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"Black Flower": Dichotomy, Absurdity and Beyond

Vanina Jobert-Martini

This was a war that reached epic magnitude, slaughter and counter slaughter, which on paper could be termed Jacobean but in life became a gruesome statistic of death and mutilation so that, as in Hamlet's Elsinore, 'carnal, bloody and unnatural acts' were committed on all sides.

Edna O'Brien, *Country Girl* (237)

- 1 Edna O'Brien has never been treated kindly by literary critics and journalists, and her writing about Irish political violence was not well received as she points out in her recent Memoir: "To write about the North was to enter troubled waters, wrath and accusation from some, fractured friendships, along with the sneering accusation that I was 'sleeping with the Provos'" (*Country Girl* 236). She also recalls an interview with Gerry Adams and what was said about her at the time: "I remembered, too, that having written about him with an openness, for my 'silly novelletish mentality,' I would be described in an English newspaper as 'the Barbara Cartland of long distance republicanism'" (*Country Girl* 249). Obviously, such a judgment does not apply to the author of *Saints and Sinners*, a collection of thought-provoking short stories displaying a consummate style and, for some of them, a sense of tragedy. "Black Flower" unmistakably deals with the issue of political murders in Ireland and actually confronts readers with atrocity and absurdity, forcing them to go beyond acquired certainties and political sympathies, to gauge the depth of the human predicament. Like many before her, Edna O'Brien has set herself the task of writing about chaos and horror, of putting language to the test of representing what is beyond words. In doing this, she is well aware of the specificity of her subject:

I admired those who had written about the war, especially Hemingway, Orwell and Auden. But this was a different war, the 'dirty war,' as it had been named fought openly and in shadows, [...] a war where courage and criminality overlapped, a war where ideals were shafted in the all out hurra of victory. (*Country Girl* 236)

- 2 This paper will approach the question of O'Brien's style in "Black Flower" resorting both to traditional and cognitive stylistics in order to reveal how readers are led to inhabit a fictional world that is bound to change their perception of the real world through a unique aesthetic experience.
- 3 In "Black Flower," Edna O'Brien's style is mimetic of the explosive political context and relies heavily on stark contrasts and oppositions. The surface structure of the short story can be compared to a "soundtrack" oscillating between silence and unbearable loudness. Speech can nevertheless be heard and contributes to the creation of a fictional world in which characters achieve prominence and focalize the reader's interest. Grice's cooperative principle (Jeffries and McIntyre 105) is thus activated, and readers make inferences about characters and context, becoming involved in a piece of crime fiction fraught with tragedy.

Silence and Sound

- 4 If "Black Flower" was adapted for the screen, the soundtrack would include private conversation verging on sweet talk, silence, howling and explosions, thus exposing the spectator's ear to the widest possible range of decibels and conveying the widest possible range of emotions. Sharp contrasts actually structure the story and form a distinctive feature.
- 5 The conversation between Shane and Mona runs as a thread through the short story and provides a chronological structure which is distorted by flashbacks. Direct speech (DS), indirect speech (IS) and narrative passages alternate and sometimes create echoes impressing the reader's inner ear. The story starts in medias res with a brief exchange between the two main characters:

"It's a dump," Mona said.
 "'Tis grand," Shane said, looking around. (63)
- 6 DS and the use of the present tense define the time of enunciation and the reporting clauses contain first names, a way of establishing the identity of the characters from the start. This first exchange, in the form of an adjacency pair (Jeffries and McIntyre 102) is in fact based on contrast rather than concord, which attracts the reader's attention. The conversation is immediately interrupted by a long flashback running over six pages. Bonheim identifies this device as "a modal façade," whose aim, here again, is to pique the reader's interest:

Stories which open with speech do not necessarily, of course, continue in the same fashion. We have noted the trick of 'the modal façade': often the first few words are in quotation marks, after which no dialogue follows for a paragraph or even a page or two. [...] The opening words [...] often constitute a kind of puzzle; the resolution is left to material in other modes. (110)
- 7 Returning to the initial conversation is not only delayed but done very slowly: "Now they were in the big dining room, famished and waiting for the owner to come and tell them what she could possibly give them to eat" (68). Readers cannot fail to notice a deictic shift with the adverb "now" placed saliently at the beginning of a paragraph, and the mention of place i.e. the big dining room. The use of the preterit creates continuity between the preceding flashback and the new context, and DS only reappears after a few paragraphs, as if the conversation was resumed. If chronology was restored, the opening exchange would be placed page 70, just before the following

paragraph: "Looking at the stranded microphone, she said it was lucky they hadn't come on a dance night, as she was not a dancer. 'Me neither,' Shane said" (70). Mona's words are reported by the narrator, but Shane's are in DS, like the opening exchange.

- 8 From then on the story concentrates on the time Shane and Mona spend in quiet conversation over dinner at the restaurant. The owner is sometimes included in the conversation, as she comes and goes to serve the meal. Her words either appear in DS or IS. These constant shifts from DS to IS and vice versa give a sense of fluidity to O'Brien's prose and tend to associate the narrator with the characters, as if he were a silent participant in the conversation. The verbal exchange is brutally interrupted by Shane's departure, which represents a major turning point in the story:

"Toilet," he said and reached out and touched her sleeve. She watched him go, something so wounded about him, his clothes clinging to his thin body, his sleeves rolled up as he tugged at the loose door knob. Then peculiarly he ran back and took his jacket off the back of his chair. (73)

- 9 The narrative comment points out incoherence between the words uttered by the protagonist and his actions and the adverb "peculiarly" raises suspicion: Shane is not going to the toilets. Mona and the owner are therefore left alone in the dining room and the conversation goes on between them, until they go out looking for Shane. The tone and content of the exchange between the two women brutally change: "Wynne shrieked at Mona—A murderer ... you brought a murderer under my roof where my grandchildren slept" (75). The change of tone is conveyed through the use of the introductory verb "shriek," in a text where such realistic comments are few and far between, hence its importance. The time spent in the dining room appears as a parenthesis in Shane's life, and the conversation with Mona could have opened up on a relationship, had the context been different.
- 10 The end of the peaceful interval is brought about by a noisy car, and just after Shane has left, dogs start howling, echoing the bleating lambs they had heard when they arrived. The connotations of the cries of the two animals could not be more opposite: sheep symbolize innocence, whereas barks are often associated with ominous unfoldings. At the end of the story, the people in the dining room hear the noise of a car: "The car drove in at hectic speed, lights fully on and then drove off again, with a vengeance" (73). The phrase "with a vengeance" denotes loudness but it also points to the idea of reprisals that has already been alluded to several times in the short story. It suggests that a trap has closed on Shane.
- 11 As for Shane's assassination, it seems to be done silently, since no noise reaches the people in the dining room after the car has driven off. Similarly, Shane was not woken up by the warders pounding on his cell door to tell him that his wife had died. The main character himself is finally reduced to silence, and the narrator remarks that "He could not say what he most wanted to say" (75). This sentence echoes the narrator's comment about the greeting card given by Shane to Mona: "Something about the message seemed unfinished, as if he had wanted to say more (...)" (66).
- 12 At the end of "Black Flower," silence prevails even though the police are about to conduct interrogations. The narrator seems to move away from character and incident to consider the matter from a much more general point of view, suggesting a pessimistic stance regarding the future:

A brooding quiet filled the entire landscape and the trees drank in the moisture. There would be another death to undo his and still another and another in the long

grim chain of reprisals. Hard to think that in the valleys murder lurked, as from the meadow came not even a murmur, the lambs in their foetal sleep, innocent of murder. (76)

- 13 Such an ending can be analyzed along the lines of Sean O'Faolain's theory and be classified among "the poetic endings whose purpose is to float the narrative into the poetic continuity of place whose image the reader will carry away in his thoughts, unaware of any sense of disjunction" (181). However, in the case of "Black Flower," the suggestion of continuity is far from satisfying and by underlining it, Edna O'Brien expresses both despair in the face of a situation that has lasted so long that it seems it will never change, and maybe the faint hope that absurdity may not triumph for ever. Such general considerations only come at the very end of the short story, which before that focuses on individual characters who retain the reader's attention, thus drawing him/her deep into the fictional world.

"Black Flower," A Story of Character?

- 14 The title of Edna O'Brien's latest collection of short stories *Saints and Sinners* raises very specific expectations. As a matter of fact, readers tend to believe that both saints and sinners are human beings. According to Emmott, fictional characters are regarded as counterparts of human beings in the real world: "In reading narrative texts, we imagine worlds inhabited by individuals who can be assumed to behave, physically and psychologically, in ways which reflect our real-life experience of being situated in the real world" (58). We thus expect the stories of *Saints and Sinners* to focus primarily on characters and on their deeds, either good or bad. Knowing that Edna O'Brien rejected the strict Catholic education she received, we might suspect that the opposition between saints and sinners is not to be taken at face value, and that the author has probably revisited such a simplistic binary vision of the world. If the title "Black Flower" points to an element of the setting (or "frame" to use the terminology of cognitive stylistics), characters are nevertheless foregrounded and are treated as figures evolving against a (back)ground. Stockwell explains:

In most narrative fiction, for example, characters are figures against the ground of their settings. They have boundaries summarized by their proper names ('Beowulf,' 'Hamlet,' 'Winnie the Pooh,') and they carry along or evolve psychological and personal traits. Stylistically, they are likely to be the focus of the narrative, moving through different settings and are likely to be associated with certain verbs of willful action by contrast with the attributive or existential sorts of verbs used descriptively for the background. (15)

- 15 In the already quoted adjacency pair, the characters' names represent individual wholes, whereas at this stage in the story we do not know where they are or what they refer to with the expressions "It's" and "Tis." The background is, for the moment, completely shapeless, which is one of the defining features of the ground as opposed to the figure. At the same time, as the characters are foregrounded, an opposition between them is made salient. The first names are clearly gendered, and the two characters express opposite opinions about the place they are discovering at the same time as the reader. Their subjective appreciations could not be more different. As a result, subjectivity is also foregrounded as one of the main themes of the story. Other elements of characterization are progressively added in a long explanatory flashback and contribute to the building up of the opposition. The reader learns about the

circumstances of their meeting: "She had volunteered to give painting lessons in the prison in the Midlands where he was serving a long sentence" (64-65).

- 16 Theirs is a chance meeting and although they happen to spend some time in the same place, they do not belong to the same world. Mona goes to the prison of her own free will whereas Shane is locked up there. Nothing is said about Mona's motivations, but readers spontaneously infer that she probably gives painting lessons to prisoners out of pure generosity and kindness of the heart. Information about Shane is not given all at once. Provided readers have a few notions about Ireland's politics, they are able to identify Shane as a member of the IRA which is notorious for its violent and murderous actions: "He said once to her and only once that she herself could be the judge of his actions. He had fought for what he believed in, which was for his country to be one, one land, one people and not have a shank of it cut off" (69). The narrator refrains from passing explicit judgment on his characters, but the reader forms a positive judgment of Mona and a much more ambiguous one about Shane.
- 17 In spite of the initial opposition, Mona and Shane are presented as a couple travelling together as early as line 3, and this is grammaticalised by the use of the third person pronoun "they," often used to refer to them both. They share an interest in painting and a personal relationship develops between them, to the point of becoming one of the structural elements of the story. Mutual appreciation is hinted at several times:

They had not shook hands when they met on the steps of the hotel, but she knew by his way of looking at her that he was glad to see her and remarked on her hair being much nicer, loose like that. (67)

"Your eyes are the colour of tobacco," Mona said.

"Is that good or bad?," he asked.

"It's good," she said. (71)

"I'd be worried for others," he said, and looked at her with such concern, such tenderness, across the reaches of the wide table, the flames from the stout candle guttering in the breeze from the open window, half his face in shadow. (72)

Mona wanted to kneel by him and shut his eyes, but she was too afraid to stir. [...]

He looked so desolate and so unbefriended, the breath just ebbing away, and the instant it left him, she let out a terrible cry. (75)
- 18 Yet, the characters of Mona and Shane do not have the same status in the story. As is the case in the last example, Mona's point of view tends to prevail. Readers do not seem to learn more about Shane than she actually knows, and they never have direct access to Shane's thoughts, unless he voices them. Readers come to know about his feelings for her through her own impressions and deductions. Mona is not the narrator of the story but the narrator seems to adopt her restricted perspective on the events. She is the centre of perception and reflector throughout and she focuses on Shane, who thus becomes the main object of interest for the reader, or in other words, the most prominent character in the story. This mode of presentation is original in so far as it runs against the general trend in which the focaliser is usually the main character in a story, with a few well-known exceptions like *The Great Gatsby*.
- 19 Shane first attracts the reader's attention because he is surrounded by mystery. Neither Mona nor the reader ever learns what he was convicted of, but murder is a likely hypothesis. Grice's cooperative principle is flouted by the narrator who does not abide by the maxim of quantity namely "make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange." The amount of background

information is reduced to a minimum: "It was a hair-raising capture that attracted the attention of the nation and confirmed him as a dangerous outlaw" (66).

- 20 As if the authorities themselves feared for his life, his liberation is "kept a secret to avoid a media jamboree" (66). Bearing a resemblance with the narrator, Shane is characterized as a man of few words who tends to keep to himself and is happy to let others talk. The narrator accounts for his silence by mentioning that the years inside have made him taciturn, and the reader is also made to understand that he is afraid of reprisals, and tries to hide as best he can. What also makes Shane prominent is that in spite of the brevity of the text, the reader can trace an evolution. Emmott explains: "Flashbacks are interesting because they are a type of context-shifting which can place contexts from two different times adjacent to each other in a text. One consequence of this is that the same person can appear in past and present forms in quick succession" (177). The use of flashbacks gives temporal depth to the story and takes the reader back fifteen years before the time of the initial situation, when Shane was captured and sent to prison:

Judging by the newspaper photographs that had been taken on the day he was captured, he had changed beyond recognition. He had gone in, young and cavalier, and had come out almost bald, with a thin rust moustache that somehow looked as if it were spliced to his upper lip. (69)

- 21 This passage is echoed later on in the story, as if to emphasize the notion of change: "How different the two hims, the young invincible buccaneer and the man sitting opposite her, ageing and dredged, his deeds locked inside him" (72). Physical change, however, does not seem to be paralleled by deep psychological change since the desire to fight for his country remains intact as he confesses to Mona. The owner of the restaurant is first attracted to Shane and pronounces him a nice man. However, a few minutes later, she is prompt to adopt the attitude of the group of people standing outside the restaurant around Shane's corpse. They consider Shane not as a victim, but as a murderer: "The group recoiled, stricken, not only with fear, but with revulsion. The brief spate of pity had turned ugly" (75).
- 22 Such radical change of opinion leads us to wonder about the validity of moral judgments, about the relevance of notions such as saints and sinners, victims and murderers. Edna O'Brien manages to elicit sympathy for Shane by using the character of Mona as a reflector. Mona's attraction for Shane is thus communicated to the reader who seems to be invited to suspend his moral judgment or at least to reconsider it, endlessly. It may be tempting to infer some kind of resemblance between Mona and Edna O'Brien inasmuch as O'Faolain's claim still rings true: "In other words, the created personalities will bring the fable alive and personalities will seem projections of the creator's personality. The truth is that a writer imagines his subject to his own likeness" (208).

"Black Flower": Crime Fiction or Tragic Tale?

- 23 Even though Shane can be considered as the most prominent character in the story, the fact that the reader never has access to his thoughts results in a lack of depth. He appears to be locked in a role, that of the political opponent using violent means to fight for his ideas. Such characters are necessarily tightly linked to a specific context. Unlike "Plunder," the next story in the collection, "Black Flower" is unmistakably set in

Ireland. The reader is thus invited to establish a relationship between the world of fiction and the extra-linguistic reality it refers to. The reader's knowledge about Ireland is therefore activated and will help him interpret parts of the story like the exchange between Mona and the governor:

As he spoke she recalled the shiver she had felt as the governor told her there were many people who wished Shane dead.

"You mean the Brits?"

"Them and his own...feuds...feuds... Put it this way, he'll always be a wanted man," and he raised his arms to fend off questions. (67)

- 24 The general context of the short story is that of the Troubles. The narrator does not dwell on the subject, as if it was well known by readers. An Irish or well informed implicit reader is thus targeted, and the reason why no specific date is given in the story may be that the period lasted so long that it came to seem an eternity. "Black Flower," does not offer any kind of political reflection or analysis, as if Edna O'Brien, notwithstanding the specific local context, was more interested in exploring the more general notion of fate. Shane thus appears as a prototypical character and even if giving him a first name is a sign of individuation, a way of granting him a unique identity, the reader cannot help thinking that there are many more like him and that he stands for all of them, wanted men. While the author remains vague about the general political context, she gives many details about the places Shane and Mona go to, as if the setting was meaningful. The description of the restaurant is uncommon and produces a strange impression:

For an hour or more, they had driven, under the prow of a range of mountain, in search of a restaurant that would be quiet but also cheerful, and now they had landed themselves in this big gaunt room that seemingly served as both ballroom and dining room. A microphone on a metal stand took pride of place, and a bit of orange curtain lay crumpled on the bandstand, as if someone had flung it down there in petulance. One end of a long refectory table was covered with a white lace cloth under which there had been put a strip of red crêpe paper, and it was there they would most likely be seated. (63)

- 25 The place does not correspond to the characters' expectations and it bears traces of past events, as if the room had not even been tidied up after the last ball. A sense of uneasiness is conveyed by the words "crumpled," "flung down" and "petulance" since they seem to suggest an atmosphere of tension and conflict. Violence is thus introduced enigmatically at a very early stage in the story. The red colour points in the same direction. By contrast, the description of the immediate surroundings evokes peace, at least until they come to the car park where they discover an ominous sign: "A sign on a post read 'Danger—High Voltage', and from a metal box there issued a burping, that every few seconds rose to a growl" (64).
- 26 Such indications do not actually make sense either at the stage when they occur in the story or later on, and the characters do not seem to interpret them in any way, yet they stand as bad omens, all the more so as several of them point in the same direction and create coherence. The child's tractor is filled with toy soldiers and the black flower is described at length:

In the hallway, a nest of candles glimmered on a high whatnot and a luxurious flowering plant trailed and crept along the floor, amoeba-wise. The petals were a soft velvety black, with tiny green eyes, pinpoints, and there was something both beautiful and sinister about it. (64)

- 27 Black Flower sounds like an oxymoron because it is rare and most readers, like Mona, have never seen any. The choice of the verb "creep" likens the plant to an unpleasant animal, which is confirmed by the comparison with amoeba, occurring in rhematic position and therefore attracting the reader's attention as an essential piece of information. Amoebas are dangerous for human beings since they cause lethal diseases. Within the context of the short story, it is interesting to take etymology into account. Amoebea originally comes from the Greek word "amoibe" signifying change or alternation. As previously pointed out in this paper, the story is polarized by a series of oppositions and contrasts, starting with the title of the collection and the title of the short story, and including silence and outbursts, youth and maturity, imprisonment and freedom, tenderness and violence, togetherness and isolation, conflicting evaluations of the main character and finally life and death. The black flower thus epitomizes the tensions at work in the story and can be seen as their objective correlative (Abrams 123).
- 28 The sense of danger and the proximity of death are repeatedly hinted at throughout the story. Mona and Shane take a walk in a graveyard, the place of their first appointment changes at the last minute, and Mona wonders why Shane does not try to be more discreet when he meets her at the station. The phone box where Shane finally dies is described as if incidentally:
- Holding open one half of the iron gate—she had put a stone to the other half—she saw to one side a public telephone kiosk that looked glaringly forlorn, the floor strewn with litter. The horse chestnut trees were in full bloom, pink and white tassels in a beautiful droop, and in the meadow, lambs bleated ceaselessly. (69)
- 29 Yet, the attention of the reader is attracted to and then diverted from the phone box and it is later on in the story that it becomes obvious that Shane had also spotted it and that it plays a crucial role in the plot: "He went out...he got change for the pay phone' Jack said and instantly she guessed that he had gone to phone one of his comrades to come for her, as he would have to disappear" (74). After Shane has left the dining room, the dogs start howling and the owner makes the wrong inferences about their behaviour, predicting a storm which never comes instead of guessing that Shane is in trouble when there may still be time to do something. As for Mona, she assumes that Shane might have passed out because he was not used to drinking alcohol. This is clearly a case of dramatic irony since the reader is able to make more adequate inferences than the characters about what is going on outside. The reader is also able to dismiss the conversation between the two women as inadequate and irrelevant.
- 30 Tragic irony is also present in the story since all the precautions taken by the characters are of no avail; looking for a place where they can spend a quiet evening, they do not escape Shane's fate. Place and plot are tightly linked in "Black Flower" and they encompass the itinerary of the main character, leading him to his death. Through the flashbacks and the peregrinations of the main characters, the story exemplifies the conceptual metaphor "Life is a Journey" and highlights the last stage (Stockwell 105-109).
- 31 Sound and silence alternate in "Black Flower," revealing a world of extreme violence and highlighting the aspiration for peace and quiet. Various modes of speech presentation are intertwined and the conversation between the two protagonists constitutes the underlying structure of the story, which is rendered more complex by explanatory flashbacks. As the fictional world builds up, it becomes more and more

obvious that Shane is in danger and that fate is about to catch up with him. Edna O'Brien's style remains transparent throughout but apparent simplicity is deceptive and conceals complete mastery of direct and indirect characterization, construction and rhythm. Figures of speech such as oxymorons and metaphors embark readers on a literary quest for meaning which takes them further than the representation of a specific Irish reality. The horrors of the war are depicted and its absurdity is highlighted but the structure of the story and the powers of speech hold fast. Resilience seems to be the hallmark of characters, narrator and author and its utmost importance is conveyed to the reader by the very form of the tale. The theoretical vantage point adopted in this article is underpinned by the belief, shared by Toolan: "[...] that there is a causal link between the signalings of narrative progression in a story and numberless the reader's individual first-person experiences of suspense, or acceleration, or secrecy [...]" (2).

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ABSTRACTS

La trame narrative de "Black Flower" est constituée par la conversation entre les deux protagonistes qui se retrouvent dans une salle de restaurant au fin fond de la campagne irlandaise. Le déroulement chronologique du récit est cependant perturbé par des analepses et des amorces qui complexifient la structure de la nouvelle. L'omniprésence des paroles, entrecoupées par des silences et des explosions de violence, donne l'impression d'une « bande-son » particulièrement contrastée qui témoigne des tensions et des conflits formant le cœur de l'intrigue. Le choix du récit focalisé et l'utilisation des analepses explicatives aboutissent à la mise en relief du personnage de Shane qui accède au statut de « figure », selon les théories cognitives. Paradoxalement, le même personnage n'en devient pas moins prototypique, en ce qu'il représente un groupe, celui des militants politiques engagés dans des actions violentes à

leurs risques et périls. Si la nouvelle ne propose aucune analyse politique, elle est jalonnée par des effets de réel, des symboles et des métaphores qui signifient le destin tragique du personnage. Confronté à l'horreur et à l'absurdité de la violence, le lecteur constate néanmoins qu'il n'y a chez Edna O'Brien ni effritement du sens ni faillite du langage, comme si au contraire la capacité à dire l'absurde était un ultime rempart permettant de préserver l'humanité et la conscience morale.

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Vanina Jobert-Martini is Senior Lecturer in Irish Studies in the English Department of the University of Lyon (Jean Moulin, Lyon 3). After completing a PhD on John McGahern's prose fiction she has published many articles on contemporary Irish authors and edited a collection of papers of W.B. Yeats. Her theoretical background is stylistics and cognition.