

Chapter 65

Banalising Evil?

Humour in Lisa McGee's Derry Girls

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ABSTRACT

2018 was the celebration year of the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, bringing power-sharing and much peace to Northern Ireland. Twenty years seem a fair distance to address the issue from a comical viewpoint. Lisa McGee's television show Derry Girls (2018) released in Channel 4, and recently in Netflix, seems to convey a nostalgic and caustic outlook at the 1990s during the last years of The Troubles and focuses on the lives of a gang of four Irish teenagers growing up in the setting of Catholic Derry. This chapter will interrogate the banalization of evil conveyed by McGee by tackling the representation of evil and violence in Northern Ireland during The Troubles.

INTRODUCTION. A REVIEW OF THE CONCEPT OF EVIL

Lisa McGee (1979) grew up in 1990s Derry (or Londonderry), a city located in Northern Ireland which is considered the second city of the region after Belfast. Her adolescence was impacted by years of violence in the region which came from a historical confrontation between Unionists or Loyalists (Protestants) who claimed that the six counties on the North of the island would remain as part of the United Kingdom, and Irish Nationalist or Republicans (Catholics), who wanted the territory to be kept as part of the Republic of Ireland. The conflict was internationally known as 'The Troubles' or the 'Northern Ireland Conflict' as reflected in the press. After decades of extreme violence, the armed conflict was finally over after a negotiation process known as The Good Friday Agreement which took place in 1998. This chapter aims at shedding some light on the discussion of whether Lisa McGee's TV show *Derry Girls* (2018-2019) banalizes or normalizes The Troubles by providing a comical portrayal of the conflict as the embodiment of evil and violence as the "most common and familiar form of human evil" (Baumeister, 1997, p. 18).

The concept of "evil" has been studied from an array of angles through history. In *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Milton was capable of presenting his personal rewriting of the Genesis and conferring the character of Satan, as the embodiment of evil, the most appealing and complex personality of the entire

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epic poem. It is very interesting to see how more than three hundred years since *Paradise Lost* was published, Milton's masterpiece continues to cause controversy: Milton's Satan offers a reflection on the danger of new forms of repression and the practice of rhetoric. Satan is blatantly a fantastic speaker and God punishes the fallen angels by curtailing their ability to speak, which could be grasped as an unembellished cue of current censorship, but also of the flaws of idealized individuals and how today's hero can become tomorrow's villain. Milton's work also brings to our minds questions such as: Are we born evil? Are we basically good?

Initial notions of evil were linked with and described through myths as natural. Ricoeur (1967) delves into defilement, sin and guilt as the primary symbols of evil and defines myth as "not a false explanation by means of images and fables, but a traditional narration which relates to events that happened at beginning of time and which has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of men of today and, in a general manner, establishing all the forms of action and thought by which man understands himself in his world" (p. 5). Yet, since the myth is disconnected from our present time in history, they myth does not function as justification. Cogitations about the notion of evil were already there. Plato had the belief that a good person is safe from evil and then, Aristotle put into play acceptance of tragedy and luck. There have been several studies on "evil", especially from the 20th century. For example, Sartre rejected the fact that evil could be redeemed, and Nietzsche believed that evil was something necessary for good, suffering for joy and pain for pleasure, which takes us to one of the constants when trying to build a definition of "evil": its foundation on dualisms, being "good" and "evil", and "victim" and "perpetrator" as opposed. Similarly, we find distinctions regarding different types of evil. Natural evil can be described as the suffering that happens with no deliberate or negligent agency of any human being. Conversely, moral evil becomes involved in the "problem of evil", especially from a theological point of view, which gives rise to theodicy or "the philosophical attempt to reconcile the goodness of God with the existence of evil (Noddings, 1989, p. 6). Van Inwagen (2008) focuses on a philosophical or theological perspective to study evil, especially to analyze the issue to get to the conclusion that "the problem of evil" cannot be defined for having a multilayered sense. Theoretical problems of evil are divided into two categories. Inwagen establishes doctrinal problems as those which theologians face, the permissible views on the origin and place of evil in the world (p. 5). However, apologetic problems are based on external intellectual attacks on theism by its enemies, the fact that the Creator would indeed allow the existence of evil. According to these problems, he ruminates on moral evil and physical or natural evil to conclude that "the problem of evil is the problem of how to find meaning in a world in which everything is touched by evil" (van Inwagen, 2008, p. 16). However, Card (2009) does not consider natural events (such as catastrophes) as evils or atrocities but "human failure to respond" (p. 5) to them.

Baudrillard (1990) analyzes modernity and labels it as "after the orgy" period, meaning a period in which several ways of liberation (political, social, sexual, gender, etc.) have already been achieved. He considers that we live in a state of simulation and human beings can only hyper-realize states of utopia to finally wonder where Evil went. The author finally abandons the binary opposition between Good and Evil because "the Good consists in a dialectic of Good and Evil. Evil consists in the negation of this dialectic, in a radical dissociation of Good and Evil, and by extension in the autonomy of the principle of Evil" (p. 139). Yet, when categorizing the different types of evil, ethics, "a part of philosophy which organizes practical existence around representation of the Good" (Badiou, 2001, p. 1), becomes paramount to approach evil. Besides, Jung claimed that what humanity needs is a "morality of evil" in order to manage evil in ourselves and others. Baumeister's widely known book on evil (1997) takes a causal stance to provide the reader with a very detailed review of a plethora of aspects linked with the

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