

Contemporary Issues of the Irish Society in William Wall's "This Is the Country"

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This is the Country

Završni rad

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on how Wall in his novel *This Is The Country* explores the issues of the twenty-first century and indicates the significance of certain spheres of daily life. Wall, writing in the first person, tries to conjure up how the society forms a person and how every event in one's life leaves something behind. In his descriptions, Wall uses everyday language to depict the events realistically and does not leave any details out. The protagonist experiences the real life, the life that many people consider unreal or too cruel. However, Wall tries to bring the unimaginable, brutal life to the people who have never seen or experienced it. The protagonist tries to be one of the people he indirectly mocks just because he, in fact, envies them. He envies the 'perfect' lives of some people he never had the chance to live out just because of the circumstances he had no influence on. Through him, Wall criticizes the contemporary society and, in a way, protests against certain parts of it. The settled patterns of lives that many lead are not necessarily good, and the protagonist reflects Wall's desire to change them.

Keywords: William Wall, This Is the Country, contemporary issues, rebellion, critique

Introduction

All societies experience change, and they do so in different rhythms. They contain within themselves sources of effervescence and are engaged in a continuous process of restructuring. Many of the changes Ireland is going through relate to the boundaries according to which Ireland is constructed and organized. (Ireland Unbound 2)

With the development of technology, mass media and globalization, people have become more estranged and, as a result, there are many social issues arising out of the chaos of the modern world. The novel *This Is the Country* itself deals with the most frequent problems that come about in the twenty-first century and Wall explores the many sides of the human personality and how the society can affect an individual. As opposed to the ‘good ol’ days’ in which people were more dependent on each other, the modern world imposes individuality and independence; the more one is dependent on others, the more the society considers him/her weak and unable to take care of oneself.

The unnamed protagonist of this novel deals with many problems that a person in the twenty first century has. As a boy who had to take care of himself his whole life, the protagonist grows to be a father, a married man with a job and “paying tax for non-cash transactions”. Violence, substance abuse, shattered families and the struggle to have a normal life are all the issues that are the cruel reality of many families in the contemporary society.

1. The Concept of Home and Family

The main protagonist searches for something close to a home his whole life. Starting from his father who abandoned him and his mother who ignored him most of his life, all he wanted was some kind of affection and stability. That is what he got when he found himself hiding in Helen's father's house, when he met Pierce Heskin, and, finally, when he created his own family with Jazz.

Throughout the novel, little chunks of the protagonist's life are being put together into a big picture. He is a junkie who spends most of his days with his best friend, Max, doing drugs and wasting his life. For his whole life, nobody actually loved him. His mother who did not find him to be very important did not make him feel like he has someone, like he has a family. The mother was a lonely, bitter woman who tried to find consolation in many men that she had. She never even once thought of how these different men would make an impact on her son. Throughout the novel, he meets a lot of men he had met before (them being the former acquaintances/lovers of his mother) and he mentions how all of them used to call him 'sonny'. Not one of them has ever stuck around long enough to be considered a fatherly figure, the one he needed the most, and that is why the word 'sonny' bothers him. His father who left him affected him strongly, and maybe he thought that he is the part of his father's decision to leave for good.

When the protagonist's mother gets killed, he has very little feelings about the incident. The thing he cannot believe is that a man can kill a woman in cold blood. He even says to Max's brother: "I'm not holding it against you about my mother. She probably drove you crazy. She'd drive me cracked every day. I wouldn't have

kidnapped her in a fit “(Wall 101-102). That just depicts how the lack of care and affection from his mother left a scar that could not be fixed.

The protagonist’s constant search for home is described in a few episodes. Firstly, he comes to Helen’s father’s house to hide from Pat Baker, a drug dealer and a psycho whose sister he impregnated: “But I know he’s looking for me because of my accomplishments with his sister” (Wall 33). Running from him, he gets into the house and finds a room that seems nice to him, a girl’s room. There, he starts exploring and soon enough, he starts feeling comfortable. He stays over a few nights during which he finds out more about the (former) inhabitant of the room he is in. He finds out she is a woman named Helen who is older now and sends her father letters about her life, her child. However, the letters stopped arriving abruptly and that is the reason he was caught -- in the night the old man caught him snooping through the drawers in hope of finding more letters.

As he settles in, he finds her underwear and clothes which seem very comfortable to him so he starts wearing them. It seems as if he wants to be Helen, as if he wants to have a normal life, even if just for a few days: “used to pretend this was my grandfather. Then other times, when I was dressed, I used to pretend I was his daughter” (Wall 43) When the old man says goodnight every night, it makes him happy, it makes him feel like he has a home and a family.

Later on, as the protagonist continues running, he runs out to the countryside and hides in “(...) what I thought was a derelict barn” (Wall 57). The barn, however, was not abandoned; that is where he met Pierce Heskin, the closest thing he had to a father his whole life. The protagonist was fixing Pierce’s tractor when Pierce found him; in return for fixing the tractor, he gave him a spare room and food. Pierce was an older man, approximately seventy years of age, who was left alone after his wife and son had died

from the same disease – cancer. As they get to know each other, they get very close. Pierce helps the protagonist deal with his life, with running from Pat, and the protagonist keeps Pierce company, helps him around the house and tries to cheer him up. Pierce becomes a big and an important part of his life; he makes plans with him on how to get Jazz back, he protects him constantly as the ‘bad people’ try to get to him. When they finally get Jazz and Kaylie, the protagonist’s daughter, to come to live with them, Pierce comes back to life:

The house is starting to look like it doesn’t belong to a dead person. There’s a fire every day and food cooked, sending its smell into every room. My daughter makes Pierce laugh out loud. He drives her around the yard on the tractor and sometimes he takes her out for a walk. In the springtime they find a bird’s nest in a wall of one of the sheds and she spends hours watching for the birds to come out and look at her. (Wall 74-75)

When the protagonist decides to move out from Pierce’s house and to keep running, he and Jazz moved to a seaside town. They both found jobs; she was a waitress, and he was a self-proclaimed marine engineer. Their daughter started school; they lived in a rented house, got a dog and were living the life as it was supposed to be. They even decided to get married. But Jazz was the one who decided to contact her brother again, to continue seeing her sister who she missed the most. That is when all fell apart. Jazz went to visit her brother in jail and was staying at her sister’s for a few days. When she came back, the story that she told was that her brother had forgiven them and that he would take a few days release from prison to come to their wedding. The protagonist went out to the open sea happy, while his family stayed at home. When he came back home, it all fell apart. Pat had never forgiven them and as revenge, he kills his own sister.

Family should be a support in difficult times and a safe haven when one has nowhere to go. However, Wall shows the other kind of families – the ones who do not care and who give no support to each other. Every part of the family has to care of themselves in order to survive. That is why the protagonist seeks someone to be his family in times of trouble and someone to share his happiness with in good times.

2. Max and Friendship

Friendship is a school for character, allowing us the chance to study in great detail and over time temperaments very different from our own. These charming quirks, these contradictions, these nobilities, these blind spots of our friends we track not out of disinterested curiosity: we must have this information before knowing how far we may relax our guard, how much we may rely on them in crises. The learning curve of friendship involves, to no small extent, filling out this picture of the other's limitations and making peace with the results.

(Lopate)

One of the most frequently mentioned characters that have deeply influenced the main protagonist and his life is Max, his best friend and the closest to a family that he has ever had. Max is mentioned in many contexts and described from different perspectives. The fact that he comes from a troubled family like the protagonist and that they have the same interests (mostly drugs) brings them two together. Max comes from a similar situation; his father was an abusing alcoholic, his brother a criminal, and his mother a sick woman who is, as Max says, also an alcoholic (later on, however, we find out from Max's brother that she was actually a caring woman who was very sick). He ran away from home (or rather was kicked out) and started doing a lot of different jobs, including the one as a porter in a hospital. That is where he also lived for a while – in the morgue with the bodies of the dead patients he used to take care of.

Max said the dead make noises. You hear them at night, resting in the dark, waiting to be brought home one last time, farting softly and sighing. It was the

only place Max ever felt safe. It's my family, he said, and I love them all. (Wall 13)

Max was also very good at school. He was interested in different subjects and was very good at math. When he got the job at the morgue, he started exploring different kinds of diseases. That is how he 'diagnosed' Pat Baker with Asperger's syndrome.

However, being smart and curious did not help Max to succeed in life. The reason he was so self-destructive might be his bad family situation. If he had better role models in life and someone to support him, maybe he would have used his potentials and become a doctor or a mathematician.

The reason for his terrible life decisions might also have been the fact that he was a closeted homosexual. Later on in the novel we find out that Max was actually thrown out of his house by his older brother:

I threw him out. I can't stand queers. (...) I caught him. (...) He was turning tricks, you know. Bringing them home. Paying for his habit. My mother thought he had a lot of friends. If she found out it'd kill her. So I fucked him out. (Wall 105)

The topic of homosexuality is seemingly just superficially elaborated in the novel. However, between the lines, Wall writes about the problem which is present in everyday Ireland. According to *The Guardian*, "In Ireland, being still a predominantly Catholic country, homophobia certainly has a religious element, as the Catholic Church teaches that homosexual sex is sinful." The fact that Max's brother found his brother's sexuality so repulsive that he had to throw him out, shows how the society influences an individual.

The job at the morgue could also be a big part of his decline. Being surrounded with a lot of people and getting close to them just to find them deceased the morning after affected him greatly; the subject of death is constantly present in his life and that is why his thoughts are, in a way, governed by it:

“This was some kind of road to Damascus thing for Max. We never know, he kept saying. It could be any day. He was right. So he stopped doing stuff. We both did” (Wall 13).

The protagonist’s friendship with Max is complex in many ways. On one hand, Max helps him feel more important, to learn a thing or two and supports him throughout their whole friendship. However, their friendship is destructive for both the protagonist and Max. The need for “adventure” in order to get away from their own personal problems makes Max and the protagonist ready to use any means necessary, including drugs and ‘living on the edge’. That is how he ends up dying – after a reckless boat ride, Max gets tetanus and dies.

After Max’s death, the protagonist feels alone, lost and in need for Max’s advice and support: “I sit at the back and for the first time in a few years I miss Max. Cool it, boy, he’d say. I can hear him. One look and he’d suss everything. He had an eye for situations” (Wall 7). Until Jazz and Pierce, he had nobody to run to for help but Max. When Max dies, he feels betrayed because Max left him alone; he also feels guilty in a way of not being able to save his friend.

In a way, Max’s death is his final tribute to the protagonist’s life. The protagonist obviously needed a wake-up call to make some changes in his life and losing his best friend made him do so. The only downside is that Max was not there to see it.

“The priest is saying things like ashes to ashes and I know that my redeemer. I’m crying. Max, Max, I say, what am I going to do without you. (...) I’m leaning against a cross. This is too much, I say. No way this is happening. I need to get my head straight. But Max was still dead when I got clean” (Wall 32).

3. Education

Most of the contemporary societies emphasize education as the tool of progress and encourage their members to pursue academic success. Big parts of child's education are the parents who have the role of supporting their children to do well in school and to have the most of everything. The characters in this novel, however, consider education an obstacle. Living in tough neighborhoods and struggling for a better life, education seems like a goal they will never achieve and they just avoid it.

The protagonist was never good at school, he states so himself. He was never particularly interested in it, either. However, when he moves to the countryside, he finds that he is good at something – mechanics. He starts with fixing diesel engines, which he finds very interesting:

First I started taking things apart and then I was put to getting things back together. (...) I like things to be exactly right. I get my overalls and my boots and bit by bit I start to work out how all fits together. The day comes when he wants to move me on to petrol and I don't give a shit. I'll quit, I say. I don't want to touch that stuff. I'm a diesel man. I'm sticking with diesel. (Wall 47)

This shows just how clever he is – he does not need a lot to figure out how things work, he just gets it. Later on he becomes a self-proclaimed marine engineer and is really good at his job. The actual problem was his surroundings which neglected his need for education and for something he can hold on to.

Max, who is actually very intelligent and smart, is also 'cursed' by the lack of care. In protagonist's words:

Max was top of the class in maths, not that there was a gang of geniuses behind him or anything, but when he went to school he was good. If he had a decent

family background or an old man with a steady job he might've turned into something. (Wall 94-95)

His father, a drunk, and his mother, a sick woman, did not give him the support he needed to take up to studying. His brother, a drug addict and a criminal, never set a good example for him, either. As his brother himself says, he considers them victims of their social environment. Every day in school was, in a way, torture for them – seeing caring, well-dressed and wealthy parents taking their kids to school every day just made them feel even more neglected and bitter (Wall 105). To feel safer, most of them seek consolation in gangs and illegal things just to think they have some sort of family who can protect them in times of need.

Pat and Jazz's family is not any better. Pat, a drug dealer and a criminal with mental issues never took care of his family unless he had some personal gain out of it. His sisters went to school, but not for a very long time. The older sister, Stacey, quit school and became a prostitute, and Jazz, 'Pat's favorite', lives under the bell jar without having permission to date or love anyone, let alone go to school regularly.

The protagonist and Jazz, however, encourage their daughter Kaylie to do well in school and help her as much as they can. It is probably their attempt to guide their child towards better things, higher goals which they never had the opportunity to achieve.

In order to improve the situation for kids coming from such conditions, they must be educated about education itself. Only experience shows the protagonist that having knowledge and a trade gives one safety and stability, both financially and intrinsically. If he had that knowledge before, he would have lived his life differently and probably would have ended up a real, professional engineer.

Nevertheless, the attitude of teachers and people who should teach is also very important. The teachers in Max and protagonist's school were not particularly accepting towards them as they decided to go back to school and to work harder. The teachers were skeptical and unwilling to help ex-junkies to find their way back. If they had better experiences with the teachers and their authority, maybe they would take their education more seriously.

4. Violence

Violence is a term well known in today's world. Many TV shows and book have been banned for 'being too violent and not appropriate', every day one can read about terrorist attacks and war battles around the world. The contemporary Irish society also has problems with violence and Wall describes some parts of it. From the domestic violence to killings in the streets and kidnappings – the stories and reports one reads in the newspapers are closer and more real than one might think.

I grew up on The Lawn, a famous place of ill repute. We had a bad name. There were times when buses wouldn't bring people in. Times when fame reached out and touched us, neighbours' houses starring on TV, stories about entrepreneurs and cool people with undeclared income. We were coming up in the world when I was a kid, attracting attention. (Wall 42)

The protagonist has a life full of violence which he tries to run away from. Having grown up in a tough neighborhood with little or no parental advisory or attention, he tries to do something with his life without knowing what exactly. That is why he experiments with all sorts of things and often gets hurt in the process.

Firstly, in pursuit of love for Jazz, he runs from her brother who wants to kill him for 'defying his orders'. The struggle he has with Pat is the most obvious display of violence that stretches throughout the whole book. Pat abuses him mentally and physically for getting his sister pregnant and eventually running away with her: "When he broke my legs I felt the separation. Nobody deserves to be broken, not for love. I lay there in the dark, noticing not my legs but the world was cracked" (Wall 51). However, the protagonist is not innocent in the whole story. He gets back to Baker in every opportunity he gets, one of them being nearly strangling Baker with a chain. The

constant battle between the two of them leads to ‘collateral damage’ – Baker ends up killing both the protagonist’s mother and his own sister.

Max's example shows how intolerant people can also verbally abuse someone for being different. As already mentioned, Max suffers abuse from his older brother because he is gay. Although the situation and attitudes towards homosexuality have considerably changed, there are still people who think that being gay should be banned by law. As stated in *The Guardian*, the rift between the two ‘opposing’ sides is still very big: “I'm sure it's unpleasant to be accused of homophobia when you'd rather see yourself as traditional but tolerant. But it is much harder to be gay in 21st century Ireland” (*The Guardian*).

Both Max and the protagonist, however, do things merely out of anger or protest which can be described as extremely violent. When a dealer they owed money to got shot, they decided to take their own revenge upon him. That is when they set fire to the bird house in his backyard: “So a couple of nights afterwards Max and I did a job on the bird table about three o’clock in the morning just for fun” (Wall 20). Their response to violence is more violence because that is the world they grew in. The protagonist himself says that he has anger problems, especially when he thinks about Baker: “I get angry and the psychologist said anger wasn’t helpful in my case” (Wall 61).

Baker himself is a bully that uses every opportunity he gets to torture someone and make them suffer. One of his cruelest crimes, besides killing his sister, was kidnapping and eventually murdering the protagonist’s mother.

Wall describes the rough side of the Irish society in order to bring closer the problems that need to be solved as soon as possible. The violence from the early stages of the characters’ lives have taught them different values and have made them think that

the easiest way to solve a problem is through violence itself; this attitude is one of the problems that every modern society faces.

5. Substance Abuse

With 9,500 registered heroin users across Ireland, drugs experts warn the problem is likely to grow, fuelled by a recession that has led many otherwise ordinary people to become dealers. (*The Guardian*)

Drugs and alcohol are one of the most frequent mentioned problems of the contemporary society. The hastiness and the stress of the modern world is a lot for many people to take in and that is why they feel like they need some kind of consolation or distraction from their everyday lives. The lives of characters in this book are somehow led by drugs or with help of drugs which they also do not deny.

The protagonist and Max are constantly under influence of drugs:

Up to that time we were not wide about where we got our drugs. Max would turn up with something in a childproof plastic bottle, or a silvery blister-pack or maybe a twist of paper with a few tabs inside (...) like there was no better way to see the seven wonders of the world (Wall 13)

They see drugs as a way out, as a way of forgetting the things happening around them. Their relatives do not set a good example for them, either – Max's father is a drunk, his brother is a drug consuming criminal, and the protagonist's mother is also keen on "Prescription only. And booze. She never had anything else to do, in fact" (Wall 92). The characters are not particularly picky and do not see the need to quit.

However, in one opportunity they decide to get a grip (Wall 13) and seek help from a priest: "This priest took us under his wing. He said we were bright kids and we were wasting our lives, which was strictly true; although we were up for anything and enjoying things, it was doing our heads at the same time" (Wall 13). They start to go to meetings and back to school regularly. Their 'epiphany', however, did not last very long. When the priest gets transferred to another parish, they continue doing the same

old thing. The priest's departure is like a sign for them – they have hopes that someone will finally take care of them no matter what and they start to trust him, but he fails them just like everybody else. In that situation, drugs seem like the easiest way out. Their personal failures and the difficult situations in their lives are 'easily managed and forgettable' by using drugs.

Even at Max's funeral the protagonist needs something to help him to live through it because he starts hallucinating:

"The dead dealer came back to Max's funeral because I had ingested something to help me through. I might have been remembering or I might have been hallucinating a little" (Wall 29).

Later on, he continues using drugs constantly and even has a car accident because of doing about a bar of hash a week and any other drug he came upon (Wall 65).

Nevertheless, having a girlfriend and becoming a father puts some sense into the protagonist. He realizes that there are more important things in life than just indulging one's every need and that having a family bears some responsibility. The only vice he has during the time spent with Jazz are a few beers once in a while. He starts grasping the consequences that drugs had left on him:

"I discover I'm genetically immune to seasickness. I think my circulatory system is so full of leftovers of assorted pharmaceuticals that I'm immune to half the diseases in the world" (Wall 171).

When Jazz dies, his whole world falls apart and he starts using again, drugs or alcohol, it does not matter to him. He only wants to forget that he is alone all of a sudden.

To many people who have never grappled with addiction, it can be difficult to comprehend the desperate desire to use, even after so many years sober. (*The Guardian*)

When it comes to addiction, it is a tunnel with very little bright spot in the end which sometimes can be really hard to attain. It is always easier to take ‘the easy way out’ because then one does not even have to try to do better.

6. The Irish society vs. the world

Considering all of the problems elaborated in this novel, one can conclude that the modern society is tough on some people and gentle on the others. Through the many battles the protagonist leads with both himself and the world, one can see that there are big defeats, but also small victories that help one to get through the day. The protagonist's final act, taking matters into his own hands and taking his daughter with him, is one of the small triumphs that he badly needed. Throughout his life and all of the terrible things he experienced, he did learn something. He learnt how to value true friendships and how to learn a lesson from every mistake he has made in his life.

Wall's interpretation and vision of the world leaves no question unanswered and makes the readers think about themselves and their surroundings. His critique of the contemporary society is just the feeling that many have but no one has the guts to express. To sum up, the Irish society is the same as every society of the twenty first century – too fast, too messy and too loud for some people to take in. Many problems arise from that chaos, but the important thing is to try to resolve them no matter how hard they seem to be. Wall's description of the ways one deals with his/her troubles should be a reminder how a person can always be better no matter how his/her situation is. One may realize how people can be formed by society, but the society is also formed by different individuals, by just a bunch of people trying to get the best of life. In order to improve the world, one must improve himself/herself first.

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