

# 'Those that I fight I do not hate': Representation of violence and sacrifice in war in Irish literature

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## Abstract

Violence and sacrifice during The Irish War of Independence is a recurrent topic in many contemporary and past literary works. This is the case of two pieces created by two well-known Irish writers: Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation" and W.B. Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death". This article will then focus on the representation of violence and sacrifice during war in these two Irish works in order to study the way in which this recurrent theme is portrayed by different writers.

**Keywords:** Violence, sacrifice, war, nation, soldiers, Ireland

**Título:** 'Odio no guardo a quienes combato': Representación de la violencia y el sacrificio en la guerra en la literatura irlandesa.

## Resumen

Violencia y sacrificio durante la Guerra de Independencia Irlandesa es un tema recurrente en muchas obras tanto contemporáneas como pasadas. Este es el caso de dos obras escritas por dos renombrados autores irlandeses Frank O'Connor y su "Invitados de la Nación" y W.B. Yeats y su visionario poema "Un aviador irlandés prevé su muerte". Este artículo se centrará por tanto en la representación de violencia y sacrificio durante la guerra en estas dos obras irlandesas con el fin de estudiar la manera en la que diferentes autores representan este recurrente tema.

**Palabras clave:** Violencia, sacrificio, guerra, nación, soldados, Irlanda.

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"We are living in a primitive and benighted era, each individual can still choose to act morally, can still choose to oppose evil, can still choose to help his brothers and sisters "on the other side," even in times of conflict, be it "ethnic" or "religious"" (Atanasov 79).

To start with the analysis, violence in *Guests of the Nation* is presented in different ways. Such topic is best portrayed in the character of Jeremiah Donovan, who is presented as an aggressive and violent man who seems to be the only one in the story that is willing to kill the English soldiers. Further, the fact that both Bonaparte and Noble reject to kill them, and even think about telling the Englishmen what the soldier is thinking about, makes Donovan seem even worse. Moreover, the Irish soldier tries to justify his violent attitude towards their guests by reasoning that they have to take revenge of the English soldiers because of having killed four Irish ones. This idea is reinforced when Bonaparte claims "I perceive Jeremiah Donovan is trying to encourage himself with hot words" (*The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* 377). Donovan's argument for revenge would just make the war become endless as then the British soldiers would have to kill more Irishmen in revenge, and so the Irish Army more British soldiers.

Also, there are some parts of the story in which violence is portrayed in a more explicit and bloody way. At the end of the story, it is narrated how Hawkins is agonizing after having been shot ("I saw him stagger at the knees and lie out flat at Noble's feet, slowly, and as quiet as a child, with the lantern-light falling sadly upon his lean legs and bright farmer's boots" *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* 379). Through giving details of the soldier's agony, the narrator is showing the violence involved in the murders of the Englishmen.

Although sacrifice in *Guests of the Nation* is portrayed through the violence present in the murders of the English soldiers, sacrifice in O'Connor's story is represented also as self-sacrifice. This self-sacrifice is portrayed in two different ways. First of all, the Englishmen are dying for defending their country. Such sacrifice is showing that the internal conflict between Hawkins and Noble is extended to the external British-Irish conflict. However, these two men show different attitude towards this sacrifice. While Hawkins tries to desert before dying in order to save his life, Belcher regards dying for his country as an honourable end. The other way in which sacrifice is portrayed in this story is through Bonaparte. This

character has an inner conflict between his chums and his country. On the one hand it is his duty as Irish soldier to obey the commands of his superiors; on the other hand he has become friend of the Englishmen and does not want to kill them. There is a passage in which his inner conflict is best portrayed:

“But why should Noble want to shoot him? Why should we want to shoot him? What had he done to us? Weren't we chums (the word lingers painfully in my memory)? Weren't we? Didn't we understand him and didn't he understand us? Did either of us imagine for an instant that he'd shoot us for all the so-and-so brigadiers in the so-and-so British Army?” (*The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* 378).

At the end of the story, it is shown how this inner conflict is solved through sacrificing his principles for his country, to the extreme that he fires the second shot to Hawkins. He has chosen to fulfill his obligation as soldier in opposition to his friends.

Apart from presenting both violence and sacrifice, *Guests of the Nation* also portrays their consequences. Apart from the most explicit consequence of two men having been killed, the story of O'Connor also presents the reader the consequences not only of the murdered, but also of the murderers. This is best portrayed through the character of Bonaparte who, through his last sentence as narrator (“And anything that ever happened me after I never felt the same about again” *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* 381), shows the personal consequences of violence and of his self-sacrifice. This character is suggesting that after killing someone, and more particularly a friend, he cannot be the same person anymore. However, as the quote of Atanasov that started this article states, he had the option to oppose evil and help his friends, but he has sacrificed himself for defending his country because, in his own words, “in those days disunion between brothers seemed to me an awful crime” *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* 376). However, it seems that more than brotherhood the real reason why Bonaparte decides to not stop the murders of the English soldiers is because he is afraid of dying himself if he intervenes (“Picturing myself and young Noble trying to prevent the Brigade from shooting 'Awkins and Belcher sent a cold sweat out through me. Because there were men on the Brigade you daren't let nor hinder without a gun in your hand” *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* 375-6).

To continue with the analysis, there is another Irish poem in which violence and sacrifice during the period of war are presented. This is the case of W.B. Yeats' visionary poem *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*. In this poem the narrator and unique character, who is supposed to be a representation of Robert Gregory, Lady Gregory's son dead in combat, makes a balance of his life before he dies. However, in contrast to Hawkins and Belcher in *Guests of the Nation*, in this poem Robert decides to die voluntarily. As Sarah Cole states in her book “written in the first person, *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death* had credited its subject with the power to “foresee”, indeed to control, his own future.” (Cole 178).

Robert's death is portrayed in this poem as self-sacrifice, a voluntary decision, as if he was in control of his own destiny. As the narrator states nobody convinced him to fight, “nor public man, nor cheering crowds” (*An Irish Airman Foresees His Death* 10). Moreover, he shows a rejection towards war, he cannot understand the necessity to fight as Bonaparte in *Guests of the Nation* could not. The narrator claims that he neither hates his enemies nor shares the thoughts of the people on his side. (“Those that I fight I do not hate / Those that I guard I do not love” *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death* 3-4). The narrator, as Robert Gregory did despite being Irish, joins the British Army in order to fight his own country. Moreover, he shows that he does not identify with Ireland as his native country, but that he sees his native town, Kiltartan, as his country (“My country is Kiltartan Cross” *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death* 5).

Moreover, through the lines

“I balanced all, brought all to mind,

The years to come seemed waste of breath,

A waste of breath the years behind

In balance with this life, this death”

(*An Irish Airman Foresees His Death* 13-6).

the narrator is portraying death as a desire, as the solution to his problems. Further, he knows from the very beginning of the poem that because of having signed up for the Army he will die, showing that he is sacrificing himself voluntarily.

All in all, violence in *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death* is portrayed in a less explicit way than in O'Connor's story. Although this poem does not contain the explicit details about the deaths of the characters in the text, through his own death the narrator is portraying the consequences of violence in war. Furthermore, although he does not refer to it explicitly in the text, violence is going to be portrayed not only in the other soldiers that are going to fight at the same war that the narrator is doing, but also in the people he is going to kill before he dies. Moreover, the narrator states that with war and violence Ireland has nothing to lose, and that people in this country can only be happier after it ("No likely end could bring them loss / Or leave them happier than before" *An Irishman Foresees His Death* 7-8).

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