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"Because I'm Struggling" Psyche, Hysteria, and Therapy in David Ireland's Cyprus Avenue

"Porque estou lutando" Psique, histeria e terapia em Cyprus Avenue, *de David Ireland*

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Abstract: *This essay examines David Ireland's 2016 play* Cyprus Avenue, *exploring the role of therapy in unravelling both the mind of the patient, a man named Eric, and his socio-cultural context. It investigates how social hysteria gives birth to personal and social hysteria and the role of history in this process. It also investigates the social, political and cultural questions facing Northern Ireland both in the past and today and how therapy has been used as an effective device for not just psychological but also social and political commentary. The essay inspects how the play helps the reader and the audience to delve into the mind of a mentally disturbed man and empathize with his mental illness, which is deeply rooted in his historical and social background.*

Keywords: *Psychotherapy; The Irish Question; Social Identity; Irish Home Rule; Sectarian Hatred.*

Resumo: *Este ensaio examina a peça* Cyprus Avenue*, de David Ireland, de 2016, explorando o papel da terapia para desvendar tanto a mente do paciente, um homem chamado Eric, quanto o seu contexto sociocultural. Investiga como a histeria social dá origem à histeria pessoal e social e o papel da história nesse processo. Também analisa as questões sociais, políticas e culturais enfrentadas pela Irlanda do Norte, tanto no passado quanto na atualidade, e como a terapia tem sido utilizada como um dispositivo eficaz, não só em relatos psicológicos, mas também em comentários sociais e políticos. O ensaio investiga como a peça auxilia o leitor e o público a mergulhar na mente de um homem com distúrbios mentais*

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e a exercer a empatia para com a sua doença mental, que está profundamente enraizada em seu contexto histórico e social.

Palavras-chave: *Psicoterapia; a questão irlandesa; identidade social; autogoverno irlandês; ódio sectário.*

Introduction

And I'm caught one more time/*Up on Cyprus Avenue*
And I'm caught one more time/Up on Cyprus Avenue
I may go crazy/Before that mansion on the hill
I may go crazy/Before that mansion on the hill
Van Morrison (1968)

David Ireland's *Cyprus Avenue*[1] exemplifies the enduring significance of storytelling as a tool for exploring and understanding the human psyche and the role of society in shaping mental illness. The character of Eric Miller, a Belfast Unionist, personifies the psychological dimension of the profound interplay between personal psychological processes and external social conflicts (Schrage-Früh and Tracy 2022, 63). Eric's psychological deterioration, culminating in his murder of his wife, daughter, and granddaughter, is a poignant illustration of how individual psychologies are molded and influenced by societal strains and traumas.

Co-produced by Dublin's Abbey Theatre and London's Royal Court Theatre in 2016 and set against the backdrop of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the play begins and ends with Eric attending a therapy session with Bridget, a clinical psychologist. The remaining eight scenes unfold through a sequence of flashbacks as Eric and Bridget engage in conversation. It gradually becomes clear that Eric is in the throes of a psychotic episode, stemming from traumatic experiences in his past. The precise nature of Eric's mental condition remains largely unspecified as does the trauma behind his issues, although there are references to a troubling background, such as his daughter stating "I think you had a very difficult childhood, a very traumatic childhood." (57) The underlying assumption is that Eric has been affected by experiences from his past, from his father being killed in WWII, through fighting in Northern Ireland over the question of Home Rule, to his hatred of Catholics and the subsequent uncertainty of Protestant/Catholic relations since the start of the peace process. The gradual

revelation and deterioration of Eric's state of mind is skillfully integrated into the dialogue, reaching such a level that he believes that his five-week-old granddaughter is Gerry Adams, the Irish Republican leader, in disguise. He looks into her "Fenian eyes" (16) and finds therein something which contrasts with his own loyalism. In order to prove his theory about the baby's identity to his daughter and wife, he draws a beard on the baby's face and adds a pair of glasses, before finally, fully caught up in his delusion, killing her in a frenzy for what he perceives to be the greater good ... "although my act was abhorrent, disgusting, apparently psychotic, it was better that I did it" (81).

Cyprus Avenue goes beyond storytelling to become a crucial exploration of the nexus between personal trauma and collective experience. The play accentuates the effects of political and social unrest on mental health, establishing itself as a vital resource for comprehending the complex relationship between individual mental well-being and larger societal forces. In this context, the psychotherapeutic aspects of *Cyprus Avenue* are particularly compelling. Eric's narrative not only provides a window into the psychological repercussions of prolonged conflict but also serves as a therapeutic lens, reinforcing the importance of intervention. It offers a unique opportunity for psychotherapists and mental health professionals to understand and address the deep-seated psychological impacts of socio-political turmoil. David Ireland's portrayal, through Eric's tragic journey, thus offers critical insights for therapeutic practice, emphasizing the importance of contextualizing individual mental health issues within broader societal and historical frameworks. This dual nature of *Cyprus Avenue* as both a literary masterpiece and a psychotherapeutic case study makes a significant contribution to both literary and mental health fields.

In addressing the events depicted, the play deals with one of the most important moments of European history, one which has had a devastating psychological effect on the Irish population, the Irish Question, also known as the question of home rule.[2] Susan McKeown states about the play that, "It reminded me of Stephen Jeffrey's comment in Playwriting: 'Often the playwright sitting alone in a room is more capable of divining what straws are in the wind than any political columnist or commentator.'" (McKeown 2019) Indeed, a great playwright does not solely connect with the political and social arena but also engages with human psychology.

In terms of the psychotherapeutic aspects of storytelling, it has long been recognized that the unconscious mind plays a crucial role in shaping human behavior. Ancient Greek

playwrights such as Aristotle provided early psychologists with insights into human behavior through their fiction. These insights often became universal case studies of the human mind (Holmwood, Jennings, and Jacksties 2022, 112; Nicolson 2022), for example through Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus myth in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1981, Vols IV and V).

Cyprus Avenue tells the story of failed therapy, inviting the audience to consider the critical importance of timely therapeutic intervention. In the narrative, the character of Eric serves as a poignant example, intervention coming only after irreversible harm had already been done. The looming sense of foreboding in the flashback scenes are indicative of those close to Eric failing to seriously consider the red flags seen in his behavior and seek help in time.

The current study juxtaposes Eric's deepening psychological trauma against his therapy. Eric's therapy is used as a tool to unravel the hysteria that has developed in his own mind as a result of the social hatred and violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. David Ireland has effectively made use of therapy to narrate a social and political commentary of incidents and currents which are deeply rooted in the historical and social background of the Irish Question.

Exploring historical context through therapeutic lenses

In *Cyprus Avenue*, a play steeped in historical richness, the psychological dimensions are inextricably linked to its historical backdrop. The narrative continuously raises historical questions, weaving them into the realms of psychology and therapy, underlining how deeply the past influences the psyche and the therapeutic journey. In intertwining his mental state with the tumultuous history of Ireland, Eric serves as a conduit for history, allowing the audience to perceive Ireland's past through his experiences.

Eric is a Belfast Unionist driven to a murderous frenzy for the protection of his beliefs, a cause that he shares with another man suffering similar struggles, Slim and, by extension, many across Ireland. *Cyprus Avenue* not only echoes the legacy of British imperialism in Ireland but also delves deeply into the complex identity struggles and religious and sectarian tensions that have long been a part of Northern Irish history. Furthermore, as Jang points out, *Cyprus Avenue* portrays the Unionists as those who feel they have lost, been betrayed and defeated amid a time of vast political change in Northern Ireland (Jang 2021, 210).

In his influential text, *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud (Vol. XXI) explores the complex nature of religion, portraying it as an illusion, "a collective neurosis of mankind" (18). This characterization stems, in part, from Freud's extensive experience in psychotherapy, observing recurring patterns and psychological effects of religious belief among his patients. Despite ongoing debate regarding the veracity of Freud's claims, one clear historical reality is the use of religion as a powerful political tool by governing elites. Such utilization often disrupts the human psyche, aligning religious affiliation with the interests of those who wield power. Environments laden with such manipulative practices are conducive to the rise of mass hysteria and fanaticism. The historical context of Ireland serves as a compelling case study, sectarian strife significantly bolstering colonial control.

In their defense of colonial rule, one part of the Irish population, represented by the character of Eric in *Cyprus Avenue*, was placed in a peculiar situation. Many in Northern Ireland did not consider themselves to be Irish because they did not fight for Irish Home Rule but rather for British colonial rule, siding with the British and considering themselves part of the same culture. They feared being a minority in a country dominated by Catholics, yet Eric questions how much choice he had in his "choice" of religion, musing "it occurred to me that perhaps I wasn't Protestant. I mean of course I am. I am a Protestant. In the sense of not being a Catholic. But what is a Protestant? What does any of it even mean? I am just what I was told I was." (34)

An intriguing aspect of the play is that Eric's ambivalence toward his religion highlights his internal confusion. This suggests that the root of his hatred is not religion itself, but rather that religion acts as a catalyst to foster group and cultural animosity towards another sect. In mentioning support of William of Orange, a personal connection is made with the historical context through Eric's embrace of the Orangemen's traditions and rituals, that solidifies his obsession with his Northern Unionist identity. Eric explains to Bridget, "I worked for Her Majesty's Government to combat the relentless campaign of genocide conducted by the IRA against the Protestant people of Ulster over the course of three decades" (9), although the exact nature of his employment is never made clear.

In 2007, a fully-fledged Unionist-Catholic government came to power, signaling the official end of the Troubles (Wallenfeldt 2023). It is against this backdrop of peace that the storm rages inside Eric's mind, as he sees his former enemies share power with those he fought

alongside. Simply put, as pointed out by Clare Wallace, the ongoing and unresolved political tension left over by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement is brought to the fore in *Cyprus Avenue* (Wallace 2020, 95).

The historical background is the real cause of Eric's issues, a context that significantly influences Eric's mental anguish. His sectarian hatred and insecurity are transformed into a feverish delirium, which leads to him committing a heinous crime. This is evidenced when he states that his daughter had sexual intercourse with "Fenians"[3] and even Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams, resulting in her infant daughter resembling Adams (25), before he goes on to identify the baby as actually being Adams, the point at which the audience's nervous laughter tips into stunned incredulity. The only way to understand Eric's mental anguish in a historical context is to understand the outside world that played such a huge role in it.

Therapy unravels a tale of horror and trauma

Eric's therapy sets the stage and transforms into a conduit through which the play not only delves into the inner machinations of a man's mind but also reflects the tumultuous external world he perceives. This therapeutic environment allows for a deeper exploration of Eric's mental state, providing insight into how his personal struggles mirror broader societal conflicts and acting as a narrative device, bridging the internal and external realms, effectively highlighting the impact of historical and personal trauma on individual psychology. The play cleverly uses these sessions to peel back layers of Eric's character, revealing the intertwining of his personal demons with the collective history of his community.

The setting of the clinic is crucial in terms of the audience's observation of the objective historical process working behind Eric's deteriorating mental state. Before she commences therapy, Bridget explains, "The things that happened to us in the past make us what we are. Our family of origin. Our conditioning. Our cultural background. Inside it's a mess. Every single one of us is a diabolic mess" (6), essentially highlighting the link between historical background and mental health.

Psychodynamic therapy,[4] also known as talking therapy, is a technique pioneered by Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century to assist patients in navigating and understanding the entirety of their emotional spectrum, including feelings that remain subconscious or unrecognized. This approach is rooted in the idea of bringing the unconscious mind into

consciousness, thereby helping individuals to confront and comprehend hidden aspects of their psyche. In the play, Bridget skillfully employs psychodynamic therapy, facilitating the release of Eric's suppressed subconscious experiences. Bridget makes it instantly clear that she is not judging Eric or singling him out as more monstrous than any of the rest of society. Eric is no exception. On the contrary, each individual's mental health is, in one way or another, a product of their community or culture and the social processes at work outside their own minds, some of which lead to social tension, violence, or even mass hysteria.

Eric not only struggles with his personal identity as a life-long Belfast Unionist during the late 1990s, but also tackles his ethical dilemma regarding feelings of hatred towards his granddaughter, a struggle which is so intimately linked that the two become inseparable. Such struggles between the personal and the ethical are quite common and continue to evolve within modern Western society. Eric does not want to kill his granddaughter since he understands that killing is wrong. However, he feels that his hand is forced and he must commit this act in order to protect the greater good of Unionism. He still feels sufficiently threatened by the past sectarian conflict of the Troubles to shift his idea of what is ethically or morally right to a conclusion that prioritizes the greater good. This largely stems from his perceived fear of Irish Republican rule, causing the extinction of Protestant Unionists.

A similar dilemma occurs for Slim, the UVF[5] paramilitary who encounters Eric in a park. Slim is so riled up by the cause in which he believes that even something as morally terrible as murdering a five-week-old baby is an action he is willing to consider. To begin with, he exclaims "Fuck that! She's a new-born baby!" (51) but after listening to Eric's ramblings and accusations, states "Course I'll do it. I'd love to do it! I'd love to put a stop to this dastardly Republican scheme!" (53), ultimately refusing, recognizing the abhorrence of killing a baby. While Slim moves through these stages of denial, enthusiasm, and eventual rejection due to ethics, Eric's psychological journey reaches no such conclusion. Eric remains convinced that, as a manifestation of Gerry Adams, his granddaughter must be killed, and regardless of the ethics of murder, he says "I have devoted my life to God. Or tried to, to the best of my abilities. But I love Ulster more ... if I have to choose between God and Ulster, I choose Ulster." (67–68) Eric and Slim's radical plans align with one of Ulman and Abse's observations on the individual giving into hysteria wherein they want to move beyond their "battered and bruised self" through what they see as devotion to a "noble and uplifting cause" (Ulman and Abse 1983, 638). This was in fact the reality for many young unemployed and disenfranchised men

throughout the 1960s to 1980s in Northern Ireland, resulting in them either taking up the Irish Republican or Unionist side in the conflict.

The play adeptly navigates the realms of ethics and morality, highlighting the malleability of ethical standards. The character of Eric demonstrates how rapidly an individual's moral compass can be shifted to align with their motivations or those of controlling forces, particularly when perceived as a viable route to a desired outcome. However, this moral dilemma precipitates significant psychological turmoil within the subconscious mind, underscoring the complex relationship between ethics, personal agency, and mental health. This thematic exploration is further inspected by Bridget in her therapeutic interactions with Eric. For instance, when Eric asks, "Why are you a nigger?", Bridget replies "do you think it's an acceptable comment to make in this situation?" (7). This is not just a question but a strategic challenge to Eric's mindset. Her open-ended questioning aligns with conventional therapeutic techniques, designed to provoke introspection and re-evaluation of beliefs. Bridget's role transcends that of a mere therapist; she becomes a surrogate for the audience, voicing their questions in an attempt to decipher Eric's offensive behaviors. By embedding this therapeutic dynamic within the storyline, the play not only provides insight into Eric's psyche but also invites the audience to reflect on their own moral compasses and influencing factors. This approach enriches the narrative, offering a layered commentary on the malleability of ethics and its psychological ramifications.

As the narrative of the play progresses, it quickly becomes apparent to the audience that they are not observing discrete therapy sessions throughout Eric's life, but rather a single session depicted through a sequence of flashbacks. This temporal complexity is deepened in Scene Six, in which Eric mistakenly perceives that he is conversing about the past with Bridget while sitting on a park bench. This crafted confusion serves a dual purpose: it not only mirrors Eric's disorientation with time and space but also exemplifies the key therapeutic concept that delving into a patient's subconscious and past experiences is crucial for understanding and resolving present issues.

Eric's interactions, especially with his family, are pivotal in this regard. The audience witnesses not just a man's spiral into delusion and paranoia but also the profound impact his mental state has on his loved ones. At the beginning of the play, Eric appears to have a relatively healthy relationship with his family. However, the shock of seeing his granddaughter for the first time and perceiving her as Gerry Adams sends him to bed "for days pretending to battle

a debilitating virus" (18), causing arguments and a rapid descent into madness, culminating in his wife telling him "GET OUT! GET OUT! *Leave*!" (26) By tracing Eric's journey, the play effectively becomes a therapeutic landscape, offering a glimpse into the complexities of mental illness and the importance of understanding an individual's temporal and spatial disorientation, including their interpersonal relationships.

In a 1995 play, *Blasted* by Sarah Kane, the audience sees a quest for ethics, as opposed to the more frequent depiction of simple right and wrong. Kane dramatizes the "ethics of catastrophe" (a concept coined by Ken Urban [37]) through her exploration of rape, war, and suicide set in a single hotel room in war-torn Leeds. As a piece of theatre, *Blasted* offers neither resolution nor redemption: "its aim is to put the audience through an experience rather than put forward a conclusive argument" (Kane 2001, commentary, 63). Instead, the story is found to be rooted in the changing and flexible space of ethics. Much like Kane's work, *Cyprus Avenue* considers not what is right or wrong but instead explores the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by struggling individuals.

The concept of separatist division is prevalent throughout the whole of *Cyprus Avenue* and revealed in violence at the end of the play. In an interview with *The Guardian*, David Ireland confesses, "I find it hard to end my plays without violence" (Lawson 2019). The play is often described as black or dark comedy, defined as using humorous moments to juxtapose horrific acts of violence (Holdsworth and Luckhurst 2013, 150). The humorous moments in *Cyprus Avenue*, largely during the discourse between Eric and Slim from Scene Six, provide momentary relief to an audience stuck in this absurdly dark story. The audience of the Royal Court performance can be seen in the video to laugh nervously, recognising the ever-present possibility of violence. This humorous discourse mirrors the dark comedy in the encounter between therapist and patient, a concept found in Sarah Kane's works, who made a phenomenological point by highlighting that "humor brackets, the violence for the viewer, forcing a reassessment of that violence, not as a release from the intensity of the spectacle, but as a reinforcement of its spectacular power" (Urban 2013, 150). In *Blasted*, the foul-mouthed misogynistic Ian brings a younger woman, Cate, to a hotel room, brandishing a gun. It is clear from the outset that acts of violence are inevitable, but the text is peppered with comedy nonetheless. Ian tells Cate "When I'm with you I can't think about anything else. You take me to another place." To which Cate replies, "It's like that when I have a fit." (Kane 2001, 22)

In a review for *The Guardian*, Billington (2016) states that *Cyprus Avenue* strikes a similar tone to that of Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, the story of an INLA[6] terrorist who, after the loss of his beloved black cat, initiates a murderous frenzy. The black comedy in this play emanates from the absurdity of the protagonists in their attempts to cover up their erroneous killing of the cat, kidnapping a ginger cat and using shoe polish to disguise its color. At the end of the play, the audience is allowed to release a nervous breath as the original cat walks in alive and well. Much like McDonagh, David Ireland makes use of black comedy to bring to light the level of absurdity and irrationality of the hatred displayed by sectarian division. Eric's "For the first time in a long time, I feel at peace." (82) at the end of *Cyprus Avenue* represents a similar moment of release for the audience after the horror they have witnessed. It is easy to see a parallel between David Ireland's play and those written by Sarah Kane and Martin McDonagh within the Royal Court's 1990s trend of "in-yer-face" theatre (Sierz 2014, 4), much of which was known for its graphic moments and explicit violence, both defining features of *Cyprus Avenue*.

Integrating identity and storytelling in therapy

The focus of *Cyprus Avenue* is on personal identity and inner turmoil, stemming from Eric's agony over his British identity. This struggle is based on the fact that the culture within which Eric once understood himself to reside has been superseded by the peace process, and the new cultural model for "self-making" conflicts too strongly with the old model for him to grasp. He recounts that on a business trip to London, some ten years prior, he was invited into an Irish pub, where he realised with horror that his identity, at least in the eyes of his drinking companion, was entirely Irish. His companion understood that Eric was from Belfast but did not seem to realise the complexity of Eric's relationship with Ireland. When Eric said he was from Belfast: "I expected suspicion, horror, shrieks of despair. But instead he placed a fat and friendly Fenian arm around my shoulder. 'My grandfather was from Limerick. Let me buy you a pint'." (37) To compound Eric's horror, he found himself enjoying the drunken experience, even enjoying conversing about football and women, singing Irish folksongs: "I was so happy that night. I was Irish. For one night, I was allowed to be Irish and I had a grand aul' time, so I did." (39) He confesses to Slim, "I might be Irish. I'm worried that I might be Irish." (44) Aquino and Reed explain that identity is rooted within the core of a person's

very being also associated with one's understanding of reality (Aquino and Reed 2002, 1424). One could argue that as Eric's mental state deteriorates as he struggles to understand his own identity, so too does his self-identity appear to crumble alongside his mental state and ability to self-regulate.

In Eric's case, he had been told from a young age that he was Protestant, and although he had never had a relationship with God, this identity, within the context of his community and upbringing, led to a deep hatred of Catholics, over which Eric had little, if any, control. In fact, Eric mentions that he marches in the Orangeman's Day parade every summer, in which the Battle of the Boyne is commemorated (8). It is clear that Eric is steeped deeply in the history, traditions, and even violence associated with Northern Irish masculinity.

In mainstream psychology, the concept of "self" is prominent but elusively defined, as noted by Bruner (2003). It is generally understood that "sel" is a performance, adapted based on contexts and guided by cultural norms, yet maintaining uniqueness within these frameworks (Bruner 2003). In *Cyprus Avenue*, Eric is caught in a crisis of self, unable to reconcile his deeply entrenched identity with a rapidly changing cultural landscape. This theme resonates with the concept of "negative liminality" described by Wallace (2020), highlighting Eric's inability to move beyond his past and embrace a future marked by calls for unity between Unionists and Republicans. His character embodies the struggle of transitioning from known past to uncertain future.

The idea of identity is what creates a person's concept of themselves so it is believed to be both "a product of situations and a shaper of behavior in situations" (Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith 2012, 70). This affects an individual's ability to control or regulate themselves, as well as their ability to make sense of their own feelings and the world around them. It is clear that Eric is able to neither regulate his feelings nor appropriately understand the world he inhabits, evident when he demonstrates significant paranoia of Catholic infiltration of public cultural life: "Fenians are absolutely everywhere. Bill O'Reilly, Barack Obama. Roy Keane. The Pope" (18), envisioning invasion of his family sphere (Wallace 2020, 96). It is ironic that, in acting so drastically on his fear of the future, he kills the future of his own family.

According to John McLeod, "Much of what a therapist does in the course of therapy can be viewed as creating an environment in which the client is enabled to tell his or her story without interruption or judgement." (McLeod 1997, 55) He goes on to explain the use of techniques such as empathic reflection, used by therapists to illustrate their understanding of

a client's situation. Bridget uses empathic reflection in phrases like "I accept and understand that" (8), attempting to create a safe space and enabling Eric to vocalize his narrative account of his actions. This leads to a tension for the audience, however, as Eric has the propensity to erupt into a lengthy angry dialogue or say inappropriate things unprompted. The audience is also left with an incomplete picture due to the fragmentary nature of scenes moving between flashbacks and therapist's office. This creates suspense as the storytelling progresses and further irony in that the "safe space" of confidential therapy is witnessed by audiences viewing the play live and online, a reflection most starkly evident and turned on its head during the scene in the park when Eric talks to himself/the audience in the belief that Bridget is present.

Storytelling has always been the backbone of psychotherapy, working as a lab for those who try to understand the human mind (Holmwood, Jennings, and Jacksties 2022, 30). The more complex societies become, the more diverse and multiplex is the shape taken by modern literature. Stories provide clues about the speaker's social and cultural context as well as the identities of both the teller and the audience. Crucially, storytelling can also affect that identity: "The client telling a story," McLeod explains, "is not only reporting on a set of events, but is at the same time constructing a social identity." (McLeod 1997, 39) Given the nature of the Northern Ireland conflict and subsequent peace process, the Northern Irish ethno-national identity is clearly a complex one, experienced not only by Eric but also by all who have lived it – protagonists, audience, and storytellers alike.

David Ireland recalls how, at the age of 15 or 16, he hated being called Irish. "I got such a shock. It was a guy from Yorkshire who called me it, so I thought he must think I'm from Dublin. But when I said I came from Northern Ireland, all these English kids still called me Irish. That was very strange." (Lawson 2019) Eric similarly struggles to define his identity in a way that illustrates his sheer hatred for the "Fenians" (Dingley 2012), still perceived as the enemy despite the war having ended years before. As the audience watches *Cyprus Avenue*, they can understand how a Unionist's mindset can be highly exaggerated. This is supported by the concept of "placelessness," which Jang relates to the lack of "socio-political" space for the Unionist imagination in the aftermath of the Northern Irish peace process (Jang 2021, 214). Eric is both out of place and out of time in his current context.

It is within this context that we examine *Cyprus Avenue*, a play which Billington called "The most shocking, violent and subversive play in London." (Billington 2016) The play is

disturbing indeed and the way it chooses to narrate the story of an ugly historical truth leaves the audience shaken to the core.

Therapy uncovers shocking revelations

Eric's sectarian hatred is accompanied by racism, fanaticism, and a deep-rooted misogyny, which fuel and feed one other and cannot be analysed separately. Sectarian hatred goes hand in hand with misogyny, fanaticism being their most common conclusion. Lewis calls Eric a "psychotic bigot" (2020) while Billington observes that "the play takes fanaticism to its logical conclusion" (2016). Seen from this point of view, the play reminds the audience of Arthur Miller's 1953 play, *The Crucible*.[7] In Miller's play, girls' mass hysteria was fed with bigotry, insecurity, and groupthink, resulting in hanging and genocide. Eric's hysteria in *Cyprus Avenue* also demands killing, although the authorities do not perform the task for him, so he ends up taking the matter into his own hands. In addition, throughout the play, the psychosexual and political condition of Northern Ireland is portrayed as a crisis of masculinity (Wallace 2020, 96). To his daughter, Eric exclaims "I did not raise my children to copulate with the agents of Rome! I did not conceive a papal whore!" (25) Later, in London, when he tells his drinking companion he is from Belfast: "I worried he was a homosexual and intended to sodomise me" (37).

Eric's almost antiquated misogyny seems as vehement as his prejudice towards Catholics. Even his family appears to believe that he hates women, with his daughter asking him whether he hated her "because I'm a girl?". She then asks Eric if he is "angry that another woman's been born in this family?", followed by whether he hates her "for not giving you a grandson" (58). These questions highlight Eric's misogyny and exemplify how distant he is not only from his family but also mentally from 20th century society – his ideas and thoughts not seeming to fall in line with expectations. The conditions women historically experienced in Northern Ireland provide a clue as to Eric's character, highlighted by Susan McKay's research into what she terms "Ireland's Rape Crisis," sexual violence being widespread in Irish culture throughout much of the 20th century. For instance, she found that the view that women were to blame for attacks was strongly integrated into Irish cultural values. This is supported by the fact that sexual assault within marriage was not criminalized in Northern Ireland until 1990 (McKay 2005). The murder of three female relations by Eric might therefore be seen to be indicative of a systematic issue as much as a result of personal psychosis.

Eric's misogyny and prejudice are evident from the beginning of the play, with his use of offensive language and slurs throughout. When Bridget attempts to trace the reasons for Eric's state of mind by asking about his mother's reaction to his father's death, he says: "She was very upset. But she was a woman. Even in those days, women were very emotional. Obviously they're far worse now. Just look at my wife and daughter, how hysterical they became as the crisis enveloped us." (30) These attitudes illustrate how out of touch Eric is with society and give the audience a level of understanding about Eric's sense of isolation and mental state. His isolation is fuelled not only by his social surroundings, however, but also by increasing paranoia about the threat residing within his own family. Eric's incessant questioning about the parentage of his "Fenian" granddaughter and claims that "[t]his family is withholding secrets from one another" (24) makes it obvious to the audience that Eric has lost trust in his family. However, at times, he does not seem as distanced and isolated, particularly when speaking to Bridget and in his conversations with Slim, acting perhaps as surrogate therapist.

It could be argued that *Cyprus Avenue* is, in fact, a study on both identity and paranoia: "Eric questions whether his colonial identity is a real identity at all, and he is paranoid about his identity being erased in the future. This is a powerful comment on the state of the Northern Irish psyche." (McKeown 2019) In London, people assume Eric to be Irish and he is taken to an Irish pub, but he identifies himself as British and states that he hates the Irish. McKeown observes that the play at this stage "dramatizes the split personality of Northern Ireland. Are Northern Irish People Irish or British?" (2019) This is supported by Wallace's assertion that there is a perceived threat to the psychogeographic state of Northern Ireland in a post-Good Friday Agreement world (Wallace 2020).

This split personality is applicable to Eric, as he detaches himself completely from the Irish identity, being paranoid and hostile towards everything associated with Ireland. Indeed, "[t]he belief that you have enemies who are plotting to harm you and are spreading lies and rumors behind your back represents a profound rift with others" (Mirowsky and Ross 1983, 228). Eric expresses to Bridget that all Catholics sexually abuse children, to which Bridget replies, "But nobody wants their children to be abused." Eric replies, "Some people do. Catholics. It's a complex form of self-loathing." (27) It is this sense of detachment that advances through disconnection and develops into persecution, all stages displayed by Eric. In the very short prologue, the audience witnesses the disconnect between Eric and his wife, with Eric looking at her "dumbfounded" while she asks, "What are you doing?" (5) Later, this

is exemplified by Eric's initial statement about his granddaughter: "We don't know that this baby is the best baby in Belfast. There may be better babies." (11)

In London, it came as a shock to Eric to discover that there "were more Irish there than there were in Ireland" (35). He was even more shocked to discover "English voices" calling themselves Irish. By "Irish" he consistently means Catholics. His Unionist frame of mind is shaken. If English people were so proud to call themselves Irish and Irish people so proud to call themselves Irish, where was his place? These identifications signal a historical transition that his mind is simply not able to grasp. Eric is utterly and irretrievably stuck in the past. His "British" cause to suppress his Irish identity seems to be melting into thin air, in a land whose interest he had always served.

The disjointed nature of the scenes in *Cyprus Avenue* not only renders it difficult for the audience to discern the order of events, whether the therapy occurred before, during or after the terrible events of the climax, but also provides a window into Eric's confused mindset. It alludes to the disjointed passage of time within his mental state, which is directly referred to in Scene Six:

> Slim: This is the now.
> Eric: No it's the past. In my mind it's the past.
> Slim: How can it be the past? How can this be the past? This is the now!
> Eric: But this happened in the past!
> Slim: Stop talking about the past! This is the now! It can't be the past! It's the now! (43–44)

Eric's encounter with Slim is significant as Eric's personal frenzy finds its equal in Slim and the audience senses the shift from personal hysteria into a manifestation of something wider. What goes unsaid in therapy is shared openly with Slim, because Slim is part of Eric's club of frenzy.

Final Thoughts

In *Cyprus Avenue*, therapy is used brilliantly as a form of social and political commentary, a mirror to the audience which indicates that the talking cure or psychological treatment is only possible when we recognise the monsters that take shape in society and spread like a disease through individual insanity and wider ideologies. It is necessary to unravel history,

to "untangle" the mess, as Bridget puts it (6). Furthermore, it is important to note that Eric stands as a placeholder for disenfranchised Unionist fighters who are still present in Northern Irish society. The play takes aim at this gap that opened in the wake of the peace process post-1998. Eric's delusion that his granddaughter is Gerry Adams, a figure synonymous with the Irish Republican movement, is deeply rooted in the trauma of the Troubles. This period, marked by bombings in Northern Ireland and brutal conflict between Irish Republicans and British Loyalists, has left indelible scars on the psyches of Eric and of Irish society as a whole.

Driven by this historical frenzy, Eric, a staunch Unionist, becomes convinced that the perceived threat posed by Catholics, embodied in his delusion of Gerry Adams as his baby granddaughter, must be eliminated. Tragically, his warped perception of reality and inability to recognize his psychosis culminates in the heinous murder of his granddaughter. This aspect of the play highlights the devastating impact of historical trauma on individual mental health and the catastrophic consequences it can have when left unaddressed. It becomes clear to the audience that the monster in Eric's mind in fact resides externally, in his social conditioning. The task of rooting out his own social evils is beyond the capability of one individual and certainly beyond Eric himself, despite his assertion at the end of the play that some work has been done in this direction. It requires the collective awareness of the whole of society. To rid society of the psychological hold of social conditioning would require a re-reading of history without any prejudice, enlightenment itself. The audience realizes that Eric is a victim of his circumstances, invoking a sense of pity. There is a growing sense of foreboding, a sense of helplessness in Eric's monologue, although clear from the beginning that nothing can be done to save him. His condition is beyond his own control. The heinous act has already taken place.

In Scene Six, Eric seems to be conversing directly with the audience. He knows that the audience represents the society of which he is a victim. In confronting society, he is calling for change, for reformation. "I wouldn't have chosen to be born in Northern Ireland, if I'd had any choice" (34) The fact that, on some level, he recognizes the audience is explicitly referred to in one single stage direction: "Eric (*to audience*) I did something then that I never thought I would be capable of doing." (49) What was left unsaid earlier is said now in this strange moment of recognition and direct communication.

Notes

1 The title of the play, *Cyprus Avenue*, may draw its inspiration from the Irish song of the same name, penned and performed by Van Morrison and played in the background at various points in the stage production. This connection is noteworthy as the song's lyrics resonate with the plight of the play's main character. In the song, the protagonist finds himself ensnared on Cyprus Avenue, grappling with the fear of descending into madness – a thematic parallel that enriches the play's narrative.

2 After the Acts of Union in 1800, the majority of the southern counties of Ireland wanted Home Rule or independence from the UK (this part of the country was mostly Catholic), while in Northern Ireland, the people (mostly Protestants) largely wished to remain in union with and governed by the UK. This divide gave birth to the Irish Question. However, there were notable deviations from these normative alignments, leading to increased tensions, fear, and animosity across the various factions. This complex interplay of religious and political identities significantly shaped the socio-political landscape of Ireland during the 19th century and beyond.

3 The term "Fenian" historically refers to members of the Fenian Brotherhood and Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), secret revolutionary organizations founded in the mid-19th century which came to play a pivotal role in the movement for Irish independence. The Fenian Brotherhood was established in the United States in 1858 by Irish nationalists, while the IRB was formed in Ireland around the same time. Their primary goal was to end British rule in Ireland and establish an independent Irish Republic. In modern times, especially in Northern Ireland, the term "Fenian" has been co-opted as a derogatory term for Irish Catholics or Nationalists, often used in a sectarian context. This derogatory usage bears no relation to the historical and political significance of the original Fenian movement, which played a crucial role in the struggle for Irish independence and the shaping of Irish national identity.

4 Psychodynamic therapy emphasizes the significance of examining how unconscious factors impact present behavior and interpersonal relationships. It involves key practices such as exploring childhood experiences, delving into the role of the unconscious mind, and analyzing the influence of past experiences on current behavior.

5 The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) is described as a loyalist paramilitary organization in Northern Ireland. Established with the aim of combatting the Irish Republican Army

(IRA), the UVF was committed to preserving Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom (Bowman 2001).

6 Irish National Liberation Army, an extremist Republican paramilitary group formed during the Troubles.

7 Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* serves as an allegorical commentary on the United States in the 1940s, particularly the era of McCarthyism, characterized by political hysteria and exaggerated fears of a "communist threat." Senator McCarthy led one of the most infamous campaigns against Hollywood scriptwriters and directors, known as the "Hollywood witch-hunt" where individuals faced imprisonment and career destruction due to their alleged beliefs. Miller draws parallels between this period and the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, a historical instance of mass hysteria. In his article "Are you now or were you ever," Miller elucidates his motivation for writing *The Crucible*, noting the "astonishing correspondence" between the calamities of the McCarthy era and the events of the Salem Witch Trials.

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