

UNEARTHING CRYPTS AND BLURRING BORDERS IN ANNA BURNS'  
*MILKMAN*

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**ABSTRACT:** Drawing primarily on the work of Derrida, this paper provides an analysis of Belfast writer Anna Burns' award-winning novel *Milkman* (2018) from the perspectives of secrecy, hauntology and the crypt, with the aim of offering new insights into the ungraspable haunting effects of trans-generational trauma. Two literary applications of the crypt are studied: a severed cat's head found by the protagonist in the so called 'ten-minute area', and cryptic letters stuffed inside an old ragdoll and hidden in plain sight. I propose that the speculative conclusions reached as a result of this study not only allow for a sharper (re)reading of the novel itself, but also work towards the deconstruction of real and symbolic borders.

**KEYWORDS:** Anna Burns, *Milkman*, Derrida, crypt, secrecy.

CRIPTAS DESCUBIERTAS Y FRONTERAS BORROSAS EN *MILKMAN* DE  
ANNA BURNS

**RESUMEN:** Basándose principalmente en el trabajo de Derrida, este artículo ofrece un análisis de la premiada novela *Milkman* (2018), de la escritora de Belfast Anna Burns, desde la perspectiva del secreto, la hauntología y la cripta, con el objetivo de ofrecer nuevos conocimientos sobre los inasibles y persistentes efectos del trauma transgeneracional. Se estudian dos aplicaciones literarias de la cripta: una cabeza de gato cercenada encontrada por la protagonista en el lugar llamado el "área de los diez minutos", y cartas crípticas metidas dentro de un viejo muñeco de trapo y escondidas a plena vista. Propongo que las conclusiones especulativas a las que se llega como resultado de este estudio no solo permiten una (re)lectura más aguda de la novela en sí, sino que también sugieren la deconstrucción de fronteras, tanto reales como simbólicas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Anna Burns, *Milkman*, Derrida, cripta, secreto.

INTRODUCTION

Anna Burns is a Belfast born Northern Irish writer, and the author of three novels: *No Bones* (2001), *Little Constructions* (2007) and *Milkman* (2018), and one novella, *Mostly Hero* (2014). *Milkman*, in addition to winning the Man Booker Prize in 2018, won the National Books Critics Circle Award for fiction in 2018, the Orwell Prize for political fiction (2020), and the International Dublin Literary Award (2020). Burns' literary success reflects the ever-growing prominence of female Irish writers who strive to give voice to previously untold female stories, which includes such important figures as Deirdre Madden, Lucy Caldwell, Sally Rooney and most recently, Louise Kennedy. However, a combination of Burns' interest in deeply philosophical themes, the complex and cryptic style of her writing, and her own secrecy about her work to some extent allows

her to stand out against the grain. This being said, it is not difficult to identify the wordy inheritance of Irish literature, with echoes of James Joyce to be found in her intentionally convoluted use of language. Whilst certain similarities in style, focus and narrative fragmentation are to be found in Irish writer Eimear McBride's 2013 award-winning novel *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, what sets *Milkman* apart is Burns' move beyond the protagonist's self-destruction towards a recognition of the dangers of the resurgence of violence, together with the message that psychoanalysis, which involves the process of deciphering encoded secrets, could itself act as a model for social change. With this in mind, this paper provides a detailed analysis of *Milkman* from the perspectives of secrecy, Derridean hauntology and the psychoanalytic notion of the crypt. I propose that such an analysis not only allows for a sharper (re)reading of the novel itself, but further that the speculative conclusions reached as a result may be used to support Burns' broader work of deconstructing both real and symbolic borders which, I would claim, acts a common semantic thread across her fiction.

*Milkman* tells the story of a young woman – known to the reader as “middle-sister” (56, *passim*) – coming of age in an unbearably noisy and inescapably stifling community, situated within an unnamed Northern Irish city during the Troubles. However, unlike Burns' first novel *No Bones*, in which the violence and destruction of the Troubles is constant and explicit, in *Milkman* everything is shrouded in secrecy. Such reflects the pertinence of my approach to the novel, for I explore the way in which the text engages with more abstract notions of secrecy rather than focusing on historicity. As scholar Beata Piątek writes, the novel is “remarkable, not so much for revealing the historical truth about the experience of young women growing up in the Troubles, but for developing the author's own form of language, of a traumatic realism, to communicate this experience with a poignancy which is beyond the reach of any historical account” (2020: 107).

Since winning the Man Booker Prize in 2018, *Milkman* has received a great deal of critical interest and international recognition. However, the innovativeness of this particular study lies in the fact that it is the first approach to the role of secrecy in the novel from the perspective of the crypt.

#### SECRECY, HAUNTOLOGY AND THE CRYPT IN LITERATURE

Secrecy plays an important function in literature on a number of levels, as argued by Roland Barthes through his depiction of the ‘hermeneutic code’, or by Matei Calinescu in his discussion of textual and intertextual literary secrets.<sup>1</sup> This paper, however, draws largely on Derrida's discussion of the role of secrecy, according to which literary works are said to open a space which allows us to understand the fundamental quality of the secret as such. The logic of the secret is said to closely resemble the logic or structure of narrative, which involves the double process of veiling and unveiling (1995: 26). Furthermore, Derrida highlights how the novel ought to be understood as a unique discourse in that it refuses to be fully penetrated, allowing for “unconditional” or “absolute” secrets: those that are never to be revealed nor resolved (Derrida, 2002: 57). As Attridge points out, “[w]e must banish [...] any idea of the secret as a truth that is hidden but could be uncovered” (2021: 28).

Through its engagement with secrecy, literature is also said to be unique in its inexhaustible reserve of expanding meanings, for “we never finish with this secret, we

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<sup>1</sup> See Barthes (1974) and Calinescu (1994).

are never finished, there is no end” (Derrida & Ferraris, 2002: 58). Equally, in resisting interpretation, there lies the inevitable possibility of misinterpretation. Such is echoed in what Nicholas Royle terms the “cryptaesthetic resistance” of the literary text, a term he says combines the “cryptic and the aesthetic, secrecy and the senses, hiddenness and beauty” (2014: 48-9). Royle – quoting Forbes – describes the novel as a bizarre but deeply complex “tale of visual punning”, whereby equally important to our experience of the novel are the blanks and spaces, “echo and refrain, strange resemblances, repetitions and doublings of all sorts, both ‘within’ the text and in the intertextual world beguilingly ‘outside’ it” (2021: 38). Accordingly, we may conclude with Derrida that “the readability of the text is structured by the unreadability of the secret” (1992: 152). Literature is thus a materiality that refuses to be penetrated.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida coins the term “hauntology” to depict how the repeated return of ghosts from the past traverse both current and yet to come thought, writing and interpretations. The term stands in contrast to ontology (just as ‘deconstruction’ stands in contrast to Heideggerian ‘destruction’); as ontology is the theory of being, the term hauntology looks to deconstruct preestablished binaries of being/ non-being (2006: xvii). The spectre is described as “what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects – on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see” (125). Engaging with spectres in literature requires the reader to confront those unresolvable secrets that hold the potential to rupture any sense of certainty, both within and beyond the text itself. Indeed, Colin Davis draws a parallel between Derrida’s depiction of literature as the only discourse that allows for the unconditional secret and the role of hauntology in literary analysis. He writes: “Conversing with spectres is not undertaken in the expectation that they will reveal some secret, shameful or otherwise. Rather, it may open us up to the experience of secrecy as such: an essential unknowing which underlies and may undermine what we think we know” (2021: 377).

The spectre, according to Derrida, is a deconstructive force that looms between life and death, presence and absence, being and non-being (2006: xvii). It is the repeated return of the spectre that demonstrates how time is “out of joint”; that the present is necessarily, yet incomprehensibly, intertwined with the past (61). Addressing the spectre’s return is said to be necessary for understanding the composition of histories. Closely connected to the spectre is the notion of the ‘crypt’, understood as a kind of tomb which conceals unfronted phantoms and secrets. Both concepts deal with the secrecy that underscores the inheritance of past traumas and how such is portrayed in literature.

In Abraham and Torok’s *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, the writers distinguish between two modes of mourning: introjection, which they depict as normal mourning, and incorporation, depicted as pathological mourning. Introjection is the process in which, by means of an extension or expansion of the ego and accomplished through language, the other is appropriated and the love-object becomes the same as the self. In contrast, in incorporation, which comes about when “words fail to fill the subject’s void and hence an imaginary thing is inserted into the mouth in their place”, the ego takes the unnameable other in but at the same time keeps it separate and unfronted (1986: 111-15). The reason this mode of mourning is deemed pathological is that the object, once incorporated, becomes a destructive force, and returns to prey upon the ego.

However, it is Derrida’s understanding of these concepts, as presented in his foreword to *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, that allows us insight into how these concepts also act as tools of writing, analysis, and interpretation, that is to say, the process of deconstruction itself. Where Freud describes incorporation in terms of cannibalism, in *Fors*, Derrida deconstructs the binary to reveal incorporation as that which respects the

alterity of the other (1986: xiv). From this perspective, the process of introjection can be understood as a kind of ontological cannibalism in which the other is engulfed, appropriated and also mystified. The notion of the crypt is key to Derrida's reading of incorporation. It is to be understood as a kind of tomb which conceals (and conceals the concealment of) unconforted phantoms and secrets. It is distinct from the Freudian unconscious, for hidden in the crypt are not the exiled, repressed thoughts or desires of the conscious, but rather someone else, an absolute other, buried alive: the living dead. The crypt is described as a "more inward forum like a closed rostrum or speaker's box, a safe: sealed, and thus internal to itself, a secret interior within the public square, but, by the same token, outside it, external to the interior" (Derrida, 1986: xiv). It is topologically both somewhere and nowhere, inner and outer, and an "undiscoverable place" (xi). It is an internal symbolic space that conceals unavowable secrets: "The inner forum is (a) safe, an outcast outside inside the inside" (xiv). Derrida describes the topographical structure of the crypt as erupting from dislocation, through which the secret is created in its division (xiv). Importantly, both the crypt itself and the encryption are hidden.

The crypt is also described by Derrida as both a "cryptic fortress" and a "labyrinth" in its resistance of interpretation through the fracturing of the symbolic (xx). As a fortress, it is the place of the absolute secret for, in Derrida's words, "[w]hat is at stake here is what takes place secretly, or takes a secret place, in order to keep itself safe somewhere in a self" (xiv). It is not a riddle to be solved, but something that can never be deciphered. As Colin Davis writes, "it is a structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future" (2021: 379). This aspect is key to understanding the philosophical significance of *Milkman*, and is echoed by Santos Brigida and Pinho when they write that "Burns moves backwards towards the future" (2021: 439). From this we can also decipher an element of a haunting trauma which surpasses one's facticity; it is, after all, the living dead. This aspect is described by Royle as "trans-generational haunting" a concept which is key to the literary analysis carried out in the second half of this paper (2014: 49). Additionally, its description as a labyrinth points to the idea of misdirection and misinterpretation, echoed in Royle's depiction "cryptaesthetic resistance" – a concept that also finds particular resonance in the novel (2014:43). Finally, the self is said to act as a kind of grounds keeper that patrols the fortress of the crypt, with one objective: not to allow anyone in. There is a certain passivity of this guarding act, for we are told how "incorporation keeps still, speaks only to silence or to ward off intruders from its secret place" (Derrida, 1986: xvii). This depiction, as we shall see, finds an uncanny embodiment in *Milkman*'s protagonist as the narrative progresses.

#### SECRECY, HAUNTOLOGY AND THE CRYPT IN MILKMAN

The concept of secrecy is constantly at play in *Milkman*. Both the style and language of the novel reflect Derrida's depiction of time as a trace structure, referring to what is present but never seen, or in Spivak's words, the "mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present" (2016: xxxvi). Nonetheless, despite this resistance, *Milkman* is by no means unreadable. English writer McCarthy's words ring true here: it is "coherence that's only made possible by incoherence; the receiving which is replay, repetition – backwards, forwards, inside-out or upside down" (2012: loc 314). The novel shares many features common to the stream of consciousness in literature; the narrative is not linear in time, and flows quickly and often from one event to another, with connections made seemingly in the there and then of telling the story. We are taken both

forwards and backwards several times within each chapter, with certain events visited and revisited at different moments in the narrative. Yet, it is obvious from the very opening of the novel that the protagonist, whose consciousness we seem to have access too, is no pure inner thinking Cogito. Thus, whilst structured as though it were an inward-looking exploration of the individual, the success of the novel lies in its exploration of the individual's inclination outside itself. Therefore, what we have is an example of a public stream of consciousness (for a book is a public object) which negates the inner/outer distinction by making a point of saying that boundaries are fluid, and that consciousness as a result is indeed accessible.

The story itself is told in part through what is not told, in never, for example, revealing most of the characters' names, the name of the town in which it is set (although it bares obvious similarities to Ardoyne, in Belfast), nor even the surrounding political situation. As Ryzard Bartnik writes, "the narrative realm proposed by Burns is (in)determinate, liminal in terms of time and space" (2021: 66). The specificity of the conflict also goes unnamed: where we might expect to read Protestant or Catholic, we have "the right religion" (46) and "the wrong religion" (47); in place of Britain and Ireland, we have "our side of the water" (118) and "over the water" (21), the distinction between north and south is referred to as "over the border" (24); the RUC and the British Army become "defenders-of-the-state" (22) and "state forces" (7); and in place of the IRA, we have "renouncers-of-the-state" (7) – all of which are more commonly reduced to "the tribal identifiers of 'us' or 'them'" (22). As Beata Piątek writes, "the reality of the Troubles is lurking on the margins of the novel, it must be reconstructed from hints, scraps of information", which itself echoes Derrida's insistence that it is those things in the margins which maintain the power to rupture any sense of certainty (2020: 108). Nor does the protagonist middle-sister ever find closure in voicing the story of what happened with the character "Milkman" which is largely a story of that which did not happen. Not only is this part of the innovativeness of Burns' writing style, but equally it reflects the secrecy of the community in which the novel is set. This lack of referentiality also points towards the idea that Burns' novel may not be exclusively directed towards the facticity of the violence during the Troubles, but rather, as *Guardian* writer Claire Kilroy proposes, "Burns' targets are more insidious forces: the oppressiveness of tribalism, of conformism, of religion, of patriarchy, of living with widespread distrust and permanent fear" (2018: n.p.). The intentional ambiguity surrounding both time and place allows the events to take place simultaneously in Belfast in the 1970s, and anywhere, anytime. In Burns' own words: "Although it is recognisable as this skewed form of Belfast, it's not really Belfast in the [1970s] [...] I would like to think it could be seen as any sort of totalitarian, closed society existing in similarly oppressive conditions" (in Schwartz, 2019: n.p.). This element of secrecy also gives the novel a dystopian feel, as if it were pointing to an imagined future rather than a historical past.

What destroys the community both from within and without is also shrouded in secrecy. From the outside we have the state forces (and camera clicks); from the inside, the renouncers (often in Halloween masks), the kangaroo courts, and the disappearances – all of which are not spoken of in the community, and referred to in the novel as "unmentionables" (116). This also represents a blurring of boundaries between external and internal threat, and ultimately between "us" and "them" (22) In terms of locations, too, everyone in the community knows there are certain areas that are too dangerous to cross, but nobody verbally acknowledges this fact. The "ten-minute area" (36) is one such place, which is considered so sinister that the time it takes to cross it cannot be included in normal calculations (339). These "unmentionables" (116) which hold or fuse the

community together are components of the open secret which makes up the unacknowledged background of the story, namely, ideology. Never spoken of, never acknowledged, the open secret in the novel reminds us of the pervasive power of ideology in general to create realities; a pervasiveness that always goes unrecognised.

Interestingly, when middle sister is poisoned by “tablets girl” (60, *passim*), she has the startling sensation of some ghost-like something finding its way inside her: “something invisible wispig into my bedroom, wispig up my bedclothes, getting in my open mouth and slipping down my throat [...] *It got in! It made its way in! They got in while I was sleeping*” (221, emphasis in original). The “*it*” in this cry would appear to refer to Milkman, whilst the “*they*” seems to refer to the community. Again, we are met with the trespassing of boundaries, this time of private and public spaces, and inner and outer selves. Importantly, this particular encroaching finds further resonance in the analysis to follow.

There are two objects in *Milkman*, linked to two events, which are productive to analyse from the perspective of the crypt. The first is a cat’s head found by middle sister in the ten-minute area, and the second is the character tablets girl’s hidden stash of letters stuffed inside a rag-doll, and discovered after her death. Together, these examples, in their cryptic complexities and indecipherable elements, contribute to the unconditional secrets of the text. Moreover, as Santos Brigida and Pinho write of the novel, “one finds that mourning might be a form of non-violent and yet radically transformative political resource” (2021: 439). I begin with an analysis of the cat’s head.

Whilst walking home from her French class, middle sister enters the ten-minute area where she finds a cat’s head. First of all, the very topography of the area immediately resembles Derrida’s discussion of the crypt: somewhere and nowhere, internal and external, buried but on the surface, and hidden within the public sphere (Derrida, 1986: xiv). The ten-minute area is described in the novel as “a ghostly place”, “a dead, creepy, grey place” (82), a place “not for normal things” (139), and an “open awful place” (101). Yet it is both dead and alive; there is a bus stop where nobody gets on and nobody gets off, and shops that open and close no matter that nobody ever goes inside. “Ma” (middle sister’s mother) describes the area as “a place attempting perhaps to transcend some dark, evil happening without managing to transcend it and instead succumbing to it, giving in to it, coming to want it, to wallow in it” (84). What happened to this place also remains a mystery, in fact, ma suggests it is possible that nothing happened there at all: “It’s imaginary – that’s its provenance, meaning it has no provenance” (92). And so, middle sister finds a cat’s head in a place that it is both somewhere and nowhere, dead and alive, open and closed, public and private. She concludes that it must have been killed by a bomb that went off in the area not long ago, not a state forces bomb, nor a renouncers-of-the-state bomb, but a Nazi bomb left over from World War II.

This bomb left the area both “disturbed within its own disturbances” (82), but at the same time “not particularly more dead than it had been before” (83). As the area is uninhabited, it was thought that no one had been killed. However, on finding the cat’s head, middle sister concludes that a death was in fact suffered in the explosion after all: that of a cat. The first thing we notice about this head is that it is missing an eye, and so the reader is immediately taken in thought to the myth of the Odysseus and the Cyclops. As the story goes, Odysseus gets the giant Polyphemus drunk on wine, tells him his name is Nobody, and stabs out his eye with a burning stake. The giant cries out for help from his fellow giants, but his screaming of “Nobody’s killing me” (Homer, 224) lead the giants to other conclusions. He is punished, so the story goes, for not respecting the rites of unconditional hospitality to his guests. Echoing this tale, just as middle sister has the

thought that no one was killed, she finds the one-eyed head of cat, the bomb's only victim. The cat's head therefore carries with it trans-generational trauma connected to current and past, local and global war and conflict. We are then told that killing cats was a kind of norm in their community. Cats, in contrast to dogs, were assumed by the community to represent unreliability, insincerity, and femininity; punished, then, like Polyphemus, for their apparent inhospitality. Also of note is that the head itself is swarming with insects; it is, in this way, both dead and alive, or the living dead.

What happens next is that middle sister's train of thought takes us back to an episode in which the community awoke to discover that all of their dogs had been killed and piled up, throats cut, for everyone to see: "soldiers killed dogs, and the locals killed cats" (100). At first what disturbed the children most by the pile of dead dogs was the fact that it appeared the dogs were missing their heads: they cried, "Mammy! The heads! They took the heads! Where are the heads?" (96). In Freudian dream logic, cats represent dogs. Following the same logic, the singular head of a cat appears as an accurate negation for a pile of headless dogs. So already the cat's head becomes a symbol from the unconscious twisted around the trauma of the dead dogs.

However, it is made clear that the trauma of dogs already stands for something else. If we go back further into her train of thought, somewhere between discussing dead cats and dead dogs, middle sister tells the reader of the chilling message she took from watching the film *Rear Window* at the age of twelve. In the film, a dog is killed by having its neck broken, to which the owner responds with cries of: "Did you kill him because he liked you...?" (89) This sent shivers down her spine: "They killed it because it liked them, because they couldn't cope with being liked, couldn't cope with innocence, frankness, openness, with defenselessness and an affection so pure, so affectionate, that the dog and its qualities had to be done away with" (89). Thus, the cat's head, which already embodies trans-generational trauma, stands too for the trauma of the dead dogs, which already stands for the trauma of watching *Rear Window*, which itself stands for the way that the community deals with alterity and difference in general. Additionally, the missing eye foreshadows the fate of the characters "maybe-boyfriend" (8, *passim*) and "tablets girl's sister" (60, *passim*) who are, like Oedipus, blinded for seeing what they ought not to see.

Finally, that the crypt is described by Derrida as a labyrinth (1986: xiv) points to the idea of misdirection and misinterpretation, made evident in the rumours that evolve regarding the reason that middle sister was spotted in the possession of a cat's head. It is commonly accepted thenceforth that there was not just one head, but multiple cats' heads, often carried in her pockets, and which she was said to cut up for purposes of dark magic. Also of note is the very fact that she was spotted in the first place, reinforcing how the ten-minute area is both public and private, open and closed.

So, what we have now is a multiply encoded object that once belonged to a cat which was blown up in an already dead place by a bomb that had spent years buried underground. On seeing this object, middle sister describes feeling "jolted as I hadn't remembered ever feeling jolted, not understanding why either" (100), which itself echoes Derrida's depiction of the crypt erupting from an inner shattering. After going back and forth several times in deliberation and arguing with herself – "I could cover it, not leave it in this open awful place. *But why?*" (101, emphasis in original) – eventually she decides to take it from the 'ten-minute area' and to bury it somewhere green (somewhere alive). To return briefly once more to the scene with dead dogs, when describing the community's men retrieving the remains from the pile and returning them to their families, middle sister says, "I added shovels to them and in my head they were digging with these shovels" (98). And so, we have moved from digging up numerous headless

dead dogs to burying the singular head of a cat. There is a sense in which middle sister is acting as Antigone – the daughter of Oedipus – who, grieving the loss of her brother, defies the King in seeking his correct burial. And so her actions are undoubtedly connected to mourning. That the Greek name Antigone means “in place of one’s parents” also echoes the role of substitution in this process, as well as the trans-generation nature of such mourning.

Middle sister begins, then, by concealing the head in her hankies. First, she wraps the head in her female hanky, the one she carried for “cultural, aesthetic purposes”, before wrapping it also in her male hanky, the one she carried for “practical purposes”, putting both, as she says, to “practical and symbolic use” (101-2). The result is that the multiply encoded object is hidden in cloths that are both hers and not hers, both feminine and masculine.

What happens next is that Milkman (the paramilitary stalker) appears, as if from nowhere. He stands beside her, with the only barrier between them being “those hankies, with their dark, dead contents” which Milkman seems unable to see (102). What is particularly interesting here is that Milkman speaks in a kind of dream logic: he asks questions that are not really questions, and his message is never fluid. It is almost as if the unconscious is throwing together contrasting images, like transmissions and connections in a dream. We may be reminded of Colin Davis when he says of the ghost that it “pushes at the boundaries of language and thought” (2021: 379). The threat Milkman delivers, which is clearly a direct threat to kill maybe-boyfriend in a car bomb, is at the same time indirect, for it is encoded in reference to middle sister’s eternally grieving sister. It is direct but only in its absence. It is in this moment, too, that Milkman reveals that he has access to middle sister’s thoughts; that he has already transgressed the boundaries of public and private thoughts, and inner and outer selves. The results of the dream-like quality of both the landscape, as a kind of in-between place, together with the cryptic dialogue that takes place there, holds a resemblance to Pascual Garrido’s discussion of the disappearing bogs in in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland*: a landscape that has “alternating periods of visibility and invisibility” and the “potential to disclose and to hide” and which reveals that there is “no clear-cut boundary between what is real and imaginary” (2020: 118-9).

Almost as quickly as Milkman vanishes, “real milkman” (140, *passim*) appears on the border between the ten-minute area and the “usual place” – the cemetery – also referred to as “the busy cemetery”, “the no-town cemetery” and “the no-time cemetery” (213). And so, real milkman is also situated in a place that is both somewhere and nowhere, dead and alive. Additionally, the very fact that the two characters are called “Milkman” and “real milkman” again plays with the blurring of boundaries between the real and the imaginary. Immediately, real milkman (unlike Milkman) sees the cat’s head and offers to take it off her hands: “‘Right’, he said as if I’d said, ‘It’s an apple’” (143). There is something pragmatic in real milkman’s response, but pragmatic in dealing with something which itself is so un-pragmatic. In middle sister’s words: “He had grasped all” (144).

Real milkman suggests burying the head in his back garden, the very same garden in which he once found, dug up and revealed buried weapons that he was not supposed to see. There is a sense in which real milkman acts as a traditional Freudian, for he unearths and deciphers the unconscious. Yet the crypt is said to be a more inner forum than the unconscious (Derrida, 1986: xiv). What real milkman does with the cat’s head is therefore also significant. First, he empties out a billiard ball case, and places the head inside, thus creating another boundary. This placing also suggests that he is replacing an



object of play with this now multiply encoded object, which conceals within its tomb a web of interconnected trauma. Such also reminds us of middle sister's initial interpretation of the cat's head as "a child's ball, some toy, a play-moneybag" (93), and echoes the idea of the crypt as a kind of play-thing, which can be deciphered in Freud's essay on (and Derrida's deconstruction of) the notion of fort/da.<sup>2</sup> Finally, real milkman makes the decision to bury it in his own back yard. The object is unearthed, encrypted, misinterpreted, encased and then buried once more, presenting the reader with an inexhaustible chain of multiple meanings; it is, so to speak, ready to burst with significance, just as the head itself is ready to burst from insect activity.

With the cat's head interpreted in terms of the crypt, middle sister's desperate attempts to protect something within herself can be read in terms of the silent grounds-keeper. The community's description of her in terms of the living dead thus takes on new resonance: "A bit eerie, a bit creepy ... it was that I resembled the ten-minute area. It was as if there was nothing there when there was something there, while at the same time, as if there was something there when there was nothing there" (180). Middle sister's response to this multi-layered trauma can therefore be understood in terms of incorporation; although she has taken this trauma, this Other, within herself, it remains separated and unfronted, guarded in the crypt. The complete significance of which remains, for the reader, ever out of reach.

The second object in the novel which is fruitful to analyse from this perspective is the collection of tablets girl's letters, found hidden inside an old rag-doll after her death. When 'middle sister' is clinging to railings on her way home from the chip shop, for her legs are too weak to support her (a combined result of social anxiety and recovering from being poisoned), she spots tablets girl's sister (shiny girl) doing just the same, but for loss of vision. During this encounter, tablets girl's sister explains how she discovered letters written, it seems, from one part of 'tablets girl' to another. This idea echoes the explanations she is said to give for her poisonings, which are based around the idea that her selfhood was divided in two, and that there was no room in her world for both sides. Whilst the so called "renouncers of the state" (7) ransacked her bedroom (her private space) looking for where she kept her poison, tablets girl's sister decided to look in the most unlikely place, a public space, namely, the living room. There, on the sofa, where it had been for so long in plain sight it had become invisible, was a rag-doll; a family heirloom once loved, long ago discarded.

Two things are worth drawing attention to before moving on. First, that the object is again a plaything, and secondly, that it has been passed down from generation to generation, and so it may represent an unspoken trans-generational trauma. The way in which these letters were hidden immediately echoes the psychoanalytic concept of "purloined letters": letters stolen, sent in secret and hidden in plain sight (Muller & Richardson, 1998). This also links with the Derridean notion that the quality of the secret is like a letter: "a secret that is at the same time kept and exposed, jealously sealed and open like a purloined letter" (2008: 131). And so, tablets girl's letters are hidden in an object that is both visible and invisible, public and private, somewhere and nowhere. Also, as they are from one part of her divided self who died (the poisoner) to another part who survived (shiny girl), the letters themselves are in a way both dead and alive. Royle's comments are pertinent here, that the "cryptaesthetic force of a work requires a reading or countersignature that responds to what is elliptical, oblique, hidden away even in the obvious" (2014: 48-9).

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<sup>2</sup> See Freud (1961).

As the episode continues, these letters are partially revealed. They are addressed to Susannah Eleanor Lizabetta Effies, the first real name to be spoken in the book. The first thing that strikes the reader about the letters is the jarring similarity in style between the way they are composed and middle sister's own narrative voice. Then there is the content of the first part of the letter, which is a list of fears that strikingly correspond to those middle sister has elaborated thus far. Next, we are met with the expression "the shudders, the ripples, our legs turning to pulp because of those shudders and ripples" (263). This is the exact way that middle sister describes her response to Milkman's presence (and absence) throughout the novel (sometimes described as an anti-orgasm), and is also the reason she so frequently loses the use of her legs. The letter continues: "Nine and nine-tenths of us think we are spied upon, that we replay old trauma, that we are tight and unhappy and numb in our facial expression" (263). It is middle sister who makes constant reference to the fear of being watched, and whilst the community never (as far as we are aware) describes tablets girl as numb, this has certainly been said on many occasions and by a number of characters in reference to middle sister. From here, we are told of tablets girl's greatest worry: "that weird something of the psyche – for do you remember, our Susannah, that weird something of the psyche? Of Lightness and Niceness that had got inside us, that was inside us and which, as you recall, *possesses* us still?" (264, emphasis mine). We may here recall the feeling of lightness that middle sister had initially taken with her from her French class: she described the feeling as "nice" and "valuable", but it was soon taken over by "What's the point? There's no point" (101).

It becomes clear that the part of tablets girl composing the letters is known to her as "Faithful Terror Of Other People And Not Just On Difficult Days" (266). There is, however, one loose piece of paper with a correspondence from the other part of her, the one known as "Lightness and Niceness" (266). This is particularly revealing, and it reads as follows:

Dear Susannah Eleanor Lizabetta Effie,  
You don't need me to tell you -  
IT'S FRIGHTENING! O SO FRIGHTENING!  
- that everything you see is a reflection of -  
ALL SO TERRIFYING!  
- your inner landscape and that you don't have to -  
HELP! HELP! WE'RE GOING TO DIE! WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!  
- believe in this inner -  
MY STOMACH! MY HEAD! O MY INTESTINES!  
- landscape. Instead we can -  
REMEMBER OUR HELP KIT, SUSANNAH! OUR COMFORT KIT! OUR  
SURVIVAL KIT! (267)

Reading (quite literally) between the lines we get the following warning: "everything you see is a reflection of [...] your inner landscape and that you don't have to [...] believe in this inner [...] landscape" (267). Again, we have a blurring of the inner and the outer, together with the idea that neither the outer landscape, which is but a reflection, nor the inner landscape which it reflects (itself an absence), are to be trusted. The outer reflection is thus a reflection of an inner nothing. Also of note here are tablet girl's cries of pain, "MY STOMACH! MY HEAD! O MY INTESTINES!" (267) as if she were the one who had been poisoned. These words are clear echoes of the cries made by middle sister, actually poisoned, from her bathroom floor just days before.

To return then to the image created in this moment of the narrative, we have middle sister clinging to rails, facing tablets girl's sister, also clinging to rails, presenting an almost mirror image or reflection. This image is reinforced by middle sister's remarks that tablets girl's sister was "tissue-paper thin, not only in her body but in every aspect of her" (267). The reflection, then, is somewhat void. The two are also seemingly stuck in this position, for at one end of the street there are dogs fighting over chips (note how tablets girl's sister co-appears with her previous trauma) and at the other, two men fighting in silence. Trapped, then, between real and surreal conflicts.

The question therefore arises as to what to make of the abruptly materialising connections that the unearthing of this crypt establishes between these three characters: tablets girl, tablets girl's sister and middle sister. Whilst I maintain that this is one of the novel's unconditional secrets, there are three possible explanations that are particularly productive to explore. The first connects to the element of a haunting trauma within the crypt which surpasses one's facticity, that which Royle terms "trans-generational haunting" (2014: 49). We know that middle sister is documenting the events after they have taken place, so it is possible that once tablets girl's crypt has been dug up and partially revealed, middle sister finds herself haunted by the spectre of the living dead buried within. These letters are after all a written account of tablets girl's own traumas which middle-sister finds herself having to decipher from incomplete letters.

This interpretation may account for the salient similarities between the language of the narrative voice and that of the letters. Additionally, it is reinforced by middle sister's repeated description of tablets girl as a kind of haunting presence throughout the novel: "like some kind of phantom, some kind of horrific nightmare" (217) and as "invisible, blending into everything, dissolving away to nothing" (234). Her speech, too, similar to that of Milkman, is dream-like and cryptic, and is spoken in "mesmerising fragmentations" (215). Further, we are reminded of maybe-boyfriend's description of how middle sister's numbed state was "starting to invade and *possess* [her]" (193, emphasis mine) during which he actually likens her to "one of those jointed wooden *dollies* that artists use" (193, emphasis mine). We also have middle sister's description, unaware that she had been poisoned by tablets girl, of something ghost-like finding its way inside her (221). What this textual evidence points towards is that middle sister is haunted by the unconfrosted ghost of tablets girl buried in the crypt. If this were to be the case, middle sister's mourning would nonetheless have elements of both incorporation and introjection, as a kind of ontological cannibalism or fusion, for the identity of tablets girl has been at least partially engulfed and appropriated.

The second possible explanation relates to Derrida's discussion of counterfeit signatures (1977: 33). We may question who wrote these letters, for it is possible that the signature is but a misdirection. Could middle sister be the letters' true pen? It does seem somewhat implausible that tablets girl's sister is able to recite these letters word for word, even more so given the weak physical state in which she is in due to her having been poisoned. Very much connected, then, is the question as to who Susannah Eleanor Lizabetta Effie really is, and this leads us on to a third possible interpretation.

Interestingly, moments after this name is spoken, we read: "She said my name then, my first name, and that felt warm" (267). Is it possible, then, that 'Susannah' is the protagonist's first name? In the drinking club, too, when tablets girl accuses middle sister of killing her in another life, tablets girl exclaims: "We all died, *sister* ... because of you" (214, emphasis mine). It has already been emphasised to the reader earlier in the book that tablets girl has never spoken of feminist issues, nor any other kind of female solidarity, why, then, would she call her "sister"? Furthermore, middle sister's own

expectation of what tablets girl's sister might say to her when she approached (for it was rumoured that she was an accessory to her sister's murder) was not, "you killed *my* sister", but rather "you killed *our* sister" (267, emphasis mine). Does this "our" suggest that tablets girl was also *her* sister? Then there is Somebody McSomebody's description of her as a "sub cat" (a buried cat?) but also a "double cat" (a divided cat?) (307). Additionally, middle sister's argument with herself in the ten-minute area, between the nice feeling she was left with after the French class, and the common voice of "*what's the point?*" (101, emphasis in original), shows uncanny similarities to the two voices in tablets girl's letters. Finally, when describing her intentionally closed disposition when confronted by the community's questions, middle sister says she gave the community, "no full-bodiedness, no bloodedness, no passion of the moment, no turn of plot, *no sad shade, no angry shade, no panicked shade* ... Just me, devoid. Just me, *uncommingled*" (101, emphasis mine). Is it possible, then, that tablets girl, tablets girl's sister (shiny girl) and middle sister are really all one person? This final explanation, more far-fetched but plausible nonetheless, is the suggestion that the entire story is itself an encoding. That where we are presented with three separate characters, what we really have is one self divided into three sisters: tablets girl, or Faithful Terror Of Other People, shiny girl or Lightness and Niceness, and middle sister, the *middle* sister, stuck, like the ten-minute area, somewhere or nowhere in-between. Two evil, two good, three shades.

#### CONCLUSIONS

As means of a conclusion, I hope to point towards how my speculative reading of the text not only allows for novel literary interpretations, but equally underscores the potential role that works of fiction can play in the deconstruction of the experience of trans-generational trauma, and the breaking down of both physical and symbolic borders.

First, with *Milkman*'s apparition occurring in the moment that middle sister unearths the crypt, I propose that the constant stalking presence of the character of *Milkman* may represent the spectre of Northern Ireland's convoluted, often violent, and hugely traumatic history which continues to haunt and shape social and political tensions within communities today. The complexity of both the narrative and the narrative style does well to reflect the complexity and the scope of such trauma, which includes, but is not limited to, political, domestic, and gender violence; all of which the narrative directly, or indirectly, engages with. Moreover, the haunting element of this trauma, embodied in *Milkman*, trespasses boundaries and infiltrates every landscape in the protagonist's life: the social and the political, the communal and the individual, public and private spaces, and even her "private thoughts safe and sound in those recesses underneath" (91). Read as such, middle sister's poisoning can be interpreted as a metaphor for this possession that has taken hold of her, the extent of which is made apparent by her sisters' observation, that she had become white: "Like white milk that's been painted extra white ... so that it glows in the dark" (221). Whilst emphasising the fact that *Milkman* had indeed got in, the image conjured is equally ghost like. If we take *Milkman* to stand for the spectre of past traumas, his possession of middle sister may in turn stand for the possessive hold that such spectres maintain on the Northern Irish narrative today. This being said, as Selvi Danaci stresses, as "middle sister survives the nightmare she was subjected to, her story and eventual recovery offer a similar confrontation and a process of healing for the country itself" (2020: 304).

A further conclusion that can be drawn from reading the novel from the perspective of the crypt relates to the construction of identity. Firstly, at an individual

level, middle sister appears trapped somewhere in between the shades of tablets girl and shiny girl. We witness how she constantly tries to reassure herself that the way she thinks and plans functions as a secret mask to protect her true inner self. Nonetheless, the novel suggests that this self-reassurance is itself the mask which hides how this “not being anything” (91) on the surface penetrates further than is accounted for. Perhaps there is not actually anything below this surface level at all, and whatever thing it is that needs to be protected is actually itself a *nothing*. Middle sister expresses that whilst initially, the “under-the-surface turbulence” (177) she felt confirmed to her that she was alive, eventually, the “numbance from nowhere had come so far on in its development that along with others in the area finding me inaccessible, I, too, came to find me inaccessible. My inner world, it seemed, had gone away” (177). Read against the history of Irish identity politics, which has historically been dominated by ideals of a desired homogeneity, the spectres in middle sister’s story reveal how identity is, on the contrary, necessarily heterogeneous, ruptured and undefined.

Additionally, the conflicting pressures of the two shades of the same spectre may also lead us to conclude that the protagonist at the same time stands for the identity of the nation of Northern Ireland itself, understood as the middle sister, trapped somewhere between the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. The three characters, by the end of the novel, are all shades (one dead and two (almost) alive), again alluding to the interconnected ghosts that haunt these three nations. It is only by means not of communion, but of confrontation and communication with these ghosts that individuals, communities and nations will be able to move beyond their self-protective/self-destructive identity politics.

Finally, throughout the course of this paper, I also hope to have revealed how *Milkman* works by dissolving barriers. First, the fluidity of the border between the internal and the external self is exposed by the community’s penetration not only into private space but mental cognition. Connected to the open secret, there is also the blurring of the boundaries between events and non-events, fact and fiction and reality and ideology. Finally, a reading of the novel from the perspective of the crypt leads to a dissolution of barriers between dreams and reality, the living and the dead, people, spectres and reflections. This is, after all, a novel that is underscored by issues of both physical and symbolic historic borders: our side of the road and over the road; our side of the border and over the border; our side of the water and over the water, and many very real barricades. This interpretation of the novel is supported by a comment made by Burns in an interview with *The Guardian*, where she says, “I think it is absolutely fascinating to explore that whole theme of borders and barriers and the dreaded other” (in Allardice, 2018).

As a concluding remark, it is interesting to briefly mention the final border that is trespassed at the end of the novel. Third brother-in-law’s tiny garden is surrounded by an equally tiny, ornamental hedge, which is small enough to step over. Third sister nonetheless insists that everyone use the tiny gate. No matter how small, this hedge acts as a social border which creates and maintains a boundary line. What we have is a visual representation of the inside/outside boundary at the heart of the novel. As the story draws towards its conclusion, third sister returns home drunk with her friends whilst middle sister and third brother-in-law are preparing for their run. They all accidentally trip over the hedge. The following conversation ensues:

‘Well, we told you, friend. We warned you. It’s rambunctious, out of control. The hedge is sinister. Get rid of it.’ ‘Can’t’, said sister. ‘I’m curious to see how it’ll transpire and

individualise.' 'You can see how it's transpired and individualised. It's transpired into day of the triffids. It's individualising into trying to kill us' (344).

*The Day of the Triffids* is a reference to John Wyndham's 1951 post-apocalyptic novel, in which a species of alien plants take over the world. The plants in this book are successful in their conquest by first creating an epic lightshow in the form of a meteor shower which blinds the entire world's population. Similarly, in the unnamed community in which *Milkman* is set, borders have not only blinded the entire community from seeing what is really in front of them (with several of the characters literally blinded along the way), but also the fixation with borders functions as part of the community's own self-destruction. Borders, then, are dangerous: they can blind, they can take over, and they can kill. As Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh stresses, the novel underscores how "this binary perspective on the world has long been accepted and internalised by community members, trapping them within its illogical, endlessly self-generating, Kafkaesque dystopia" (2020: 44).

This being said, hope is found in the novel's dissolution of these same borders. The novel ends with middle sister and third brother-in-law not bothering with the tiny gate, but instead jumping the tiny hedge, themselves symbolically surmounting borders. This ending also acts as an abandonment of the internal struggles amounting from the tensions between identity and identity politics that the novel engages with. Middle sister, who has moved through questions of 'who am I?' and 'what is my relationship with other people?' finally finds relief when the boundaries that once dominated present themselves as diminished in size. The final sentiment is something akin to, 'it's just a tiny hedge, and I think I could even laugh at it.'

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