

Reflection Statement

“*Bobby Sands is doing it for me.*”³

- **An 11-year-old boy, amongst a pile of rubble, speaking to news reporters when asked of 66-day Irish Republican Army hunger striker Bobby Sands.**

The statement is not only the title of my narrative but foregrounds its concept as well. Using the historical framework of Bobby Sands and ten other hunger strikers, prisoners of war, held in the famous H block of Long Kesh Prison, I examine the developing political consciousness of a young Irish girl. Set in Belfast, Northern Ireland, 1981, the story portrays a young girl, Cathy, navigating early adolescence through the contextual paradigm of great political and social upheaval in Northern Ireland. The inextricable bond between personal narratives and the political hands that control them was heavily inspired by the study of *Good Night, and Good Luck*⁴ in Extension One. Employing historical fiction to intensify niche perspectives and experiences can be seen in the way that I make recurring reference to Bobby Sands’ increasingly rebellious actions against the British authorities through vignettes, where the father explains Sands’ political significance to Cathy and her brother. Peter Carey’s *The True History of the Kelly Gang*⁵ facilitated my understanding that fiction based on fact can resonate, if narrative features are employed to effect.

My intended audience is predominantly young adult women with an appreciation for historical fiction and its consequent subversion of male-centric military-based stories. The leitmotif of moral awareness and political transition would appeal to a feminist audience who

³ Documentary by Trevor Birney, released in 2016.

⁴ Film directed by George Clooney, released in 2005.

⁵ Novel by Peter Carey, published by UQP in 2001.

may be drawn to the growing empowerment of female characters in the constrictive patriarchal milieu of governmental and religious institutions. It remains accessible to a universal audience as well, because of its timeless thematic concerns of conflict and pervasive loss. I envision my narrative to be published in an online anthology of short stories, steeped in historical significance and each written with the express purpose of foregrounding a historical personality that may not have had global popular resonance.

Crafting authentic and relatable characters was essential to the credibility of the entire narrative. Initially, Cathy perceives the world through an idealistic and politically apathetic lens, caught up in the myopic world of discovering her sexuality. Ignoring the soldier as an enemy, she prioritises his attention over her political loyalties, '*Being desired was intoxicating.*' To layer her character with complexity, Cathy is represented as synonymously nurturing, '*Cathy took Sean's hands...he was especially sensitive*', connoting her protectiveness of Sean during her parent's quarrels. This sheltering of Sean precipitates her political awareness as his death shifts her priorities from sexual identity to political identity, symbolised in the relentless hitting of the bin lids, a political act used during the Troubles to warn Irish men of British authorities. Her character arc is precipitated by Bobby Sands' mother's monologue in church where the allegorical anecdote of Bobby Sands' paradoxical kindness in '*suffocating a wee foal*' to cease its suffering, is followed by the synchronous beating of bin lids by a line of women. Engaging in a similar act at the end of the narrative, as she stands in front of the soldier she once wanted to attract, is a cathartic and empowering act, '*her fierce eyes did not once stray from his*'; Cathy adopts the passive resistance of Bobby Sands, which is more admirable than the conventional aggressive response to futility. Sean's characterisation is more emblematic of innocence and the power of familial

propaganda, echoing the story of William Tell⁶ and his son. Sean's cautionary advice to Cathy not to speak to the enemy is a regurgitation of his surroundings, his death mirroring the palpable injustice of a world already steeped in poverty and pervasive destruction. His vulnerability is echoed in the soft, foal-like eyes of Bobby Sands, thus aligning them both as pawns in a militaristic game of ideologies. In order to develop a capability to achieve this extended pathos and alienation within the political realm, I read Franz Kafka's *The Hunger Artist*⁷, which facilitated my understanding of the relationship between starvation and emotion, and the often futile and transient consequences of sacrifice.

Stylistic and structural choices were made to elevate tension and encapsulate the leitmotifs of maturation and loss. Using the structure of the Campbellian monomyth⁸, I charted Cathy's process of transition away from the ordinary world of her superficial adolescence to a growing acknowledgment of truth through the media and her experience of loss. These obstacles then lead her to the climactic beating of the bins, representing her growing political stance. Symbolism of the imagery of eyes is carried through in Bobby Sands' eyes in the mural, the soldier's scrutiny of her body, her own consideration of whether her eyes are being admired and the witnessing of death in general. This eternal Sartrean gaze⁹ of watching other people can be considered a dichotomous interpretation; a surveillance of a community or a need to observe and learn as part of maturation, a concept highlighted by my reading of the short story *Nightmare*¹⁰. Visceral imagery of 'blood ran along the creases of the skin lining her knuckles' and the anaphora of 'Everyone' in 'Everyone would hurt. Everyone but the

⁶ Famous Swiss folk story. <http://history-switzerland.geschichte-schweiz.ch/william-tell-switzerland-hero.html>

⁷ Short story by Franz Kafka, published in *Die neue Rundschau* in 1922.

⁸ Writing Excuses. 2013. *Campbellian Monomyth*.

<https://writingexcuses.com/tag/campbellian-monomyth/>

⁹ Cummins, T. *The Gaze*. <https://thomascummins.com/the-gaze/>

¹⁰ Short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald, published by Scribner in 2017.

British’ serve to reinforce the politically divisive environment and the focalisation of the characters in demonising the enemy. The asyndeton of ‘*bruising of his lung, dislocation of his shoulder*’ implies a brutal death empathically positioning the reader to align their perspective with that of the character. Hemingway’s iceberg theory¹¹ of writing which asserts the need for simple words with complex depth influenced my use of the truncated sentence, ‘*Stopping of his breath*’ which enables audience interaction as they cinematically envision the final moments of Sean’s life, a strategy used by O’Flaherty in his short story *The Sniper*¹² where he immerses us in the pain of a brother killing a brother. The repetition of rituals of walking and waiting outside Mrs O’Grady’s store enabled me to evoke pathos when these rituals are disrupted.

Thematic treatment of the emotional complexities of loss and gain was heavily influenced by my study of W.B. Yeats in the Advanced course. Yeats’ exploration of Irish identity as marred by loss, yet continually developing as a result of this same grief, is something I attempted to explore through my project. The Channel 4 TV programme “Derry Girls”¹³ is set in Derry, a Northern Irish city, around the same time as my piece. The structure of the show in its insertion of harsh events - such as death or bombing into everyday situations in a way that neither downgrades nor exaggerates them - has been crucial to understanding how I make passing statements to death to characterise the precarious setting. Further to this social and atmospheric research of Ireland was the viewing of Chris O’Dowd’s *Moone Boy*¹⁴, which follows the mundane interactions of a young boy in small-town Ireland, assisted in the

¹¹ The London School of Journalism. *Introducing Ernest Hemingway*.

<https://www.lsj.org/web/literature/hemingway.php>

¹² Short story by Liam O’Flaherty, published by *The New Leader* in 1923.

¹³ Sitcom by Lisa McGee, set in Derry during the early 1990s. First aired in 2018.

¹⁴ Television programme by Chris O’Dowd, first aired in 2015.

growth of my understanding of Irish family life. Though not inherently irrelevant to my plot development, much of the literature focused on the Troubles which follows the male hero archetype of a narrative, such as Brian Moore's *Lies of Silence*¹⁵, displaying the experiences of the many young men involved in physical violence and fighting, which is similarly displayed in *Hunger*¹⁶; the violence is used to represent the impact of passivity. Through *Derry Girls*, however, I was given a key into the view that I was trying to represent, the life of young girls, old enough to know, but too young to understand what was happening to their home. Additionally, the reading of contemporary Irish fiction in two (slightly twisted) rom com-esque texts by Sally Rooney- *Conversations with Friends*¹⁷ and *Mr Salary*¹⁸, and a romantic tale of diaspora in Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn*¹⁹ gave me deep grounding in my socio-political text and its target audience. Being pieces of contemporary Irish fiction, they gave insight to a modern Irish voice. Rooney's post-modern style presents a reshaped interpretation of grammar and allows for a certain flow when reading, which shapes the voice of her characters. This development of an atmospheric voice was furthered through gaining understanding of integrating context into narrative is something I developed understanding of through reading William Trevor's short story *The Distant Past*²⁰. Similarly, the development of my understanding of the frustrations of an apparently suffocating Irish adolescence was provided through *Brooklyn*, as it follows the challenges of a character growing disheartened with previous truths.

¹⁵ Novel by Brian Moore published in 1990, set during the Troubles.

¹⁶ Film directed by Steve McQueen, released in 2008.

¹⁷ Novel by Sally Rooney, published by Faber and Faber in 2017.

¹⁸ Short story by Sally Rooney, published in the Irish Times in 2017.

¹⁹ Novel by Colm Tóibín, published by Viking in 2009.

²⁰ Short story by William Trevor, published in *London Magazine Stories 8* by London Magazine Editions in 1973.

Ultimately, this overall research combined with a deep interest for Northern Ireland has provided for a deeply engaging writing process. Through facing numeral challenges within plot and target audience, undertaking the English Extension 2 course has provided me with a deep knowledge of the multiple factors that need to be considered when crafting narratives and facilitated my extensive growth as a writer.