



bitig Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi

bitig Journal of Faculty of Letters

(Cilt/Volume: 4, Sayı/Issue: 8, Aralık/December 2024)

Conor McPherson's *The Veil*: The Haunting Reflection of the Past in Early Twenty-First-Century Ireland*

Conor McPherson'ın *The Veil* Adlı Oyununda Yirmi Birinci Yüzyılın Başlarındaki İrlanda'da Geçmişin Ürkütücü Yansıması


Tuğba Şimşek

Dr.

Social Sciences University of Ankara

English Language and Literature

tugba.simsek@asbu.edu.tr

 ORCID 0000-0002-9532-3165

Araştırma makalesi/Research article

Geliş Tarihi/Received: 20.10.2024

Kabul Tarihi/Accepted: 04.12.2024

Atıf/Citation

Şimşek, Tuğba (2024), "Conor McPherson's *The Veil*: The Haunting Reflection of the Past in Early Twenty-First-Century Ireland", *bitig Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, 4 (8), 276-292.



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This article was checked by iThenticate, turnitin or intihal.net.

* This article is an abridged and revised version of the fourth chapter of my dissertation.

Abstract As an early twenty-first-century Gothic play, Conor McPherson's *The Veil* reflects the socio-economic problems and traumas of Ireland after the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy. As indicated by the title and the prevalent mirror image within the play, the playwright holds up a mirror to the past and through a correlation between nineteenth-century and early twenty-first-century Ireland. Conor McPherson points out the everlasting impacts of postcolonial traumas in the present, as well. In the play, the economic predicament of the landholders and the tenants function as a microcosm of contemporary Ireland, as the post-Celtic Tiger period brought back the problems of the past like unemployment, dispossession and emigration. Moreover, during the early twenty-first century, the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy created a haunted landscape replete with ghost estates while also producing zombie banks cannibalising the Irish society. In this regard, the impoverished and harsh conditions of nineteenth-century Ireland, which transformed people into zombified figures, are closely intertwined with the effects of economic decline in the early twenty-first century, such as ghost estates and zombie banks. The zombie figure signifies not only economic hardships but also the enduring legacy of colonialism in the present. At the intersection of the past and the present, McPherson presents an uncanny and zombified portrayal of contemporary Ireland. Accordingly, this article explores the traumatic echoes of Ireland's revenant past in the aftermath of the dramatic economic crisis.

Keywords: Conor McPherson, Irish gothic, *The Veil*, the Celtic Tiger, ghost estates, zombie

Öz Yirmi birinci yüzyıl başı Gotik örneği olan Conor McPherson'ın *The Veil* adlı oyunu, Kelt Kaplanı ekonomisinin çöküşünden sonra İrlanda'nın sosyo-ekonomik sorunlarını ve travmalarını yansıtır. Oyun başlığı ve oyun içinde sıkça kullanılan ayna imgesinin de gösterdiği gibi, yazar geçmişe bir ayna tutar ve on dokuzuncu yüzyıl ile yirmi birinci yüzyıl başı İrlanda'sı arasında bir bağlantı kurarak, sömürge sonrası travmaların günümüzde hâlen devam etmekte olan etkilerine dikkat çeker. Kelt Kaplanı sonrası dönem, işsizlik, mülksüzleştirme ve göç gibi geçmişteki sorunları geri getirdiği için, oyunda, mülk sahibi ve kiracıların ekonomik çıkmazları, çağdaş İrlanda'nın bir mikrokozmosu olarak işlev görmektedir. Dahası, yirmi birinci yüzyılın başlarında, Kelt Kaplanı ekonomisinin çöküşü, hayalet mülklerle dolu ürkütücü bir manzara yaratırken, aynı zamanda İrlanda toplumunu tüketen zombi bankaları da ortaya çıkardı. Bu bağlamda, on dokuzuncu yüzyıl İrlanda'sının insanları zombileştiren yoksul ve zor koşulları ile hayalet mülkler ve zombi bankalar gibi yirmi birinci yüzyılın başlarındaki ekonomik düşüşün sonuçları birbirleriyle yakından bağlantılıdır. Zombi figürü sadece ekonomik zorlukları değil, aynı zamanda günümüzde devam eden sömürge mirasını da ifade eder. Geçmişle günümüzün keşiştiği noktada, McPherson, çağdaş İrlanda'nın tekinsiz ve zombilemiş bir tasvirini sunar. Dolayısıyla, bu makale, dramatik bir ekonomik krizin ardından çağdaş İrlanda'nın dirilen geçmişinin travmatik yankılarını inceler.

Anahtar sözcükler: Conor McPherson, İrlanda gotiği, *The Veil*, Kelt Kaplanı, hayalet mülkler, zombi

Introduction

Living through both the Celtic Tiger period and its aftermath, Conor McPherson has witnessed socio-cultural and economic changes in the society, as reflected in his plays such as *The Weir* (1997) and *The Veil* (2011). His post-Celtic Tiger play *The Veil* takes place in the nineteenth century when there was a decline in the power of the Protestant Ascendancy and poverty dominated the era, heralding the upcoming Great Famine of 1845. The setting of the play correlates with the socio-economic and political circumstances of contemporary Ireland in the early twenty-first century when the Celtic Tiger economic boom was in decline, particularly because of the global economic crisis in 2008 resulting from the bursting of the housing bubble and the collapse of the subprime mortgage market in the USA. The recession caused severe economic problems in Ireland and other countries. In this context, with reference to *The Veil*, this article discusses McPherson's exploitation of the

Gothic through a zombified portrayal of early twenty-first-century Ireland, addressing postcolonial traumas in the aftermath of a dramatic economic crisis. Some scholars like Jordan (2019: 255), Carleton (2017: 14), and Wolfe (2018: 113) point out the play's resonances with twenty-first-century Ireland in relation to its declining socio-economic conditions. However, even though these scholars emphasise the supernatural or Gothicised aspects of the play, they do not delve into the zombified vision of twenty-first-century Ireland. For this reason, this article aims to discuss this revenant state of contemporary Ireland, unveiling the traumas of the past that deeply affect the present.

The Celtic Tiger Economic Boom and Downfall: A Zombified Ireland

To better understand the historical and socio-economic context of the play, it is essential to take a brief look at the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath. During the Celtic Tiger period in the mid-1990s, Ireland experienced unprecedented economic growth, which hinted at a more hopeful and independent future for the Irish, especially after many years of economic problems as well as political conflicts. This prosperity

made Ireland one of the most economically successful countries in the world. [...] Unemployment, for long a deep structural problem of the Irish economy, was virtually eliminated and a country used for over 150 years to seeing generation after generation of its young emigrating now had the new experience of becoming a country of immigrants (Kirby 2010: 2).

The long-established problems of unemployment and emigration were, thus, reversed, as Ireland turned into a land of investment. However, only economic growth was prioritised, while social improvement and the well-being of the people were ignored, leading to a significant gap between the rich and the poor and increasing inequality in society. Despite this, the Celtic Tiger period was a turning point in the Irish economy and society which had been struggling for many years as a result of its colonial history and its aftermath. Hopeful prospects for the future of Ireland lasted only until the economic recession in 2008 when

[a] combination of a global financial crisis, political corruption, unethical banking practices, and fiscal hubris brought the Celtic Tiger to an end. The cranes stopped moving; the spec houses became ghost estates; joblessness climbed to nearly 15 percent; emigration abounded; austerity became the condition on which the government was bailed out by the European Union (Hill 2016: 3).

Unemployment, massive debts, unfinished housing schemes and emigration mark Ireland's economic downturn. When economic decline reversed the booming tide for Ireland, excessive property development and consumerism, particularly triggered by both the growing individualism and the economic aspirations of the Celtic Tiger period, resulted in immense debts and austerity measures.

Ireland, thus, transformed from one of the most successful and wealthiest countries to "one of the largest debtor countries in the world by 2010" (Kay 2011: 5). This reversal turned Ireland into a Gothicised country with these abovementioned ghost estates which refer to "speculative, underoccupied, often unfinished housing developments that now litter the Irish landscape" (Kitchin et al. 2010: 8) as a result of a lack of well-thought-out planning and regulation. Kuhling argues that "Irish consumerism during the Celtic Tiger took on the mindless, voracious appetites of the zombie" (2015: 11) and the unregulated investments in housing were a part of this excessive consumer culture. After the economic crisis, getting mortgages or finding enough funds either to buy or to complete the construction projects became very difficult; therefore, the Irish landscape ended up replete with these abandoned or uninhabited houses. These houses turned into the ruins of the prosperous Celtic Tiger period. In this context, Keohane and Kuhling describe post-Celtic Ireland as "a haunted landscape of ghost estates and zombie banks" (2014: 140). It is important to note here that the 'zombie banks' refer to the banks supporting the excessive housing boom during the Celtic Tiger, but the economic crisis led them to bankruptcy, yet they were still

preserved through government support which helped pay off their debts. Hence, the Irish people suffered financially as these banks cannibalised the country (Kirby 2011: 249; Keohane et al. 2014: 140). Thus, the collapse of the Celtic Tiger disclosed a Gothic Ireland. Killeen and Morin explain further:

The housing boom, upon which so many Irish fortunes were based, soon produced 'ghost estates'; the financial wizardry admired all over the world magicked up 'zombie banks'. Property developers, who had for a decade been lauded as engineers of a cosmopolitan future, were reviled as Frankensteins, vampires and ghouls. [...] In other words, in the economic downturn we re-entered Gothic Ireland (or, more credibly, we never really left it) (2023: 6).

The Celtic Tiger economic investments, ending up in failure, turned Ireland into a big, haunted house. This economic decline and subsequent severe consequences such as debts and unemployment in the early twenty-first century brought the troubling and complicated past back into the present and immensely affected the Irish psyche. In this regard, the simile which Keohane and Kuhling draw upon to substantiate the undead past through the zombie figure is a pertinent one in order to illustrate the fear and anxieties of contemporary Irish society. As the undead, "the figure of the zombie represents the fear of history repeating itself, of a return to enslavement by an imperial master" (Keohane et al. 2014: 141). Therefore, the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger is marked by a return of the past, revealing the deep-rooted issues and traumas of Irish society such as unemployment, emigration, dispossession, destituteness, and alienation. These issues, already embedded in Irish history as colonial legacies, are re-actualised in twenty-first-century Ireland.

The Twenty-First Century Gothic and the Irish Gothic

Taking into consideration the image of a zombified Ireland, it is important to briefly discuss twenty-first-century Gothic and particularly the Irish Gothic to better understand the context of McPherson's play. In the twenty-first century, Gothic has become a mainstream genre and mode. Spooner states that "[i]n many ways twenty-first-century Gothic resembles that of the twentieth century; its distinctive trends and themes generally cultivate ideas seeded earlier in the preceding century rather than plant entirely new ones" (2014: 180). Yet, according to Spooner, one distinct quality of twenty-first-century Gothic is that "vampires have been joined by other mythical beings, including demons, fairies, werewolves and, most prominently, zombies, in a revitalised bestiary of Gothic creatures. Many of these derive from folkloric traditions newly appropriated into the Gothic through the processes of globalisation" (2014: 180). In the twenty-first century Gothic, zombies become as popular as vampires, especially in fiction or films like Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga* (2005-2008) or TV series like *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022). Botting further argues that "[z]ombies are the new vampires" (2013: 755). Regarding its origin, the zombie was "predominantly born of the voodoo and witchcraft beliefs of West Africa and Haiti, where a corpse could be reanimated or the living placed in a death-like trance, both perhaps controlled by a sorcerer, and created in order to serve as slave labour" (Conrich 2015: 16). Devoid of free will and consciousness, the zombie "is a creature born of slavery, oppression, and capitalist hegemony, manifesting collective unconscious fears and taboos" (Bishop 2010: 37). The zombie, then, refers to the fear of enslavement and return to the brutal colonial past. Postcolonial Gothic often employs Gothic tropes such as zombies, along with other liminal creatures like ghosts and vampires, to discuss the colonial legacy and historical traumas. As Wisker further points out,

[p]ostcolonial Gothic uses Gothic tropes: silence, liminal spaces, ghosting, identity, split selves, metamorphosis, vampires, were-creatures, ghosts, zombies – and an endless imprinting of the repressed past, an everyday haunting of place and people – to make visible and palpable the history and legacy of the repression, silencing, erasure, and remapping that was colonialism, whether imperial rule or settler invader culture. (2012: 2)

In addition to the expression of the postcolonial experience, capitalism and consumer culture in the twenty-first century have also fuelled the popularity of these unconscious monstrous figures. Especially with the increase in consumer culture, “the figure of the zombie has been used as a social critique of the insatiability of capitalism” (Kuhling 2015: 6). This figure calls into question not only the current economic and social dynamics but also the dichotomy between human and nonhuman, humane and inhumane. Thus, the twenty-first century Gothic, thrives on anxieties, fears, or traumas surrounding economy, globalisation, and postcolonialism. Furthermore, Spooner argues that “the twenty-first century has been marked by the rise of interest in trauma and its manifestation in literary texts” (2017: 14), which also nourishes the Gothic narratives in terms of psychological perspective intertwined with social and cultural matters, thereby exposing the uncanny return of the past and the sense of haunting in the present.

Because of the historical and cultural peculiarity of Ireland stemming from its colonial legacy, the Irish Gothic possesses a distinct place in the Gothic tradition. To grasp McPherson’s place in the contemporary Irish Gothic, it is essential to briefly look into the Irish Gothic. As Killeen explains, there is a controversy regarding the Irish Gothic, whether it is “a ‘tradition’, a ‘canon’, a ‘genre’ or a ‘mode’” (2014: 12) and he continues to argue that “[t]he terminological difficulty arises in part because it is difficult to know where Irish Gothic begins and ends since, on close examination, Gothic tropes, motifs and themes appear everywhere and anywhere in modern Irish literature” (2014: 12). Though it is hard to determine the beginning or end of the Irish Gothic, Ireland’s colonial history and its everlasting impacts certainly provide the main Gothic elements. In this sense, the Irish obsession with the past and the return of the past and the dead create a kind of Gothicised Ireland, reflected in its landscape, culture and beliefs. Killeen further argues that “[w]hat is peculiarly ‘Irish’ about the Gothic tradition is that it emerged from a geographical zone which was defined as weird and bizarre. Indeed, Ireland as a whole was identified as a Gothic space” (2006: 18). The return of the repressed and the past, the essential parts of the Gothic, are already embedded in Irish culture, as seen in its folklore and myths. Killeen argues that “if the Gothic is often seen as the return of the repressed, the past that will not stay past, Ireland has usually been constructed as a place where the past had never in fact disappeared, a place where the past is in fact the always present” (2014: 10). So, the return of the dead, the supernatural and ghosts are the fundamental elements in the Irish Gothic, problematising the relationship between the living and the dead, the past and the present. The supernatural and ghosts are particularly common in Irish plays as poignant representatives of the past or traumas. Therefore, the Gothic motifs serve as tools to project the haunting narratives of the past. Moreover, O’Toole (2019) argues that “[c]ontemporary Irish theatre is a haunted place. There has been a large-scale Gothic revival, with ghosts, the supernatural and the uncanny being constant elements in the work of Sebastian Barry, Conor McPherson, Marina Carr and Mark O’Rowe” (para. 2). All these playwrights help enrich contemporary Irish Gothic although there are few studies concerning the Gothicism of their works.

Regarding McPherson’s oeuvre, it is observed that he makes use of certain Gothic elements such as the return of the repressed, uncanny elements and the supernatural including ghosts, vampires and devils, as seen in *The Weir*, *St. Nicholas* and *The Seafarer*, respectively. Therefore, McPherson already draws on the Gothic tradition to explore the intersection of micro and macro-level stories in Ireland. Particularly, McPherson’s constant use of the supernatural contributes to his exploration of the legacy of the past in the present. Additionally, brought up as a Catholic, McPherson has always been immersed in the supernatural, as Catholicism has influenced his way of thinking and seeing the world, thus drawing him into the Gothic world. As McPherson (2011d) says:

I was brought up as a Roman Catholic so perhaps this is why I see supernatural stories as the most natural thing I can present on stage. I have always felt that the theatre is the

perfect place to contemplate the unknown and often in my plays ordinary people are faced with inexplicable phenomena. These have included ghosts, vampires, fairies, premonitions and the Devil. I want to invite the darkness that surrounds the stage on to the stage in order to illuminate all that is truly important to us. And something that feels important to me is that we recognise that the experience of being alive – and being conscious of being alive – is an unfathomable mystery. It's a mystery we should marvel at and celebrate (para. 13).

McPherson's dramatic works revolve around the unknown, the inexplicable and the mysteries and obscurities of life. Therefore, the Gothic has already been an essential part of his writing from his spooky ghost stories to his vampiric, haunted and devilish characters. There is always a supernatural eeriness and a sense of haunting that dominate the works of McPherson. According to Carleton, "McPherson's corpus provides an almost textbook approach to [the] discussion of the Irish Gothic. His 2011 play *The Veil* is a quintessentially Gothic dramatic text, set in a big house in 1820s rural Ireland, evoking the landscape, the era and the cultural politics of" (2017: 6) nineteenth-century Ireland. In *The Veil*, while McPherson employs some typical Gothic tropes such as the supernatural, the return of the past, the Gothic atmosphere, the haunted house, the troubled and oppressed heroine, the ghosts, incest and madness, he also creates a zombified and haunted Gothic world in the twenty-first century context.

The (Un)Veiled Past in *The Veil*

The Veil was first staged in the Lyttelton Auditorium of the National Theatre and directed by McPherson. The story takes place in 1822, in a Big House where Hannah, her mother Madeleine Lambroke and her grandmother live together. It is set in the period of the Ascendancy whose power is gradually declining. The estate is quite in distress financially as the landlady Madeleine cannot even pay her employees, and, for this reason, her daughter Hannah is going to be married off to the Marquis of Newbury in England to save the estate. Madeleine's cousin, a defrocked priest called the Reverend Berkeley will come and chaperone Hannah to England for her marriage. After his arrival with his friend Audelle, the story revolves around two séances and unfolds further as the past, fears and traumas are revealed.

It is crucial to emphasise the setting's significance in understanding its relationship with contemporary Ireland. It is unequivocal that McPherson makes a conscious choice in terms of the setting. In his interview with Maddy Costa, McPherson (2011c) asserts that "[t]here was a big economic crash following the Napoleonic wars. So, a place like Ireland, which was very poor, was just on the floor" (para. 6). With a retrospective outlook, McPherson (2011c) adds as follows:

When I look at what's happened to Ireland, I think: where did this awful dysfunction in our psyche come from that we've destroyed our own country? On one level you can say it's just post-colonial corruption and mismanagement. On another level, it's like an echo of a long, violent trauma. For hundreds of years, to be Irish and Catholic meant your life was just shit. You were not allowed to go to school, you were not allowed to own land, you didn't have any rights. If people suddenly get that power back, of course they fuck it up (para. 6).

By locating his play in the nineteenth century, McPherson aims to explore the past and its ongoing historical and political dynamics, thereby comparing nineteenth-century Ireland and contemporary Ireland. In his statement above, McPherson refers to the ongoing impact of colonialism and specifically the Penal Laws which stripped Irish Catholics of their basic rights to acquire education, property and certain occupations. For the playwright, colonial practices traumatised the Irish for a very long time and when they had economic and political power – that is the Celtic Tiger economic boom – they could not handle it. For this reason, the financial crisis in 2008 brought back the predicament of the past to the present.

McPherson started writing *The Veil* in 2008, so naturally, the play echoes the spirit of the period, as he (2011a) states:

I started making notes [for the play] in late 2008 as Ireland had suddenly started to be in bad trouble. We had been through such a strange journey in the sense that we were poor, then we were told we were one of the richest nations in the world, then suddenly we were in the hands of the IMF. For the first time, I realized the public can share a dysfunctional psyche, and that psyche can be generational. The Irish Famine is only five generations ago. I began to realize the mess we'd got ourselves into must have come from some tremendous trauma. For the first time, I accepted I am Irish – up till then I'd always felt European or a citizen of the world (para. 14).

By observing transitions and economic decline in the society during this period, McPherson delves into history to examine this long-lasting historical trauma of Irish society. Besides, modernisation and globalisation accelerating from the mid-1990s created a liminal space in Ireland where the old and the new, the traditional and the modern coexisted. As Kuhling and Keohane state, “[t]he experience of living in contemporary Ireland is that of living in an in-between world, in between cultures and identities, an experience of liminality” (2014: 14). McPherson (2011c) observed this sense of in-betweenness and ambiguity, and “wanted to create a play in which time was crashing in on itself, so that what people might think is an echo of the past is in fact a premonition of the future” (para. 8). In *The Veil*, his retrospective scrutiny of the past is projected through the lens of Ireland which underwent a huge transition in the early twenty-first century.

Moreover, it is also essential to discuss the significance of the Big House in the nineteenth century to better understand the historical and colonial context. The Big House of the Protestant Ascendancy becomes a vehicle for scrutinising colonial history and the circumstances of the people living inside and outside the house. It operates as a political symbol for the Ascendancy's power in the society regarding the historical and political dynamics between the British and the Irish. As Kreilkamp states, “[f]or the conquered Irish, the Big House evoked memories of dispossession, exploitation, and injustice – and, simultaneously, of a remote and glamorous power, of inaccessible social position and wealth” (1998: 20). However, in the nineteenth century, the Big House also began to signify the decay and collapse of the Ascendancy, as it embodied colonial deterioration and economic decline. It is significant to highlight that during the Irish War of Independence in the early twentieth century, many Big Houses were burned down (Donnelly 2012: 141) as they symbolised oppressive colonialism and the Ascendancy legacy. Therefore, the decaying Big House in the midst of the tension between the landowners and tenants and the economic struggle develops into a symbolic entity, representing the multiple political and socio-cultural divisions in Ireland. The play, therefore, characterises “a house haunted by history, a situation represented by way of undead spectres that, notably, elicit desire and/or dread” (Davison 2009: 51). McPherson, thus, exploits the Big House trope to delve into Ireland's haunting history.

Throughout the play, the decline of the power of the Ascendancy and the socio-political unrest are apparent. As Kreilkamp states, the Big House “was built on land usually expropriated by men and women who considered themselves Irish, but who were caught between two countries and two identities, separated from their tenants not only by class, but by religion, language, and national origin as well” (1998: 7). Especially the relationship of the landowner Madeleine and the Irish estate manager Fingal illustrates these political conflicts and dichotomies, as Fingal is a loyal employee who has not been paid for 13 months, yet still, he works hard to help Madeleine and the management of the estate. Despite his being an Irish Catholic, he becomes a devoted helper in this Anglo-Irish household. Because of this, he is confronted by hostile gazes and assaults by the town's people. He says: “I'm neither one thing nor the other any more. Each side rejects you and everyone is suspicious” (McPherson 2013b: 239). Because of his love for Madeleine, he

chooses to stay with her and for this, he is deemed a traitor by the Irish people. Eventually, he bursts out in frustration to Madeleine:

You never think how hard it is for me. To have to show my face in Jamestown! Even my own family are ashamed of me! They hate me all round the country all around here because of my loyalty to you. No one respects me. But I stay. [...] I walk around with no money in my pockets, it doesn't matter, the locals and their keepers laugh at me, it doesn't matter. (2013b: 297)

Besides Fingal's complex position in Ascendancy Ireland, both Madeleine and Hannah become the victims of the failed colonial system though they are the colonisers in this context. When Hannah utters her anxieties about her husband-to-be, Madeleine explodes in anger: "So what, you will you remain here at Mount Prospect with its endless debts, enduring the hatred of those who rent your holdings, until you too are finally turfed out? You will be alone for ever – stigmatised as a bumpkin from the colonies whose only dowry is the odour of our failure!" (2013b: 236). As Tracy points out, in "[t]he Gothic tradition, [...] the heroine is usually threatened with sexual possession and the loss of her property" (1999: 17). Both Madeleine and Hannah are confronted with the loss of their possession, namely their estate; furthermore, their class status is on the wane as their economic power is gradually fading. So, the problematic relationship of the Irish with the Ascendancy and the economic and colonial decline define the spirit of the age. In this sense, the Big House becomes the symbol of various socio-political dynamics in the nineteenth century.

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that the title of the play is ironic in relation to the theme of revelation, or the removal of the veil surrounding the people and the nation, and it refers to the political turmoil of nineteenth-century Ireland. In the play, Mrs Goulding, the housekeeper, refers to Daniel O'Connell's speech at Loughferry, in which O'Connell says: "It will take a strong draught to blow back the veil of confusion!" (McPherson 2013b: 245), pointing to the veil surrounding Ireland. The veil imagery within the play is utilised in the context of the political conflicts of nineteenth-century Ireland with reference to O'Connell and the revolutionaries who commit some militant actions in the background of the play, as the Reverend Berkeley points out, "[t]he bridge was half destroyed by so-called revolutionaries" (2013b: 229). Thus, the atmosphere of political unrest and instability in Ireland is underlined. In this context, Jordan considers O'Connell as a haunting figure from the nineteenth century, who shaped the future of Ireland, as Jordan states: "O'Connell's voice of protest helped define the future of Ireland, and he, like the other indigenous characters who die in the building collapse, haunt [*The Veil*]" (2019: 105). O'Connell is a significant political figure because he helped remove a political and religious obstacle, or a veil, in Irish history, which alludes to the play's title. As Carleton argues, "the O'Connell era with its insurgent upheaval [works] as a timely metaphor for millennium era Ireland, where we see a nation again on the brink of radical transformation and in which the colonial past threatens/promises to be sloughed off" (2017: 12). *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the veil as "[s]omething which conceals, covers, or hides in the manner of a veil; a disguising or obscuring medium or influence; a cloak, mask, or screen" ("Veil," n.d.). The word signifies a sense of concealment although the play focuses on revelations and confessions. The stories of each character are veiled but everything finally comes to light. A revelation must occur in order to make the haunted and the haunting lift their veil because ghosts are the hidden remnants of the past and will be of the future if they are not confronted. Early twenty-first-century Ireland abounds with these ghosts considering their historical trajectory. Moreover, in the Gothic narratives, the veil, a literal piece of cloth, is employed as "an essential vehicle [...] because its obscuring of the 'real' enables the masking of both identities and motivations as well as a troubling of the boundaries between the Other, the protagonists' own inner darkness, and the realism of virtuous, normalized society" (Foster 2023: 14). Therefore, the literal and figurative meanings of the veil are exploited by the playwright to uncover the circumstances of the society and the individual by unsettling the boundaries. McPherson

employs the veil as an ironic vehicle to demonstrate the intersection of nineteenth- and early twenty-first-century Ireland, indicating that it must be unveiled for the sake of the present.

Besides the political turmoil, a brief look at the socio-economic conditions of nineteenth-century Ireland is important to better understand the past and its relation to contemporary Ireland. Eagleton defines Ireland in the nineteenth century as follows: “Violent, criminal, priest-ridden, autocratic, full of mouldering ruins and religious fanaticism, it was a society ripe for Gothic treatment, having much of that literary paraphernalia conveniently to hand” (1995: 188). Hansen also argues that “[t]he [Gothic] genre itself becomes a space in which the Irish cultural imaginary pits the dichotomous logic of terror against the troubles provoked by the unhappy Union” (2009: 22). Nineteenth-century Ireland embodies and nurtures Gothicism through its colonial legacy, which has shaped its history, geography and culture to this day. During this period, Ireland experienced traumatic historical and social transitions. Starvation, diseases and ongoing poverty as a result of the failure of the harvests dominated the period and transformed Ireland to a great extent. As R. F. Foster explains further, the Great Famine “was seen as a watershed in Irish history, creating new conditions of demographic decline, large-scale emigration, altered farming structures and new economic policies, not to mention an institutionalized Anglophobia among the Irish at home and abroad” (1988: 318). Famine and subsequent emigration crippled Ireland for more than a hundred years in terms of its economy, population, language and politics. All these traumatised Irish society for a very long time and their impact can still be seen in the present. Therefore, in the context of Ireland, the nineteenth century is the Gothic cusp, as Miles calls it, which is “a transitional phase, when the Gothic epoch came to an end, and the modern one began” (1995: 87), referring to these transitions and the discrepancy between the past and the present, tradition and modernity. Killeen further argues that “[t]he Gothic is located at this historical juncture as it is a product of a society that is seeking to heal itself from the crisis involved in such a traumatic transition where the traditional has been supposedly superseded” (2014: 23). For these reasons, the nineteenth century is a peculiar historical juncture – the ghost from the past haunting the present – that McPherson goes back to explore.

In the play, McPherson draws attention to some crop failures, thus illustrating a picture of an impoverished nineteenth-century Ireland which was marked by poverty, emigration and enmity towards the British government. People cannot pay their rents and they need to “delay payment until their crops are renewed in the autumn” (McPherson 2013b: 219). There is a foreboding of an upcoming famine as “[t]he meagre crop has failed again” (2013b: 230). Because the tenants cannot pay, the landlady Madeleine also cannot pay her employees like Fingal. Clare, the housekeeper, has already been saving money for her “passage to Ontario” (2013b: 275) to have a better life. The poverty of the people and their destitute circumstances are indeed apparent in the play. The collapse of the houses, the economic hardships endured by the tenants, the children dying from illnesses, the potential risks of unemployment and dispossession, and “a crowd of haggard-looking” (2013b: 243) people all around Jamestown overtly reveal the socio-economic conditions of nineteenth-century Ireland. As Allfree (2011) states, “[h]ints of the supernatural abound in an [*sic*] historically rich piece in which the Irish famine as good as comes knocking at the window, a decision prompted in part by Ireland’s recent catastrophic ricocheting from boom to being hauled before the International Monetary Fund” (para. 5). In this sense, deprivation, unemployment, dispossession and emigration as the realities of nineteenth-century Ireland are correlated with twenty-first-century Ireland in the post-Celtic Tiger period when these same issues resurface following the catastrophic economic decline.

Furthermore, in the play, on their way to Jamestown to accompany Hannah, the Reverend Berkeley and his friend Audelle witness the poor conditions of the people. Berkeley describes the people as follows: “Desperate men and women suddenly descended upon

our coach. So numerous were the pale hands outstretched towards us, it was only later I understood that an insensible infant thrust before me by a cadaverous wild-eyed woman must surely have been deceased” (McPherson 2013b: 229). The depiction of the woman indicates the desperate and helpless conditions of these people, turning them into living dead as they are alive yet ghoulish. They are depicted as “poor wretches” (2013b: 239). The pale hands and cadaverous look bring to mind the image of the zombie; these people are, indeed, zombified. Poverty and starvation dehumanise these people into being zombie-like figures. Audelle also mentions the dreadful conditions of people in Jamestown. He recounts the night that they spent in “a ghastly inn” (2013b: 243) as follows:

Nothing stirred in the street outside. The only sound was the hollow ticking of a clock in the hallway. Dear Lord. After a few restless, frozen hours in a narrow beside your kicking cousin, the Reverend, I went for a dawn walk that burnt my skin raw. Where the street ended and became countryside was the brick wall of the workhouse and a crowd of haggard-looking men and women turned to look at me with such alien ferocity I thought that should I ever myself stranded here, I'd blow my brains out. Now, there's a thought (2013b: 243).

Desolate streets and hollow sounds create an atmosphere of suspense and terror, thereby transferring the eeriness of the night to a group of weary and ferocious people who are most likely emaciated and look as dreadful as the night itself. The cosy atmosphere of the Big House and the daunting outside world are thus contrasted and Audelle's narration sounds like a ghost story that is being told by the fireside. This Gothic tension and atmosphere, therefore, enhance the tone of the impoverished and dehumanised circumstances these people suffer from.

Reyes asserts that in contemporary Gothic, despite “their romantic potential, [zombies'] rotting bodies, contagious nature and ontological status (neither fully living nor fully dead) have ensured they remain subjects of horror and abjection” (2019: 89). Because the boundary between the living and the dead is blurred, the zombies elicit horror since they are uncanny creatures unsettling the realms of the known and unknown worlds. Therefore, these ‘haggard-looking’ and ‘cadaverous’ people with their bodily decay and dehumanisation, correlate with the images of zombies and create “a scene of horrific, gross corporeality” (Townsend 2014: xxvi). This corporeality accentuates their circumstances better, revealing the impacts of poverty as they probably have no lands or houses and hunger follows them as they linger in the streets. Regarding contemporary Ireland in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger, “[h]aving acted as a success story for rapid globalisation, the debt crisis plunged Ireland into the abject condition, complete with begging bowl, of a postcolonial periphery” (Gibbons 2013: 14). Considering the origins of the zombies in Haitian culture, the zombies are dehumanised slaves and, therefore, the creatures and victims of the capitalist system. As Kuhling points out, the image of the zombie is used to “refer to the proletariat, the precariat and the colonised who are suffering under the conditions of dehumanisation in contemporary capitalist society or under conditions of slavery caused by colonialism” (2015: 9). These people turn into the abject figures, the zombies, as their destitute and deprived conditions are projected through their zombie-like states. In the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger, – even throughout the Celtic Tiger period, there was a huge division between the rich and the poor – poverty has become an ongoing problem in Irish society. McPherson obviously questions and depicts how poverty creates such dehumanised figures while also pointing to the system causing these sufferings.

In this context, the seances in the play are instrumental in manifesting the reciprocal interaction of the past and the present through which the buried and the devastating circumstances come to light. The eruption of the past in the present or the return of the repressed creates a kind of uncanniness which in turn leads to terror, horror and suspense. In the play, Hannah possesses this kind of spiritual power through which she may summon ghosts or hear voices. As Fitzpatrick states, “the uncanny is materialized in the character of

the young bride, whose betrothed status makes her a liminal character. She is thus enabled to move in the shadowy gaps between the natural world, and the hints of a supernatural landscape that lies just beyond it" (2012: 173). Through her uncanny liminality, séances open up the invisible realms to disclose what is happening in reality, such as the poor conditions of the tenants, the economic collapse of the Big House, the anxieties related to the marriage arrangement with an obscure future and a regrettable past.

The first séance is randomly yet consciously driven by the Reverend Berkeley and Audelle under the guise of a prayer. Berkeley believes there is an entrapped spirit in the house which he thinks belongs to Edward, Hannah's father. After he starts his summoning, a very loud noise is heard "*like a gunshot over their heads. It seems to blow the room apart with its sonic impact. Their drinks go flying, cups are dropped. Each instinctively cries out and cowers*" (McPherson 2013b: 253) as the stage direction reads. Everyone is frightened by the prospect of what has happened. Then, a constable appears at the door to inform that the terrace of houses has collapsed and the families are trapped under the rubble. It seems that they have opened the gate to the unknown realm and let things materialise on earth or as if they have disturbed nature. Hannah believes all this could be related to their séance, as she says: "[P]eople have died, Mr Audelle, children have died, in property we owned and we heard something like a thunderclap here while we were... we were... Well... whatever we were doing" (2013b: 256). As a result, the output of the séance brings the social reality into the scene. As Punter argues, "Gothic in general is strewn with ruins, endlessly attentive to the 'other' stories that can be told about national and cultural monuments" (2002b: 122). The ruins of the declining estate create a Gothicised landscape evoking the past and the present at the same time as "a signpost of memento mori that engendered a melancholic response to the impermanence of human effort and the vicissitudes of history" (Davison 2009: 51). Ruins bespeak the disruption of the power structure and become the haunting relics of the future to summon the spirits of the past. It operates in the same way as the haunted house since they remain in the past and cannot redeem themselves from their ghosts until a certain confrontation or resolution. The Big House of the play is already haunted and is about to fall apart financially, and the ruins of the houses symbolise the economic decline within the household and demonstrate the poor conditions of the tenants. The affinity between these ruins and the ghost estates of contemporary Ireland is undeniable, as the ghost estates are the remnants left behind by the economic boom despite its hopeful vision for the future. The rubble of the estate, thus, weaves together the past and present here in terms of economic decline and poverty.

During the next séance, the paranormal occurrences increase the Gothic atmosphere, thus creating a sense of fear and horror in the room. The rattling window, the noise of "*furniture being dragged across a room above them*" (McPherson 2013b: 267), then again, the sound of moving objects and, finally, a thud are heard. Suddenly Hannah starts singing a song and then asks to see her daughter. She becomes hysterical and claims that "[t]hey've locked [her] in!" (2013b: 269) while Berkeley tries to exorcise her. In the meantime, while they are trying to calm Hannah, Grandie, who is suffering from Alzheimer's, is also disturbed by the ongoing turmoil. In the midst of this chaos, while Berkeley tries to soothe Hannah, the door is opened and Audelle sees a small child "*with a pale face and dark eyes*" (2013b: 270) who looks at him for a moment, then leaves. The next day, it is revealed that an infant, foreshadowed by the child seen in the séance, was found in the rubble. As Smith argues, "[g]hosts are [...] projections of our innermost anxieties and this blurring of physical and psychological realities becomes reworked in Freud's idea that the self is ghosted by the subconscious" (2007: 148). In this regard, while Hannah believes that the child signifies her unhappy future marriage and an uncertain future, Audelle thinks that the child is the one he abandoned, referring to his own regrettable past. Most of the time, a child connotes a hopeful future, but here, the death of a child beneath the rubble, which signifies the weight of historical and socio-economic difficulties, clearly hinders any notion of hope. In the play, the child becomes a common point connecting Hannah and Audelle in their anxieties of

the future and the past respectively; however, in the context of Ireland's socio-economic circumstances, it implies that the prospect of establishing a secure future for the young generation seems distant. Therefore, the death of the children along with the collapse and decay of the estate may indicate a troubling future.

The tomb scene is the final piece that dissolves all the dynamics and provides an outlet for the characters to reach, though not entirely, a kind of resolution. When Hannah took Audelle to see the tomb, she saw a man and a woman watching her at the entrance of the tomb: "they lurched towards me I realised I was somehow seeing... myself and Mr Audelle! It was us but... our corpses... walking" (McPherson 2013b: 292). Then, she ran away from the tomb. This supernatural experience at the tomb, in fact, demonstrates that both Hannah and Audelle have absolved their ghosts which were materialised in the tomb. The animated corpses, or zombies, that she saw could be seen as metaphors for their fears and anxieties from the past and the present infected by the past. Hannah has seen their haunted selves, the abject in the Kristevian sense, as "[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (Kristeva 1982: 4). As Braun states, "[t]he abject as a structural concept, and its real placeholders always point towards a repressed part of our affective identity, namely the unacceptable desire for the maternal body, for dissolution, for whatever we have to expel from our bodily and psychic selves" (2018: 201). The appearance of the corpses represents the expulsion from 'psychic selves' which have been unsettling Hannah and Audelle for so long since they need to confront and discharge their extreme emotions. These emotions surface as distorted images in the form of corpses or zombies, projecting the characters' state of living dead. The dissolution of the characters into ghastly figures like corpses or zombies allows them to confront their haunting past or future. The idea of haunting, in this sense, finds expression in the corporeality of the zombies, that is the corpses of Hannah and Audelle.

Through these haunting micro-narratives, McPherson bridges the past and the present as well as the micro- and macro-narratives of Ireland, as the prevailing theme of being haunted reflects "generational psychoses and traumas" (para. 6) as McPherson (2011b) states. Throughout the play, nearly every character is haunted, whether by the past, a person, or the prospective future. Considering these hauntings, McPherson (2013a) states in his interview that

[t]here's something in the Irish psyche which is very self-destructive, full of self-doubt. [...] So it seems like we should know who we are – and yet there's an awful lot of conflict and self-doubt and people trying to figure it out. And in the last 20 years we've been on a mad rollercoaster ride. That's sort of who we are. A lot of Irish plays reflect on that (paras. 12-13).

What McPherson refers to is that micro-narratives are integrated with the macro-narratives of the country haunted by the past. In postcolonial Gothic, "[w]hat has been kept hidden as a personal trauma caused by historical events can, in the *unhomely* moment, be brought to the surface to make visible the link between that personal tragedy and a wider political reality" (Rudd 2019: 73). McPherson's inquiry into history through personal narratives seeks to investigate the origins of the troubles and traumas in contemporary Ireland by connecting the past and the present, the individual and the political.

Furthermore, the idea of haunting and revisiting the past finds expression in the mirror image. The mirror becomes a haunting Gothic trope disclosing or unveiling the past; therefore, it is also interrelated with the title itself. Hannah's father hanged himself from "a brace above the mirror" (McPherson 2013b: 226). Grandie tells a story of a king with mirrors in his eyes who told her that St Patrick was a gold prospector and converted people to Christianity (2013b: 257), thus discarding the pagan belief of Ireland. Audelle's story of his wife also bears another mirror imagery. When Audelle looked at her eyes, he thought he "was looking *through* her eyes into something so meaningful that [he] swore that somehow [he] could behold God there" (2013b: 258). Berkeley also thinks: "[W]hen we look at each

other, just as I am looking at you now, it is as though God is looking at Himself in a mirror. And each eye, the beholder and the beheld, reflect the other back and forth as mirrors do, into a kind of genuine infinity. The infinity of God” (2013b: 264). Lastly, at the end of the play, Grandie is looking at the mirror as if something is at present there. Berkeley realises this and starts observing Grandie as if there is really something there. So, the play ends with a sense of an uncanny feeling or presence. Considering all, the play starts with a mirror and ends with a mirror. To see or not to see is the focal point of the play which is intertwined with the title itself. The mirror shows a kind of reflection, perhaps an illusion rather than reality, or, indeed, a veil of glass inverting reality. The title and mirror imagery complement each other in this sense. The characters need to unveil the cataract in their eyes in order to see through and live on. Piatti-Farnell argues that

[t]he ‘Gothic mirror’ is a distortion of the human, a re-evaluation of the known; in the reflection, the familiar become [*sic*] unfamiliar, the known becomes unknown, the certain merges with the uncertain. [...] Inevitably, the mirror allows discourses of terror and horror to be filtered through the challenge of answering one fundamental question: what is real? (2017: 180).

The mirror itself is an uncanny object, “for it threatens to break the boundaries of not only the physical body, but also of the self” (2017: 180). By embellishing the whole play with mirror imagery, McPherson manifests uncanny reflections of the individuals and the society. The mirror, therefore, creates doubles, alternate reflections of the self or society. It is how twenty-first-century Ireland is reflected through this haunting lens of the play itself, serving as a haunting mirror image that evokes the past.

Regarding the correlation between nineteenth-century Ireland and twenty-first-century Ireland, McPherson, thus, presents a continuous haunting narrative. According to McPherson, the troubled Irish history intertwined with British colonialism has impaired the nation in various ways, thus ruining the Irish psyche which remains forever haunted by this traumatic past. In his interview with Claire Allfree, McPherson (2011b) says:

It got me thinking: just what is this glitch in our psyche that’s got us back to this state of poverty? [...] It’s almost as though we were happier being bankrupt, as though being the victim is the most comfortable place to be for a country that was colonized. I’ve always felt very free of history, but now I’m older I feel we have to deal with these generational psychoses and traumas (para. 6).

For this reason, his historical trajectory aims to make sense of present-day Ireland in the aftermath of the economic crisis of the early twenty-first century. Jordan asserts that “the recession-related plays [like *The Veil*] are directly connected to houses and living quarters, belonging, sanctuary, dispossession and eviction” (2019: 14) all of which were also present in nineteenth-century Ireland. McPherson’s play operates as a bridge between the past and present, representing the interrelated historical continuity of contemporary Ireland. It also suggests that Ireland transforms into a zombified country, a living corpse entrapped within the temporal and historical loop, like the characters in the play. It cannot escape its haunting past, as the past, future and present are woven together, creating a bridge that connects traumas across the centuries. As Inglis argues, “the cultural roots of the zombie in Haiti itself are very much connected to ex-slaves’ fears of a return to an enslaved condition” (2011: 46). In this regard, as a result of the economic collapse, the financial and political impacts of the colonial past are reanimated in contemporary Ireland, already cannibalised by zombie banks and global capitalism. This likely triggers the fear of losing autonomy and power, similar to nineteenth-century Ireland under British control, when the Irish were deprived of their autonomous power. Moreover, it is possible to think that the Big House becomes a kind of objective correlative, serving as a linear symbol that connects two historical points and extends to the zombie banks of twenty-first-century Ireland like the Anglo-Irish Bank which contributed to the country’s financial suffering. Thus, economic stagnation intertwines with historical stagnation, as the Irish psyche appears to be trapped

in the past. Keohane and Kuhling assess twenty-first-century Ireland, particularly in 2011, as follows: “[N]ational sovereignty is eclipsed and Ireland becomes a neo-feudal fiefdom, a neo-colony of bonded tax-serfs paying tribute to a global elite of senior bondholders, a new absentee aristocracy of bankers and multinational corporations” (2014: 145). In this sense, neo-colonialism becomes a new overlord of Ireland and the ghosts of the past come back to haunt Ireland once more. The Big House is also reincarnated as the neo-colonial economic force in contemporary Ireland.

Conclusion

By setting the play in the nineteenth century, in a Big House, McPherson bridges the past and present as early twenty-first-century Ireland faces a dramatic economic decline, reviving the past problems and traumas. The socio-economic conditions of nineteenth-century Ireland illustrate the bitter realities of the society, such as poverty, unemployment, dispossession and emigration, which resonate with twenty-first-century Ireland in the post-Celtic Tiger period. The impoverished circumstances of nineteenth-century Ireland, which turned people into zombified figures, and the consequences of the economic decline in the early twenty-first century, such as the ghost estates and zombie banks, are closely intertwined. The zombie figure itself is an outcome of colonial history; for this reason, the poor conditions of the people and the cannibalistic politics of Ireland find expression in the zombie figure. Thus, the financial and political traumas of the colonial past are revived in contemporary Ireland. Considering this historical correlation, Ireland itself becomes a zombified country, a living dead, as the Irish psyche seems to be entrapped in the past, still affecting the present, and the predicament of the past cannot be evaded because of both economic and historical stagnation. The rubble of the houses, the haunting micro-narratives of the characters, and McPherson’s play itself also underline the theme of the constant haunting, the intersection between the past and present, and the troubled Irish psyche. The destitute, alienated and dispossessed figures of the past still linger in contemporary Ireland, haunting these ghostly estates. All in all, during the post-Celtic Tiger period, globalised and modern Ireland, though it was expected to be flourishing, was instead financially waning, thus becoming a zombified country. The cannibalistic economic and neocolonial dynamics of contemporary Ireland immediately evoke the past and manifest how the Irish psyche remains haunted by historical traumas. By revealing how contemporary Irish Gothic represents the bitter reality and haunted psyche of the Irish shaped by their colonial history, this study paves the way for further research on Irish Gothic drama and contemporary Ireland, contributing to the growing body of research in Irish Gothic drama, a field that has been underexplored.

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