



History, War and Text: A New Historic Study of Frank O'Connor's *Guests of the Nation*

***Ms. Adarsh M.**

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Providence College for Women (Autonomous)
Coonor - 643103
Mail ID: adarshmano79@gmail.com

Dr. Amudha R.

Associate Professor, Head of the Department
Department of English, Providence College for Women (Autonomous)
Coonor - 643103

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ABSTRACT

New Historicism brings out the relation between the text and the non-text. The American critic, Louis Montrose propelled the correlation between history and literature. The purpose of this paper is to observe the influence of history in Frank O'Connor's infamous short story, *Guests of the Nation* (1931). It is structured with a background to New Historicism and takes into account the influence of the social setting that shaped the author's perspectives and examines the integration between the two. The two Englishmen, Hawkins and Belcher form an unexpected friendship with the Irish soldiers, Noble and Bonaparte but it ends in a tragedy. The reason for this tragedy is brought out through the lens of the literary theory, new historicism.

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Introduction:

The world of literary theory was revolutionised in 1980 with the publication of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* by the notable American critic, Stephen Greenblatt where he introduced the term, New Historicism. The theory is defined by Peter Barry, in *The Beginning Theory* as, "A method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same



historical period. New Historicism refuses to ‘privilege’ the literary text: instead of a literary ‘foreground’ and a historical ‘background’ it envisages and practices a mode of study in which literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight” (Barry, 2018). The idea of providing equal weighting to both the literary text and the historical context was implemented by Louis Montrose, a remarkable critic who elucidates it in *Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture* as “The Historicity of Texts and the Textuality of History,” (Montrose, 1997). The purpose of this paper is to analyze the ‘equal weighting’ between the short story, *Guests of the Nation* by Frank O’Connor and the Irish War of Independence.

Frank O’Connor was born in September 1903 at Cork, Ireland. His area of expertise spanned over various genres like biography, memoirs, journal columns, criticisms, and short stories. He fought during the Irish War of Independence and later published his first short story collection, *Guests of the Nation* in 1931 where he explored the multiple facets of war. His early works primarily brought out his experiences as a soldier in the Irish Republican Army. He died in 1966 due to heart failure. Some of his notable works are *Bones of Contention* (1936), *The Midnight Court* (1945), and *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (1962).

The short story, *Guests of the Nation* portrays the plight of the British and Irish soldiers at the hands of a dominant power. It highlights the friendship between two English soldiers held captive by three Irish soldiers at an old lady’s house in the Irish countryside. The Englishmen, Belcher and Hawkins form a friendship with the Irish soldiers, Noble and Bonaparte. The four play cards together and have a war of words about religion and capitalism. However, the commander of the two Irish soldiers, Jeremiah Donovan maintains a distance from the Englishmen that is blurred only during the game of cards. The unexpected friendship between the two factions falls apart at the military order to get rid of all the English hostages. Noble and Bonaparte are unwilling to go through with the order whereas Hawkins is ready to desert the English army to join the Irish forces as he sees no difference between the two. At a turn of events, the two Englishmen get killed which leaves an emotional scar in Noble, Bonaparte, and the old lady who cared for the two men.

Methodology:

The paper follows a qualitative approach, which focuses on the interpretation of the selected text concerning themes, symbols, and broader societal contexts. This study takes a qualitative literary research by analysing the primary text and substantiating it with necessary data from the secondary



resources. The text, *Guests of the Nation* by Frank O'Connor is examined through the lens of Louis Montrose's New Historicism theory of the co-relation between the text and the non-text. This research study adopts a textual analysis to explore the relationship between history and literature.

Research Objectives:

The study is framed to scrutinise the following objects:

- To analyse the relationship between the text and the non-text.
- To examine the impact of the Irish War of Independence.
- To explore the reflection of the Irish War of Independence in the context of a literary work.
- To evaluate the humaneness of soldiers who are bound to the duty to their country irrespective of circumstances.

Data Collection Methods:

The study establishes its necessity with the assistance of primary and secondary resources. The primary text examined in this research is the short story, *Guests of the Nation* by Frank O'Connor. This text is pertinent as it highlights the plight of war in the perspective of soldiers. The relationship between the soldiers, even if some are held in captivity, shines a light on the qualities like friendship, camaraderie, betrayal, and the incapability of resistance to power. In addition to the primary text, secondary sources will also be consulted. Some of the secondary resources include scholarly articles, vital research essays, and evaluations, which will be employed to provide necessary support for the textual analysis.

Theoretical Framework:

The research places an emphasis on Louis Montrose's theory of New Historicism which examines the relationship between the text and the non-text. John Brannigan, in *Introduction: History, Power and Politics in the Literary Artifact* notes that, "An important realisation of the new historicism is that literature and history are inseparable. Literature is a vehicle for the representation of history, and it does contain insights into the formation of historical moments. It reveals the processes and tensions by which historical change comes about" (Brannigan, 1999). The object of this study is to analyze the historical representation of the Irish War of Independence as Brannigan further observes, "For new historicism, the object of study is not the text and its context, not literature and its history, but rather



literature in history. This is to see literature as a constitutive and inseparable part of history in the making, and therefore rife with the creative forces, disruptions and contradictions of history” (Brannigan, 1999).

Discussion:

The text, *Guests of the Nation* is set during the time of the Irish War of Independence which lasted from 21 January 1919 to 11 July 1921. The political conflict started with the British colonisation over Ireland in the sixteenth century. The strife blew up in the twentieth century with the 1916 Easter Rising where the Republicans fought against the British forces. Although the former lost the battle, it kindled the spirit of nationalism in the hearts of the Irish people. The war of Independence started with the election of 1918 where the Nationalist party, Sinn Féin, were elected. They formed the Dáil Éireann, the first Irish Assembly and led the country to fight for its Independence. The war invoked a hostile reaction from the native Irish but since the country was short on arms and artillery, it took on the strategy of guerrilla warfare. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) that consisted of civilians, volunteers and military officials fought against the British military.

The Irish guerilla warfare took on a strategic note where the British forces were ambushed often by the Irish citizens. The British retaliated in their own ways. This back and forth is reflected in *Guests of the Nation*. The British had shot four Irish men, including a sixteen-year-old boy. In retaliation, the Irish killed their English prisoners. Since the Irish followed the Guerilla warfare tactic, the two Irishmen, Noble and Bonaparte were normal citizens who enrolled in the army. The latter notes, “They (Hawkins and Belcher) were handed on to us by the Second Battalion when the search for them became too hot, and Noble and myself, being young, took over with a natural feeling of responsibility” (3). Frank O’Connor served in the Irish Republican Army during the War of Independence. He incorporates some of his experiences as a member of the IRA in the short story. The Irishmen and Englishmen form a camaraderie with each other but due to the fight between their two native countries, the latter were shot dead by their trusted Irish friends. Though Noble and Bonaparte fulfilled their duty as soldiers, they never got over the tragic fate faced by their English friends at their hands.

Frank O’Connor wanted his country to be a free nation but he observed that war brought out the worst in a man through the form of hatred for the opposing faction. This is reflected in the short story through the character, Jeremiah Donovan. He was a sombre man who always kept a distance from Hawkins and Belcher, as well as, Noble and Bonaparte. He only showed any kind of emotion when the



other four men were playing cards. Bonaparte states, “Sometimes Jeremiah Donovan would come up and supervise the game and get excited over Hawkin’s cards, which he always played badly, and shout at him as if he was one of our own... But ordinarily Jeremiah was a sober and contended poor devil” (3). Though Jeremiah stayed with the others, his sense of detachment gave him an advantage over the others. He observes, “The enemy have prisoners belonging to us and now they’re talking of shooting them. If they shoot our prisoners, we’ll shoot theirs” (7). When he gets the order to execute the hostages, he does not get affected by it. However, when he passes on the order to Noble and Bonaparte, they get pretty shaken by it. Donovan plans the execution and even fires the first shot at Hawkins who couldn’t digest that men whom he considered as his friends will kill him for their country. Hawkins even offers to join the Irish army along with Noble and Bonaparte, his friends. He didn’t see a difference between the British and Irish but Donovan killed him mercilessly. Connor shows that war can bring out the worst in a human and make one lose sight of their humanity.

Conclusion:

The paper explores the relation between the text, Frank O’Connor’s *Guests of the Nation*, and the non-text, in the context of the Irish War of Independence by applying Louis Montrose’s new historicism. The short story highlights the circumstances that occurred during the Irish War of Independence. Soldiers are expected to blindly follow the orders of their superiors, but this short story reflects the inner conflict present in humans, especially soldiers at the time of war. The story also gives importance to the extensive conflicts present in the society. From Louis Montrose's concept of new historicism, the text is profoundly combined with the cultural and historical forces, reflecting the moral complexities and inner turmoil of the people trapped in national and political conflicts. Connor's portrayal of the apprehensive friendship between the Irish soldiers and the British captives showcases how individual relationships are shattered by political agendas, especially during wars. The study also reflects that literature can never be completely separated from the historical period, as the relationship between the text and the non-text removes the barriers in comprehending the complete meaning intended by the author. Connor’s work reflects the turmoils present during his time and bridges the distinction between the truth in a literary work and the historical representation. The short story, *Guests of the Nation*, can further be explored through the avenues of trauma and postcolonial theory.



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