

## WOMEN POETS OF THE IRISH TROUBLES: DEFINING THEMES

**Katelyn Tijerina**

Appalachian State University  
North Carolina, USA

Tijerinakn@appstate.edu

**Abstract.** Northern Ireland's Troubles turned the 20th century into a prolonged battleground. The country was divided by religion: Protestants versus Catholics. These conflicts led to the loss of thousands of lives and terrorism throughout the country. Male authors' writings from this period have received consistent focus. This paper seeks to explore female authors and the defining characteristics of their work as they engaged with themes of violence, nature, and individualism. Six women who lived and wrote during that period are contextualised and examined.

**Keywords:** Irish Troubles, women's poetry, Northern Ireland, Irish poets, political protests

Women have often been overlooked in the retelling of major historical events, including the Troubles, a significant conflict in Ireland that spanned much of the 20th century. It is equally important to give voice to the women of this time who suffered as well. They were not immune to violence. Girls who fraternised with the other side were subject to being tarred (Begoña 2010). This consisted of kidnapping young women, tying them to a pole, pouring hot tar on their bodies, and writing messages like "soldier-lover". They could be left for up to twenty-four hours before being released. Women often turned to poetry as a way of protest and catharsis. Poems written during and around The Troubles were particularly characterised by themes of violence, nature, and individualism.

This religious conflict, lasting around thirty years, pitted Catholics against Protestants in Ireland. During the First World War, a group of individuals overcame buildings in Dublin and named themselves the Irish Republic. In 1919, there was another two-year conflict between the loyalists and the British Army. Later, the Catholic community found itself at a consistent economic disadvantage, which grew into tensions. In 1969, the Apprentice Boys Derry March transitioned into three days of rioting (Imperial War Museum 2025). During the 1960s to 1970s, tensions grew to an all-time high, with the British Military forming peace walls. Bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972, 15,000 people gathered to march against the policy of internment. Some marchers clashed with soldiers who fired on them with rubber bullets. Fourteen people were killed that day (Imperial War Museum 2025). The 1970s and 1980s saw an increase in violence, with assassinations and acts of terrorism on both sides. By the early 1990s, negotiations for peace had begun with heavy losses on both sides. By 1997, both the Provisional IRA and the loyalists had called a ceasefire. These times were distinguished by death and brutality. Tensions ran high, and fights broke out across the country. Families and communities turned on each other. Outspoken individuals were subject to assassination or gun violence. In the shadow of this discord, artists vouched for deliverance.

The Troubles were a time characterised by violence and death; in reflection, so was the poetry. The poetry written by women at the time focused on the violence that surrounded them. Ruth Carr, a poet from Belfast, was born in 1953. Her poem, “Hanging Tree”, focuses on the needless violence of the time, comparing the violence to the Salem Witch Trials. Allegories and metaphors for the real horrors of the Troubles were common, as direct acknowledgement could potentially put poets and other writers in danger. The “Hanging Tree” is a common symbol in literature that signifies unfair death and violence. Her poem references witches as the crows reminisce about the death of a woman. She writes,

“Tongue of a woman with healing spells” (Carr 2006, line 6). Retrospectively, it is agreed that the women hanged during that time were innocent. Carr, in her poem, is attesting to this. Women are often the unseen casualties in conflicts as they lose fathers, brothers, and husbands. They may also be the focus of violence, being less protected than their male counterparts. Furthermore, Carr’s reference to healing spells further implies the innocence of the woman-healer.

Deidre Cartmill published her first poetry collection, *Midnight Solo*, in 2004. Born in Moy and later living in Belfast, she wrote the poem “The Moy Made Me”, which focuses on the violence of the era, depicting graphic scenes. She wrote, “[The ghosts] bleed through us/ and we can’t begin/ to start again, to loose/ ourselves from the sins/ of our bloodiness” (Cartmill 2006, lines 20-24). Cartmill points out that the conflict continues because of the history behind it; that cultures and societies are bound to the conflict of their ancestors. Her poetry stands out for its straightforward and abrasive lines. She ends the poem with, “Our throats are cut/ and our tongues/ are buried with our bullets” (lines 38-40). This powerful imagery evokes blood and gore, reflecting the savagery that permeated the time.

Ireland is renowned for its lush forests and natural beauty. Death often brings together themes of theology and nature, which intersect in poetry. As a result, much of the poetry written by women during this time also explored these themes, marked by a strong sense of naturalism. Jean Bleakney, a poet of the Troubles, studied biochemistry at Queen’s University in Belfast. Her poetry explores humanity’s connection with nature. Bleakney wrote “Postcard”, a poem that illustrates the culture of the time. She writes, “We count the sun among the disappeared” (Bleakney 2006, line 3). The Disappeared, in the context of the Troubles, were people stolen from their homes, often tortured, and then buried in unmarked graves (BBC News 2025). The idea of the Disappeared is a recurring theme in this poem. The sun symbolises happiness that has been lost due to violence. She says,

“In rain that is commensurate with tears” (Bleackney 2006, line 10). Again, she draws attention to the nature of Ireland and reflects the times.

Kerry Hardies, born in Singapore and raised in County Down, lived in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. Her poetry is blunt and to the point. She incorporates nature, specifically a black bird to represent the death of others. Her poem, “On Derry’s Walls”, alludes to the historic structure, built in the 1600s and still standing today, symbolising the enduring animosity between the Protestant and Catholic communities. She writes, “Fed off the worms that have fed off the clay/ of the Protestant dead” (Hardies 2006, lines 3-4). The blackbird, most likely a crow (a blackbird commonly associated with death), watches over the Wall. Hardies’ outright acknowledges the violence of the conflict through the narrative of this bird. Later in the poem, she writes, “In the blackbird’s looped entrails/ everything is resolved” (lines 13-14). She remarks that, to the birds and to the worms, the dead are the dead; nature doesn’t discriminate. Her clever focus on the blackbird serves to remind the readers that lines blur and to call into question the necessity of this conflict.

The Troubles affected thousands of people, along with their culture and religion. To fully grasp the horrors, it is necessary to focus on individuals. Colette Bryce studied English Literature and Sociology at St. Mary’s College. She’s famous for the masterful use of figurative language in poetry. Her poem “Break” is a tragic one, as she tells of a conversation with a soldier boy. The young flirts with a girl, encouraging her to interact with his military gear. Bryce narrates, “Let me punch your bulletproof vest. *Go on, try*” (Bryce 2006, line 4). The mood is lighthearted and playful, though there is a heavy meaning overlaid. The vest is there for the danger he will face, the people he may kill. The lighthearted mood continues, “*Here’s the catch and here’s the trigger. Let me look through the eye*” (lines 7-8). The narrator is encouraged to hold the gun, to engage with a weapon. This interaction is not too different from a boy showing off a new toy or item to a girl. This blithe scene

juxtaposes the context. Furthermore, girls and women often got punished if found talking to the wrong man. Bryce focuses on this short scene instead of the big picture to emphasise the young people and young love lost.

Paula Cunningham explores politics and challenges the *status quo* through her writings. Her poem “Mother’s Pride” uses an extended metaphor to describe borderlines and maternal relationships. The title itself is a double entendre. Mother’s Pride literally is a brand of bread most common in the UK. However, the poem starts with a soldier making himself a meal. Drawing border lines with his butter knife. “Mother’s Pride” represents both the pride—or lack thereof—that this soldier may feel, and the impact on the mothers affected during the Troubles. The beginning lines of the poem are, “Hand with a knife/ his preferred medium/ was Mother’s Pride plain toast” (Cunningham 2006, lines 1-3). The knife is assumed to be a butter knife as he references toast, but without specification, speaks to the violence of the soldier. Cunningham writes, “Which my frowning mother/ quickly buttered over/stabbing the bread” (lines 20-22). The narrative quickly shifts from the soldier to the narrator’s mother, frowning at the borders drawn. Her actions are more directly aggressive as she “stabs” the bread. Cunningham focuses on this image to highlight the relationships strained during this time and the subtlety of the inescapable Troubles. Even during breakfast, war seeps into everything.

The majority of these poems include an intersection of these themes. “Hanging Tree” includes naturalism, and “Post Card” violence. Women poets during the Troubles focused on violence, nature, and individualism. Women experience the world differently from men, as their experiences are often exclusive to womanhood. During the Troubles, they lost fathers, husbands, and children alike. While they may not have been on the front lines, they were vulnerable to the violence and spoke out in the form of poetry. Though often considered the “fairer” sex, women experience the world justly in times of injustice.

**REFERENCES**

- BBC News*. 2019. “Who Were the Disappeared?” (June 4, 2019), sec. Northern Ireland. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-27235088>.
- Begoña, Aretxaga. 2010. “Ruffling a Few Patriarchal Hairs: Women’s Experiences of War in Northern Ireland.” [www.culturalsurvival.org](http://www.culturalsurvival.org) (March 10, 2010). <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/ruffling-few-patriarchal-hairs-womens-experiences-war>.
- Brown, John, ed. 2006. *The Emerging Poets*. Derry, Northern Ireland: Magnetic North.
- Imperial War Museum. 2022. “What You Need to Know about the Troubles.” Imperial War Museums. Imperial War Museums. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-troubles>.
- Rice, Adrian. 2025. “Irish Troubles: Education through Poetry.” Lecture.