

**Excerpt from ‘Teenage Kicks: Representations of Coming of Age Amongst The Troubles in Northern Ireland’ by Elizabeth Stringer.**

Visual representations are able to physically show the coming of age experience allowing the audience to watch the coming-of-age experience of those on screen, as they would a friend or relative, but are also able to relate it to their own coming-of-age experience. Visual representations have a long-standing relationship with coming of age, especially with the rise of the teen drama in the early 2000’s. Visual representations were amongst the first to not only document the Troubles on film for the news and put the Troubles on screen. In recent years, the Troubles have captured the attention of many filmmakers such as Kenneth Branagh with his 2022 film *Belfast*.<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise that writers, directors and producers have in recent years combined the two, coming of age and the Troubles, on screen. What differs from written representations is the added physical elements of lighting, music, sets and camera shots to aid this, unlike written representations which can only offer titles such as *Before My Actual Heart Break*’s acknowledging The Beatles’ ‘Eleanor Rigby’.<sup>2</sup>

In 2018, Lisa McGee’s *Derry Girls* premiered on Channel 4 and captured the attention of thousands whilst quickly became a beloved TV show.<sup>3</sup> The plot centres around five teenagers, Erin, Orla, Claire, Michelle and James, growing up in late 1990’s Derry, with the latter being Michelle’s English male cousin. Whilst most representations of the Troubles, like *Milkman* and *Before My Actual Heart Breaks*,

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<sup>1</sup> *Belfast*, dir. by Kenneth Branagh (Universal Pictures, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Delaney, *Before My Actual Heart Breaks*, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

are drama-heavy and emotive, McGee's sitcom approach captured Derry in the 1990's accurately with many Derry natives taking to social media to express how accurate the show was. Jokes such as 'tell that to Bobby Sands over there' and 'I'm pretty sure interfering with your sunbed sessions isn't very high up on anyone's political agenda' would not stand in different representations of the Troubles, particularly with this being a comedy.<sup>4</sup> However, it also holds emotive moments particularly in both series endings. Series one's finale goes back and forth between the teenagers supporting Orla by dancing on stage to Madonna's 'Like A Prayer' and then cuts to the Quinn's stood watching the news of a fatal bombing at Omagh with a poignant moment where Granda Joe puts his hand on Da Gerry's shoulder.<sup>5</sup> The penultimate episode of series two mirrors this and shows the ceasefire of the IRA cutting between the group of at their prom.<sup>6</sup> For the Derry Girls, poignant coming of age moments are intertwined with poignant political moments and the visual cues aid in highlighting this relationship.

In Alba Quiñones Endicott's *Females Also Come of Age*, Endicott writes 'Growing up is not a group activity'.<sup>7</sup> Despite this being in the context of young women which does not apply to James, the general ideology applies. Whilst the group as a whole do come of age, it is alongside each other and not together. In this group, each teenager represents a different coming of age story and in this chapter I will explore the relationship between coming of age and the Troubles through Erin and James.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Episode One' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

<sup>5</sup> 'Episode Six' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

<sup>6</sup> 'The Prom' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

<sup>7</sup> Alba Quiñones Endicott, 'Females Also Come of Age', *The English Journal*, 81.4, (1992), 42-47 (p. 47).

Erin is the protagonist and occasional narrator of *Derry Girls*. Erin represents the feeling of growing up and moving from one part of their life to the next which the audience can relate to. The visual elements with Erin's 1990's attire, music taste and interests remind the audience of their own coming of age experiences and we are mostly reminded of a time without conflict and minimal adult issues. As we see the show from her outlook, Erin is outspoken about the Troubles and injustice.

Through Erin's eyes we usually see the political elements of growing up in the Troubles alongside her internal struggles coming of age. This is demonstrated in the opening montage of the series, which is accompanied by the nostalgic and dreamy 'Dreams' by The Cranberries has various clips of soldiers in vans, a 'Welcome To Londonderry' sign with 'London' being blacked out with graffiti, the infamous white building with the words 'YOU ARE NOW ENTERING FREE DERRY' and then this zooms into a bedroom with Erin asleep.<sup>8</sup> Over this montage Orla reads from Erin's diary 'I come from a place called Derry, or Londonderry, depending on your persuasion' and that 'It's fair to say I have a somewhat complicated relationship with my hometown'.<sup>9</sup>

The visual shots of Derry alone portrays it as a turbulent city, and Erin's writing highlights the 'complicated relationship' those living/growing up amongst the Troubles have with it. Through Erin's eyes, we see Derry through a teenager's eyes, one that is growing up slowly like the environment around her. The internal struggles of growing up, portrayed by the lack of boundaries her cousin has, are met with

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<sup>8</sup> 'Episode One' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

<sup>9</sup> 'Episode One' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

external conflict surrounding, portrayed by Erin's musings on the Troubles and the montages of Derry.

However, Erin wakes up and then yells the question 'Is that my diary?'.<sup>10</sup> This comedic element alone breaks the traditional dramatic approach to the Troubles without taking away the turbulence. Whilst the focal point of Erin's speech is to do with her relationship with Derry and its surrounding conflict, we are reminded that Erin is still a teenager navigating familiar relationships with her family members and the ever-changing moods and anger of a teenager. Again, the choices of music, camera angles and the montage, are specific to a visual representation in aiding the narrative.

As we enter the series through Erin's eyes, we grow with her through the different series and see how she handles adolescent pains and the conflict surrounding her. Whilst her cousin and practical sister, Orla, 'Ought to think about wising up' in the words of Sister Michael, it is Erin who takes the role of responsibility of the two girls as well as take the lead of the group.<sup>11</sup> Whilst the rest of the group deal with their own coming-of-age experiences, Erin's coming of age experience is similar to those shown in film, and it is the most pertinent one for the audience in comparison to the other members of the group. Erin is the one who deals with the pining of David Donnelly, being stood up to prom, fallouts with Clare and the adolescent fears of not fitting in, which even with the backdrop of conflict is relatable.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Episode One' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

<sup>11</sup> 'Episode One' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

Erin's life is lived in parallel to the Troubles. Part of her storyline is her moving from one part of her life, childhood, into the next part of her life, being an adult. Series one highlights growing up amongst the Troubles and therefore Erin's childhood is defined by the violence, like her parents and Joe. However, series two displays coming of age amongst the peace negotiations and coincides with Erin's transition into adulthood without conflict. Erin and the group now have to come to terms with the conflict they have spent all their lives with and navigate it.

In the series two opening, Erin reflects back on the Troubles, much like Mary in *Before My Actual Heart Breaks*. Mirroring the opening of series one, Erin says "for generations we'd known nothing but violence, nothing but hatred but finally we were saying enough is enough finally we were saying let's give peace a chance" with montages of Derry, such as one with orange smoke bombs.<sup>12</sup> The camera then pans to her in a bath before Orla storms in shouting "She's in here! [...] She's doing Wogan" and her mother shouting inaudibly at her.<sup>13</sup> Again, the lack of boundaries her cousin has are juxtaposed with the external background, but this is one with peace and freedom. Whilst this is not dwelled upon as a serious matter in the show, Erin can now focus on growing up without worrying about the surrounding conflict. The comedy element demonstrates this as it is a relatable moment for teenage girls around the world. This can only be done with the visual representation as a montage would be hard to portray in other representations.

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<sup>12</sup> 'Across the Barricade' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

<sup>13</sup> 'Across the Barricade' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

The relationship between Erin's character coming of age and the Troubles is one in which coincides with each other and mirrors each other. We are reminded that the impact of the Troubles will have had a significant impact on her growing up, and although this is shown comedically, we know that it will force Erin to view the world differently. Whilst every generation comes of age amongst some form of external turmoil, coming of age amongst violence is not a regular experience so the impact will be more significant. Whilst the third series of the show will potentially illustrate this impact, we can see this throughout series two. By the end of the series, Erin realises how important her friends are to her and this marks the beginning of her coming of age on her own terms, without the conflict surrounding her forcing her.

Whilst Erin's coming of age story is the focal point of *Derry Girls*, the series also focuses on a specific experience rarely told in Troubles narratives, James's. James's mother is from Derry but moved to England whilst James's father is English and he himself grew up in England. However, on a trip to Derry, James's mother left him with his Aunt and cousin Michelle to live there and sent to the girls school fearing his safety at the boys one. James's character could be put into a drama context and made into a tragic character or a product of warfare in his coming of age story. However, this is far from the case in James. When it comes to James's character, jokes are always made at his expense, such as him being an "English prick" and a "savage" by Michelle or when he tells the Quinn's "it's not very likely in my case [to get pregnant]" and Joe replies "I wouldn't rule it out son".<sup>14</sup> Whilst the jokes could be

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<sup>14</sup> 'Episode Three' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

'Episode One' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

'Across the Barricade' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

seen as cruel, characters such as Michelle and Joe take in James and look after him when he needs it highlighting there is no malicious intent.

In an interview with *The Irish Times*, *Derry Girls* writer Lisa McGee reveals “If I was a different writer, *Derry Girls* could be quite a bleak show. I’ve always leaned towards funny” and that ‘I really like teenagers, and they’re often not well written, particularly in drama. They’re either treated like mini-adults, and it’s weird and sexual, or they’re not treated with the respect they deserve’.<sup>15</sup> James’s character is the epitome of what McGee sought to do with the show’s characters. His situation ‘could be quite bleak’, yet the show does not portray it like that.

In one episode, the Quinn’s and the girls go on a holiday to avoid the Orange walks, yet Joe drives them into the middle of the parade, Mary and Gerry tell James to get out of the car to talk to them as he’s English so ‘they might respect that’.<sup>16</sup> Whilst this situation could be ‘quite bleak’, the shouting and James’s awkwardness compared to the outspoken Erin and Michelle, makes the situation laughable. The visual elements of cutting to each characters face in a close up and then outside the car at the parade encompassing the car adds to the humour. When looking at this situation as a teenager, this could be a poignant moment as a ‘bleak’ coming of age experience. However, the situation is made to be comical and fun. Whilst the argument could be made that this is potentially quite traumatic, McGee’s delicate approach to the situation and it only being singular event not dwelled upon means that McGee’s writing ‘treated [James] with the respect [he] deserve[s]’.

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<sup>15</sup> Zoe Williams, *Lisa McGee: 'If I was a different writer, Derry Girls could be quite a bleak show'* (2022) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/lisa-mcgee-if-i-was-a-different-writer-derry-girls-could-be-quiete-a-bleak-show-1.4826413>> [accessed 8 April 2022].

<sup>16</sup> ‘Episode Five’ in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

In terms of coming of age, the backdrop of the Troubles and James being English could be traumatic and on a similar level to the narrator of *Milkman*. However, McGee gives James a coming of age experience without the trauma forcing him to come of age. Through James, McGee highlights how the coming of age story aided by the Troubles does not always have to be traumatic even in the most turbulent situations.

This is further highlighted by McGee in the second series, after the ceasefire. Whilst there is a ceasefire, an English character living in Derry would still be unheard of. In the second episode of series two, the new English teacher goes through poems and asks who wrote the poem 'An English Rose Among Thorns', a take on the expression 'like a rose among thorns'.<sup>17</sup> The 'English Rose' aspect, whilst probably thought by James as simply being an English flower, an 'English Rose' is commonly known as being as a young English girl who has pale skin, rosy cheeks and natural hair, all which James is made fun have fun and which he argues against, such as "I'm more of a man than Orla".<sup>18</sup> Again, this aspect highlights a coming of age naivety that has been moulded by McGee to be a comedic aspect which in any other format would not work.

The 'thorns' aspect of the title of James' poem implies that the Derry natives surrounding James. Whilst this can be seen as an anti-Irish sentiment from a Troubles standpoint due to the implications of the Irish being 'Thorns'. However, this

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<sup>17</sup> 'Ms De Brún and the Child of Prague' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

<sup>18</sup> 'Episode Two' in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).



is more likely to be because he is often made fun of for his interests and not due to the current political climate. Here, McGee reminds the audience of the innocence of coming of age in this time and that not everything needs to be politically charged and can be the awkward one often portrayed. This is significant as it highlights the people of Derry and those impacted by the Troubles without having to constantly rely on the turbulent elements.

After the title of the poem is revealed, the camera pans to the classroom where James cowers and puts his hand up with a look of fear on his face before Ms De Brún tells him “Yeah I can see why you might want to remain anonymous alright”.<sup>19</sup> Again, this could be seen as politically charged with the implications of anonymity of the Troubles due to being guilty of a crime, yet McGee’s writing and the comedic delivery of the actors removes this political element with the visual aspects of this adding to the comedic experience. However, by the end of series two we see James nearly leaving Derry but deciding against it, shouting “I am a Derry girl!” in an emotional moment when reuniting with the girls which cuts to the President of the United States giving a speech about the hope for the Derry youths future.<sup>20</sup> Part of the coming of age experience is accepting who you are and being able to use this in moving onto the next part of life. James has accepted Derry, and all its elements, is a part of his life and where he belongs. For James then, the Troubles are integral to his coming of age experience and the visual elements aid this.

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Ms De Brún and the Child of Prague’ in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

<sup>20</sup> ‘The President’ in *Derry Girls* (All 4, 2018-2022).

For both James and Erin, the Troubles are integral as a backdrop to their coming of age story. However, unlike the written representations of them coming of age, they are able to look at their coming of age without turmoil and with the normal awkward experiences of being a teenager going into the next phase of their lives. There is optimism for both of their coming of age experiences and a sense of hopefulness for their futures. Whilst the Troubles is parallel to their coming of age experience, McGee is able to show that the relationship between the two does not always have to be traumatic but one where they can still have normal coming of age experiences.

The use of a soundtrack and visual aids helps us to understand the relationship between coming of age and the Troubles in a way other representations cannot. However, the representation of a play can combine the written and the visual whilst placing it in a live setting which can be more intense.