activities such as chopping down trees and blocking roads, digging trenches, delivering dispatches, and spying on the enemy (McKeon 34). Frank O’Connor, however, in spite of his enthusiasm, was assigned only to safe jobs like reconnoitering the enemy and carrying messages (McKeon 36). His mother, who had a bigger impact in his life than his father, also played a minor role in the Revolution, carrying messages

and, eventually, guns in her shopping bag (McKeon 34). O'Connor's idealism and romanticism went untested for several months because he was not much involved in the actual fighting (Tomory 23), however, as the War of Independence gradually evolved into the Civil War, he began to lose gradually his idealistic and romantic view of the conflict. Once, O'Connor and other rebels were given orders to shoot unarmed Free State soldiers with their girls. Deeming the order as senseless and unfair, O'Connor sought an IRA official of a higher rank who interdicted the orders. The order was cancelled but it did not mitigate O'Connor's perception that excesses were being committed in the name of the ideals he proudly championed. Later, O'Connor was imprisoned by Free Staters and saw a fellow Republican beaten nearly faceless and bayoneted in the legs and buttocks. The next morning, the boy was taken out and shot. After this episode, O'Connor was transferred to another POW camp and there, seeing the treatment given to the prisoners, he completely lost his idealism and romanticism. Ten years later, these experiences served as the basis for "Guests of the Nation" in which O'Connor expanded the fratricidal character that defined the Civil War to encompass the preceding Anglo-Irish War, humanizing the hateful Black and Tans and showing that, even against a despicable foe, atrocities had been perpetrated in the name of lofty ideals.

In order to achieve this effect, O'Connor subverts the image of the Black and Tans by creating likeable characters and setting them in unfair circumstances. The Royal Irish Constabulary, as this British paramilitary force was officially called, was assigned to counter the rebel activities, retaliating against the insurgents' actions with disproportionate and quite often uncontrollable violence in order to guarantee the local social order. The RIC, or the Black and Tans, was almost totally composed of brutalized English and Irish WWI veterans who had a hard time reintegrating into the society and who had little or no training in policing (Bennett 38). Vicious, brutal ex-convicts and down-and-outs who carried bull-whips and frequently lashed, terrorized and robbed innocent people also integrated the ranks of the Black and Tans (McKeon 36). Richard Bennett, in his book *The Black and Tans*, reported a remark by a Unionist Limerick landowner on the RIC: "These blackguards should never have been let loose in this country. They are not gentlemen." "They were not," reaffirms Bennett, "and by their ungentlemanly behaviour over a few short months made it very difficult for any Irishman to remain neutral in the struggle against England." (38). At the peak of their activities, in 1920, hardly a day went by when a village wasn't burned down (McKeon 38), and in November of the same year, in just one week, twenty-four towns were badly damaged, looted and burned in response to the dramatic escalation of violence that ensued after the imprisonment and death of Cork mayor, Terence MacSwiney, a Republican and a playwright whom Frank O'Connor knew personally and admired (McKeon 39). Yet, in "Guests of the

Nation” Frank O’Connor does not emphasize these Black and Tans’ deeds that make them a sort of Cromwellian scourge. Frank O’Connor, instead, breaks with the Irish nationalistic common view and takes a step forward by making them sympathetic victims in Irish hands. To achieve such effect, O’Connor fashioned Belcher and Hawkins as sympathetic towards the Irish.

Bonaparte, the narrator and a soldier of the IRA, tells us that “you could have planted that pair [Hawkins and Belcher] down, anywhere from this to Claregalway and they’d have taken root there like a native weed.” Bonaparte compliments: “I never in my short experience saw two men take to the country as they did.” (5) Hawkins affinity to Ireland is also evident in the fact that he knows the country better than the Irish rebels (6) and also because he has a particular interest in Irish dances which he can perform as well as any native (6). More important than the fondness for the country and culture, however, are the relationships developed with the Irish. Both Hawkins and Belcher get along with the old woman – maybe a faint allusion to the personification of the country – that works in the house. Belcher, especially, develops a distinct affection towards the old woman, deeming her as “his friend for life” (6). The heart of the story, evidently, lies in the unexpected camaraderie between Irish rebels and Black and Tans. If, on the one hand, the Englishmen display interest in Ireland, learning about its geography and customs, and getting along with the natives, the Irish in turn learn from them a simple but meaningful word that stands for “mates”: “chums”. All these elements combined create a friendly environment in which the word “guests” – instead of “prisoners” – is more appropriate to describe the kind of relationship and atmosphere that emerged among them.

In this context, not only the national differences, but also the power relations, are softened: Hawkins has too much liberty to speak up for a prisoner, and Belcher, who is characterized by his massive body, can freely use a hatchet to help the old woman in the house (6). Eliciting sympathy towards these characters, who belonged to an infamous class of people, is a result of underscoring their very humanity; their very capability to empathize with the Other. Fear and hatred of the Other, remarks Benedict Anderson, is one of the roots of nationalism (141), and in a war excited by a fervent nationalistic discourse, the situation portrayed in O’Connor’s short story renders a special characteristic to the camaraderie evolved in this unlikely situation: the idealistic boundaries that define identity and alterity are blurred, and the very humanity that makes all of us equal arises.

The limits of the dissolution of these boundaries, however, are tested in the climax of the story. In retaliation to the execution of four Irish hostages, the IRA commands Donovan to be in charge of the execution of the two English prisoners. He in turn orders Bonaparte and Noble to take part in the preparation of the place and then in the execution. Having to perform his duties as an IRA soldier, Bonaparte faces a dilemma that its morality becomes ever more

estranged from the propaganda promulgated by Pearse and approximates to the atrocities that made Black and Tans infamous over Ireland. Escorting the Englishmen to the bog where they are to be shot and buried, Bonaparte hopes that the prisoners will escape: “If they did run for it, that I’d never fire on them” (13). However, the Englishmen neither fight nor attempt to escape. Instead, Belcher silently acquiesces in his fate, while Hawkins maintains a steady barrage of questions and arguments that intensify Bonaparte’s awareness of his moral dilemma. “Weren’t we all chums? Didn’t we understand him and didn’t he understand us?” (13). Ultimately, Hawkins appeals to the boundaries they dissolved, and in spite of their former allegiance to their own countries, he proposes to become one of them: “You can’t come over to my side, so I’ll come over to your side. That shows you I mean what I say? Give me a rifle and I’ll go along with you and the other lads . . . I’m a deserter or anything else you like. I don’t believe in your stuff, but it’s no worse than mine.” (14-15).

The bonds they created, however, were not strong enough utterly to eliminate the boundaries that separate them. Despite the fact that Hawkins’s characterization foregrounds his fondness for Ireland and for his ‘chums’, it would be very unlikely that a Black and Tan deserter would be accepted into the ranks of the IRA. Bonaparte desperately wishes to be relieved of his moral burden, hoping that something could happen, like a flight of the Englishmen or that someone else takes the responsibility from him (13), but in the end he must choose between the moral heroism of going against Donovan’s orders or the betrayal of the cause he champions. O’Connor creates a predicament that tells us that even decent people like Bonaparte and Noble, in spite of the noblesse of their ideals, sooner or later would be dragged to commit a heinous act occasioned by the very nature of war. The irony of it is that this is not the gallant sacrifice of a life on the battlefield that leaders have inculcated since hosts began ravaging their neighbours’ lands, but a hideous execution of two English hostages in retaliation for the British Army’s equally, or rather doubly, execrable execution of four Irish hostages (Atanasov 75). On top of that, these characters became intimate, making it not an execution of an enemy, which is still inglorious, but a cold-blooded murder of a friend. Ultimately, the dissolution of the boundaries that defined identity and alterity far from transcending the differences aggressively accentuated by the war, emphasizes the immorality of taking someone’s life, suggesting that, ultimately, all wars are fratricidal.

The horror of the execution in “Guests of the Nation” is foregrounded by the fact that this story is narrated in the first person. Bonaparte’s rendition of the event is like a confession conscious of the impossibility of absolution: “and anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again.” (18). This technique renders a rather personal trait to the account, which is particularly effective for deepening the emotional liaisons and

potentializing the stakes of his moral dilemma. If the psychological effects of the violence in “Guests of the Nation” are emphasized by the humanization of the enemy, in “Civil War,” it is brought about by their very dehumanization: The Free Staters do not interact with the Republicans, their position is often unknown, and their whole action gives the impression of being an impersonal and deadly force of nature. As a result, it creates an atmosphere that sublimates ideals and morals reducing it to a primordial question of survival, which, in turn, engulfs Jim Dolan and Tim Murphy and leads them to their ultimate moral dilemma.

O’Flaherty emphasizes hatred as the main driving force of his characters which, in turn, is presented as a misguided and corrupted form of the lofty values and principles advocated by the Easter Rising propaganda. O’Connor, on the other hand, tackles the same object but through the opposite point of view. Instead of focusing on the hatred that divided the Irish, he concentrates his attention on the bonding of very unlikely friends. Both authors, through different approaches, depict the most gruesome, inhumane, and nihilistic aspects of the Irish revolutionary period in place of its most romantic, idealistic, and heroic characteristics.

Liam O’Flaherty and Frank O’Connor could have remained as fervent idealists, as many Republicans did. They could have sought the portrayal of experiences of symbolic transcendence through heroic feats. Their most lofty ideals, however, vanished before the atrocities – especially those conducted by the Irish against themselves – resulted from the successful revival of violence as a means to enforce the Republican agenda. The bloodshed both writers witnessed and chose to portray in their literature, in disagreement with the Rising propaganda, was not a *cleansing* and a *sanctifying* deed. Jim Dolan and Tim Murphy’s deaths, in spite of their beliefs, are not those of martyrs, and likewise the execution of the English soldiers Hawkins and Belcher is far from a purifying rite that would bring about a new age of righteousness. Liam O’Flaherty and Frank O’Connor’s disillusionment with the Irish Revolution not only marked their personal life but is also reflected in their fiction. Their disillusionment is a result of the tragical and unpredictable *denouement* of the Revolution: what began intended to unite and incite Ireland to fight and conquer her place among the nations of the world ended up violently dividing the Irish.

Notes

1 Peter Cottrell observes that “the 1798 Rebellion was the first Irish insurrection that aimed to break with the British Crown and create a secular republic along Franco-American lines. Rather than severing the link, the failure of the United Irishmen drew Ireland formally into the United Kingdom [through the Act of Union 1801].” In: *The Irish Civil War 1922-23*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2008, P.15.

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