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Eroticism in the “Cold Climate” of
Northern Ireland in Christina Reid’s
The Belle of the Belfast City

ABSTRACT

Closely based on the dramatist’s personal experience, Christina Reid’s *The Belle of the Belfast City* offers a commentary on the life of the Protestant working class in the capital of Northern Ireland in the 1980s from a woman’s perspective. It shows the way eroticism is successfully used by the female characters as a source of emancipation as well as a means not only to secure their strong position in the private domain of the household, but also to challenge the patriarchal structures that prevail in the Irish public sphere. The analysis of the play proposed in this essay focuses on the contrast between the presentation of its male and female characters. I will demonstrate that, while the former group desperately cling to the idea of preserving the social *status quo*, the latter display a more progressive outlook on the social and sexual politics of the country. In particular, I will investigate how the tensions between the representatives of the two sexes reveal themselves in the corporal sphere. I will argue that, as opposed to the erotically-inhibited and physically-inarticulate male characters, the female *dramatis personae* take advantage of being more connected to their bodies and use their physicality in an erotic fashion to subvert the rules of the patriarchal system and its strict moral code that limits their social roles to those of respectful mothers, obedient sisters or virtuous wives.

ABSTRACT

The presentation of eroticism in *The Belle of the Belfast City* is deeply rooted in the social and political context of Northern Ireland which plays an important role in Reid's whole dramatic *oeuvre* as one of the most crucial factors determining the lives of her characters. Although Reid's works are difficult to categorize under the label feminist or political, since they "present more of a description of the . . . situation than an active fight against society, as bad as it is" (Große 402), they show a strong influence of the macro-politics of the country on the micro-politics of the Protestant family in Northern Ireland, suggesting the impossibility of separating the private from the public. Another element that *The Belle of the Belfast City* shares with many other of Reid's plays is the fact that it draws inspiration from the dramatist's own life in the capital troubled by the sectarian conflict.

Reid has repeatedly admitted that her dramatic works are closely based on her personal experience of being raised in a Protestant working class family in Belfast. This meant growing up mostly in a female-dominated environment, since, as she puts it, "working-class women spend all our time with other women and children" (qtd. in Shannon 212). In the interview held in Łódź at the international conference "Irish Drama of the 20th and the 21st Centuries: Changes and Evolutions," Reid spoke about spending her childhood mostly in the company of her mother, grandmother and great-aunts, whom she remembers as excellent storytellers. Although she describes them as "terribly respectable Protestant women" (Reid, Interview), deeply concerned about the way they should present themselves to their neighbours, when left alone by men, who in their free time usually headed for the pub, they would show a markedly different, otherwise concealed, bawdy aspect of their personality. This often erotically flavoured behaviour met with social consent, since, as Bataille explains,

More often than not moderate eroticism is tolerated and where there is condemnation of sexuality, even when it appears to be stringent, it only affects the façade, the act of transgression itself being allowed as long as it is not made public. (219)

Not unlike the Mundy sisters from Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, who in the moment of a carnivalesque relief transform in the eyes of the male narrator, Michael, "into shrieking strangers" (Friel 2), women in Reid's family used to get together in the privacy of their home to practise their own female habits and rituals involving activities such as drinking sherry

or telling “dirty stories” which were otherwise absent from their daily life (Reid, Interview). As Reid stated on another occasion, “It made me realize how ageless women are—they can talk like young girls at any age and on their own are tremendously uninhibited and bawdy—a side that they would never show to men” (qtd. in Roche 134), which finds an adequate reflection in *The Belle of the Belfast City*.

Addressing the dystopian elements and strategies used in the play, Lachman contends that the drama is informed by

the view that culture, controlled by discourses of power which are most often designed and possessed by men, is responsible for painful transition of a female body and mind from the state of natural and spontaneous potentiality to the state of ordered, civilised form. (145)

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Yet, despite these pressures, Reid’s women appear capable of subverting and challenging the dominant male ideology as well as asserting themselves as independent and liberated individuals. With this in mind, in my article, I wish to address the erotic aspect of the lives of the Protestant women of the North, easily discernible in their carnivalesque activities, as presented in *The Belle of the Belfast City*. Juxtaposing Reid’s female characters with some of the male *dramatis personae* who are presented as more detached from their bodies and thus, erotically inarticulate, I will investigate the role eroticism plays in their daily existence, focusing on the use of the erotic as a tool of manipulation and empowerment as well as a signpost indicating a path to independence and self-esteem. The analysis will demonstrate the importance of eroticism in defining power structures and relations within the family, particularly between the representatives of the opposite sexes, and thus support the interpretation of the play as a “tribute to the indomitable aspect of women” (O’Dwyer 241).

In order to gain a proper insight into the subject matter, it is necessary to begin with a brief overview of the situation of women in Northern Ireland in the mid-1980s, which the play illustrates. In her book on twentieth-century fiction by Irish women, Heather Ingman quotes Edna Longley’s pamphlet “From Cathleen to Anorexia: The Breakdown of Irelands” (1990), which highlights a clear-cut division of gender roles in the society.

Longley argues that masculinist ideologies such as Protestantism, Catholicism, nationalism and unionism, have exercised and continue to exercise a stronger hold in the North than in the Republic[; she states]: “Ulster’s territorial imperative has produced a politics which pivots on male refusal to give an inch.” (141)

Reid supports this opinion and gives it an expression in *The Belle of the Belfast City*. When the sisters Vi and Rose exchange their social and political views in an elaborate Shavian fashion typical of his discussion plays, the latter states: "Their right-wing Protestant Church is in total agreement with the right-wing Catholic Church on issues like divorce and abortion, on a woman's right to be anything other than a mother or a daughter or a sister or a wife" (Reid, *Belle* 221). As shown in *The Belle of the Belfast City*, this attitude, on the one hand, relegates women from the male-dominated public world of politics and religion; on the other, it reinforces the matrilineal bonds among the female members of the society. As Lachman notices, "the level of confidential understanding between women and the sophistication of emotional, intellectual and moral framework allow them to constitute an intellectually independent community which exists parallel with the official and legitimate society" (148). In this way, Reid presents the private sphere of the household not so much as a traditional confinement for the independent female spirit but as the last stronghold of female power.

The boldest and most vivid character in the play is Dolly, the eponymous Belle of the Belfast City, a matriarch who, after the death of her husband, acts as the head of the female-dominated family. Despite her ripe old age, the character seems full of energy and vitality which she uses in a truly carnivalesque fashion. This positions her in the long line of literary presentations of mature women, such as Chaucer's Wife of Bath or Beckett's Mrs. Rooney, to name but a few, whose bawdy, often sexually explicit remarks and behaviour challenge the patriarchal standards of female modesty and decency.

Dolly describes her animated and insubordinate spirit in terms of dance. She states: "I can cope with not bein' able to dance with my feet no more. But I couldn't cope with not bein' able to dance in my head" (Reid, *Belle* 197). The choice of the metaphorical image does not seem accidental in this context, since both the Protestant and the Catholic Church in Ireland have perceived this form of kinaesthetic activity as erotically charged and exciting the sexual urges of the body, and hence deemed it as sinful and subversive towards their dominant religious ideologies. Christina Reid once mentioned in a private conversation that the women who danced have been often perceived in the Protestant community as evil. In the play, she puts words condemning dance into the mouth of one of the supporting characters, preacher Issac Stanaloft, who appears in one of the numerous retrospections in her play. The man, whose sexually ambiguous behaviour renders him as a possible child molester, delivers a message that denounces all popular forms of entertainment, dance included. He lectures his audience to beware of

the unholy passions of Satan's cinemas[,] drinking dens of the evil[,] the dreadful desires of women who dance[,] the devil's voluptuous temptresses with painted faces and lacquered nails and hair dyed red with sin[,] the devil who lurks in the dark dance halls and hostelrys and picture places. (Reid, *Belle* 233)

Dolly categorically rejects this type of religious discourse, putting the carnivalesque moments of joy and pleasure in their rightful place in the everyday life of the family.

Yet, her life was not always smooth and easy. At the age of thirteen, after she won a talent competition in songs, recitations and tap dancing, Dolly became a reliable source of income for her family who for the next six years “dress[ed] her up as if she was thirteen . . . an' trail[ed] her round draughty owl halls to sing to audiences of twenty or thirty” (Reid, *Belle* 180–81). It was only the marriage to Joe Horner who fell under the spell of her performance that changed her life. The man freed Dolly from the fetters of forced infantilism and introduced her to womanhood. Contrary to what might be expected, marriage did not put an end to Dolly's dancing days. As Rose explains, “from then on she gave up the stage and did all her dressing up and dancing and singing just for him” (Reid, *Belle* 180). One may suspect that this kind of private performance was not deprived of erotic overtones which served as a source of Joe Horner's constant fascination with and youthful sexual attraction to Dolly. What the woman received in return was a possibility to enjoy a high status within the family with her husband “wait[ing] on her hand and foot” (Reid, *Belle* 181) and an exemption from the household chores. As Dolly herself admits: “I was never a housewife. My Joe never wanted that. He was a rare bird. An Ulsterman who could cook” (Reid, *Belle* 195). Nurturing the erotic side of their relationship, she positioned herself as a precious trophy, in this way boosting Joe's male ego, which seems but a tactic for gaining power within the family and a means of subversion towards religious fundamentalism and extreme right-wing Unionism represented by her nephew Jack and Ian Paisley, the extremist Protestant preacher who “has frequently emphasized the authority of fathers and husbands in the home” (Ingman 144) and whom Reid often mentions in the play.

In her relationship with Joe, Dolly avoided open conflicts; she rather exercised her power applying certain manipulative strategies. She neither downgraded her partner nor did she overtly express her superiority. Instead, she praised his sexual virility and used her other veiled erotic tactics. Even years after Joe's death, she proudly and plainly announces him as “the cock of the North” (Reid, *Belle* 181), which clearly shocks her daughter Vi.

The middle-aged woman does not perceive this as a proper way of speaking about her deceased father, especially that the words are uttered by her seventy-seven-year-old mother, who, by the standards of the local society, should probably be preparing to meet her maker rather than incessantly recalling her flamboyant past.

The erotic nature of Dolly's relationship with Joe used to meet with the moral suspicion of the local Protestant community, especially when Dolly unexpectedly got pregnant at the age of forty-one, which became "the talk of the neighbourhood" (Reid, *Belle* 181). Reid provides a straightforward explanation for this reaction in one of the interviews:

Well, I think we are—pardon the pun—all screwed up about the sexual thing here. We are taught, both Catholic and Protestant, very early on that sex is something sinful, that it is something for marriage and that women just have to put up with it [and Protestants are taught that.] Even more. Because you've got that big Scottish Calvinist thing that sex in itself is a sin. (qtd. in Shannon 214)

Thus, what appears to be the source of controversy in the play is the fact that, since they did not plan the child, it is clear that the couple were sexually active not so much for the sake of procreation but for erotic pleasure. As Rose comments ironically, "Bad enough to be doing it at their age, but even worse to be enjoying it so much that she was careless enough to get caught" (Reid, *Belle* 181). What may shed some further light on this particular societal attitude is Bataille's idea that:

Erotic conduct is the opposite of normal conduct as spending is opposite of getting. If we follow the dictates of reason we try to acquire all kinds of goods, we work in order to increase the sum of our possessions or of our knowledge, we use all means to get richer and to possess more. Our status in the social order is based on this sort of behaviour. But when the fever of sex seizes us we behave in the opposite way. Pleasure is so close to ruinous waste that we refer to the moment of climax as a "little death." (Bataille 170)

Such a socio-economic approach proves particularly valid in relation to the Protestant working class with its strong ethos of work and stringent rules of morality, which Dolly breaches by giving birth to a child, and in this way bringing the evidence of her excessive erotic behaviour into the public sphere. Consequently, it is no wonder that, although the pregnancy meets with her husband's enthusiasm, it also causes gossip among the neighbours.

Dolly is strongly self-conscious about her matriarchal role in the house, which becomes most conspicuous when, after Joe's death, she is unwilling to

yield her position to the usurping young nephew Jack. Her comment: “Jack likes to be the only man. The one in charge. Thought he would be the man of the house when Joe died. I soon put him in the right place” (Reid, *Belle* 219) sheds light on the overt struggle for dominance taking place in the private sphere of the household. Conscious of the need to constantly remind Jack of his position within the family, she repeatedly asserts herself as the superior figure, for instance when she informs her nephew about his sister having left her husband, a fact that he was clearly unaware of, commenting ironically: “Nobody never tells me nutin’ these days” (Reid, *Belle* 184).

In order to humiliate Jack and exhibit his weaknesses and limitations, Dolly again makes an effective use of her erotic schemes. In one of the retrospections presented onstage, she forces her teenaged nephew to participate in a carnivalesque familial performance to celebrate the birthday of her deceased husband. Dolly introduces a role play in which Jack is to perform the part of a soldier courted by young women. The very idea of dressing up for the performance appears to him already inappropriate from the point of view of Protestant decency and respectability, but it is the words of the song they are about to sing that bring the young man to an outburst of anger and frustration. Here, again, the juxtaposition of the female erotic articulacy and the religion-based male inhibitions becomes evident. The song has the form of an exchange between a soldier and a maiden, played by Jack’s sister, Janet, who asks him in a teasing fashion for the reasons why they should not marry. The man offers her a whole range of excuses just to finally admit that it is impossible for he already has a wife. At this point, the tension reaches its peak.

Jack is almost in tears in anger and humiliation. He grabs hold of Janet, shakes her, shouts.

JACK. Oh no sweet maid I cannot marry you!

For I have a wife of my own!

He runs out. (Reid, *Belle* 219)

The role imposed on Jack can be seen as a form of mockery, in which all the women of the house, apart perhaps from Vi, ridicule his excessively strict moral conduct. It reveals Jack’s sexual and erotic inhibitions which stand in conflict with his desire to be a model man playing a superior role in the family. Performing the provocative scene of wooing conducted by a woman, the female characters manifest that they feel comfortable with the erotic aspect of their lives, thus pointing at Jack’s deficiencies in this respect, which he perceives as degrading and humiliating. Consequently, the game introduced by Dolly seems a part of her conscious tactics of putting her nephew in the right place in the hierarchy of the family, thwarting

his hopes to rule the house. Yet, it should be stressed that another possible reason for the rise of erotic tension and anger in the scene results from the nature of the toxic relationship between the siblings and the subtly implied erotic fascination of Jack with his sister which can never be realized, due to the strong social and religious taboo against incest.

Dolly's position changes only when her health deteriorates radically after a stroke, subsequently to which the family house becomes the property of the National Front, due to Jack's and his associates' machinations. Earlier, however, Dolly incessantly acts as a jester introducing the spirit of subversion to the household. These moments are frequently charged with erotic energy clearly permeating most of her showy songs which contain numerous explicit allusions to courting and erotic behaviour and which strongly contradict Protestant moral strictness. She is a queen of misrule orchestrating the carnivalesque activities performed within the private sphere of the family.

Apart from being Dolly's source of power and authority, eroticism also plays a liberating role in Janet's life. The woman's traumatic childhood has left a deep mark on her psyche, which is conspicuous in her constant feeling of guilt, fear of sin as well as submissiveness and an inability to decide about her own life. At first, growing up in an emotionally and physically sterile Presbyterian family and later remaining under the watchful eye of her despotic brother, who declares himself "the guardian of [her] faith" (Reid, *Belle* 205), Janet has not fully developed into a self-conscious woman aware of her rights and needs.

Jack's dictatorial tendencies are evident already in the siblings' early youth when the boy violently smashes the figure of a "pretty lady" Janet bought in Dublin, which turns out to be a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and severely reprimands his sister with the ferocious words of a fanatic preacher:

That's no pretty lady. It's a blasphemous Popish statue. A heathen image of Christ's mother. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them, for I the Lord Thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and the fourth generation of them that hate me. You have sinned, Janet. You have broken the fourth commandment. You must be punished. (Reid, *Belle* 204)

Taking into account the nature of her later transformation, Janet's seemingly childish whim to buy the statue seems to be endowed with a symbolic meaning. As Marina Warner observes,

Although Mary cannot be a model for a New Woman, a goddess is better than no goddess at all, the sombre-suited masculine world of the Protestant religion is altogether too much like a gentleman's club to which the ladies are only admitted on special days. (qtd. in Ingman 143)

Apart from being an incarnation of physical beauty and thus an object of Janet's admiration, which, according to the strict Protestant ethics, would be considered as an instance of vanity, the figure serves as a symbol of Janet's need for an icon that would stand for female strength and unity, something that Jack desperately tries to destroy. McDonough suggests yet another interpretation; she argues that, in the figure of the Virgin Mary,

Jack can see only a symbol. [Thus, his] reaction to Janet demonstrates how women in general, and his sister in particular, have for him been turned into symbols by his religious upbringing. Jack shares this desire to shape Janet into a symbol with Janet's Catholic husband Peter, and even with the Englishman, Martin, with whom Janet had an affair. (189)

Consequently, the destruction of the statue may also be seen as anticipating the shattering of the imposed and strongly reinforced gendered role models and the subsequent emancipation of Janet, which to a large extent is a reaction against the sin-obsession and unrelenting misogynist stance of her brother.

Apart from the toxic relationship with Jack, who assumes the role of a strict guardian of her body and soul, another reason for Janet's dissatisfaction is her unhappy celibate marriage which provides her with neither emotional nor physical fulfilment. Desperate to change her life and "tired of being the sister of a devil and the wife of a saint" (Reid, *Belle* 208), the woman eventually yields to the persuasion of her more liberated cousin, Rose: she visits London and spends a romantic night and a day with a man ten years younger than her. This adventure not only gives Janet bodily satisfaction, but also has far-reaching psychological effects.

In order to explain this change, let me briefly refer to Bataille and his definition of eroticism as opposed to surrendering to low carnal instincts. He argues: "Human eroticism differs from animal sexuality precisely in this, that it calls inner life into play" (29). As Janet presents it, her adventure is not only an occasion for a release of the accumulated sexual energy, but an erotic experience which gives her a deep sense of procrastinated emotional fulfilment. She admits: "It was everything I ever dreamt it might be" (Reid, *Belle* 208). The erotic encounter with the young lover provides her with a sense of self-worth and confidence. To go even further in this direction, it may be seen as a transforming experience that conditions a significant metamorphosis of the character and a redefinition of her female

self, which alludes to Judith Butler's idea of gender identity understood as an "accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" in whose performative nature "resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" (520). In the play, it is the erotic, as opposed to the sexual, that serves as a destabilizing factor that stimulates the change in the fossilized gender constructs through transgressing the sedimented narrow norms and models towards greater autonomy and individuality.

Trying to confront it with the ideology her mother and brother tried to instil in her, Janet at first reacts to her experience with confusion. She realizes that she lacks remorse for her "sinful" behaviour, which causes her puzzlement and fear. Janet states: "I don't feel guilty, and I should feel guilty. I need to feel guilty. . . . There is no forgiveness without repentance. And I'm not sorry" (Reid, *Belle* 206). She tries to provide a justification for her behaviour using religious discourse: "Maybe I'm possessed. Maybe Martin is the devil my mother said was always there. Waiting at your shoulder. Fornication. Adultery. Adultery. Adultery . . ." (Reid, *Belle* 207), yet to no avail.

Janet's initial situation and her gradual change are visually projected onstage in the scene which may serve as an expressionistic presentation of the character's sense of entrapment in her socially defined gender roles. Janet is literally positioned between two men representing two different standpoints and claims. One of them is her kind-natured, erotically inarticulate Catholic husband, Peter, singing a simple de-eroticized folk song declaring his platonic love; the other one, Jack, recites a passage from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians in which the apostle presents marriage as an undesired but necessary means to bridle human immorality and praises a solitary life of erotic abstinence, thus encouraging his sister to leave her marriage and return to the one who "as the man of the house [will] protect [her] from temptation" (Reid, *Belle* 196). One may observe a considerable amount of erotic tension implicit in the scene resulting from both men's desire to repossess Janet which is visually presented as an act of the reclamation of her body by the two characters who occlude her and announce one after another: "I love you. Come back to me" (Reid, *Belle* 209), though paradoxically in reality Janet's relationship with either man is anything but bodily. In this scene, however, Janet's physicality quite literally becomes a site upon which the men try to impose their authority.

Such a stage image can be perceived in a broader context as a representation of the situation of women in Ireland in the 1980s and of the Irish attitude towards the human, and especially female, physicality dominant among the majority of male Protestant and Catholic authorities. Viewed from this perspective, the scene symbolically illustrates the way in which

“women’s bodies often function in the postcolonial theatre as a space on and through which larger territorial and cultural battles are being fought” (Gilbert and Tompkins qtd. in Sweeney 155). The male characters act like possessive conquerors appropriating and idealizing Janet’s body to serve the fundamentalist Catholic and Protestant agendas which define physicality as a source of sin. They treat her instrumentally as an object of their quest that inspires both fascination and fear.

It is yet the latter feeling that seems to prevail in their lives. Thus, paradoxically, neither her brother nor her husband can offer Janet any erotic satisfaction—Jack due to the social taboo against incestuous relationships, and Peter because of the fear of intimacy he experiences as a Catholic who married a Protestant woman in his pastoral mission of “doing something more positive towards peace and reconciliation” (Reid, *Belle* 210) or perhaps because of his implied homoerotic tendencies. The latter suggestion is supported by Mary Trotter, who puts forward the following reasons for the malfunction of the relationship between Peter and Janet:

Janet grows up to rebel against her Protestant heritage by marrying a Catholic who is equally committed to transgressing borders; he is a member of the almost all-Protestant police force . . . Janet and her husband marry not for love but to escape the aspects of themselves that they fear. Janet tries to erase the fierce Protestant lessons her mother taught her before she moved in with her Aunt Dolly; her husband is running away from his homosexuality. (174)

According to Trotter, this failure to confront their individual sexual phobias is the reason for the couple having been stuck in a celibate relationship for fifteen years.

Trapped in a dead-end situation, Janet finally gives vent to the repressed anger and frustration, revealing her anxiety and unfulfilment resulting from the unconsummated marriage. Initially presented as immature, suspended between the role of the sister and the role of the wife, she gradually progresses towards self-knowledge and self-realization. Janet addresses Peter in an accusatory way: “I wanted you to take me . . . to teach me . . . I wanted to exorcise him [Jack] . . . to find out that it wasn’t an act of sin and shame and pain and guilt” (Reid, *Belle* 210). The woman hoped that, through marriage, she could break away from the toxic relationship with her brother and start a new life as a wife and a mother. After years during which her hopes remained unfulfilled, she is finally able to openly voice her frustration.

The expressionistic scene ends with Janet’s distress resurfacing with a double force; she shouts at Jack and Peter: “I am not your mother!

I am not your sister! . . . I am not your virgin mother, nor your virgin wife!" (Reid, *Belle* 210). She also repeats similar words in real life in her final confrontation with Jack. Stating: "I never needed you. I was only afraid of your need of me. And now I'm not afraid any more" (Reid, *Belle* 244), Janet discloses her brother's weakness and manifests her self-sufficiency. In doing so, the woman rejects the idealistic unattainable gendered role models that have been imposed on her since early childhood and asserts herself as an independent flesh-and-blood human being who has the right to seek fulfilment of her basic bodily and emotional needs.

Yet, to achieve full independence, Janet has to free herself of the fascination with her lover, Martin, for whom, after all, she is again a model of innocence, a projection of the male desire for pure and unspoiled femininity rather than a real woman. She has to realize that their erotic experience is not an end in itself nor a way directing her into another relationship, but a means towards a deep change. This involves stepping out of the historically motivated narrow confines of gender which Butler defines in theatrical terms as a much rehearsed act (526). Janet's case stresses the need for a revaluation and reinterpretation of the old script reinforced by the patriarchal society, according to which a woman can only realize herself as a man's subordinate. The character's erotic adventure is a life-enhancing experience, exploding the narrow confines of social gender constructs and redefining her identity. Große argues that in Reid's works:

some of the female characters loosen the bonds consequent upon being just mothers, sisters, wives, [and lovers,] i.e. of being defined by their relationship to men, and thus lay the foundations for being just themselves. (399)

Janet is a perfect example of this when she eventually realizes that, instead of engaging in a relationship with another man who would take care of her and decide about her life, she should focus on herself. She has to accept her own feelings as well as physical and emotional needs. Janet's transgression of the rules is not just a temporary carnivalesque outburst of the repressed emotions but a rite of passage in the course of which she re-discovers her independent female identity. It is also an initiation into maturity understood as self-awareness and an ability to control one's life. Although Janet remarks that she would like to return to the safe times of her youth (Reid, *Belle* 208), she comes to realize that she can no longer act like a child "living in Never Never Land" (Reid, *Belle* 211). Towards the end of the play, Janet announces to Jack that she returns to London but does not leave her husband for Martin. She states: "I want a life of my own. My own!

Nobody else's! Not his, not Peter's. Not yours. Most of all not yours. I am walking away from this violence" (Reid, *Belle* 244), which serves as a sign of her ultimate transformation.

Another female character in the play to be mentioned is Rose, whose behaviour and attitude can be seen as transgressive in both professional and private terms. As regards the former, the woman is a photographer actively engaged in politics, a field that in Northern Ireland has been to a great extent reserved to men. As Tracie comments, "It is interesting that Rose moves from the sphere of domestic photography into photojournalism, a form of cultural production based on public images" (119), thus continuing her father's hobby and acting as an opponent of the extreme rightist movement and an advocate of the changing position of women in her country. As regards her private life, Rose openly resists the strict religious rules cherished by Jack. Her erotic life is perceived by her cousin and many people from Belfast who share his outlook as an offence to the Protestant morality, especially that it has been made known to the public, the proof of Rose's "disrespectability" being Belle, her daughter, whose skin colour gives irrefutable evidence of her mixed parentage.

Finally, the idea of rejecting the traditional model of femininity is not alien to Rose's elder sister, Vi, either. Although the woman, in many respects similar to Friel's Kate Mundy, seems to deeply cherish the Protestant ethos and be embarrassed by the rich erotic life of her parents, she admits to having once declined the marriage proposal of a well-situated man. Vi explains: "Maybe it's just as well that growin' up with the real thing made us . . . too choosy" (Reid, *Belle* 231), which shows that for her the rejection of the role of a wife and a mother was a conscious choice rather than an instance of failure.

Reid's presentation of the female characters sharply contrasts with the image of the erotically impoverished male *dramatis personae*. With the exception of Davy, who is more of a child than a man, and Dolly's deceased husband, the other male members of the family exhibit an inhibitive and restrictive approach to human sexuality and eroticism. The one who most openly manifests such an attitude is Jack. The man impersonates all negative impulses driving religious and political extremists in Northern Ireland. Reid locates the source of Jack's fundamentalist attitude towards the human body and its sexual aspect in his exceedingly rigorous Presbyterian upbringing. The resulting emotional and physical unfulfilment leads to frustration, anger and violence. As Bristow paraphrases Bataille's ideas:

Put another way, the more Christianity sought to purge the world of sin, the greater pressure there was on the deathly power of sexual desire to transgress. In sum, Bataille believes Christianity bears the burden of

responsibility for why sexuality has been associated with shame, filth, and even hatred. (126)

According to Bataille's philosophy, taboos aim at eliminating violence from our lives. Yet, this does not mean that either the sexual or the erotic can be totally eradicated from human existence, the former being necessary for the reproduction of the species and the latter, in its carnivalesque aspect, "sanction[ing] the existing pattern of things and reinforc[ing] it" (9), to use Bakhtin's words. In other words, eroticism can fulfil the role of a safety valve for all the forbidden drives and emotions. Hence, when the super-ego forces are too strong, frustration and violence accumulate and find an alternative outlet.

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This observation appears particularly relevant in relation to the radical religious stance represented by Jack. Raised by his mother, a widow of a Presbyterian Minister, he has developed an obsessive fear of any form of physical contact, deriving from the perception of flesh as a source of impurity. Dolly describes her sister-in-law as one who "Goes to church on Sunday, an' prays to God to give her strength to beat her children" (Reid, *Belle* 196). Yet, as she further explains, these words do not denote physical maltreatment but rather mental abuse, beating "Into the ground. Not with a big stick. With words. Words like sin, the world and the devil. And the worst sins were the sinful lusts of the flesh" (Reid, *Belle* 196). Erotically and sexually inarticulate, due to the overwhelming fear of the body which manifests itself in the character's avoidance of any physical contact with others, Jack compensates for his limitations through his aggressive actions in the male-dominated field of sectarian politics.

Trying to find the reasons for Jack's anger and frustration, one could also point to his inferior position within Dolly's family, as discussed earlier, which appears deeply inscribed in the wider social context the play was written in. Shannon observes that the crisis of the male ego seems particularly discernible among the Protestant working class in Northern Ireland, since it was often the case that the woman had to bear the burden of being the breadwinner in the family when her husband was killed or imprisoned, or simply due to the fact that many factories employed only women.

The paradox of women taking both the social and financial responsibilities of home away from the men turned those men into childlike figures. Idle, resentful, their sense of inferiority bred by generations of frustration, they were easily turned toward political violence. The gun and the bomb, or close proximity to them, gave them a sense of machismo that their everyday life denied them. (Shannon 11)

In this respect, Jack's engagement in the National Front can be perceived as emblematic of the situation of many men in Northern Ireland. Yet, it should be stressed that his feeling of being underestimated results not so much from the economic pressures but from the fact that he is psychologically too weak to win the position of the head of the family and is constantly reminded of his deficiencies by the female majority in the house. At one point, Jack states: "Women! That's always been the trouble with this house. Women having secrets, whispering, gossiping" (Reid, *Belle* 193), which reveals his inferiority complex and desperate desire to control the insubordinate women of the family. The only person who initially surrenders to Jack's dictatorial power is his sister, Janet, whom he wants to protect from what he perceives as external temptations. Again, one cannot escape the impression that the particularly strong wish to control his sibling may result from Jack's erotic fascination with Janet. The constant need to suppress his desires, in turn, leads to resentment and violence directed against other people: Irish republicans, people of a different skin colour and especially women, which is most conspicuous in his misogynistic remarks, such as: "Women! Women! Temptation! Deception! You're the instruments of devil! The root of all evil!" (Reid, *Belle* 205).

Reid is yet careful not to exaggerate Jack's Unionist and religious extremism to the absurd and the grotesque. She provides Jack with a measure of humanity through the words of Vi, the most composed and rigorous of all the women in the family, who is the only one truly able to sympathize with her cousin. The positive side of Jack's character is also revealed when he recalls joining Vi singing a humorous song about a Protestant who marries a Northern Irish Catholic girl and converts to Catholicism. The cousins re-enact their performance. This unusual moment of joy and unity is yet shattered when Dolly "*points to the [family] album and cracks with laughter*" (Reid, *Belle* 188), which reminds Jack that, while the two were singing the song, "Rose came sneaking in and took a photo" (Reid, *Belle* 188). Tracie explains this atypical reaction alluding to Marianne Hirsch's idea of the familial gaze, defining it in relation to family photography as "the powerful gaze of familiarity [that] imposes and perpetuates certain conventional images of the familial and . . . 'frames' the family in both senses of the term" (qtd. in Tracie 110). Tracie states:

Everyone in the family willingly enters into these group recreations [song, dance and theatre] with the exception of Jack. His aversion to having his picture taken, and in particular taken off guard, reveals his desire to keep the familial gaze functioning at all times rather than to lose face. (113)

Such inflated concern for propriety and respectability also finds a reflection in Jack's demeanour which even in the private context remains "*careful and controlled*" (Reid, *Belle* 182), serving as a manifestation of inhibition and a chronic unwillingness to surrender to the bodily instincts.

While Jack's erotic inhibitions bring him close to Janet's husband, Peter, and his sexual reticence, the character's male desire to control women is also discernible in Rose's former partner whom she met in London. At the time when the play is set, he is "a very respectable married man" (Reid, *Belle* 195) and an influential figure in the Baptist Church, greatly worried about his good name and thus fearing the fact that his having an illegitimate child could be made public. What sheds further light on his character and attitudes are Rose's recollections of the circumstances of their separation. She states: "What I remember clearly about Belle's father is how inadequate and dependent he made me feel. How outraged he was when I turned down his noble offer to make an honest offer of me" (Reid, *Belle* 208). Although the man has no connections with Northern Ireland, he represents the religious attitude based on the patriarchal idea of male superiority over women perceived as more bodily-oriented and thus more prone to corruption and immoral behaviour, which Rose so much detests. This only reinforces the strong juxtaposition of the sexes in the play.

To conclude, Reid presents Belfast, and metonymically Northern Ireland in the 1980s, as a place where one can notice a clear dichotomy between the private sphere of the household dominated by women and the public male sphere of politics and religion governed by appearances as well as anger and violence resulting from the underlying crisis of the male ego. Reid shows a distorted face of political and religious fundamentalism which leaves a deep mark on the private lives of her characters visible, for instance, in their dysfunctional marriages and erotic inarticulacy. Eroticism, as depicted in *The Belle of Belfast City*, has not been yet totally eradicated from the everyday reality. In fact, it is presented as having a decisive role in the lives of the female *dramatis personae* as a source of power and self-knowledge. Reid shows that, in the specific social and cultural context presented in the play, eroticism may help to redefine the female gender identity. One might feel tempted to perceive such a depiction of the transformative power of the erotic experience as closely related to the conventional binary opposition of the female physicality and male intellectuality. However, though the women in Reid's play indeed seem to be more in touch with their bodies, the men are far from representing a rational approach, their empty slogans and physical detachment suggesting emotional and sexual deficiency rather than intellectual sophistication. This can be seen as a result of what might be called the "cold religious and political climate" of the country where cruelty "comes from frustration

and depression, [where] people are forced to live within a very narrow boundary, with a limitation put on the expression of their own individuality” (Reid qtd. in Shannon 215), and where eroticism is seen as a source of sin rather than of self-fulfilment.

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