Moments in the Middle

Narrating a Self Under the Shroud of Social Control in Anna Burns’ Milkman

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2020

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This took one second, just one second, and my first thought - unbidden, unchecked - was that this was the underside of an orgasm, how one might imagine some creepy, back-of-body, partially convulsive shadow of an orgasm – an anti-orgasm.

Anna Burns
Abstract

This thesis explores how the mechanisms of social control can affect the development of the self and how this is reflected in the narrative voice of Anna Burns’ *Milkman*. It looks at the stylistic choices that reveals the narrator’s experiencing and cognitive self in context of a universe in which surveillance and sousveillance form a restrictive space for that self. The complex historic and political context is largely left out to focus on the individual, but the theoretical framework draws on a wide range of fields in an attempt to see middle sister within a larger cross-disciplinary understanding. By exploring the setting and people around middle sister through the web she spins in her narrative, it is also possible to discern how her being is shaped by circumstances more familial. In dissecting the intricacies of the narration itself, we can see it is a reflection of the war between her inner and outer world, and the fusion between form and content.
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To Rebecca, whose (seeming) infinite patience with the constantly changing topics never wavered and translated into a (seeming) never-ending faith in an inevitable completion.

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To Rafi, whose many hours of independent reading and skiing is owed many more hours of reading and skiing less independently just so I can see that peace on your face.

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Middle sister leaps of the page. Her personality is singular, her character strong and principled. Her unique voice, filled with regressions, page-long distractions, occasional elaborations, and seeming constructs, depicts a journey. It is a journey of exploration and formation, where identity and individuality merge and emerge in a world of constant external repression. Here, the principles of group loyalty dominate over the creation of self. Social control as a tool ensures compliant and conforming behaviour within the group and guarantees strength against the common enemy: the oppressor. As such, the friend becomes an enemy of the self. Fitting in, belonging, and adapting to community expectations and regulations becomes a shackled state where personal identity markers that diverge from the accepted must be quashed or leave you shunned.

*Milkman* came out of a seeming nowhere to win the Man Booker in 2018 against staunch competition. From a publishers perspective, it must be ‘tricky to sell a book with no character names, no place names, no apparent adventure in the plot, and lengthy digressive paragraphs which demand concentration’ (Hutton 353). As soon as it made it onto the Booker longlist, it was an almost assured winner. The Booker judges read each shortlisted novel three times. It follows that it was no surprise that *Milkman* prevailed despite it having ‘languished in the shadows’ (356). Booker judge Val McDermid points out that ‘a book that stands up to being read three times is a book that probably has a claim to being the best of the year… sometimes you read a book and it’s the glitter and the speed and the superficial charm of it that grabs you, but what you take away from it really is nothing, as a week later you couldn’t tell a stranger on a train what it was about or what it meant to you’ (Marshall). *Milkman* stays with you. Not only does it stand up to being read three times: this novel is better with every read. It is ‘an immense rush of dazzling language’ which ‘submerges readers’ into the plot while appearing to be ‘a deeply stirring, unforgettable novel that feels like a once-in-a-generation event (Kirkus Reviews) to one reviewer. It is a ‘creepy invention’ which is ‘strange and intriguing’ (Kilroy). To others, it is ‘a wilfully demanding and opaque stream-of-consciousness novel, one that circles and circles its subject matter, like a dog about to sit, while rarely seizing upon any sort of clarity or emotional resonance’ (Garner). The fact that many consider it unreadable, or just too ‘much effort for so modest a result’ (Garner) is in stark contrast to thinking the narrative ‘original, funny, disarmingly oblique and unique: different’ (Kilroy). The diverging views are understandable since the ‘opaque quality of this narrative’ can cause ‘some readers despair’ (Hutton 359). The novel did sell hundreds of
thousands of copies after its Man Booker win\(^1\). Of course, we have no way of knowing how many collect dust on a bedstand because the buyer found it utterly unreadable, but it did come from nowhere and went somewhere.

This thesis will explore the larger context of social control and concept of self in Anna Burns’ *Milkman* by dissecting the narrative voice of middle sister. It will show how middle sister’s narrative functions as a manifestation of the complex social world in which she is forced to function. This particular narrative illustrates the battle between self and society regardless of time and place even if we ‘recognize the difficulty (impossibility?) of making any universal claims about the nature of the human condition’ (Mumby 3) based on a novel alone. Specifically, this paper will not be about the Northern Ireland context, which in itself, like middle sister, is wholly unique, and yet representative. Nor is it about Anna Burns, who will remain largely absent from this thesis\(^2\). Instead, it will engage with the universal context of identity creation in a setting where communal pressures and expectations consume individual development. At the core of understanding is the narrative voice. It speaks ‘to the reader as a human being, not simply as a member of some local culture’ thereby crossing ‘cultural boundaries’ (Nussbaum 391). The combination of the emotional and cognitive, help convey more than just an intellectual understanding of a given time and place without simplifying the complexity of a human experience. In this narrative, the significance is its rare and challenging nature as it reflects that complexity.

*Milkman* is a demanding read. There are so many words, such a constant flow of consciousness depicted with so much language, with repetitions, listings, elaborations, that it poses a particular challenge that there might not be any words left as Burns may have allowed middle sister to use them all up. That which is embodied in the text requires a certain something of the reader and many may ‘fail to be what the text demands’ (9). Every sentence is a fountain of information perceived as a chaotic description of a chaotic inner life in a chaotic outer world. On a first try, it might be slow and arduous, for a quarter, half, or the whole novel. There are not that many pages, but it is impossible to take in all impressions, the myriad of themes, the meaning of every page, passage, part when each is laden with so much information and meaning. It forces the reader to either entirely submit to the book, to immerse fully, or lose your trail as the story takes a sudden turn from some milkman to the ten-minute-area to pa and you suddenly find yourself in an extended several page anecdote of a time gone by with a person not yet introduced but suddenly of grave significance. But we ‘approach

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\(^1\) As reported in 2018

\(^2\) It is, of course, stipulated that Anna Burns wrote this narrative, but she *is* not her narrative. Middle sister *is*.
literature for play and delight, for the exhilaration of following the dance of form and unravelling webs of textual connection’ (Nussbaum 171), so working a way through the diversions, distractions, digressions, disappearances, pays off with what, ultimately, is a neatly wrapped package serving us middle sister on a plate ready for dissection. The unravelling might be demanding, but we unravel by investigating the ‘processes that are actually there to be seen in the text’ (9). A narrative is never ‘a fixed and stable communication phenomenon but…part of the complex and shifting terrain of meaning that makes up the social world’ (Mumby 3) in which it belongs. We can only understand where this is coming from because ‘certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist’ (Nussbaum 5). ‘The lexical choices’ made in the novel enables not only ‘the character and mentality of ‘middle sister’’ (Hutton 358), but also figures as a reflection of the control imposed on her by her social setting. The narrative processes all serve to accentuate the relation between the narrator and position of social control dominating said narrator. The confusion in navigating her local conditions is reflected in the textual construct.

The narrative intuitively draws from the fields of sociology, psychology, history, philosophy, and political theory to show the connection between self and social control. Interdisciplinary studies and cooperation seem to be increasing in number, and fiction can have a unique function in bringing them together. This interplay between the form and content produces ‘some of the most interesting and urgent questions about literary form itself’ (Nussbaum 22). These questions cannot be properly pursued ‘unless one asked about the intimate connections between formal structures and the content they express’ (22). When the content is drawn from a multitude of disciplines, asking big philosophical questions, inquiring into dominating historic perspectives, wondering about the functions of our mind, and the interactions we pursue with each other, a text can impart with grand thoughts through its narrative. When reading, we search ‘for patterns and possibility – of choice, and circumstance, and the interaction between choice and circumstance – that turn up in human lives with such a persistence that they must be regarded as our possibilities’ (171), but also our limitations as individuals within our communities and context. Fictional writing is often easier to digest, use of imagery and inventive language easier to picture and understand, emotions more transferable making it a valuable method of mediation. Recognising this cross-
disciplinary intertextuality also enriches the field of literary studies\(^3\) where narrative should be the foremost concern.

The narrative in *Milkman* is form and function in fusion with content. As readers, we need to adjust our approach as the experience differs from a more typical reading experience significantly. It ‘demands to be taken at a slower pace, and yields its meaning more gradually’ (Hutton 357) and more intricately. There is a fine line between overload of information, of words, of meaning, and taking in the purpose and opportunity of the style. The conflicting reviews reflect the inimitable nature of the narrative, affirming that just this novel warrants focus and consideration for its stylistic choices. After all, ‘there is, with respect to any text carefully written and fully imagined, an organic connection between its form and its content’ (Nussbaum 4) because ‘form and style are not incidental features’ (5). This form and content is not capricious or impulsive, it is deliberately mystifying. The joy and purpose of *Milkman* is in the disentanglement as the stylistic approach becomes a necessary representation of the turmoil inside and outside middle sister. If the basic premise is to enlighten the reader through a fusion of form and content in a fictional account, then the fiction can become not a mirror held up to reality but instead a hammer with which to shatter it\(^4\). Our sense of what constitutes real is questioned. We can look outside of ourselves and discover in a common humanity both our differences and likenesses, walk into a world so like and unlike our own. The power of fictional accounts can come across as more real than reality itself, simultaneously decimating and expanding the reality we know.

Practically, the thesis will be divided into three main sections. The first section, “Mise-en-scène”, deals specifically with the setting of social control. It explores how the narrative illustrates the everyday oppression and social order in middle sister’s district and how social control becomes internalised into the individual psyche of community members. Furthermore, it explores how language accentuates the role of the people in that social order and in their contextual relations. Finally, it explores middle sister’s position of middle. The second section, “Antithesis”, deals with the major influences in her life, many of whom are considered social outcasts, and relations to all the important “others” in her life. The third section, “Ambiguity”, initially looks at the blending of form and content to elaborate on the

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\(^3\) Many interesting developments of interdisciplinary ideas happens both in academia and semi-popularised sections of said academia. See for example Literature, Cognition and Emotions (LCE) at UIO for a cooperation between literary studies and psychology. For an example from further afield, see Ivan Jablonka’s book *A History of the Grandparents I Never had* (2012) and the accompanying *History is a Contemporary Literature* (2014) which attempts to reframe the connection between literary narratives and the social sciences.

\(^4\) No disrespect to Bertolt Brecht’s original quote: Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.
narrative construction of self. It explores the semi-therapeutic nature of the storytelling undertaken by middle sister in some detail. It also aims to be a beacon of light in the relative darkness by looking at the use of humour and small nibbles of hope placed throughout. Social control need not be definitive and infinite.

As a theoretical framework, Francis Fukuyama’s take on the modern identity and it’s interplay with society is complimented by Lesley Harman’s sociological perspective on the self in context. Looming over them is the shadow of Michel Foucault and the premise of self-regulation and internal control mechanisms in the face of active surveillance. As for literary theory, the aforementioned Nussbaum provides the backdrop understanding of fusion between stylistic form and function of text with content. Complimenting the self from a literary interpretive perspective, writings on becoming and bildung have been consulted and utilised, especially that concerned with the coming-of-age of young women. For narrative theory, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan is the dominant source. A few sources are written directly on Milkman, but not many particularly extensive due to the relative newness of the novel.

Identity is generally thought to be the image middle sister shows the world, alternatively wants to show the world but cannot (herein lies the challenge). Self, on the other hand, is her being. In Milkman, the two are inexorably intertwined and bewildering, the one indivisible from the other. The narrative consistently reflects the narrative enforced by the community in conjunction with her self, leaving middle sister, even twenty years later, with the communal pressures still lingering in her voice. From a psychological perspective then, we can distinguish ‘between the self as an experience and the self as a source of cognitive activity. The experiencing self is “in the moment” while the cognitive self steps out of the moment to engage in contextual reflections’ (Cote and Levine 10). For this novel and many first-person narrations, the experiencing self is where the action is, while the cognitive self attempts to deconstruct the action from afar. It constitutes a somewhat confusing puzzle where the mix of the concurrent middle sister and the retrospective narrator suffuse. There are obvious places where the narrator is addressing us retrospectively, but it is fleeting in the sense that one often cannot tell which is the cognitive self and which is the experiencing self. In retelling, the narrator is reliving the traumatic period in her life, therefore reverting to her former self in so much as the painful and confused emotions come back full force. The narrative voice is simultaneously an attempt at self-healing, understanding, and self-creation. After all, the experiencing self was disallowed the opportunity of self-creation. Therefore, the voice conjured for middle sister ‘fits a personality still under construction, cobbled together from bits of books, eavesdropped adult conversations, children’s lore, and a stubborn
fumbling toward her own, hard-won understanding. Middle sister’s self is coherent in its incoherence’ (Miller). A distinction between the cognitive and experiencing self is therefore explicitly noted on occasion, but most often, no attempt at separating the cognitive and the experiencing self has been made because the two of them are the same, so entangled in their emotive experience that they cannot fully divide and conquer.

The comparative complexity of the narrative ensures that making dogmatic statements with any certainty at all is terrifying when dissecting Milkman. There is always a possibility that one has missed something, a nuance, an allusion, an image, a detail, misunderstood a cultural reference, expression, term. Hutton, for example, erroneously claims that no one but Lassie the dog is given a proper character name (Hutton 360). A discussion of other instances of character names is provided below. Roberto del Valle Alcalá asserts that the novel is ‘focalised through its nameless protagonist, a young girl only ever referred to as “middle sister”‘ (136). Again, this is incorrect: it depends who is speaking to or of her. Similarly, Drong writes that ‘Burns does not put any articles in front of the common nouns which are used in lieu of the names of her characters’ (Drong 178). Significantly, Milkman is ‘the milkman’ in the first sentence of the book and is continuously referred to as ‘the milkman’5 up until the point of capitalisation. This distinction is significant because he is never a milkman. Similarly, it is ‘the man who doesn’t love anybody’ throughout, always with a distinctive definite article - except for when he is referred to as ‘real milkman’, an actual milkman. Trends does not equal consistency in this novel. Further, in various reviews, the reviewers are out of the ballpark on when the novel takes place, when the narrator is speaking from, sometimes where the action is. The disentanglement is a formidable task where picking and choosing come across as a partially cleared “mind” field. There is something ironic and disconcerting in attempting to name this that generally has no given name.

1 Mise-en-scène

1.1 Setting the Stage

Middle sister is inundated, deluged, besieged, overwhelmed by the presence of watchers. While the contextual uniqueness of the “Irish problem” has been rendered unlabelled, the political is still a backdrop that entirely encompasses and dominates. The domination is confirmed by the constant monitoring. There is a (near) invisible outer enemy that is ever-present in its oppressive nature. They are the surveillants, the watchdogs, the onlookers, the

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5 See for example page 166 where he is referred to as ‘the milkman’ three times in the first 4 lines.
enforcers. Representing the government over the water is the warden that silently, imperceptibly, possibly watches his guards from the tower office in the panopticon. Representing the soldiers in the bushes are the guards that not so silently, imperceptibly, possibly watch the proverbial prisoners to ensure order and control. Their presence is represented by clicks from nearby greenery, cars, or disused buildings (Burns 66) to symbolise their tangible yet subtle hold over the local community. The locals, represented by each individual prisoner, police themselves because they are imperceptibly, possibly being watched continuously. The measure of control is both visible and unverifiable (Foucault 381), though not as tidy as Foucault envisioned it. There is resistance in the watched which enforces, interestingly, an added layer of self-policing in the form of the community as a watcher of its own. The surveillance from above is in place, and the self-regulatory control mechanism functions, but it is coupled with an intense form of self-regulatory sousveillance from within. The prisoners watch not only themselves but each other, creating a system of full and complete veillance.

This coming together seems a matter of survival. The community’s combined strength is a means with which to stand against this common enemy watching. Any untoward actions or incidents not within the acceptance of the self-regulated policing ‘would cause division, would end that much-harkened pulling-together in order to overcome the enemy state. No. None of that’ (Burns 64). One protects the community first, not ever making moves that might endanger the civic coherence. Instead one engages in constantly pervasive cultural observation based on restrictive measures created to ensure compliance. A perpetual pushing of an us versus other viewpoint is wrapped in the ‘psycho-political atmosphere, with its rules of allegiance, of tribal identification, of what was allowed an not allowed, matters didn’t stop at ‘their names’ and at ‘our names’, at ‘us’ and ‘them’, at ‘our community and ‘their community’, at ‘over the road’, ‘over the water’ and ‘over the border’’ (24). The group is fighting for its continued subsistence and to ensure sustained presence with its cultural and historic markers intact. Continuously replicating and reinforcing social divisions is a way to ensure survival, and survival is ‘associated with each person’s contributing and ascribed roles in that group’ (Cote and Levine 8). Every person, therefore, is of the utmost significance to the group as an entity and continued purveyor of cultural markers in a particular territory. Even the shunned must stay, imprisoned within the community, playing their part.

Prison riots are not rare if conditions are sombre, gloomy, dismal enough. If the locals are metaphorically imprisoned by their social universe, the social universe may take the form of a pressure cooker about to blow; it is a constant state of careful balance that might at any
moment tip in the wrong direction. The distinctive nature of the conflict requires idiosyncratic, sometimes arbitrary measures, to keep from detonating. At one point, the volatility is kept in check by the presence of dogs on the street, who with no words, warn of the presence of the (near) invisible other, the soldier. Their presence is necessary to preserve a semblance of peace, to avoid outright street battles. However, this conflict is of ‘the very type that erupts in seconds between individuals, between clans, between nations, between sexes, doing irreversible damage all around’ (Burns 96) never knowing at which level of the social order it might erupt. There is a conflict between the Hobbesian notion of brutal, short lives where the struggle for survival in a constant pittance against the other can only be curtailed by a strong state on the one hand, and the enlightenment ideal of individual freedoms and a wish for an orderly controlled peace on the other. The dogs represent a systemic civilising factor that aids conflict-avoidance: a balance of power. When the dogs are gone, the balance of power is upset, and they are ‘back to that close-up, face-to-face, early ancient hatred’ (97). The local Hobbesian measures of social control are allowed to dominate through continuous enforced compliance, with occasional eruptions, out of a perceived necessity.

Opposing the mutual enemy by coming together and showing strength in numbers should be a good thing, but it also results in the constant application of inordinate pressure to ensure conformity. It limits the power of the outside oppressor, but it is within the oppressed group that a dichotomy of social control is likely to develop. The community must enforce functions to maintain a defence against the outside world. The first principle of human identity is our ‘integration into a human group’ (Cote and Levine 5). This principle of ‘in-group/out-group thought and behavior patterns’ was ‘once based on threats to physical survival’ but ‘these patterns morphed into perceptions of psychological vulnerability and danger’ (6) in the modern era. In the social world of middle sister, physical danger and psychological vulnerability reign side by side; physical danger is omnipresent, and modern ideals of identity touchable. Here ‘everyone’s behavior is monitored for lapses in respectability’ (Miller) and ‘every resident was supposed to know what was permitted based on what was not permitted’ (Burns 24). This necessitates a constant navigational perspective in the everyday, where each must be entirely switched on to ensure they do not breach etiquette. The ‘social character’ or ‘mode of conformity’ of the community becomes ‘directly linked to the demographic situation of that group’ (Harman 54) and the demographic situational context is one of continuous peril and strain. This naturally affects the nature of the group dichotomy, but largely on an individual level, the stress factors being constructed to maintain the group rather than the self. The common enemy might be the oppressor, but the
threat of physical and mental violence from their own is more profound, more consuming, and harder to ignore or stand up to. Continued metaphorical confinement is guaranteed as externalised and internalised threats are constantly applied to community members. Those with power, seek to impose collaboration of natural individual allies by overt and explicit pressure, but also by subtle, invisible pressure often just decipherable for the community itself. The community is driven by the need ‘for a clear identity, meaning, and a sense of pride’ (Fukuyama 71). As the alliance of ‘natural’ members is enforced, recognition is transferred from the individual to the group. When that group is marginalised by another more powerful group, the marginalised group seeks strength in numbers by thriving ‘on suspicion, supposition and imprecision’ rendering everything ‘so back-to-front it was impossible to tell a story properly, or not to tell it but just remain quiet, nothing could get said here or not said but it was turned into gospel’ (Burns 229). When the ‘the ambient paranoia penetrates even those who are determined to resist it, like middle sister herself’ (Miller), the shadow of the panopticon encloses the resistance in gloom, the community inadvertently increasing the power of the oppressor through its own measures of control.

Violence and the threat of violence can often make for a good measure of control. The social structure is entirely dependent on the political as the two are inexorably entwined becoming ‘a product of the various constellations of power and political interests that make up the relationships among different social groups’ (Mumby 6) within a community. Here, ‘in each of those totalitarian-run enclaves… male paramilitaries…ruled over the areas with final say’ (Burns 120). The overtly visible measure of social control is the armed man, the weapons, the militarised, the brutal. Enforced participation through a constant state of informal policing becomes the ‘day-to-day business of dirty laundry in public, and of the district renouncers laying down their law, their prescripts, their ordinances plus punishments for any perceived infringements of them. There were beatings, brandings, tar and featherings, disappearances, blackeyed, multi-bruised people walking about with missing digits who most certainly had those digits only the day before’ (119) as well as impromptu courts of a dubious nature. The visible control is unrefined and coarse. The results are there for all to see and it seems the only thing the community can see clearly at all. The social organisation here is ordered ‘around a discursive symbol system’ where normalcy is defined by membership’ (Harman 61), and membership defined by submission to the reigning discourse. The discourse of us and them has become ‘second nature: convenient, familiar, insider, and these words were off-the-cuff, without the strain of having to remember and grapple with massaged phrases or diplomatically correct niceties’ (Burns 22) consistently enforcing compliance
through explicit violent measures. In general, ‘conformity becomes problematic because others orient among themselves through communicating membership’ and the ‘individuals do not deeply relate to others as members with anything more in common than their membership’ (Harman 61). Considering that the membership is enforced with the threat of brutality, it becomes a constructed kinship no longer based on tradition or the familial or the natural. Instead, it is an enforced communal spirit based on the excuse of the common fear or hate of an outer enemy.

Not all measures of social control are as unambiguous, overt, intentional as the armed man, the vendor of violent threat. Some are more subtle and even harder to fight, fathom, forego. Shame, for example, becomes a powerful, though probably intentional measure of social control. As people, we ‘crave positive judgments’ that are ‘made by other people’ in our communities who recognise our worth, and any such ‘positive judgment’ leaves us proud while a lack of it leads to ‘either anger or shame’ (Fukuyama 18). In our unlabelled district, middle sister reports that she ‘didn’t know shame. I mean as a word, because as a word, it hadn’t yet entered the communal vocabulary’ (Burns 53). The community embraces that which is unlabelled, should not, cannot, will not be understood and explained. Unlabelling does not mean something is not there. Middle sister ‘knew the feeling of shame and I knew everybody around me knew that feeling as well. In no way was it a weak feeling, for it seemed more potent than anger, more potent than hatred, stronger even than that most disguised of emotions, fear (53)’. The lack of language at describing shame points to a lack of willingness to admit its destructive nature to both the individual and the community, thereby giving it more power, accentuating its hold. It is, unnamed, effectively utilised as a means of compliance, a tool to perpetuate conditions inevitably. Its efficacy is even more potent if purported as ‘a public feeling, needing numbers to swell its effectiveness, regardless of whether you were the one doing the shaming, the one witnessing the shaming, or the one having the shame done unto you’ (53). The image of collective shame so accentuates the sense of disvalue in the individual. It is a painful feeling that grabs hold of your gut, maybe giving it a little twist, maybe bending over double as if in physical pain. To avoid this hold on the gut, this feeling of helpless, unexplained, indignity, and ‘given it was such a complex, involved, very advanced feeling, most people here did all kinds of permutations in order not to have it: killing people, doing verbal damage to people, doing mental damage to people and, not least, also not infrequently, doing those things to oneself’ (53). Shame forces people to act out of character, outside of comfort, over the line, committing acts against others or
themselves to avoid feeling this unnamed feeling so permeated by anguish that holds them steady by their insides.

When the language of membership dominates the social discourse, it compromises the individual. A group seeking recognition, dignity, respect, approval, leaves any personal identity concerns or search for personal pride and acknowledgement, belittled and marginalised. After all, ‘human beings are intensely social creatures whose emotional inclinations drive them to want to conform to the norms surrounding them’ (Fukuyama 56). As a consequence, ‘the relationship between the individual and society’, particularly in the world of middle sister ‘is marked by clashes of unique human possibility with the restraint of social convention’ (Abel 6). Our drive for belonging and acceptance will cause us to self-regulate, often at the behest of ourselves, particularly when faced with a community driven largely by a combination of overt and obscured social control efforts based on constant intense surveillance. The ‘two fundamental human social needs: avoiding aloneness; and awareness of self as an individual entity’ (Harman 64) collide as the individual attempts to reconcile the self with all the spoken and unspoken prohibitions. Recognising universal individual rights with individual autonomy as a vital aspect of liberal democratic ideals becomes a non-priority. Instead, ‘assertions of collective identity, of which the major manifestations were nationalism and politicized religion’ (Fukuyama 56/57) are allowed to flourish. Middle sister’s world is rife with nationalistic, politicised religious manifestations and while her inner self struggles for visibility it is forced from the outside to be ‘a particular kind of person from a particular place and observing particular customs’ (59). The individual is forced to comply in the public and supposed private sphere, from friends and foes alike.

The continuous interplay between the community and the individual therefore inevitably compromises the individual. The distinction between the inner and outer self where the inner being is valued ‘above existing social arrangements’ (40) has been lost in this social universe. Community can be therapeutic in nature, ‘giving purpose to the individuals, connecting them to others, and teaching them their place in the universe’ (96). However, the outer culture can also be perceived as an ‘iron cage imprisoning the inner self’ (96). The prisoner is imprisoned by the overt outside physical restraints in combination with the inner self-regulatory confinement, unable to exist independently entirely ‘taking one’s cues from others and basing one’s self-perception on those cues’ (Harman 61). When those cues are all signals to devoid the self and focus on ‘making one’s allegiances known’ in a game ‘played through the language of membership’ (61), constructing a self becomes a near impossibility. The overt dominance of interpreting cues and conforming to the interpretation takes on a
prescriptive role subjugating all manners of life to its truth and our ‘deep interior spaces’ with its potential fails to realise itself (Fukuyama 103). Instead, the ‘external society through its rules, roles, and expectation is responsible for holding us back’ (103). The self fades.

The combination of constant oppression and relentlessly conditioning behaviour virtually ensures a destruction of self. The dominance of the political situation guarantees that it is the only true issue of value, leaving community members gagged out of fear for upsetting the tender balance. How can one speak when that will ‘threaten widespread disintegration of the current status quo?’ (Burns 64). Anything will be overshadowed ‘in the context of the political problems, where huge things, physical, noisy things, were most certainly, on a daily basis, an hourly basis, on a television newsround by-newsround basis, going on’ (64). You are not important. There is an expectation to not lumber your fragile community with your petty little life because in that larger context it becomes just that: petty. This notion speaks directly to the value of self in middle sister. The outer community defines entirely who she is, and her value for others, constantly suppressing the person that she might be devoid of community demands. Society and self will always be somewhat at odds in every societal construct, but in this social universe, there are no odds of significance at all for the self. The selves have been so thoroughly eradicated that any deviances6 have been boxed and labelled for safekeeping so as not to threaten the communal order. While ‘the inner self is the basis of human dignity’, that dignity is closely connected and even ‘due to one’s membership in a larger group of shared memory and experience’ (Fukuyama 10). If you remove that outer factor of control and regulation, the ‘I’ might not flourish, but die, alone. If you fight convention looking for that “I”, you might be shunned, criticised, ostracised, marked, cold-shouldered, labelled, misunderstood, feared, snubbed, and the self, again, might die, alone. If you just exist, go with the flow, fail to rock the boat, hang on tight for the ride without actively engaging, the ‘I’ might vanish in the deep recesses of your being, alone. Our inner lives are always grappling with the larger question of being human, of our nature, and identity construction. We constantly navigate the self in context of our social environment, mostly finding a balance that will afford us a mix of co-existence where our selves our comfortable. For middle sister, ‘in those early days, those darker of the dark days, there wasn’t time for vocabulary watchdogs for political correctness, for self-conscious notions’ (Burns 22) of how you might be perceived and what was expected. The expectation to stay in line reigns supreme.

6 Further discussion of deviants takes place mostly in chapter 2
When vision is left blurred and cloud cover descends into the streets, it leaves the individual unable to retain or sustain any sense of clarity. Coupled with the inability to articulate difficult emotional states, such as shame, comes inability to see. The blurred vision and missing words feed off each other as a proverbial metaphorical and literal darkness rules. It is ‘as if the electric lights were turned off, always turned off, even though dusk was over so they should have been turned on yet nobody was turning them on and nobody noticed either, they weren’t on’ (Burns 89). That which hides in the dark is shrouded indefinitely in the minds of the inhabitants; all the unseeables, unspeakables, unknowables covered eternally in ‘this constant, unacknowledged struggle to see’ (89). The pallid, ashen, colourless, ashy vision of the world is not ‘really physical; [I] knew the impression a pall, of some distorted quality to the light had to do with the political problems, with the hurts that had come, the troubles that had built, with the loss of hope and absence of trust and with the mental incapacitation over which nobody seemed willing or able to prevail’ (89/90). The historic and political context, the religious and cultural foundation, towers over the world in the form of a mist, a foggy substance refusing to disclose natural connections, question the state of the things, but affirming its position as the veil that covers whatever might be beneath and between.

The conflict cannot be named by its true name because the true name will not be true to everyone. The community lives in a semblance of silence, letting the unspoken, the unsaid, the unmentionable, the constant shroud covering all communication dictate and guide the community members. Naming the vulnerable and the exposed seems to make it more susceptible to harm, naming the dangerous and frightening renders it a more immediate and present hazard. Shrouded language is a way to survive even if ‘there was no getting away from views... each was intolerant of the other to the extent that highly volatile, built-up contentions periodically would result from them’ (112). In not speaking, you avoid falling into a random trap of the wrong view. Instead, ‘you had to have manners and exercise politeness to overcome, or at any rate balance out, the violence, the hatred and the blaming’ (112). You move beyond without facing up to it. There is no choice but to follow the indicated road map ‘for how to live otherwise?... This was living otherwise. This was underneath the trauma and the darkness a normality trying to happen. Observing the niceties, therefore, not the antipathies, was crucial to coexistence’ (112), and therefore to existence. Any attempt at normalcy becomes an enforcement of wrongs, a way of forcing communal coexistence and cooperation, espousing a language the community owns, constantly signifying rightful belonging and wrongful acts. This ‘language of membership is a silent one: an
unwritten, unspoken language that can only be used by members who are culturally fluent and seek to pre-empt the verbal with the non-verbal. In public settings, the silent language has far greater exclusionary and inclusionary significance for the member than mere words’ (Harman 153). It becomes part of the Foucauldian system of power relations, of monitoring, of the unseen and unnamed controllers out there. Epithets are part of the silent language of uniform understanding, of those in or out, acceptable or not. The struggle enters the realm of symbolism. For some, it may seem the use of ‘vague aliases like “renouncers” and “the opposite religion”’ are there ‘to take the edge off the novel’s historical specificity’ (Miller). Alternatively, Burns wishes to emphasise the non-verbal signifiers in the interplay between the universality of the experience of the one in any conflict situation by not labelling that context explicitly. Language, spoken or not, is at the base of not labelling. You must use the euphemisms because ultimately, not labelling is about survival in a world where a misnomer can be lethal.

The specific context, even if unlabelled, does not lose power. Often things that cannot be named holds the most power. They are unuttered, often invisible, unexplained but all-pervasive because their presence is still felt. Language can be used to subjugate, and ‘the very process by which one culture subordinates another’ begins with ‘the act of naming and leaving unnamed’ (Spurr 4). The ‘insular, embattled enclave’ in which middle sister lives, is just as ‘suffocating and inescapable’ (Miller) regardless of the unnaming or not. Where we encounter both obfuscation and clarity at the same time is when the unlabelling eradicates or perpetuates membership. Being unable to outright label and classify without euphemism means being unable to communicate openly. Things left unspoken can consume from within as the community continues to ‘exercise undemocratic control over their narrative territories’ (Drong 173). It communicates a notion of safety but remains committed to not recognising the uncomfortable fact that no effort is aimed at understanding the other outside. If a common vocabulary for discussion could be accepted, dialogue could ensue. Since the language is that of signifiers exclusively catered to the closed group, the language of communication does not exist. When wee sisters are reading ‘disallowed paraphernalia’ from that country ‘over the water’ it inspires nothing but fear and shock because ‘trying to understand their viewpoint’ is uttering an obscurity ‘of the type that instantly could taint any person in our area’ (Burns 150). But the unlabelled specificity also invites an outsider, namely the reader, in on a different more inclusive level where the unnamed euphemistic approach allows for outsiders to understand despite the lack of appropriate vocabulary.
In allowing the antonomasia to reign, the story itself becomes ‘representative of other closed societies existing under similar restrictive circumstances’ at the same time as it recognises the ‘lack of safety in being straightforward’ (Burns, Southbank Centre’s Book Podcast) in such communities. For Hutton, it makes it clear that ‘the events she [Burns in this instance] is describing could happen in any repressive, militarised society where conflict continues’ (362), increasing the universal appeal of the narrative. The unlabelling further accentuates the power that lies in the lexical: ‘The persistent use of these invented terms – her [middle sister this time] own lexicon for describing the paramilitary situation in Northern Ireland – is a neat and ironic means by which she suggests her estrangement from the community in which she lives, and her distaste for everything that community values’ (365). Engaging in the practice of shrouding of the unsaid by not naming can be considered a rejection of the locally construed, constructed, concocted rule of law. It is a denunciation of the accepted and expected. This might certainly be a valid interpretation of her lexical choices, but it is just as likely that middle sister’s obscuring language is part of her difficulties in coming to terms with her past7. Hutton further argues that ‘she [Burns again] wants to make the familiar strange and thus force a reconsideration’ of how we see the past of the particular Northern Ireland context (366). While not rejecting Hutton’s point outright, this claim steals from the notion of universality suggested above. The reach of the novel, much thanks to the exposure that came with Man Booker win, has ensured that the familiar is already strange to a great many readers whose background is not local to Northern Ireland and whose expertise might not be on any troubles connected to its history. Naturally, for these readers, a reconsideration might be out of reach, a consideration much easier to grasp.

1.2 Placing the People

Milkman emphasises the power of naming by virtually cleansing capitalised labels of people and replacing them with euphemisms, leaving individual identity markers behind closed doors. The feel is utterly unique8. A name affiliated with or created by an opposition, a danger, an enemy, or misguided friend, can disintegrate the individual. They become a factor in the power structure that is the fabric of the social universe. Names are a touchy subject, severely constrained, certain names even banned due to the ‘psycho-political atmosphere, with its rules of allegiance, of tribal identification’ (Burns 24). The outside oppressor reduces

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7 Discussed extensively later
8 This has, of course, been done before, most notably in Jose Saramago’s Blindness.
a whole people to a single stereotype by grouping them as an opposition. In doing this, they remove their individuality in favour of how the group is perceived, initially from the outside, and inevitably from the inside. The locals internalise a function of group mentality based on them being the oppressed, the resurrectionists, the derided that derides individuality. Subsequently, to resort to labels based on a relation, a single moment, or a singular feature of a personality or a place is helpful in maintaining the unity. This removes individuality and guarantees group affinity gains even greater control and continued unity against the outside oppressor remains the focus. The ascribed roles confine people based on their age, gender, and affiliations. In resorting to personified epithets, an individual is left with a limited context or trait. The characters in Milkman become reduced individuals within a narrowly defined group affiliation context, doubling down on the disenfranchisement. The emphasis is removed from the individual and centred on the group mentality. The group is made up of people, but the people are insignificant as unique selves. The double-downed marginalization of being oppressed by the outsider and the insider leaves the self and society continuously in staunch conflict.

The euphemistic approach can, however, function as liberating factor because our name, by placing us in a particular social context, can be a restraint in and of itself. The lack of label might create a perceived anonymity. In the world of middle sister, a name will place you, significantly, in a religious and political context. It will expose your affiliations, which in turn can be dangerous in the wrong setting. Therefore, ‘by omitting individual and specific character names, and reducing characters to names which specify their function in the community and relation to the narrator…Burns removes some of the cultural specificity of the world she describes’ (Hutton 361). When cultural specificity and enforced group coherence permeates everything, escaping it, even for just a moment, can be liberating. Though everyone can probably discern the cultural specificity in a moment, this is a world where saying it out loud can be a spark of something disconcerting, and perceived anonymity can feel like an element of safety. It is a way to forget, deny, ignore, even for just a moment.

Generally, the epithets serve to accentuate social relations. Family and friends are given a euphemism that represents their relationship to middle sister. Other characters are given euphemisms that represent their occupation (teacher), places them in a group (the renouncers), something that represents what they do or like to do (chef), a classification of their role in relation to another character that occasionally reflects the view of middle sister about a particular issue of contention or concern (wrong wife and true wife), and some are given more euphemisms than one (tablets girl/district poisoner). The exercise of
characterising by the use of antonomasia simplifies a character’s place in the novel, their role deliberate and often self-explanatory, though the lack of capitalisation of their euphemism indicates that their characterisation is just that, a characterisation. Some, however, break with the ruling convention, sparking curiosity.

There is significance in breaking patterns and general rules. In understanding the role of the antonomasia, noting exceptions becomes pivotal in the attempt to examine the relation between the stylistic choice and the content meaning. The capitalisation of a character’s epithet is a clear sign of particular prominence. The general rule is that none of the euphemistic representations are capitalised, but there are exceptions. In contention for the position of antagonist, we have two main contenders (though several others might submit an application on a good day) both introduced immediately and with a mass of dramatic revelations. We learn that ‘The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died’ (Burns 1) in the novel’s opening sentence. The opening sentence is representative of the novel as a whole insofar as it contains such a mass of information: it introduces two characters in addition to the narrators cognitive and experiencing self, contains a strange but telling characterisation, a threat, and a death. It is not a subtle sentence. The level of action is palpable, but the epithets are subtly introduced, their significance illusive, only becoming significant later, or even on a second reading of the novel.

Somebody McSomebody is given an epithet that places him firmly in the pile of significant foils. He is not just somebody as opposed to nobody, he is Somebody with a surname too, a truly unique position. He is capitalised, given an epithet that is recognisably more like a name than any other character. There is even a prefix of Mc and a double Somebody both capitalised. He is a someone to reckon with. He is a vital piece of the puzzle that helps disclose middle sister and a key figure in what there is of a plot in Milkman. No other character receives a classification resembling his capitalisation, rendering him utterly unique in middle sister’s life and narration. Ironically, he does not have a significant amount of mentions or scenes in the narrative. He often comes with a reminder of his significance: ‘This was a reference to one of our district’s beyond-the-pales. Nuclear boy happened to be Somebody McSomebody’s younger brother - Somebody McSomebody being one of ma’s eligible for me to marry as well as the boy who was to get me whis his gun in the toilets of the district’s most popular drinking-club after the ambush and death of milkman’ (61). Ma wants middle sister to marry him, her being unable to see that he is on a steady downward slope of creepy. He starts off as slightly ridiculous, sad, and just a little scary, and ends up with the
gun drawn: ‘As for all this stalk-talk he did, and his surety of our relationship, and the futurity of our coupledom, never could I have imagined that the menacing, deluded, obsessive, deranged types of this world could instantly recover from being menacing, deluded, obsessive and deranged and instead backpedal like no tomorrow into sycophancy and obscurity’ (Burns 134). There is no hope for Somebody. He has plummeted into an ominous darkness of semi-obsession with middle sister in which he refers ‘to himself now too, in the first person plural whereas not long before he’d been a normal first person singular like everybody else’ (132). It is easily imagined that Somebody fails to meet the requirements of the community, leaving him open to descend into despair, and ultimately become a danger to others.

There is a constant discomfort connected to Somebody. He could easily be placed in a black and white binary opposition category of evil. He does not play by the rules, and even ‘said my name, my first name, forename’ and then ‘here he said my name, my forename, once again’ (132). Somebody wants to be named. He wants to use given, proper, own names, to distinguish between people by a (somewhat) distinctive identity marker. He longs for intimacy, closeness, connection, and in attempting to receive it he is infringing on middle sister’s personal space. He is figurately forcing himself inside her intimate zone, and ultimately, of course, literally forcing himself into that same place. Maybe it is more desperation than evil. He is forcing his way into being Somebody because he cannot stand being nobody but a member of a group. Unlike Milkman, who is never physically abusive toward middle sister, Somebody is. He is tangible. He is Somebody, after all.

Being the title character should also indicate a certain sense of somebody, and Somebody is not the only possible antagonist introduced in that first sentence, so is Milkman. His name is initially a nickname, a parable for his role in the struggles as a paramilitary. Middle sister encounters him at the beginning of the novel not knowing ‘whose milkman he was. He wasn’t our milkman. I don’t think he was anybody’s. He didn’t take milk orders. There was no milk about him’ (2). Real milkman is, of course, a whole other character. Milkman is not capitalised in these first pages, nor is he for another just short of 200 pages till longest friend says: ‘Now don’t jump down my throat, longest friend, but tell me, what’s the crack with you and Milkman?’, capitalising him in direct speech. Probably realising the reader might miss the significance of this moment, Burns makes an unconventional, funny, and remarkable move in allowing middle sister to notice that ‘she called him Milkman, and that she gave him a capital letter’ in a metanarrative moment. She remarks that ‘to everybody else he was ‘the milkman’, with only the youngest in the area believing he was a milkman…If she was calling him ‘Milkman’, I now decided, that must be because he was ‘Milkman’’ (197).
Just like that, he is capitalised for the remainder of the novel, attempting to nudge Somebody off the top of the antagonist podium. Middle sister is not sure why he is suddenly capitalised, and neither is the reader. When his true name turns out to be Milkman, it is hard not to conclude that Milkman is a massive metaphor of a hyperbolic nature for the fact that the people in this community are entirely confined to their roles. It entirely becomes them.

Where Somebody is just disconcerting, Milkman is terrifying, chilling, invasive to the core. His is ‘also uninvited but much more frightening, much more dangerous [than first brother-in-law]’ especially because he ‘stepped from out of nowhere onto the scene’ (Burns 2). Middle sister knows he is wrong this Milkman, this older married man trying to ingratiate, charm, compel his way into her. Rejecting him does not work, he is persistent, does not listen, ignores her anxiety, pushes forward his agenda. Even though they only meet a few times, his presence is relentless, continual, ceaseless, and smells of permanence. He is the personification of the constant veillance. He is the panopticon personified, you never know when he is watching, when he will pop up next leaving middle sister crumbling, twisting, on the inside. The shadow of him is far-reaching. Where Somebody is tangible and touchable, where a hint of sympathy can be identified, Milkman is callous, cruel, pervasive, insidious, ubiquitous in a way that indicates an evil embodied: a classic antagonist of the unambiguous days of good and evil, black and white, binary opposites. Of course, for the community, he is the hero in the end. The martyr of good, exalted by the children. Imagine the feeling in middle sister having to contend with her nightmare being hailed, her perception being discounted.

The two main antagonists are not alone in standing out: some characters are allowed an actual real name. Their significance usually seems minimal, at least in terms of their role in middle sister’s life, their purpose therefore largely to make a point about the trend of unnaming. They seem to exist in a vacuum outside the community: Peggy who is a nun and only a figure of real milkman’s backstory, or Ivor from ‘over the road’ and therefore from the ‘the opposite religion’ (187) who is even more on the outside due to the not actually existing in the first place. The peripheral outside-of-the-closest-circle-may-not-qualify-as-foil role of supporting-character-is-allowed-a-name theory is reinforced by the fact that the French class participants, ‘Siobhan, Willard, Russel, Nigel, Jason, Patrick, Kiera, Rupert of Earl and the rest’ (79) are, in fact, named (and several of the names are on the banned list kept by the clerk and clerkess). In their peripheral role, they are out of the political zone, or in the past, and not contentious. Maybe more significantly, if you are dead, you may have a proper name, though

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9 The effect on her is covered fully later
this is not automatic since, for example, neither da nor nuclear boy is allowed one. Milkman, however, is only exposed as really being Milkman when he is dead when it does not matter because ‘whatever he had been and whatever he’d been called, he was gone’ (Burns 304). Similarly, district poisoner is allowed to reveal her real name, but only in death and disclosed in ‘a private missive written by some aspect of district poisoner to another aspect of herself’ (262), her schizophrenic paranoid internal dialogue revealing great confusion over identity. Her post-death revelations are beyond beyond-the-pale, placing her so firmly in a category of intensely outside that a name is the least she is owed. Further, the aforementioned Lassie, having escaped the dog massacre, is dead at the time the story takes place and can therefore be named. Of course, a dog named Lassie is a generically named dog and the name sounds much like a euphemism taken from an entirely different Lassie who is akin to a superhero dog. This Lassie, as the sole survivor of a massacre against all odds, is also somewhat of a superhero. We should be looking at an allusion alias here. The capitalisation, however, might indicate, like with Milkman, that even the dog becomes the role assigned by societal pressures. In this case, a hero. Regardless, there is an idea that you can be free to be uneuphemised on the outside, the outside being peripheral or dead, under just the right circumstances, outside the political spectrum.

The above breaks with the normative prescription of most characters, deviating from the norm to counter some possible monotony. Stylistically, though, if we consider the role of foils as a purpose for protagonist character development, the euphemistic approach serves this objective well. There is a rather large number of characters, and the use of antonomasia places them securely in relation to middle sister. It is easy to remember whom is whom, rather than having to keep Conor from Seamus or Jack from Jon. Even if some of the epithets are communally rather than personal, it still indicates positioning and role. Many communally labelled foils are pivotal, each in their own way, to middle sister’s development bringing to the story a purpose uniquely connected to their epithet. The many characters middle sister has affiliations with are all similarly nameless and named at the same time. This accentuates the sense that ‘those characters with whom the protagonist comes into contact…exist…not in their own right’ (Swales 52). Instead, their function is ‘for the educative benefit of the hero’ their significance ‘underwritten by a potentiality slumbering within’ (52) the protagonist: middle sister. Among all the epithets, we find middle sister centre stage.

10 This is a fallacy, her ‘whateverness’ pretend, knowing this man continuous to shape her in his death. See later.
11 Discussed further in latter chapters
12 Notable exceptions and variations discussed above
1.3 In medias res

Middle sister has no name either, but middle sister seems the most dominant euphemism, and that middle defines her place in the story. Middle in one way is a place to disappear and in another way a means to emerge visibly. It counters a binary logic of either/or and encompasses an idea of “both”, creating an ambivalence reinforcing the status of being torn between self and society. Though she is referred to by other epithets such as (middle) daughter, longest friend, and maybe-girlfriend, this is in direct speech from other characters placing her in immediate relation to the speaker. We are all the protagonist in our own lives, so to other characters, she is an antagonist, a foil, an insignificant other, a blip on the radar, or any other extra, especially in the context of the community. The others are largely placed relative to her, a significant point of her middleness. The ‘middle’ part of her euphemism is crucial in placing middle sister not only in her relations but in her story.

Middle sister is the middle (girl) child. Making her a middle child is neutralising and explosive at the same time. Her role in the middle is a vacuum between the mistakes of her older siblings and the peculiarities of wee sisters with their sense ‘of entitlement which as you know in this place is rare’ (Burns 147). This vacuum is indicative of existing in a nothing that is a nothing on the road to something. What that something is, cannot yet be determined, as if the nothing is a blank slate, one leg on each side of a fence of self or society. She can still marry the right person, even if it is unclear to her if she should marry by heart or association, and she still has a chance to “come out right”. Inherent in this, is the struggle between her self and the dominant outer influences; she does not know what right is, but she knows that ‘more often it’s the case that keenness and initiative get stifled here, turned to discouragement, twisted too, into darker channels’ (147). She is not wee sisters with their seeming ease of existence and peculiar question (83), she is not the missteps of her older siblings, and a battle between conformity, being stifled, and acquiescing to darkness is inevitable. The middle indicates that she is squashed between two opposites, or squeezed from numerous angles of community and self, and that she holds this position in solitude and near isolation. The middle position gains added weight when we realise she is both entirely alone and not alone in that middle. When we meet third brother, he refers to her, surprisingly, as twin sister (there is a possible, barely noticeable hint this might be the case on page 99 where they are referred to as ‘the youngest in the family’ in what could be a collective twin type of sameness). That he is not euphemised with twin brother speaks volumes about her inability to truly be close to anyone. The identity marker of twin would place him too close. Instead, he is ‘third brother,
my third brother’ (Burns 268) who renders her ‘too overwhelmed to do my own stepping’ (269). His mere presence, the inability of movement, is a physical reminder that she needs him around, that their connection is profound. His prolonged absence was not only an abandonment of tablets girl’s sister but of middle sister herself. She ‘feels the vibrations of his approach’ (268), sensing his return as a missing piece of her middle. Of course, he could never truly be in her middle. There are no wee brothers, and the principles and realities of being a boy are entirely different from being a girl in any context, but in this context in particular. Middle sister remains the middle.

Additionally, middle sister is in the middle of the rumour about her and Milkman. Initially, she believes that ‘gossip washed in, washed out, came, went, moved on to the next target’ (5), but the (unfounded) rumours about her and Milkman persist. They endure long enough for her to become a middle for the community and for the rumour to become the middle in her everyday life. Middle sister ‘has opted for emphasising caution, indirectness and even silence as protective stances against the potential perils of language and communication’ (Estévez-Saá 90). Her usual tactics of ‘deliberate obfuscation of reading while walking about’ (Burns 130) is not working. As much as she tries to remove herself, be uncontroversial, keep her head down, she is in the middle of the community gossip.

Being in the middle of the gossip means people are talking, discussing, spotting, discerning, wondering, surmising, fabricating. Her reputation precedes her, but ‘the only reason such a thing was preceding was because they made it up and put it there’ (229). The community has lost sight of reality, succumbing to ‘the context of our intricately coiled, overly secretive, hyper-gossipy, puritanical yet indecent, totalitarian district’ (172). There is wide basis for vivid conjecture making it possible ‘to gauge how all these locals were arriving at the most detailed of information regarding me and him that they were’ (172) for someone familiar with the extended gossipy, whispering conduct of the community. The nattering places a vast burden on her to be responsible for her standing in the community despite having no real relation with Milkman. There is no avoiding it, ‘it was as if I’d fallen into the very person, according to everybody, I was now supposed to be’ (129). Her meetings with Milkman, a mix of real and communally fabricated ones (166) are a constant ‘admonition, with my having to refute, to explain, to be responsible for other people’s misconceptions’ (284). Ma recognises the destructive nature of community confabulations. She would rather middle sister ‘came out with your filthy, unfitting language for the rest of your life than for you to turn out one of them cowardly people who can’t speak their minds but won’t hold their peace and instead mumble behind hands and get their fights out in sneaker and whispers’
Still, the community hold is too strong, for when middle sister finally tells ma the truth about Milkman, ‘ma looked at me without interruption but when I finished, and without hesitation, she called me a liar, saying this deceit was nothing but a further mockery of herself’ (54). Ma epitomises how patriarchal violence seeps through culture, with both visible and invisible means. She is a representation of the spilt selves, where one part is obliged to conform with the patriarchal concerns of the male-controlled community and the other wanting to break free. Women become alternately both victims and collaborators believing and building on rumours ‘even at the outer limits of absurdity and contradiction’ (306), and it remains down to middle sister to ‘dispel it, to refute gossip by people who fostered gossip and clearly wouldn’t welcome either, denial of their gossip’ (65). She has no means with which to oppose. Everyone around her ‘is engaged in a culturally enforced conspiracy of gaslighting’ (Miller), constantly forcing her to reassess her conception of events and the self within, the rumours never allowing her out of the middle to just be.

The unfounded rumours about her relations to milkman stop middle-sister from living her life. Even ‘the death of Milkman wouldn’t mean, for me, the end of Milkman’ (Burns 306). She knows, in a moment of clarity and understanding, that he is in her, a defining moment, a reckoning, a persistent trauma that loiters in her middle. The community does not easily forget, and consequences will persist even if the lack of physical presence lightens the load somewhat. While he is still alive, she cannot go running, do her reading-while-walking, ma is on her back, and ultimately, she is blamed for much of the fallout in the end. It comes to a head when she despite having ‘always lived in this district and had since childhood, without properly acknowledging it, been attuned to the currents, subtleties and rhythms of this district’ (239) does not notice the silence of the personified chip shop. They are all staring at her, some defiantly, not caring if their reaction is beholden to truth. It ‘might have been true or might not have been true, but the chip shop thought it was true and, in that moment, surrounded by all these people with their minds made up, I thought it was true as well’ (240). Their truth becomes her truth because there is no other choice than to accept the truth of the community without being ostracised, no way to stand against community pressure over time, to hold onto your inner truth. The focus on her and her relation with Milkman forcing its way into the centre stage of her, forces embittered silence upon her.

The perceived silence is a formidable contrast to the narrative voice, which spews out the tirade of words, not at all seeming like someone who ‘renounces language and words as a safeguard for her own integrity and survival in her troublesome community’ (Estévez-Saá 90). The novel seems to ‘make [certain] claims while its style makes rather different claims’
(Nussbaum 35). It emphasises the reticent nature of middle sister yet equips her with this relentless narrative voice that seems to want to speak all the unsaid. The narrative is illustrative of her attempt at removing herself from the middle she was forced into. She becomes something of an observer to the lives of others, consistently inserting their stories into her own, often seemingly to avoid something of discomfort to her, simultaneously comprehending and not comprehending their part in her journey. She is stuck between observation and the marginalised middle position in her narrative. She is weaving and obfuscating her role as a people watcher in order to escape the full pressure of her semi-ostracised stance in the middle of the action. Her compulsion to tell stories is a way to create meaning, simultaneously hiding and exposing. Her narrative shapes not only her experiences but seeks to extract the fundamental meaning of the experiences of herself and others in context. In telling their story\textsuperscript{13}, the parts she has access to and knowledge of, which clearly is not always the full story, she is trying to make sense of her own. It contextualises her. No one exists in a vacuum. This is her story, she is the protagonist in her life, and the web is spun from her. It keeps her trapped in the middle, but in her web are all the foils that help construct that web, ensuring the web contains sustenance and substance for her to impart with on the road from silence to sharing.

The cognitive narrator might seem open, but it seems the ramble of so many endless words has a purpose of transparency and mystification both. Stephanie Schwerter writes of Mary Costello, author of Titanic Town, that ‘only after having gained an emotional and mental distance in relation to the place where sectarianism and political violence were part of everyday life could she detach herself from the past and write about her experience’ (153). Our narrator\textsuperscript{14} does not have the same detachment of clarity. She is still emotionally and mentally submerged in her past trauma. There is clarity in her voice because everything needs to be said, to be reiterated, repeated, reaffirmed because it was not said in the moment. It is a contrast to ‘the twisting of words, the fabrication of words and the exaggeration of words that went on in this place’ (Burns 54). At the same time, it must be said in a way that is demanding of the receiver because the narrator is not entirely comfortable with the stream of words that for so long was attached to danger. The use of equivocations is a necessary protectionary

\textsuperscript{13} Da’s story is an example. Bits are exposed throughout the novel, revealing sexual abuse, mental health issues, communication problems, always illustrative of expectations, shame, secrets, appearances, and pure pressure infused in a medley of her own experiences and emotions, his story enforcing, challenging, impacting hers.

\textsuperscript{14} I dare not venture to speculate on the state of mind of Anna Burns, though her seeming insistence of referring to the narrator as a very separate ‘she’ with her distinctive and own voice suggests a wanted and explicit separateness between the two.
stance. It becomes a ‘metaliterary mediation on the possibilities as well as limits of language, words and wordlessness’ (Estévez-Saá 87) and the dangers attached to communication. When the norm has been silence, breaking that silence brings out a peculiarity, trait, mannerism of someone lightly traumatized. The language indicates discomfort with language itself. Fear will do that. In obfuscating through overload, language can be used to uphold a semblance of safety and protection even when the silence is broken.

Middle sister is putting herself back in the middle. She is permanently controlled by the context around her be it the political situation, rumours, or family expectations. The opportunity to tell her own story is empowering because the stories we tell for ourselves become our stories. Longest friend says she is ‘not inferable’ and ‘cannot be deduced’, which the community does not like. It is out of the norm, it is discomforting and disconcerting and she ‘prepossess people’ not to like her with her ‘lack of give’, so what she does not offer, ‘people will make up for themselves’ (Burns 241). Her protective silence has provided others with the right to her story, to fill in the blanks, place the pieces of the puzzles randomly. When middle sister tells her own story, it is a way of taking her power back from Somebody McSomebody and Milkman, from the gossiping (women) of the rumour mill, from her sister, or longest friend or anyone else writing her story for her occupying her space. She needs to own her middle. Like the researcher, the social historian, the anthropologist, she is never a ‘neutral, dispassionate observer’ but ‘heavily implicated in the construction of the narratives that provide insight to the social reality’ she inhabits (Mumby 4). The process of taking back the power is not necessarily a candid one because she necessarily must remain in the middle position she is uncomfortable with. She is struggling to steal back her narrative. It is weighing her experiencing self down, ‘physically too, it got tiring, all that distrust and push-pull, the sniper-open-fire, the countersniper-return-fire, the sidestepping and twisting, with both me and my community appearing to freewheel our way to some final interface’ (Burns 178). The fatigue remains in the cognitive self, especially since this rumour has particular resonance considering it also includes the political conflict due to Milkman’s paramilitary role. There is an inevitable clash between her narrative truth and the community constructed truth as she is ‘checking to see if the community was concealing itself in those tucked-away places’ (178). They are tucked away physically, yes, but mostly they are embedded in the tucked-away places of her mind. In fighting the middle position, the attention and focus on her alleged affair, she cannot find the balance between protecting herself and discouraging them. She is ‘confounding them as I had intended to confound them’ but she had not ‘intended
confounding myself as well’ (Burns 178). The community narrative is too strong, and it persists through time to the cognitive self still partially in its grip.

The narrative’s relation to time and space is relative. Milkman has a non-linear and non-chronological narrative. It leaps and bounds through a time and space limited to the early adult life of middle sister, with certain flashbacks to childhood, or digressions into another’s story. The opening line is a prolepsis that essentially reveals the entire plotline. We tend to consider memory sequential, and time as linear and chronological, a ‘uni-directional and irreversible flow’ (Rimmon-Kenan 44). But memory is a fickle thing and so is time even if ‘individuals and societies continue to experience time and to regulate their lives by it’ (43). Middle sister tells a story, in many ways, colloquially tailored, and circular in nature, insistently out of the linear. Her narrative style presents as a slightly confusing babble, unsequential, and unforeseen. Occasionally it is unclear how the story bent in a particular direction, leaving thoughts incomplete behind.

If considering the minutia of a single paragraph or shorter section, this is largely true. Some scenes take forever due to her digressions. It is difficult to grasp the passage of time when middle sister digresses into a longer explanation about something seemingly unrelated only to return to the starting point, often just briefly. This is, again, a way for her to avoid the middle she is so firmly placed in. The experiencing middle sister is a teenager at the height of social anxiety. She is both most likely to conform and be formed, and to revolt and comply excessively at the same time. Fear ensures that the digressions can span pages and distract from the story point. The pace is never within a norm. Instead, it explores ‘an infinity of possible paces’ (53) decelerating what one could expect to be normative pace and rarely accelerating the pace of the story in an attempt to hold off any uncomfortable climaxes. It is inundated by avoidance, slowing and lingering. There is, however, always a follow-through. There will always be a starting point at which the digression diverges from the plotline and another point where it returns. For example, on page 93, middle sister finds the cat’s head spurring her into a longer analepsis of the very concrete dog massacre and its significance before returning to the head briefly on page 100. For another 65 pages, middle sister is meeting Milkman in real-time, digressing to various backstories of feminists or maybe-boyfriend’s cars, occasionally reminding us she still has ‘the bag containing hankies containing the head’ (Burns 145), before finally leaving it with real milkman, and behind. Seen from a larger perspective, this is symptomatic of the entire novel. The circumlocutions are temporary distractions. The latter two chapters slowly grab hold of any loose ends, digresses some more, and then allows for middle sister to grab hold of her story and remain in
the middle till it all ties together leaving the reader satiated in the sense that there is a form of closure and completion.

In giving her the role as a highly personal female homodiegetic protagonist-narrator, she is given the opportunity of rectifying wrongs with her own characteristic voice. Traditionally, there is an inconsistency ‘between the outer and the inner life, the dichotomization that propels man outside and confines woman inside’ (Abel 26). Simply put, women are prevented from engaging fully with the world in their search for self. Middle sister is a play on this notion that female characters, protagonist or not, were ‘excluded from active participation in culture’ being ‘thrown back on herself’ resulting in an ‘intense inwardness’ which ‘allows her to explore and develop spiritually, emotionally, and morally, but often at the expense of other aspects of selfhood’ (24). Finding her place and defining her role among others is a job already done for her, forcing the inward motion of self-exploration. Her retraction from speaking up, escapism, social withdrawal is representative of that inward retrospection. The narrative, however, is hers to shape. She shapes it within, the only confines her mind. Middle sister is trying to break out from the inside, but her narrative is inundated with signs that not all is well on that inside, despite the passage of time because the social has been internalised. The aforementioned opening prolepsis is necessary to kick off the story because middle sister has something to say. The ‘first-person narratives lend themselves to the use of prolepsis better than other types because within the admittedly retrospective character of such narratives it seems more natural for the narrator to allude to a future which has already become past’ (Rimmon-Kenan 48/9). Middle sister does not allude though. Her cognitive self is still too entangled in the experiencing self. Instead, she explicitly expresses a future storyline, ‘telling the future before its time’ (48), encouraging the reader to consider the journey to that point rather than wondering what will happen in the main plotline. This way, she cannot take it back, it forces her to continue voicing the story till the end. She cannot drown out the noise of Milkman and Somebody but has to tell of them because her interactions with them are of her. The trauma of telling that story is what necessitates an outside dissection: she is not capable of telling it straight. It is for us to look for clues, pick up on cues, make connections, rather than riding along the storyline effortlessly.

Middle sister is being constantly pulled by both arms, her middle caught in a painful position of not being able to follow in any one direction. Her unwillingness and discomfort at being the middle might make her assertion of self as an important middle in her own life convoluted, confusing, erratic. Only one narrative, the community’s, is allowed to dominate and since ‘the construction of social reality is not spontaneous and consensual but is the
product of the complex relations among narrative, power, and culture’ (Mumby 6/7), that narrative must be consistently policed. Middle sister is naturally inclined to fight: ‘Already I could feel my stubbornness, my ‘mind your own business arising’. Unfortunately, whenever that happened, I’d pretty much turn perverse, refuse to learn from experience and cut off my nose to spite my face’ (Burns 4/5). At the same time, she polices herself. So, she does not completely conform but engages in a constant struggle with the dictates of the community. She is, however, not ‘like a cat that does not recognize any boundaries and will not be subordinated and controlled by anybody’ (Drong 176). She is not a free, dissenting spirit. The narrative and story world in combination is making exactly the opposite point: She is terrified of being on the outside because the fear of being excluded is entirely debilitating. At the same time, the mechanisms of social control are so destructive to her self that her individuality screams for freedom and just being that self. It often comes to light in her narrative in the form of contradictory, sometimes paradoxical, emotional-intellectual interplays: ‘I pushed him [maybe-boyfriend] out of my mind, not because he didn’t matter but because he did matter’ (Burns 247). The cognitive self is a scream from the future to place herself in the middle of her narrative even if she is still unable to fully commit to it. The premise of her entire journey throughout the novel is placed in a label of middle, a sharp lexical symbol of her being centre stage, and torn between two parts.

2 Antithesis

2.1 Others in Her Self

The consistently constant communal demands on conformity ensure that ‘the reading of other becomes the primary social activity’ (Harman 58). Reading is part of the intense sousveillance, they of everywhere at any time keeping individual members in line. These individual members all have a self ‘embodied in external symbols; symbols which by collective agreement (often subtle and non-verbal)’ (58) exists to uphold a value system as defined by the community. Keeping your head down, ‘the lowest of low profiles’, becomes a necessity to hide that ‘your personal distinguishing habits had fallen below the benchmark of social regularity. If you didn’t, you find yourself branded a psychological misfit and slotted out there with those other misfits on the rim’ (Burns 60). The psychological misfit or ‘the strange therefore becomes that which can not be read discursively; that which has no place in the language of membership. The strange is that which can not be accounted for through the
achieved fluency of the vernacular’ (Harman 58). As a result, the misfits must be interpreted within the confines of a community understanding, alienating them further.

Middle sister’s cognitive self carries the terror of being misconstrued with her at all times in the narration as she moves from silence to a semi-deceptive incessant flow. This fear of being misconstrued is entirely natural given the many rejections her experiencing self encountered. She is in ‘a vision of individual development’ resulting in ‘a series of disillusionments or clashes with an inimical milieu’ culminating ‘not in the integration but in withdrawal, rebellion, or even suicide’ (Abel 6) of some individuals. Her being is in the middle of beyond-the-pale even if it takes her some time to realise that ‘along with the district poisoner, the poisoner’s sister, the boy who killed himself over America and Russia, the women with the issues, and real milkman, also known as the man who didn’t love anybody, I too, was one of those intemperate, socially outlawed beyond-the-pales’ (Burns 199). The community have diagnosed her. She is creepy and obstinate and the reading-while-walking ‘is disturbing. It’s deviant. It’s optical illusional. Not public-spirited. Not self-preservation. Calls attention to itself and why – with enemies at the door, with the community under siege, with us all having to pull together – would anyone want to call attention to themselves here?’ (200). Longest friend lays into her with a massive indictment, a guilt-trip, not entirely out of the blue, but still a shock for ‘I loved longest friend; at least used to love her, or loved still what I knew of her’ (195), knew of this person now seemingly unfamiliarised. Middle sister is left ‘having to persuade and prove credible to someone who’d always been in my confidence, someone whom I’d felt was authenticated in my heart’ (202). We have already been forewarned of the event. Middle sister had already realised that her ‘trusted-fewer people had declined further’ reaching ‘the point where there was now only one remaining trusted-fewest person left for me to have faith in all the world’ (174). That is longest friend, and longest friend is now ‘my one-time sister-in-thought’ draining the life from middle sister (202). She is without trusted people, friends, having ‘lost through having no faith in them and no faith or sense of entitlement in myself’ (180). The cognitive self blames the experiencing self for not being able to handle close relations, being inspired enough, not entrust enough. She seems almost perplex that this state of affairs could not be prevented, that the experiencing self did not see this coming, shouting a “what did you to do us” from the future, in a rare criticism and frustration from the future to the past. Longest friend listing her community epithets (‘you’re the girl who walks…the one who reads… the pale, adamantine, unyielding girl who walks around with the entrenched, boxed-in thinking’ (204)), marks a shift in their relationship and forces middle sister to see her self in the context of how the world chooses to see her, without
illusion, running away, ignoring. What before was a vague suspicion is confirmed. Since she is a master of avoidance, this is a brutal reckoning.

Longest friend is not alone in admonishing her. Even (third) brother-in-law\textsuperscript{15} reproves her for reading-while walking making it clear that ‘you should not do that, that it’s not safe, not natural, not dutiful to self’ (Burns 58), calling upon her already fragile self, claiming her behaviour is destructive to that self from her lack of compliance. It is her fault. She is switching herself off, abandoning her being. She might as well ‘stroll amongst the lions and the tigers’ placing herself ‘at the mercy of hard and cunning and unruly dark forces’ (58). He is concerned for her well-being, knowing her choice to retract is proof of her contrariness to the district gossip and politics, and surprisingly\textsuperscript{16}, he seems to agree. It is easy to contend it is mere frustration at not being able to protect her from the observers, the onlookers, from Big Brother. But for her, it is an admonishment from someone she trusts, in line with the cruel, hard loving provided by ma. She calls middle sister ‘some sort of mob-woman … out of the pale’ having ‘lost your intrinsic rights and wrongs’, even asserting that ‘you make it hard, wee girl, to love you’ (54). Whatever she is, it is not good enough, and it is certainly from being contrary, not being. It is like the child being admonished for being born bad, not doing something construed as a momentary, situationally bad specific act. Middle sister feels at the cusp of being ‘banished to the furthest reaches of darkness, ostracised and shown no mercy as a district beyond-the-pale’ (63). When maybe-boyfriend, normally patient and accepting, liking her for who she is, for her intricacies, oddities, strangeness joins in the rebukes, it is also out of concern. He claims that it is not possible in their type of environment to do the things she does, stand up to the pressure. He decries her for doing a vanishing act, the way she withdraws in herself becomes a situation she has created, and she should suck it up and acquiesce, adapt, disarm. He is torn, for ‘I like that you do that reading-while-walking. It’s sort of quiet, out-of-sync thing you would do, thinking too, that nothing was odd or that nobody was noticing. But it is odd, maybe-girlfriend. Not normal. Not self-preservation. Instead it’s unyielding and confounding and in our type of environment it presents you as a stubborn, perverse character’ (286). Even those that exist in their own outsideness reproach her, one by one, telling middle sister that her being is amiss.

The interplay between rejection and silence becomes a forceful combination where one reliably reinforces the other. There is a circle of agony where her withdrawal feeds of the community’s opposition to her withdrawal. Using withdrawal and silence as a means of

\textsuperscript{15} Significantly, she usually drops the “third”, he is the only in-law that counts,

\textsuperscript{16} Both third brother-in-law and maybe-boyfriend will be elaborated upon in the next section
survival becomes a road to further rebuff from close associations, resulting in increased 
withdrawal. The reading-while-walking is an escape she needs, but it just serves to push her 
farther into dismissal. It can be seen as a ‘performance of intellectuality as a form of external 
mobility openly defying the communitarian mandates of confinement, interiority, and 
discretion’ (Valle Alcalá 138), but it is more likely an escape perceived as open defiance. It is, 
however, a source of incense for the community at large. Eventually realising ‘just how much 
I was impacting people without any awareness I’d been visible to people’ (Burns 200) is 
surprising to her. She is clear that her silence is a way of ‘maintaining a border to keep my 
mind separate’ and to ‘ground and protect myself’ (54) from the outside moving in on her 
self. She is at once aware that ‘by reading while I walked I was losing touch in a crucial sense 
with communal up-to-datedness and that that, indeed, was risky. It was important to be in the 
know, to keep up with, especially when things here got added on to at such a rapid compound 
rate’ (65). Longest friend accuses her of refusing ‘to abandon my facial and bodily numbance 
in spite of everybody knowing the numbance as protection did not work here’ (204). It is 
instinctive, emotionally and intellectually.

Middle sister knows that her withdrawal is at odds with the result she wants to 
achieve. It is what protects her from an endlessly pressurised and distracted mind. It is 
‘purposely not wanting to know’ which was ‘exactly what my reading-while-walking was 
about. It was a vigilance not to be vigilant’ (65), to keep a safe space inside, a moment of 
peace, of living through another fictional being, in a different 
time. Pretending not to see, 
especially to herself, is ‘a useful screen, a way of resetting reality, another protective barrier 
that she erects each time the circumstances threaten to pile up and overwhelm her’ (Drong 
176). Protecting yourself through withdrawal is an easier feat than standing up to the 
predominant force: ‘All societies have had rebellious teenagers and misfits who didn’t want to 
accept those rules, but in this struggle, society almost always wins out by forcing inner selves 
to conform to external norms’ (Fukuyama 35). The struggle inside affects the outer self and 
its attempts at dealing with conflict and discomfort, and the outer self prefers to escape to the 
inside, not resolving anything, but instead placing middle sister in firmer opposition with the 
community and ensuring the continued destruction of the self. It is disorienting and 
exhausting.

This withdrawing, secluding, hiding, becomes a process of vanishing. The community 
is to blame as it is ‘impossible not to be closed-up because closed-upness was everywhere’ 
(Burns 114). The strive for neutrality, for blending, being unnoticeable is a necessity when 
‘shiny was bad, and ‘too sad’ was bad, and ‘too joyous’ was bad, which meant you had to go
around not being anything; also not thinking, least not at top level, which was why everybody kept their private thoughts safe and sound in those recesses underneath’ (Burns 91). There is no way back from that which she has been defined as, because that ‘is what happens when doors swing open on inner contraries. Impossible then, with all the irreconcilables, to account, not just politically-correctly, but even sensibly for oneself’ (113). Maybe-boyfriend thinks she likens the dead: ‘I look at your face and it’s as if your sense organs are disappearing or as if they’ve already disappeared so that no one gets to connect with you’ (286). Breaking a destructive pattern of engagement where her face naturally comes ‘nearly-remote and almost-inaccessible’ (301) deliberately. The disillusionment with everyone around her, those that are rejecting the bits of her that still remain, admonish her for doing seemingly innocuous things made uninnocuous by circumstance, all contribute to her vanishing as she realises, observes, and engages with other people’s reaction to her, integrating their view into her self. The community, her people really, shape her by their responses to her being. She is ‘socially conditioned into pretending’ certain things are not so said or not happening because there is a delicate interplay between ‘all the unmentionables here that managed, all the same, to get mentioned whilst retaining a patina of not being mentioned’ (116). She is forced to suppress which is inside and in opposition, creating a conflict between the recesses of her private space and a wish to conform. When ‘the inner sense of dignity seeks recognition’ – it is, ultimately, about who we are, and if other ‘people do not publicly acknowledge it’ or even denigrate or fail to acknowledge said existence, we falter, because ‘self-esteem arises out of esteem by others’ (Fukuyama 10). Middle sister has no esteem that she can identify, and the outer self starts to fade, becomes invisible, remains non-sensical. The only alternative is to remain in the only honest space left, the farthest reach of the private space, that in her middle, and vanish in that.

To accentuate the dangerous demise linked to non-conformity of social constraints, middle sister is poisoned for her transgressions. The district poisoner very nearly succeeds in killing her. Her action is not ‘referring to my affair with Milkman, which I assumed she was referring to because that was all anybody – whose business still it wasn’t – referred to’ (Burns 214). The poisoning is symbolic of the contraventions, district poisoner’s reasoning firmly rooted in a strange feminist-like perspective in which middle sister becomes ‘the cat-familiar’ of a quack doctor incarnation of Milkman responsible for killing district poisoner and another twenty-three women in a century long gone by (214/5). Again, middle sister is likened to a cat. It indicates that she is a free spirit, but not particularly loyal or trustworthy. She chooses unfamiliar paths and tends to come and go as she pleases up to a certain point. Her choices are
fraught with hazard and despondency, leaving her exposed and vulnerable, and in the middle despite the efforts at the opposite. A familiar is a form of spirit animal that aided a witch or warlock in their magic practices. If Milkman is the purveyor of magic that murders women and middle sister his cat-familiar, she is colluding in his misdeeds, of her own volition. Truly, district poisoner is not that far off the community perception. She just places the misdeeds in another format. It becomes a hyperbolic parable to the reality of now: middle sister as the lover of a dangerous, married paramilitary as a mutual assured truth. For district poisoner, middle sister is a traitor to her gender, and for that, she must be punished.

The poisoning is inconsistent with the truth that is middle sister’s traumatic experience with Milkman, but middle sister does not have the language to articulate her truth. She is not Milkman’s familiar back in the fantasy past nor in the presence of the experiencing self. The relation between them is a falsity, and the trauma of her experiences remain all over the narrative both explicitly and implicitly.

Middle sister has not been schooled in the language of unwanted sexual innuendo, ‘she has no vocabulary with which to resist or even describe what is happening to her’ (Miller). Untoward advances from first brother-in-law and Milkman become indicative early on in the narrative that this novel ‘recodes the voice of someone who has struggled to find that voice’ (Hutton 367) in the face of disabling pressures. She is left frozen, speechless, incapacitated. The community has no concerns about sexual predators and ‘if no physically violent touch was being laid upon you, and no outright verbal insults were being levelled at you, and no taunting looks in the vicinity either, then nothing was happening’ (Burns 6). She has no knowledge of institutions that might support her discomfort at being the interest of a sexual predator. In fact, she has ‘no proper understanding of the ways that constituted encroachment. I had a feeling for them, an intuition, a sense of repugnance for some situations and some people, but I did not know intuition and repugnance counted, did not know I had a right not to like, not to have to put up with, anybody and everybody coming near me’ (6). We are far into #metoo territory. It might take years for women to disclose abuse, in particular when faced with an oppressive community that does not recognise the nature of or have signifiers to describe sexually unwanted attentions. Middle sister wonders why she could just ‘not stop this running and tell this man to leave me alone’, instead waiting for her cognitive self to disclose that she was unable to ‘have those thoughts until later, and I don’t mean an hour later, I mean twenty years later’ (6). She acknowledges his lack of wokeness in ‘presuming I didn’t mind him beside me when I did mind him beside me’ (6). For the violence of Milkman may not be physical, but it is intermittent, oppressive, destructive, a thought that cannot leave,
continuously weighing on middle sister and affecting all aspects of her life. He ‘was appearing, stopping me, standing in the way of me or falling into step beside me’ (Burns 166) ‘where he had never been before’ (5). The physical appearance leads to mental aberrations in her ‘growing suspicions of almost everyone and everything…proof of how the milkman had got in. He’d infiltrated, my psyche’ (166). The total allostatic load must have contributed to a significant amount of weathering stress\(^{17}\) for middle sister, affecting not only her psyche but also her physical well-being. Not having the language to articulate the effect or the understanding of Milkman as a stressor eliminates the possibility of rectifying, of reckoning, of resisting.

2.2 Her Self in Others

Middle sister is not the only outcast in her community. In fact, this community does have its share of strange as defined by a collectively defined voice, and these beyond-the-pales ‘were a law unto themselves. Often the pales were said to flout convention, to move things not reasonably on one as everybody else did, but unapproved, unannounced, move things on two, or three, or even side-step their convulsions entirely on to some new, even more farfetched footing’ (219). This is even something warring religious affiliations can agree on, defining ‘who was of normal disharmony and who was a man-overboard person’ (71). It supersedes conflict and division. These misfits each embodies a part of middle sister that has been lost to her. Their stories must be comingled with her own for her web to hold. They are rule breakers unable or unwilling to follow the given line. They are communally labelled foils whom all touch middle sister. They are her potential, authentic selves. They are the beyond-the-pales.

Real milkman, aka the man who didn’t love anybody, flouts convention. Initially, he seems a bit of a Boo Radley, a non-communicative recluse living alone that strikes fear in the hearts of the local children. He is ‘one of our district’s official beyond-the-pales’, who shouts at the children ‘up to the point he’d altered their landscape’ in such an explosive manner that some begin to cry (140). He fights with everyone, being fed up with their silly games, with mock courts and local justice, with the pattern of disappearances, with the local rules and regulations. He became ‘contrary for doing exactly what the renouncers-of-the-state in our district had ordered people in our district not to do’ (248). He throws their guns out in the street in abject protest at them involving him in their war. Real milkman helps people ‘in spite of his unloving reputation suggesting he did not’ and the community is unable ‘to

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\(^{17}\) For more information about allostatic load and weathering stress, see section on further reading
acknowledge his good deeds... because his reputation for general all-round unfriendliness had become so fixed in the district consciousness that it would have taken an enormous explosion of conscious effort to shift that particular bit of hearsay on to the truth’ (Burns 141). He is trapped into being the man who didn’t love anybody, but not because he is ‘unloving, anti-social, bad-tempered’, nor because he is ‘uncooperative’ or ‘prone to arguments’, or even ‘stern and conscious and aware and unyielding’. Quite on the contrary, is in a ‘higher state of consciousness’ (254), travelling beyond not just the pale. He is a point of confusion as understanding his ways is beyond the grasp of the community because real milkman is beyond the rest, not just beyond-the-pale, but beyond better.

As a foil, real milkman rises to a point of significant prominence for middle sister. Her contact with him moves from being coloured by slight discomfort to a grateful insight. She ‘didn’t consider him horrid or very cross, or even much beyond-the-pale, that is, considering the other beyond-the-pales in our area’ and ‘no matter his misanthropic ways, or his reputation for such ways, he did possess the characteristics of having a stern concern for people’ (142). He comes to her rescue near the graveyard after another encounter with Milkman whilst the cat’s head is in her hands. Instead of rejecting her emotional and practical response to the reality of the cat’s head, he acknowledges her predicament. He appears ‘solemn, austere, yet here he was, giving his time, bringing me hope, listening to me, taking me seriously’ (144). Middle sister is seen by him, her concern recognised as a real concern. This time it is a cat’s head, but if the cat’s head can be acknowledged, maybe her predicament with Milkman can too. His attitude surprises and uplifts her in a way no other character ever ventures to do. In acknowledging the presence of the surveillants, also known as ‘the unmentionables’, and admitting he is ‘unable to do anything to alter this unmentionable’, he opens her mind’s eye to the possibility that even for her in powerlessness, it is possible ‘to adopt such an attitude of acknowledgement, of acceptance and detachment’ (145). There is a sense of freedom in him. Real milkman becomes a father-figure and a symbol of absolutely caring and daring to admit that. She wants to thank him ‘again, properly, meaning thank you for the cat, for bringing me home, for being ma’s friend, for being a person in the background’ (165). He touches her, and he touches others. When they want to kill him, they cannot as all the women, most of whom have a crush on him, are against it. This, coupled with his status as loony, becomes his rescue. The ‘final judgment was that this milkman of the area had proven another district resistant with anti-social behavioural tendencies not consistent within a standard perimeter of conformability, meaning he qualified as another member of our community’s woebegone beyond-the-pales’ (322). Real milkman is ‘not all
there’ and ‘death penalty can be eschewed in the interest of being decent to a district mental vulnerable’ (Burns 322). Real milkman is possibility. For him, being partially shunned seems irrelevant. For him, veracity and authenticity win. He goes against the grain, showing middle sister another way with kindness. He is integrity.

Teacher will inspire to think of the world differently. She is intellectually based in the emotional world of imagery, in words as purveyors of distinct perspectives. It is about taking leaps of faith, of daring to dream and hope and live. In her unwillingness to accept the class discomfort with engaging in the interpretation of poetry and acknowledging that the sky can be a myriad of colours other than blue, she ‘confirmed further our suspicions about her; in short, suspicions that she was none other than a beyond-the-pale-person’ (71). She even laughs ‘because she had an unnerving amount of humour – another thing which ruffled us’ (69). They are muffled by ‘this presenting of an anti-culture to our culture when she herself was of our culture’ (72). Teacher displays joy at the innocuous, she makes philosophical statements about the things that are lost in this space of social control, of subjugation to centrally determined principles. She does not believe they are ‘meant to be coffined and buried while all the time still living, that nothing of the dark was so enormous that never could surmount it’ (80). Essentially, that shroud of darkness in which they walk forever can be overcome. They ‘must let go of the old’ and open ‘to symbolism, to the most unexpected of interpretations’ to ‘uncover what we’ve kept hidden, what we think we might have lost’ (80). She recognises that something is indeed lost, though it remains somewhat intangible. She recognises it out loud, without filter.

There is a conflict between the literal world and the figurative, between the conventional and the exceptional, where language is shrouded in bored and safe darkness. The idea that French can be more than resuscitating and repeating verbs and phrases is foreign and uncomfortable. The class is not meant to be ‘burdening us with taking things apart which are in the same language to find out if they’re a poem or something’ (70). There is no desire to learn ‘figures of speech and rhetorical flourishes with one thing representing another thing when the represented thing could easily have been itself in the first place’ (70). Middle sister lives in a black and white world. The sky can only be blue because ‘it was the convention not to admit’ (70) that it is anything but blue. The underlying tension is, yet again, at the heart of a restriction. They cannot ‘accept detail for this type of detail would mean choice and choice would mean responsibility and what if we failed in our responsibility? Failed to in the interrogation of the consequences of seeming more than we could cope with? Worse, what if it was nice, whatever it was, and we liked it, got used to it, were cheered up by it, came to rely
upon it, only for it to go away, or be wrenched away, never to come back again?’ (Burns 70/71). The constant feeling that nothing can be beautiful in their world because it might be disappeared by the hand that rocks the cradle at any given time reigns supreme. Change is the ultimate danger because the consequences are unpredictable and unknown, and to handle any unpredictability beyond the unpredictability that is of the conventional everyday political unpredictability would be too much. Therefore, ‘after generation upon generation, fathers upon forefathers, mothers upon foremothers, centuries and millennia of being one colour officially and three colours unofficially, a colourful sky, just like that, could not be allowed to be’ (73). Better to stick with the hell which you know. There is no room for language to be anything but literal. The language is wholly coded by and for the community in an ever-continuing preservation of the conflict. Teacher thinks it is time to talk, to look for beauty, to dare to experience more than fear, to use words to search for everything the community destroys by accepting the current state of affairs.

Teacher is heavily representative of the lack of self in the community in so much as she has a very clear authentic self: ‘it was obvious she was a person too defined within herself to be long perturbed by anything at all’ (72). She wants her students to open to other interpretations by accessing what is within without worrying about their unease because ‘even your temporary unhinging, dear students, in the face of this sunset is encouraging. It can only mean progress. It can only mean enlightenment’ (77) because they are feeling something. Taking in another possibility, an alternative path, and acceptance that ‘maybe we did have street trees but they must have been put in half an hour earlier as nobody here had noticed them before’ (78). They can open their eyes, edging unwillingly toward a cleared vision, seeing through some of the darkness, breaking somewhat free, but without dismissing the previous self-imposed concealment. The class ‘knew that the sky that evening had been an initiation’ (79) into thinking otherwise. Their discomfort at the idea of an empowered self is strong enough to ‘criticise the outrageousness and disharmony and the unfitness to be a teacher of our teacher’ (79). A strong self, thinking inversely, contrariwise, inside out, the wrong way around, alternatively, is just not an acceptable form of self to display. Teacher’s assurances and inspirational words, her faith in change, is a daring thing to say ‘to us, to people who were not only not into metaphors, not into admiring to what patently was there. But it had felt valuable. She felt valuable’ (101). For middle sister, the self she displays is a comment on their value, that the class can embrace a value in themselves. What she is, and what she says, lights a glimmer of hope. Hope, however, is lethal, destructive, demoralising. There is always a chance that ‘the next chapter was the same as this chapter, as had been the
last chapter’ or that ‘all chapters stayed the same or even, as time went on, got worse’ (Burns 101) but if you never try anything, you stagnate, stop, remain. If you have allowed yourself to be seduced by her premise, by the symbolism and the metaphors, by the search for beauty in the convention of sky, the chance of disappointment is too high. Their instinct is to instinctively and protectively turn their backs, acknowledging there is meaning, but being unable to ascertain if this meaning is ‘a safe something or a threatening something’ (73/77). Middle sisters inner narrative voice knocks her back down, the voice of the community ringing loud in her words. She is responding to her hidden self, that on her inside wanting and needing to come out, to be recognised, to recognise itself, but she cannot accept it, understand it, embrace it. The idea of it, though, has been born by seeing beauty beyond the blue. Where real milkman is integrity in self, teacher is meaning.

Third brother-in-law, has escaped ostracization, despite not playing by the rules, simply by being perceived as an all-round nice guy of a non-threatening nature. This is despite him being loved by all women (except maybe his wife) because of ‘his atypical high regard for all things female’ and being ‘a mad exerciser, a mad street fighter, a basic all-round mad person’ (11). He has a sense of fair game dancing around him, treating people straight up according to his own moral compass. The result is that middle sister ‘liked him. Other people liked him’ (11), but ‘under normal circumstances, he would have been placed in the category of our district’s beyond-the-pales’ (60)

‘considering alone his avowals of devotion towards women, his mission of idolatry, his supreme glorification and deification and view that on earth in women was the life of things, the breadth of things, the cyclical, essential nature, higher aspect, the best, most archetypal and utmost mystery of everything’ (67). For middle sister, he is freedom, safety, and peace. He is freedom for her to be, he is safety to run, and he is peace from all hurtful words and conjectures because ‘he never gossiped, never came out with lewd remarks or sexual sneers or sneers about anything. Nor did he ask manipulative, nosey questions’ (11). He does not talk like first brother-in-law who ‘made lewd remarks about me to me…about my quaint, my tail, my country, my box, my jar, my contrariness, my monosyllable’ using ‘words sexual, I did not understand’ (1/2). Even if his exercise fixation could sometimes override his thinking mechanism (243), as illustrated by his relentless requests for her to run while poisoned, he is there for her, which the relentless requests confirm. Like the others, he is authentic, but, above all, he is loyalty.

Maybe-boyfriend is a safe space in his otherness and, bear with me here, a representation of truth. He is close, but not too close, existing in a semi-removed outskirt from
the rest of her life due to living in another area. Middle sister keeps him mostly to herself, in “hiding”. Her relationship with him is fraught with all the things left unsaid, and seems a minitia of society at large. She is inundated by subterfuge, lies, omissions, oral no-go areas that certainly flavours her relations with maybe-boyfriend. She wants to move ‘forward on proper coupledom by cohabiting’ (Burns 43), but the wish is quashed in diversionary rambles about where such a cohabitation could take place and the actual suitability about maybe-boyfriend according to family. Society sneaks in to ensure her compliance, always creating doubt in her mind. The presence of Milkman further complicates matters between them. Middle sister can no longer relish in the semi-secret comfort of maybe-boyfriend. He has been a representation of something different, something liberating, due to his being ‘curious and engaged and eager – because of passion, because of plans, because of hope, because of me. And that was it. With me too, he was uncalculated, transparent, free from deception, always was what he was, with none of that coolness, that withholding, that design, those hurtful, sometimes clever, always mean, manipulations. No conniving. No games-playing’ (18).

Middle sister is tied to convention, and convention dictates that in this community, conniving, game-playing, manipulation, deception, withholding is the norm rather than the exception. Where maybe-boyfriend is free, middle sister is shackled, and she is unable to be as frank with him as he seemingly is with her. Maybe-boyfriend has been comfort food, but Milkman with his not so veiled threats imperils the liberating something maybe-boyfriend represents for her. She goes from hiding him to others, to active omission to him, scared both for his safety and that maybe-boyfriend will not hear the right parts, see her side, and instead be ‘unable to take in the weight of what I myself couldn’t take in the weight of?’ (246). The blueprint from ma on rejection due to socially internalised responses has been internalised in her, surfacing in connection with intimate relationships that might be tried by trouble. The magnitude of the predicament is a massive escarpment with no bridge, no rope, no road around, and his feelings are in the way. It will become a blame-game anyway, so better to leave it unsaid.

There is, however, something off with maybe-boyfriend’s safe space. For one, he took her to ‘that recent alarming and alerting sunset’ (72). He asks, insouciantly, for her to come ‘because it’s the sun’ (73) seemingly naturally engaging in this pastime, ‘as if this wasn’t unprecedented, as if people in my environment suggested sunsets to each other frequently’ (74). There is no way to understand ‘how come he has thoughts of seeing a sun go down when nobody I know – especially boys, also girls, women too, men too, certainly me – has ever had a thought of seeing a sun go down?’ (44). Despite her clear fondness for him, he crosses
boundaries that makes her uncomfortable. When ‘faced with his behaviour, and with this skyscape in front of me, and with the expectation I was supposed to observe it, witness it, attend it in some way and have an appropriate reaction to it, I stood beside him and looked and nodded even though I didn’t know what it was I was looking and nodding at’ (Burns 75). Her affection makes her acquiesce, but on the inside she still resists.

Of course, maybe-boyfriend is not as frank and uncomplicated as middle sister believed and indicated in the first place. Her cognitive self drops little hints, foreshadowing events to come noting that ‘maybe-boyfriend always had new things about him, things I hadn’t noticed in others’ (44). No physical description implies he is as particularly effeminate, but ‘like chef, he liked cooking which was not usually done by boys and I’m not sure I liked him liking cooking. Also like chef, he didn’t like football, or was it that he didn’t go on about liking it in the way required of boys and for that reason became known in his area as one of those males that wasn’t a fruit but didn’t like football all the same. Secretly I had a worry that maybe-boyfriend might not be a proper man’ (44). She doubts him, worrying if ‘maybe-boyfriend in some male way was refusing to fit in’ (76), the male way of not fitting in being different than the female. But he is trying to fit in. He is using her, not out of ill will and maybe not consciously, to seemingly fit at least in that specific sense of having a girlfriend.

Despite her suspicions or fleeting thoughts of wonder, her experiencing self remains largely ignorant till the necessary decision to say the unsaid is made. She arrives at a place, where a certain confidence in the self and in him seems to prevail by way of her spontaneity. She is ‘to go to him, to go now, said my spontaneity, to tell out to him face-to-face all this misunderstanding we’d been having and to communicate properly and get this mess cleared up’ (287). Her instinct being hide and avoid, this is many miles beyond her naturally inclined comfort zone. She personifies her spontaneity, giving credit to something ingrained in her personality. If it were a decision based on emotional-intellectual interplay, she would have to engage fully with the emotive and the rational outcome of the confrontation. What she craves is catharsis, a release from the guilt, a relief from the things she has inside that she has no words for, to impart with the weight of the abuse she experiences. Middle sister cannot know that a tell-all conversation with maybe-boyfriend will not happen because ‘the surprise and unexpectedness at what was happening in that kitchen between those men was turning out to be only so for me’ (293). Maybe-boyfriend may not have been as observant and attentive as he should have been due to distraction he has been engaging in with chef. A distraction that is, of course, beyond anything remotely acceptable here. Middle sister does not irrationally scream or shout, barge in, she just watches, remaining ‘where I was, as if something ever so
strong had placed an invisible hand on my arm and firmly was staying me, ordering me, commanding me, warning me’ (Burns 290). She is ‘slipping into a state of incomprehension whilst fully comprehending at the same time’ (294) knowing exactly ‘what was coming and this was not for my eyes to see or my ears to hear’ (293). This is the truth of maybe-boyfriend. A non-binary homo/hetero, both one and the other, completely authentically. There is an element of understanding for the predicament the two men are in, and instead, she turns to blaming herself because ‘I had no right to be angry because if I’d managed this differently it wouldn’t now be my fault’ (297). She recognises her own subterfuge and lack of divulgence as part of him concealing this piece of himself. The situation needs to be abandoned and ignored and not talked about as per usual, but on some level, this silence seems a value question. Middle sister indicates she walked in on something private, and her disdain for gossip requires a quiet retreat. Maybe-boyfriend needs to be protected for his distinction, his fallacy, his passion, his being. Also, maybe-boyfriend seemed genuine in his care for her, in pushing for cohabitation, conversation, communication. Despite his omissions, concealing an aspect of himself to her, he somehow emerges as wholly authentic and truthful. He is truth.

There is strength in numbers. Illustrative of the all-consuming nature of a political religious conflict is the women with the issues, whom, interestingly, real milkman is favourable of (151/2). Their concern is to take matters from out of the bubble of Northern Ireland and recognise their connection with an increasingly globalised world. They want to focus on the universal issue of women’s rights, introducing concerns that are beyond the devouring conflict by communicating across tracks, attempting to broaden the scope. They even cooperate across community lines hailing ‘not just from the two warring religions here, but also from a smattering of the lesser known, lesser attended to, indeed completely ignored, other religions’ (153), which is obviously preposterous. It serves no other purpose than to antagonise and is certainly something that you cannot do with permission. Any attempt at insurrection seems futile. You cannot ignore the local political problems and border issues without being punished. Stories start to circle and you are marked for non-conformity simply because concerns are beyond local concerns, in opposition with convention.

In wanting to break up long-lived conventions they are considered destructive. Even middle sister labels them ‘these aborting homosexual insurrectionists’ (156). They become agents of the truth that social constraints are ‘more relentless in women’s stories’ (Abel 12). In a world where ‘marriage wasn’t meant to be a bed of roses. It was a divine decree, a communal duty, a responsibility, it was acting your age, having right-religion babies and obligations and limitations and restrictions and hindrances’ (Burns 50), fighting from a
feminist perspective is a no-go zone. The ‘women who rebel against the female role are perceived as unnatural’ (Abel 228). Even catching eyes with them in the street is tantamount to ‘social suicide’, and ‘these women, constituting the nascent feminist group in our area… were firmly placed in the category of those way, way beyond-the-pale. The word ‘feminist’ was beyond-the-pale. The word ‘woman’ barely escaped beyond-the-pale’. So they become ‘these women with the issues’, and people said awful things about them, ‘not just behind their backs but to their faces as well’ (Burns 152). Middle sister is at a significant breaking point historically where feminism that breaks with traditional gender patterns start to appear.

The women with the issues are representative of this coming turning point. They are in her narrative to remind us that even in a community like hers, the changes are coming, albeit slowly and arduously. Their lofty ideas do not fit in with life, so they cannot expect the other women ‘to go along with the preposterousness of the silliness they had concocted as rationale in their heads’ (159). The ‘women represent a proliferative capacity at the heart of the identarian construct, a nomadic force threatening the stability of the sovereign entity’ (Valle Alcalá 138). They are dangerous. Middle sister is drawn to the women with the issues but ‘there was too much of a risk, and besides, they were challenging the status quo while I was trying to go under the radar of the status quo… even if in some measure regarding their issues I might be in agreement, there was no way ever I was going to link with them’ (Burns 164).

The political antagonism ‘mutes the articulation of alternative worldviews by groups at the margins of political power’ (Mumby 7). They have no voice. Even if we can see sympathy, a semblance of attraction to the cause, a little feminist inside middle sister, she is not ready for that type of conflict, this kind of visual revolt. Feminism is in her, behind her reluctance to marry and behind the anger, she displays at her sisters dominated being in the face of her ‘piece of dirt’ (Burns 2) husband. She is angry ‘at her for being the wee wife, for doing exactly what he told her to, and at him, for trying to put his own contemptibleness over onto me’ (4). Middle sister is torn between tradition and progress. Our heroine ‘must chart a treacherous course between the penalties of expressing sexuality and suppressing it, between the costs of inner concentration and of direct confrontation with society’ (Abel 12/13). The women with the issues stand tougher in the face of adversity, they cooperate with truth in each other, relentlessly, accepting that being authentically feministic must be punished. Their confrontation with society cannot succeed at this time because global cultural concerns are minimised, society too stubbornly traditional, but they persistently try. They are revolt.

Two characters are inseparable yet completely separate in the roles as foils for middle sister: district poisoner and her shiny sister. There is a fine line between being beyond-the-
pale and shiny, and there is thin ice between being shiny and destroyed. The sisters are consistently orienting the self through the other, with middle sister in the middle, being pulled between light and dark, between shiny and dulled. They are the fight between good and evil, but not that of the classic kind of a binary oppositional struggle, but of the modern kind where even evil can be pitied, empathised, cried with, and good can be an ambivalent good.

District poisoner is a manifestation of a way middle sister might go: the crazy way. Her madness is real and true, beyond-the-pale. Though some think her ‘very deft, very furtive, very making herself invisible, blending into everything, dissolving away to nothing’ (Burns 234). Her madness is closely connected to the oppressive nature of the community as it relates to ‘identity, legacy and tradition’, ensuring that she ‘was minding to a very great degree, adhering far too much, giving more attention perhaps than was meet, to separating herself, to isolating herself which was what she was doing whenever she did her poisoning’ (265). The continuous poisoning of others is simply a symptom of the extreme measures taken to divide her selves as a response to the world she is forced to endure. It is a scream for recognition ‘during an era that was so stuffed with political problems that even a tiny demented person… could walk around freely and weekly, poising people yet rate not a jot in the rankings’ (183). Middle sister sees district poisoner’s split self as she is taken over by ‘psychological usurpers and possessors’ who can only be dispensed of in death. It is too late for her. She must die. In middle sister’s narrative, despite her difficult relationship with district poisoner, there is empathy felt through the jumbled language. Middle sister knows it could be her, her terror, her lost self. District poisoner’s terror believed it could dispense of the shell, her body, of the physical being, the weak voice of hope, reason, the bit that knew the delusion and danger is on the inside and not an external threat. But the terror is not the self, it is just the remaining manifestation of the self, unable to exist without the suppressed part of district poisoner. She is a warning not to allow yourself to be immured, confined imprisoned, locked-up, in your minds search for the authentic self.

True wife, mostly known as tablets girl’s sister, is, strangely enough, also a warning not to be completely immured in your authenticity. She is ‘translucent, untouched by our darkness’ (90). Known to be one of the shiny people, it means she is beyond-the-pale in a slightly off-ended category. The result is much the same: you are shunned either way. Liking, accepting, understanding, this ‘rare, baffling, radiant type of people’ who ‘give of a constant goodwill and trust’ (88) is too disconcerting. They are in trouble for being a picture of ‘innocence, frankness, openness, with a defencelessness and an affection and purity so pure,
so affectionate’ (Burns 89). They are in danger because darkness cannot abide by the light where darkness reigns supreme. The ‘years of personal and communal suffering, personal and communal history’ constantly ‘overladen with heaviness and grief and fear and anger’ means that being open ‘to any bright shining button of a person stepping into their environment and shining upon them just like that’ (89) will just hurt too much. True wife is not disliked, it is just ‘hard to deal with the threat she posed by going about completely holding her own’ (90), being authentic. She is a threat because she dares to shine where human darkness eliminates light. They are ‘sunk in one long, melancholic story to the extent that the truly shining person coming into this darkness ran the risk of not outliving it’ (90). The shininess cannot be allowed to exist, being shiny is truly perilous to the spirit of the oppressively conjoined community. Her demise is foreshadowed in the relative judgment of all those who shine. Her future state of ‘diminished shininess’ in an ‘encroaching darkness’ (260) is inevitable. It is not possible to fight the darkness permanently.

Middle sister and true wife are bound together by their poisoning by district poisoner and their relation to third brother. She knows this too could be her. They are connected by their experiences both literally and figuratively. Middle sister can see that true wife’s shininess ‘was damaged, patchy, hardly to be discernible. Apart from a few dithering blinks and the odd, sullen twinkle, she could have been any one of us with our heavy slumbering loads’ (259). Middle sister sees good destroyed. True wife has her spirit and her shiny self near obliterated, bringing them closer on a relative plane. Middle sister realise their sameness, her own slumbering shine connects them figuratively. Middle sister wants to help, but might ‘not be able to, owing to a state of clinging to railings herself’ (260) as the physical ramifications of the poison leave them both reduced mentally and physically. Seeing true wife diminished with ‘all her surveillance detections overwhelmed and overwhelming’ (267) now unable to navigate the world, is profoundly disruptive to any hope middle sister might retain after her poisoning. The changing euphemism, however, is a manifestation of something righteous: True wife goes from being tablet girl’s sister, an epithet that gives her no self at all, to becoming true wife, a representation of something rectified, a victory for the individual wishes over a collective concern. A victory for authentically living and being, through choosing your own mate. Her new euphemism also puts her in relation to middle sister rather than the community and her sister the poisoner. It is a significant evolution, their bond creating a strength they were unaware of, and the narrator driving home the significance of true wife as a foil for a belief in prevailing love. Middle sister floats somewhere between the
two sisters in her search for self. The sisters are a warning: a line between vanishing in and outshining a prevailing darkness.

A literal symbolic other of her self can be found in the area labelled the ten-minute area. You can pass through in ten minutes ‘hurrying, no dawdling’, and everyone hurries through. For once, not because of the political problems which are ‘naïve, clumsy, hardly of consequence’ (Burns 81) in comparison with the abandoned blocks of night-time. Here, the gothic rules. It is mysterious, strange, scary, unreal, obscure, disconcerting. The churches are ‘out of action, disused, defeated, almost shells of buildings’ but ‘their black spires still towered up there in the sky’ (81). It is ‘an eerie, grey place, a place attempting perhaps to transcend some dark, evil happening without managing to transcend it and instead succumbing to it’ (81) clearly ‘not for normal things’ (137). The symbolism is hardly subtle on a superficial level. There is, however, an extended symbolism in that middle sister’s relation to the ten-minute area is significant because she consistently challenges its impact when walking through it. It challenges her back. Middle sister competes with the darkness with her unrecognised shine. Her experiences in the ten-minute area far transcend ten minutes as she carries with her some of the darkness in the weight, feel, and smell of a cat’s head into the world outside.

It is a place of growth for middle sister, a place for reckoning and insight. She is forced to continue ‘to stand there, in this territory of things pretend and not clearly stated, also in this area where individuals shouldn’t just hurry, but should make a point really, of never entering in the first place’ (136) both literally and metaphorically. She is literally forced because she encounters Milkman and the other men who are either with or not with Milkman, She is walking an ambivalent line of being forced or compelled to look around due to the recent eye-opener of teacher. Her near awakening loiters with her on her walk-through, and she casts her eye to the ground to look for the blue that was missing in the vibrant colourful sky of every colour but blue. Logically, if the sky can be green, maybe blue could be found on the ground, and ‘this had me glancing to the ground’ (93). She is daring to look for the unexpected, unaccepted, unconventional, finding catharsis in the form of a cat’s head. The decapitation of the cat is the death of the ‘subversive, witch-like, the left hand, bad luck, feminine’ (93) meaning the opposite of the purity, love, and fidelity of something blue in a dreaded marriage. Middle sister’s subversive feminist is compelled to take the head with her. Under the image of the two remaining churches, ‘still unstable, still on the brink’ (83) threatening to crush anyone unlucky enough to be underneath when they eventually tumble, the constant squeeze middle sister is in, the overhanging danger, the pressure from above,
looms large. The darkness in which she stands is her self. The ten-minute area is abandoned and dilapidated, but not void of sense, of perspective, of progress. Nor is middle sister. The extended metaphor of the ten-minute area as a place in her mind where she should not enter is explicitly expressed: ‘I resembled in my open-but-closed perspective the ten-minute area. It was as if there was nothing there when there was something there, whilst at the same time, as if there was something there when there was nothing there’ (Burns 180). The part which opens up for an alternate perspective, idea, thought, is a no-go area. She cannot keep hold of its lure, bring it out in the open, see it unambiguously and elucidated. Instead, she is forced to consider that part of her mind a dark and creepy place with rundown buildings and boarded up shops which she sometimes must pass through, but never linger. The whole area is representative of her actual self hidden in the dark recesses of her mind.

3 Ambiguity

3.1 Shaping

In shaping this story, middle sister shapes the self with it. Perception and perspective shape any given reality. Existing in a collectively given truth, where the invisible and visible hand of social control dictates, the self is shaped with that construed truth. Truth is not only in the eye of a singular beholder but the common perception of the community as an enforced unified beholder. This is why middle sister consistently attempts to shape and reshape reality and perceptions of said reality: she is looking for her self. The narration is a search for truth, a messy journey through the jungle of influence from the community, the traumas of the experiencing self, and the understanding the cognitive self can discern. What on one page is a construct, a figment of her imagination, can on a later page be an unequivocal truth. They are not major plot points or necessarily very significant. Instead, they are little dribs and drabs illustrating her relative confusion. She knows that Somebody is ‘so far gone in his makings-up that I think he thought every word true himself’ (117), but her cognitive self seems only semi-conscious that her own makings-up flavours her narration. She is engaging in an act of self-creation, never intentionally deceiving or flavouring, just searching, and explaining.

Amid her ramblings, therefore, she will ramble her way into an invention, or establish a truth with intricate levels of unawareness and awareness at the same time. For example, when district poisoner poisons a man and middle sister thinks district poisoner thought he was ‘Hitler maybe’. He swiftly becomes ‘the man who was mistaken for Hitler’ rather than something someone maybe thought because the assumption was that they thought it even if
there is no apparent reason for thinking so other than that Hitler may have deserved a poisoning for his transgressions. This seems a bit of a reach, but for middle sister arriving at such a conclusion is intricately interwoven with the fact that she and tablets girl’s sister were poisoned too. Even if she has engaged in what the community considers serious transgressions, she is hardly a Hitler, and tablets girl’s crime was simply being too shiny or the “good” sister. But to her, it helps explain what cannot be explained by the madness of tablets girl alone. Middle sister does not let go of the allegorical evil, and within a page, ‘Hitler maybe’ is a new-born epithet for a man of whom nothing other than the poisoning is known. It continues to reside in middle sister’s mind returning intermittently in a stray thought such as: ‘I was poisoned. Then the man mistaken for Hitler was poisoned’ (Burns 267). A stray thought, supposition, becomes a truth, a part of her storytelling, as she desperately attempts to contextualise and explain so the world can be orderly and make sense, her crimes befitting the punishment. She has a similarly confusing relation with Ivor, who she makes up, but sometimes seems to forget is a figment, because he could potentially provide a semblance of safety, solve a problem. She is configuring her suppositions into the story, constructing the narrative, from her perspective, based on her revisited and retrieved memories, with possible elements of confabulation but also conjecture, contextualisation, trauma, omission, reconstruction, and the influence of the community.

Throughout, the same points are reiterated in a myriad of different ways and contexts. In rhetoric, repetition is used to convince. It is more likely middle sister is attempting to convince herself rather than the reader. It is an affirmation of her retelling, a way to extinguish any doubt she might have. Furthermore, middle sister is intent on ensuring that ideas, concepts, words, phrases are repeated for emphasis. The intended meaning cannot be left veiled. For example, there is no uncertainty that the business of marriage is a difficult subject in middle sister’s world when ‘marrying in doubt, marrying in guilt, marrying in regret, in fear, in despair, in blame, also in terrible self-sacrifice was pretty much the unspoken matrimonial requisite here’ (256). We understand, marriage is important, marriage is contentious. The iterative nature of the text forces recognition of how a certain concept consistently permeates her mind.

The complexity is further accentuated since the frequency of repetition is not limited to a single page or point in the story but persists throughout. The topic of marriage, to reinforce the previously stated emphasis, is reiterated on several occasions through conversations with ma and in major plot points such as when third brother arrives back to tablet girl’s sister from wrong wife, making her ‘true wife’ (275). We learn that ‘this business
of people marrying people they didn’t love and didn’t want and where someone from the outside might look in and shake their head and say that somebody ought not to be in such an intimate position in another somebody’s life if it turned out they were the wrong somebody’ (Burns 255). The many reasons not to marry the right person: the political situation, the fear of being alone, being bullied into it, the fear of oneself, fear of causing envy and anger to arise in others, and that, most importantly, sustained happiness it too much to ask (255/6). These ideas linger consistently in the background, often being brought to the foreground. The emphasis that her cognitive self places on marriage leaves her experiencing self struggling with established practice. Traditionally women, ‘instead of testing their self-image through adventures in the outside world’ are ‘initiated at home through learning the rituals of human relationships, so that they may replicate the lives of their mothers’ (Abel 228). Middle sister has always known, since she was just a wee one, that marriage is required in a certain format that has little to do with choice. Ma, for example, is so entirely indoctrinated in the official line of thinking on marriage and relationships that she cannot see that Somebody is an utterly unsuitable fit for middle sister. Only in retrospect can middle sister’s somewhat cognitive and emotional distance allow her to wonder if ‘this really was – in the undergrowth of her own recesses – truly what ma believed of women and of their destiny herself?’ (Burns 50/1), or it may be just another manifestation, repetition, of ma’s submission to the patriarchy.

The many repetitions emphasise the many layers of difficulty making it impossible to overcome a cultural demand effectively. Of course, each time an idea, a moment, an opinion, a plotline is repeated, it is done in a new context, so ‘no event is repeatable in all respects, nor is a repeated segment of the text quite the same, since its new location puts it in a different context which necessarily changes its meaning’ (Rimmon-Kenan 57). The new context illustrates the penetration of certain ideas into every corner of society. Middle sister is finely attuned to the demands, after all, they are everywhere. Occasionally though, her narrative seems to perpetuate the repetition to reinforce the truth of it. She might be trying to convince herself, she might be trying to convince her readers, or she becomes the purveyor of a mismanaged truth brought to the forefront of consideration because she is compelled to.

Middle sister is compelled to use all the words in the world, as well as some extra ones, to regurgitate her story. It is complementary to the repetitions in so much as she utilises numerous synonyms and adjoining terms to convey the absolute point without room for misunderstanding. She needs ‘not to be numb, but to be aware, to have facts, retain facts, be present, be adult’ (Burns 294). Despair, joy, confusion, fear must be accurately described with the right language, usually in lists. These emotional echoes pervade her narrative. Likewise,
particular happenings are also inundated by listings that usually come in three, but often more, sometimes alliterated, always connected by meaning or context: ‘drinking, fighting and rioting were run-of-the-mill, customary, necessary’ (Burns 59). The need to include the lists speaks of a need to share extensively and excessively, describing every feeling and impression that could not have been described, or even identified, at the time of the events themselves.

The many words are also about being allowed and able to use them. Middle sister’s interest in language is not new. She is a reader, a learner of French, and her command of language strong, her interest palpable: ‘Though I myself and wee sisters said ‘however’ and ‘indeed’ – it was an emotional word, too much of colorant, too high-flying, too posturing; basically it was of that quintessential ‘over the water’ language, with ‘quintessential’ being another of those words. Almost never were they used here without ruffling or embarrassing or frightening local people, so someone else said, ‘Fuck, who would have thought!’ which toned things down, being more in keeping with societal tolerations here’ (21). Notwithstanding the many words of the cognitive narrator, she claims that her ‘knowledge of the world consisted of fucking hell, fucking hell, fucking hell, which didn’t lend itself to detail, the detail really being those words themselves’ (222). No one tells her cognitive self what words are disallowed, even if she cannot quite shake that feeling of doing something wrong. She is giving in to the words. For the cognitive self, using them is release, regurgitation, orgasm, recitation, freedom all at once. The presence of language, of words, of signifiers, all free to use to express, identify, understand, oppose, shape.

Middle sister uses words playfully in her narrative, but her experiencing self certainly ‘minimalised, withheld, subverted thinking, dropped all interaction surplus to requirement which meant they got no public content, no symbolic content, no full-bodiedness, no bloodedness, no passion of the moment, no turn of plot, no sad shade, no angry shade, no panicked shade, no location of anything. Just me, downplayed. Just me, devoid. Just me uncommingled’ (174/5). That ends here. Not only will she use all the words available, she will invent them, deliberately use combinations of an inventory nature, often with a faulty prefix, because “uncommingled” so much more accurately described how she was diminished in her being. Language is, after all, a construct, and none of her inventions are beyond the understanding of the reader. The children are ‘beriobbened, besilked, bevelveted, behighheeled, bescratchy-petticoated’ (341). The children, untypically here, in their fanciest clothes, dancing in the street, dressed to the nines with a be-prefix literally being by becoming. Similarly, Milkman scolds her for all her ‘arunning’ and ‘awalking’ (9), using a
prefix of negation where a prefix of negation should not normally be, lending extra power to his complete rejection of who middle sister is, what she likes, making these activities drawn-out wastes of time. Couple this with the wide use of vernaculars such as ‘numbance’ (Burns 204), and the language remains both particular (for those in the know) and surprising (for those not in the know). Either way, it is revelatory in its specificities, oddities, inventions. Middle sister has so much to say, and so many ways to say it. Hutton claims that the many convoluted passages and phrases ‘reflect the narrator’s increasing confusion as the stalking intensifies, and she becomes more silent, withdrawn, and psychologically disturbed’ (365). That may ring true for the experiencing self, but for the cognitive self, any convolution is also a play with language in her retelling because she can. Language is part of the self-creation, and the invention of words equals reinvention of self. Forget newspeak, this is freespeak.

3.2 Humour
Not everything is despair and darkness. Instead, the novel uses its darkness to be darkly funny. Most often it is gallows humour, murky and morose, sometimes even wrapped in melancholy, oftentimes subtle, and often only apparent on a second or third read. The humour is deeply embedded in the totality of the narrative context as it affects the reading and the interpretive process by its mere presence. It is often absurd, but more so when considered as part of a whole. It is locked inexorably with the voice of middle sister, sometimes and attempt at distraction or refocusing from the things that are too hard to handle. When maybe-boyfriend’s parents leave a letter for him and his brothers as they depart forever excusing their permanent absence with the fact that the boys are grown, realising that is not the case, they add: ‘Well, those of you who aren’t grown up can be brought up and finished by those of you who are’ (39). Clearly, there is nothing funny about parents abandoning young children, but the unexpected turn invites relief as the reader ploughs their way through, breaking any perceived monotony. Clearly, ‘one way to get an audience to laugh was to engender a certain set of expectations’ and then break with them (Couder 4). In this case, the expectations violated are those ingrained in us pertaining to parental roles. The novel attempts to make light of serious situations by emphasising futility and the incongruous nature of much of life in middle sister’s world when affirming that ‘the only time you’d call the police in my area would be if you were going to shoot them, and naturally, they would know this and so wouldn’t come’ (Burns 182). As readers, ‘we recognise absurdist humour as a narrative strategy that forces us to relinquish the schemata that organise and structure everyday life. As
a consequence, we are compelled to more closely consider and ultimately reinterpret the text’ (Couder 17). We awaken, take note, and reconsider. The humour, however dark, serves to lighten the heavy read and focus.

The explicit sense is that the humour of Milkman must be seen in context with the lexical, content, narrative, character development, plot, and any other element contained in the novel. Interestingly, occasionally, the humour seems to poke fun at the novel’s style itself as ‘the renouncers’ plot of the graveyard just up from the ten-minute area’ also becomes ‘the no-town cemetery’, the ‘no-time cemetery’, ‘the busy cemetery’ or just simply, the usual place’ (Burns 213). It introduces an element of stylistic self-irony at the use of euphemisms, elaborations, listings. Much of it is language-based, as when real milkman comments he does not understand ‘mickle-much’ of women’s issues or expletive reactions such as ‘go and have a wee word? Was he crazy as well as blind and deaf and dumb…?’ (153/4). Other humour seems to have further purposes of characterisation. Ridiculing characters is a frequent occurrence, though the ridicule is largely presented in a loving inserted to inspire empathy and lighten the load18. Using humour to accentuate character traits, flaws, and peculiarities, often signify a change in the character or a change in the perception of the character. Ma seems an easy target, and therefore good example, of both.

First, middle sister discovers that her mother has desire when she initially professes her past romantic feelings for her longest friend real milkman. This leaves middle sister discovering that this pious, proper woman has a past which at this point to her is ‘revelatory coming from her mouth straight into my ears…This was scandalous, also exciting, even rather refreshing…that the sanctities would have to adjust in meaning to include the lower half of the body’ (252). Ma has desire, newly awakened all out desire for real milkman, and in the lower half of the body at that, despite her religious propriety and general acceptance of and proclivity for following the unspoken regulations. Later, ma struggles in her newfound romance with real milkman as ‘these armrests aren’t capable of articulation…they’re stuck fast to the body because it’s a one-piece chair and of course the chair itself can’t have gotten smaller which means my rear’s gotten bigger but it’s gotten bigger without the concomitant modification to a new way of negotiating furniture instead it is still acting from the retention of the memory of how smaller in the olden days it used to be’ (325). Her insecurities and subsequent rant each become a matter of amusement. The original imagery of the woman unable to keep from bumping the armrest and the personification of the rear end is surprising

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18 Really, no pun intended her related to the example of ma’s enlarged rear end provided below.
figurative language, ensuring giggles despite her obvious distress. It makes her more human, removing some of the animosity the reader might harbour from the pressures and expectations, the harsh words and rejection, she has subjected middle sister to. The humour coupled with the rare helplessness inspires increasing sympathy for ma. It does, however, have a serious second angle. It is revelatory in illustrating the ambivalence in ma and middle sister’s relationship. Middle sister needs to break free from her mother, this is her coming-of-age, especially the ways in which ma continues to collude with the patriarchy to oppress her daughters (in particular concerning marriage). However, it is also important for middle sister to re-connect and retain the part of her mother that is a continuation of her self, a cross-generational connection in existence despite generational divides.

Quite often the humour is explicitly stylistic and invigorating. When middle sister runs away on the final page, she is ‘almost nearly laughing’ (Burns 348). ‘Almost nearly’ is clearly the same as saying ‘probably laughing’, which is the same as saying ‘more or less laughing’, which is the same as saying ‘laughing out loud, rolling on the ground in ecstasy that I am in a good place right now’19. The reader laughs with you, middle sister. We see your maybe laughing and raise you extra laughter.

3.3 Hope

Humour alone is not enough to see hope in the ‘upheavals of inner landscapes’ (80) that consistently follow middle sister throughout the novel. The community seems so restrictive and set in its ways that change is far from palpable. There are, however, a few things meant to encourage. Such encouragement can often be found in children. When ‘all these little girls – ‘our side’, ‘their side’ – were dressed in long clothes and high heels and were falling over as they played the international couple’ it proves they mean ‘very much more here than mere ballroom-dancing champions of the world. They had achieved that outstanding status of straddling the sectarian divide, a feat probably meaning nothing outside the sectarian areas in question, but which inside equated with the most rare and hopeful occurrence in the world’ (314). Athletes, writers, musicians, artist – anyone of fame can straddle the divide. There is hope in that. The children, role-playing them, are the future, looking forward to days ahead where tensions are diminished, and mixed play allowed. Life now can never be about the pursuit of happiness, but always about the roles enforced upon the individual, but the future might different.

19 If the reader does not recognise what is going on here, please see page 53
Change from the outside might also be trickling in as aptly illustrated by the relative demise of the women with the issues. Despite the poor results to their concerted efforts, their presence lingers in the novel, consistently seeming to range between the crazy and the inevitable, a beat balancing between eradication and victory. We know that ‘local women en masse’ command an ability to direct communal action and influence public opinion. As a result, ‘on the rare occasions when they rose up against some civic, social or local circumstance, they presented a surprising formidable force of which other forces, usually considered more formidable, had no choice but to take note’ (Burns 12) even if they do not agree with the women with the issues. The power of women is looming underneath, even if they only rarely utilise that power and always without it being a consciously political feminist move. The ‘women’s issues were baffling, demanding, awful bloody annoying’ and ‘completely off their heads… with female-orientation and female-amalgamation and women-this and women-that’ but it ‘seemed you could easily spark an international incident if you didn’t walk out your door and at least make polite gesture to some of their hairbrained, demented ideas’ (311). The women with the issues will prevail eventually. They have to be recognised, even if crazy. Change is acoming.

Middle sister’s relation to ma also changes significantly. It is not just because ma ‘was blossoming…losing that…older person’s perspective that usually she went about in and that I hadn’t noticed she’d gone about in until of late when she’d stopped going about in it’ (335), though this is clearly a part of it. Society is losing the hold it has on ma, allowing her to open her eyes not just to a new possible lover, but also to stand up to society somewhat more unencumbered\(^{20}\). Her willingness to, ultimately, reject the truth of malicious gossip allows for middle sister to experience a moment of hope in this significant change: ‘gloriously I felt a comfort go through me, a sense of solace second on me, all because she’s paused in her admonition to consider I might be telling the truth. It could be easy to love her’ (224). The change in ma might be enough to stop middle sister from completely vanishing.

To finish us off, we celebrate two significant turning-points that both indicate there is way out of the system of social control in which middle sister is forced to exist in a semblance of function. The first is the death of Milkman. She realises she is no longer forced to constantly watch her back, be paralysed by fear and capitulating to that fear. It is ‘while standing in our kitchen digesting this bit of consequence, that I came to understand how much I’d been closed down, how much I’d been thwarted into a carefully constructed nothingness

\(^{20}\) It is worth noting that ma’s frequent visits to real milkman at the hospital despite this being out of kilter is a stark contrast to not taking middle sister in because the neighbours convince her not to. Hope is a fickle thing.
by that man. Also by the community, by the very mental atmosphere, that minutiae of invasion’ (Burns 303). This is the point of ultimate bildung for middle sister: she can clearly see the “who am I” and the “what is the outside world in me”. Ultimately, middle sister develops and matures throughout the novel, seemingly developing some tools, if not to overcome, to handle the community social control without completely vanishing. She recognises the lack of control over life as she is ‘journeying now to have done to me what I should have accepted long ago was going to be done to me’ (298). Certain things are just inevitable, impossible to counter, or an inability in her to do anything but acquiesce and accept. But some things you can affect. Milkman stopped her from reading-while-walking, from running, from walking, from living safe and as normal as normal can be in her district. After his death, she ‘went back to walking. Not to reading-while-walking’ (312), but to walking. It is a slow start. She can let go of the fear of Milkman and walk outside, but she is not ready to go back to reading-while-walking, again confirming her status as beyond-the-pale but possibly lingering somewhere between almost maybe normal and the beyond.

Alternatively, not reading-while-walking is an admission that she has been too closed off, done too much living in another century, and that being more present is the only way to navigate sufficiently. She knows she has to take one step at a time, that Milkman’s death does not mean instant freedom and safety. After all, she still lives in the community that enabled Milkman to stalk her, but has achieved the maturity to realise that ‘with these sorts of things you have to take each day, each person, each reprisal, at a time’ (341).

The second distinctive turning-point is third brother’s return. Middle sister’s many returns to the topic of marriage are personified in her twin’s sudden reappearance. His former girlfriend, his true love, the one he left behind for the wrong reasons, tablet girl’s sister/true wife stumbles as ‘one hand flew to her mouth, the other reached out, possibly to ward him off, possibly to take hold of him’ (269). All the things that are not said, and the consequences of that unsaid, seems to come to a head when the shunned, abandoned woman permits ‘him to bring his arms around her, while she herself held on to him while managing at the same time to push away at him’. She admonishes him, ‘saying, ‘I think I hate you,’ which meant she didn’t because ‘I think I hate you’ is the same as ‘probably I hate you’, which is the same as ‘I don’t know if I hate you’, which is the same as ‘I don’t hate you, oh my God, my love, I love you still love you, always, always have I loved you and never have I stopped loving you’ (272). They walk off into a metaphorical sunset they can suddenly see, in all its iridescence, despite true wife no longer having much vision to speak of, the sky in all its beauty and colour and with the full meaning and understanding of what it means to be able to see at all, wins.
4 Denouement

Anna Burns is inclined to give us all of middle sister in equipping her with a voice that drives home every point by relentlessly pursuing the reader. The stylistic choices complement the confusion, the hurt, the trauma of constantly being monitored and castigated. This has been an analysis of the textual self and its dialogue with that context. The textual self is an individual shaped by the contextual world of social control and the foils in it. Any individual engages in an interplay between the outside and inside in elbowing out the space we inhabit, but for some, the circumstances make it infinitely harder. We are at the point where her hindsight meets her younger self, where enough time has passed for her to be capable of sharing, but the shadow of control still looms large. Her present self enters into the past self, the two selves merging, in an attempt to preposition a future self.

The stream of consciousness is illustrated by run-on-sentences carefully constructed with a fluid poeticism that constantly dives into seemingly arbitrary transgressions and regressions. There is nothing casual or arbitrary about it. It is deliberately repetitive and regressive in its pursuit, allowing the story to unfold with middle sister's mind as she attempts to create a room of her own. The story bends with every sentence, creating an interplay between her anecdotes, the political backdrop, and the many characters. The interconnectivity of the characters is both obvious and fleeting as they casually enter the stream of consciousness, suddenly dominating the storyline and showing their importance in the influence and formation of middle sister. It is a ramble which is no ramble at all, instead forming a kaleidoscopic pattern in which from chaos emerges a form of map to follow. It is particular and with purpose, filled with open subterfuge, and concealed sincerity simultaneously. It is the ambitious creation of a narrative voice that aptly manages to illustrate the turmoil she is so trying to hide, conquer, handle, fight, ignore, surmount at the face of an enormous level of outside social control. The narrative form deepens our understanding of middle sister’s position of submission and non-submission to the outside subjugation and expectation, her position of being an unwilling centre stage, leaving her lost in a vacuous middle, searching for her being. In her continuous circumfusion and circumvention in and out of the story of her, the narrative remains circular between society and self, but always ultimately returning to that self.

We leave middle sister while maybe, almost, somewhat hopefully, very nearly laughing.
Works Cited


Further reading:

For more information about weathering stress and allostatic load:

BBC World Service, The Inquiry, *What’s Killing Black American Babies*, Monday 30\textsuperscript{th} April 2018 [https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cswqt4](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cswqt4)


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