



# Patrilineage and Transgenerational Trauma in Yeats's *Purgatory* (1939)

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## *Abstract:*

This paper offers a novel dramaturgical reading of Yeats's 1939 verse play *Purgatory* to explore the representation of patrilineage from the point of view of transgenerational trauma. In psychological studies, there is a growing body of evidence attesting to the fact that trauma experienced by an individual can significantly affect their children and even grandchildren, although these generations have not had a first-hand experience of the initial trauma. This paper, therefore, not only offers a close dramaturgical reading of Yeats's *Purgatory* in light of patrilineage, but it also employs cultural trauma theory and some aspects of clinical trauma studies as a new frame of reference to gain a more thorough and topical understanding of what Yeats's drama has to offer to contemporary audiences.

*Keywords:* Filicide, Patricide, Patrilineage, Transgenerational Trauma

## *1. Introduction*

This paper offers a new dramaturgical reading of Yeats's verse play *Purgatory* (1939) through three highly interconnected themes: patrilineage, trauma, and more specifically, transgenerational trauma. Conducting a dramaturgical analysis means that the playwright's intentions, biographical events, and the historical context in which the play was composed are replaced with a close examination of what the script conveys to contemporary audiences. This allows new layers of interpretation to emerge and therefore it helps situate Yeats's drama in more global and topical contexts, making it more accessible and relatable to a wider spectrum of audiences. Through this dramaturgical approach, this paper contributes to the paradigm shift that can be witnessed in Irish studies, where queer, dramaturgical, and biopolitical readings of plays text have begun to increase, complementing previous postcolonial, literary, and intentionalist readings of scripts. More specifically, this essay employs

cultural trauma theory to offer new avenues of understanding Yeats's drama today, and within that, it examines the patterns of transgenerational trauma in the play. Within psychology and psychoanalysis, transgenerational trauma is a relatively new area of analysis, which has been constantly and dynamically evolving over the last ten years. However, it is worth noting the crucial difference between clinical trauma studies and cultural trauma theory. This paper draws on some observations of clinical trauma studies regarding specific symptoms of transgenerational trauma as observed by psychologists and psychoanalysts. However, since it is not a psychology paper, its contribution is predominantly to cultural trauma theory rather than clinical trauma studies.

Irish studies abounds in articles and books about representations and manifestations of trauma in Irish history, literature, film, and music. Considerable research (literary as well as anthropological) has been conducted on the topic of trauma and transgenerational trauma regarding the Troubles. Papers in clinical trauma studies include, for instance, research conducted by the School of Psychology at Queen's University Belfast, examining young people's transgenerational issues in Northern Ireland, which was prepared for the Commission for Victims and Survivors (Hanna, Dempster, Dyer, *et al.* 2012). In addition, it is worth highlighting the study conducted by Damien McNelly at the WAVE Trauma Centre in Belfast, titled *Transgenerational Trauma: Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland* (2014), and a psychology research paper investigating the intergenerational transmission of conflict-related trauma in Northern Ireland through a behaviour analytic approach (Fargas-Malet, Dillenburger 2016). Besides these clinical approaches to the topic of transgenerational trauma, Irish theatre and literature have been widely explored through the framework of cultural trauma theory thanks to the works of Síobhra Aiken, Patrick J. Mahoney, Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, Anthony Roche, Alexander Coupe, Eva Urban, and Melania Terrazas Gallego among others<sup>1</sup>.

Despite this abundance of trauma research within Irish studies, psychological readings of Yeats's play texts have been limited so far, except for studies by Chu He, who has recently analysed Yeats's *Purgatory* through the lens of generational trauma (2021). In her article, she claims that thanks to *Purgatory*'s hybrid form (some elements of Japanese Noh theatre, symbolism, minimalism, cyclical structure, and even realism), the play conveys some of the underlying features of later trauma plays. The novelty of her approach lies in placing *Purgatory* in dialogue with Yeats's *A Vision* (his prose writing on philosophy and spiritualism) which, the author believes, offers significant insights into trauma, too (2021, 343). Augmenting what Chu He avers in her article, this paper furthers the investigation of transgenerational trauma in Yeats's play text, but it does not attempt to bring the play into any dialogue with Yeats's other writings, his thoughts, intentions, or his historical contexts. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how literature can expose trauma transmission; to discern the dynamic intersection between text, subject, and society; and to flag that such literary testimonies of transgenerational trauma have global, social, and political implications. This paper equally offers a novel and more practical understanding of Yeats's concept of "Dreaming Back" which is central to *Purgatory*. What I contend here is that Dreaming Back which the Old

<sup>1</sup> An excellent and rich volume on Irish cultural trauma studies is titled *Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Culture* (edited by Melania Terrazas Gallego, 2020), offering insights into literature, film, history, music, digital archives, and creative writing. Another seminal book on trauma and Irish history is Síobhra Aiken's monograph *Spiritual Wounds. Trauma, Testimony and the Irish Civil War* (2022). The main areas of focus in existing research on trauma and Irish culture as well as history mostly include the Irish Famine, the Magdalene Laundries, the Easter Rising, the Irish Revolution, the Irish Civil War, the Troubles, and the devastating impact of the Mother and Baby Homes on survivors.

Man (the father) experiences repeatedly in *Purgatory* is not the flashback of past memories but his present reality, that is, the transgenerational atmosphere which obstructs the healing of the traumatic event. The Old Man's Dreaming Back, as we shall see in what follows, is in fact the creation of his own intrapsychic experience for the sake of his own survival. In other words, Dreaming Back in the play corresponds to that extended intrasubjective field (internal space) for the Old Man to live out feelings, which is called "transgenerational atmosphere" in clinical trauma studies (see Bakó, Zana 2020, 16-17).

## 2. *Patrilineage, Trauma, and Transgenerational Trauma*

Modern as well as contemporary Irish drama abounds in so-called family plays, including plays that highlight the pressure the normative family imposes on its members; plays which position the rule of the father (and by extension, the rule of the state or nation), as the main axis around which the family and the national gender order is arranged; and plays which centre on problematic father-son relationships. Yeats's *Purgatory* is one of those modern Irish plays which interrogate the patriarchal violence inherent to the Irish family cell and its impact on generations to follow. As we learn about the Old Man's (the father's) various layers of trauma, the play gradually displays those strategies of emotional and even physical violence through which the Old Man's father maintained familial control in the past, thus pushing his son (the Old Man) to commit patricide. However, what makes *Purgatory* even more striking from a psychological point of view is that it includes filicide as well, which is very rare in Irish drama. In my close reading of the script, I shall demonstrate the cause-and-effect relationship between the patricide and the filicide tropes that appear in Yeats's *Purgatory*.

Through patricide and filicide, as well as through the events that lead to these tragic decisions, the integrity and harmony of the family cell that has been so central to the Irish state is completely dismantled in the play, due to the Old Man's (the father's) inability to heal the traumatic past caused by his violent father. In *Locked in the Family Cell*, Kathryn Conrad has observed that "the centrality of the family cell to social, economic, and political organization defines and limits not only acceptable sexuality but also the contours of the private sphere, the public sphere, and the nation itself" (2004, 4). David Cairns and Shaun Richards describe familism as a post-famine phenomenon in Ireland which consolidated strict codes of behaviour not merely between men and women, husbands and wives, and the gendered roles within the family, but also between fathers and sons (1988, 42). The centrality of the family cell is still present today not only in Ireland, but in other countries too, especially in those countries which have recently taken an authoritarian turn. It is important to stress that the idealisation of the family cell has required a lot from individuals, forcing them to marginalise the needs of their body and soul, thus obstructing the healing of traumatic events. Cairns and Richards further explain that

[f]or familism to operate it was essential that the codes of belief and behaviour upon which it depended, particularly the regulation of sexuality, and unquestioned patriarchal authority guaranteed by the Church's sanctions and underpinning stem inheritance, should be accepted by the family and the whole community. Only widespread acceptance could make it possible to perpetuate a system which demanded so much of individuals. (59-60)

However, what we can so often witness in Irish plays, including Yeats's drama, is the ways in which characters turn their back on such demands and expectations. As Cormac O'Brien has explicated, the father-son trope in Irish drama and theatre has predominantly been understood as a metaphor for Ireland's anti-colonial struggles, or as the everyman's protest against an au-

thoritarian Church-State complex (2021, 93). This paper complements these understandings with a new layer of interpretation, which explains the problematic father-son relationship in the play through the parent's unhealed trauma. O'Brien's emphasis of patrilineage, namely, "the inheritance of patriarchal epistemology as passed down from father to son" (*ibidem*) bears relevance for my reading of *Purgatory*, too, as it is the pressure of such patrilineage that prompted the Old Man to oust his own father in the past and eventually, it is what it pushes him to kill his own son. According to O'Brien, there are three main routes of patrilineage that can be observed in Irish drama and theatre: 1) the father is emulated by the son; 2) the father is ousted by the son; 3) the father is replaced by the son. In *Purgatory*, there is no sign of the first route, as the hostility between fathers and sons is so palpable that the sons (the Boy and the Old Man in his youth) do not even attempt to emulate their fathers. The third route (the son replacing the father) bears some significance for *Purgatory*, as the Old Man ruins his son's life just as his father had ruined his life, but it is the second route (ousting the father) that is crucial for interpreting Yeats's script.

The trope of ousting the father as a means of putting an end to the pressure of patrilineage can always be perceived as symbolic of the failure of the nation or the state, not merely within the Irish context but also in more global and topical interpretations of the script. As O'Brien has articulated, "[e]ach dramatic epoch has presented a newer version of Irish sons ousting their father as symbolic of the failures of church, state, or nation" (98). The patricide in Irish plays often remains an attempted one, such as in J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), where father and son reconcile after the conflict. Yeats's *Purgatory* twists the patricide trope that haunts Irish theatre by complementing it with filicide and offering details about the psychological reasons that induced these tragedies. When O'Brien discusses the trope of ousting the father in contemporary Irish drama, he identifies three main patterns within that trope. The first one is the aforementioned patricide attempt, that is the rejection of the father followed by reconciliation – this pattern does not appear at all in *Purgatory*. The second pattern is characterised by a subconscious inheritance of patrilineage in spite of the son's efforts to evade it, which is often facilitated by the mother figure. This is much more relevant to *Purgatory*, as in the Old Man's Dreaming Back periods when he recalls the painful events of his past, it is clear that he partly blames his mother for giving so much power and control to the husband. What is more, due to her sudden passing, she left the son alone with a violent and irresponsible man under whose yokes the son (the Old Man) turned out to be very similar to his despised father, and he treated his own son with the same neglect and hatred with which his father had treated him.

The third pattern discerned by O'Brien is even more pressing for a deeper understanding of Yeats's *Purgatory*, whereby the son discovers that there exists an inescapable psychic connection which is impossible to sever (*ibidem*). The only difference is that in *Purgatory*, the son does not seem to display any awareness of this psychic connection. He merely rejects and ridicules his father, demonstrating hostility and an utter lack of understanding towards his father's past and present. In *Purgatory*, it is the father (the Old Man) who, through his son's hostile behaviour and answers, gradually realises the inescapable psychic connection between him and his son, and therefore the inevitability of transmitting his own traumas to his son and further generations, hence he decides to oust his offspring. This psychic connection between the Boy and the Old Man is indicated to the reader right at the beginning of the play, which begins with the Boy claiming that he is fed up with listening to his father talk while carrying a "pack" (a bag of money) that his father had given to him:

*Boy.* Half-door, hall door,  
 Hither and thither day and night,  
 Hill or hollow, shouldering this pack,  
 Hearing you talk. (*VPl*, 1041)<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the play, there is a moment when the son attempts to escape from his father, but it is noteworthy that although he (the son) feels that he has a chance of severing the bond with his father, he tries to escape with the bag of money that his father gave him previously. The Old Man demands the son to give him back the bag of money, yet the son refuses to obey, which leads to a physical struggle between them, ending with the bag dropping and the money being scattered all around (see *VPl*, 1047). It is this event, as we shall see later in more detail, that serves as one of the main triggers for the father's decision to end the life of his only offspring. Interestingly, O'Brien has observed that such dysfunctional father-son relationships are so profoundly embedded in Irish playwriting that, in fact, they have become self-perpetuating (2021, 102) similar to, I would add, the traumas that individuals carry and transmit from generations to generations. O'Brien equally discerns that even though the dysfunctional father-son dyad may act as a metaphorical critique of certain dysfunctional establishments (neoliberal governments, a new-disgraced Church, the authoritarian state complex, or nationalism), in contemporary Irish theatre this dyad "still carries primary weight as a signifier of and paradigm for the successful patrilineage of patriarchy" (103). This means that Irish plays, which seemingly interrogate the pressure imposed on individuals by patriarchal rule, in fact, still end up displaying the successful inheritance of masculine power and dominance from fathers to sons. Bearing this in mind, *Purgatory* is a striking play, as its main character (the Old Man) is so aware of the dangers of transmitting the traits of his violent father and the resulting trauma as to decide to put an end to patrilineage by killing his son, and thus he is left alone to deal with the traumas caused by his father.

As indicated earlier, patrilineage is closely related to and is part of the trauma that haunts the Old Man in *Purgatory*. The term "chronic trauma" was coined by clinical trauma theorist Judith Herman who has described chronically traumatised people as isolated individuals who experience acute loneliness, disconnection from the present, and social alienation, and whose feelings permeate every relationship of their lives, including familial bonds as well as affiliations with the community they are part of (1997, 37). In her book, *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma*, Meera Atkinson focuses her analyses on familial trauma – which is also at the centre of Yeats's *Purgatory* – and claims that "familial trauma tends to run in multigenerational cycles, and it does so in a vacuum: social connection, disconnection, and historical events are contributing factors" (2017, 4). Transgenerational trauma, of course, is not limited to familial trauma, but familial traumatic events are less often examined through the lens of transgenerational trauma. Atkinson explicates that "[t]rauma is related to an overwhelming or sudden experience, and it is characterized by a delayed response that features involuntary and often repetitive disturbing phenomena, such as nightmares and flashbacks" (5). However, trauma is not merely an upsetting memory of a past event instead, it "involves a complex psychic operation that challenges the notion of a distinct psychic past and present" (*ibidem*) and more pressingly, when trauma haunts someone's present, it assumes a "dreamlike quality" (17). The representation of Yeats's Dreaming Back in his plays is often interpreted as disturbing flashbacks of past memory. Since

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I employ *VPl* as an abbreviation for *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, edited by R.K. Alspach and C.C. Alspach (1966).

in *Purgatory*, it is evident that the Old Man (the father) is still deeply traumatised by his violent father's actions and behaviour, the Dreaming Back flashbacks that appear in the play should not be reduced to flashbacks of past memory. When something becomes memory, it means that the human mind has managed to digest the traumatic experience. The Old Man's present is hindered and haunted by the unhealed past, and the tragedy of his life lies exactly in the pathological processing of transgenerational trauma. This is what Hungarian psychodramatist Tihamér Bakó and psychotherapist Katalin Zana have described as the main factor leading to the creation of the so-called transgenerational atmosphere:

The unshareable experience is captive in the intrasubjective space. The traumatized individual feels they have no narrative that corresponds to the experience they have gone through. A traumatic experience that surpasses the individual's processing capacity is not integrated, and does not become a past memory; it remains present. The events of the past are present not as memories, not *as-if* realities, but as reality itself. (2020, 15, italics in the original)

If we observe those passages in Yeats's script in which the Old Man "dreams back", it becomes clear that for him, it is not a memory at all – he perceives those events as if they were happening in real time, which, in turn, prevents him from building any bond with his own son and from standing even the slightest chance of healing the trauma. As we shall see in the following section, what we witness being created by the Old Man in *Purgatory* is his own intrapsychic reality (internal space) which is crucial for him to survive. Hence, he gradually shrinks away and retreats from the external world and, at the same time, from his own uncontainable feelings and experiences, thus remaining locked up in that intrapsychic reality.

In what follows, I provide a dramaturgical reading of Yeats's *Purgatory*, outlining the various layers of trauma that appear in the play and analysing the script through the main characteristics of pathologically processed transgenerational trauma. These features include but are not limited to the utter lack of mirroring and containment by the traumatised individual's environment; the presence of "basic fault", that is, profound mistrust; the inability to turn the trauma into memory; primitive functions working against the traumatised individual's integration; the perception of the present as menacing; and the inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. What I wish to demonstrate by close reading the script through transgenerational trauma symptoms, is that the Old Man's Dreaming Back experiences function here as an intrasubjective field, an internal space for him to live out hurts, wounds, and feelings that he has not been able to share with anyone. Although the intrasubjective field is created for the sake of survival and a sense of safety, it hinders the healing process and facilitates drawing the next generation (the Boy) into his own undigested experiences.

Bakó and Zana have referred to this intrasubjective field or internal space with various terms: crypt, inner deposit, locket, transgenerational atmosphere, and internal capsule (16-17). The term 'locket' appears to be the most illustrative of this phenomenon, as it helps us imagine unhealed traumatic events as lockets within the personality that continuously block and sabotage every single relationship they try to form or maintain: "[t]hese lockets within the personality, though isolated from it, store the traumatic experience and the undifferentiated, undigested memories of the traumatic experience: unintegrated, overly painful feelings, the memories of relationships with lost and unmourned family members" (17). What is more, these lockets may also store concrete images, such as the image of the aggressor (Volkan 2013, 233). The Old Man's Dreaming Back matches exactly these descriptions of the intrasubjective field (locket), and it is crucial that the Dreaming Back sessions serve in the play as futile attempts to integrate and process deep hurts and to mourn painful familial bonds. More pressingly, the

feelings that are stored in these lockets within the self are completely cut-off from the external world and environment: “They form an intrasubjective experience complex (a mass) in which feelings cannot be distinguished one from the other, or from the traumatic event itself. Since they are shut away, *their intensity remains unchanged*, they are untamed and unprocessed” (Bakó, Zana 2020, 17, my emphasis). In what follows, I shall outline how this intrasubjective field is gradually built by the Old Man and how it leads to the final tragic act of filicide.

### 3. *Pathological Processing of Transgenerational Trauma in Purgatory*

The dialogue that we witness in *Purgatory* between father and son (the Old Man and the Boy) is a remarkably unbalanced one, given that the two parties talk through each other in most of the play. This means that while the Old Man is trying to tell the story of his traumatic past, the son’s brief, dismissive and often unrelated answers make the Old Man’s words seem like an inner monologue. However, from his narrative, it becomes clear that his trauma is multilayered and consists of several different painful factors. Before the Old Man begins talking about his violent and irresponsible father, he directs the focus to the house he used to live in and to his mother’s responsibility. The fact that he blames his mother also indicates that the trauma he is trying to explain to his son has not been processed at all. As the Old Man explains, even though her mother was a “grand-dam” who owned a big house, she married “a groom in a training stable” (*VPI*, 1043). What he describes is not merely about her mother marrying below her social status, but choosing a man who later squandered everything they had (thus, their son’s future, too) on gambling, horse race betting, excessive drinking and on other women. In the passage below, the father tries to mourn the future he could have had, had it not been for his father, including the safety of a great house, proper education, and the presence of her mother while growing up:

*Old Man.* Looked at him and married him,  
And he squandered everything she had,  
She never knew the worst, because  
She died in giving birth to me,  
But now she knows it all, being dead.  
Great people lived and died in this house;  
[...]  
They had loved the trees that he cut down  
To pay what he had lost at cards  
Or spent on horses, drink and women;  
Had loved the house, had loved all  
The intricate passages of the house,  
But he killed the house; to kill a house  
Where great men grew up, married, died,  
I here declare a capital offence. (*VPI*, 1043-1044)

In this excerpt, we learn that the passing of his mother, his primary caretaker, and the only one from whom he had any chance of receiving love, constitutes the centre of his complex trauma. The Old Man feels that he was left completely alone to deal with a man who did not love him or care about him: because she passed away, in his formative years he had no one to share the difficulty with. Noting that “[s]he never knew the worst” is a clear indication that the Old Man wishes he could have shared the horrific experience with someone and blames his mother for something beyond her control, namely, her tragic and sudden death. Moreover, when he calls his father’s act of “killing” their house as a capital offence it is more about the

destruction of the safety and the warmth of a home that any child needs while growing up. Because of his irresponsible father, the Old Man has never experienced a sense of home and safety, which adds significantly to the underlying trauma.

After the above-cited passage in which the Old Man seems to focus on his mother's role in destroying his life, he shifts the emphasis to the father, who tried to keep him on his own level, therefore he was never sent to school and did not receive proper love from him, merely some "half-love" because of her mother: "That he might keep me upon his level / He never sent me to school, but some / Half-loved me for my half of her" (*VPI*, 1044). The first line of the passage is crucial to the understanding of this play, as it indicates that the Old Man is aware that his father deliberately hindered his development, education, sense of safety, and a loving home. It is an indication that his father intentionally transmitted his own trauma package to his son, so that he would not be alone with his miserable life. During the play, as we shall see, the Old Man gradually realises that his son (the Boy) in many ways resembles his grandfather, which considerably contributes to his decision to kill him.

Besides the loss of his mother, the fact that he had to cope with hardship alone, the gradual destruction of their home, and the lack of education and therefore proper socialisation, another layer of the Old Man's trauma can be traced back to his teenage years (when he was sixteen), when one day he witnessed his father coming home drunk again and burning down their house. This was the day when the Old Man became a murderer, stabbing his father with a knife that he still uses today for eating, then leaving him in the fire. The Old Man also recounts that even though no one witnessed the patricide, his father's drunken friends kept threatening him with trial, which forced him to run away and thus he ended up being "a pedlar on the roads" (*VPI*, 1045). What is striking in this part of the Old Man's story is that after all he has recounted, he still identifies with his father, which indicates that he has fully internalised those negative traits that his father deliberately transmitted to him.

What I have described above constitutes the Old Man's multilayered trauma experience, which he desperately tries to share with his only social connection (his son); yet his story remains ignored, unvalidated, trivialised, questioned, ridiculed, and even pathologised. I see *Purgatory* as the Old Man's attempt to heal a trauma and turn it into memory; yet the son's reactions bring in some of the main risk factors for a trauma becoming unhealed, thus transgenerational. Bakó and Zana point out five main risk factors which are closely related: 1) the unshareability or silence; 2) the absence of others sharing the same or similar fate; 3) the lack of a safe broad and close milieu (society, friends, family); 4) the absence of a narrative; 5) and the damage to the mourning process (2020, 14). All five risk factors bear relevance to what happens in *Purgatory*, but I would centre on the most crucial one, the unshareability of the experience, given that *Purgatory* can be seen as a futile attempt to share a trauma and turn it into past memory.

Unshareability happens when either the fact or the gravity of the trauma is questioned by the traumatised individual's immediate or broad environment (13). In this case, the fate of the father's trauma depends entirely on one family member, the son, whose responses question the father's narrative in several different ways. It is already telling that although in most of the play, it is the Old Man who speaks, the play begins with the Boy's words, which clearly express that he sees his father as a burden, an annoying figure whom he must, for the time being, obey. The Boy is fed up with carrying the bag his father gave to him and more importantly, he states his annoyance with hearing his father talk – he restates this shortly after his father's first attempt to talk about his former home and parents: "I have had enough! / Talk to the jackdaws, if talk you must" (*VPI*, 1043). This sets the tone for their entire conversation which, as I have indicated before, is more like a monologue with minor interruptions from the son. What is crucial about the son's



interferences is that they do not resonate at all with the content of his father's speech. Some of them are insults: "A silly old man" (*VPl*, 1041), "Your wits are out again" (*VPl*, 1042), "You have made it up. No, you are mad! / You are getting madder every day" (*VPl*, 1045). Other reactions include more direct questionings of what his father is experiencing in the present: "There's nobody here" (*VPl*, 1042), "I cannot hear a sound" (*VPl*, 1045), and "There's nothing but an empty gap in the wall" (*VPl*, 1045). What is more, when the Old Man opens up about how his mother and father met and describes what his father did, the Boy seems to defend his grandfather against his traumatised father by asking, "What's right and wrong? / My grand-dad got the girl and the money" (*VPl*, 1043), which soon turns into a direct menace: "What if I killed you? You killed my grand-dad, / Because you were young and he was old. / Now I am young and you are old" (*VPl*, 1047). The way the Boy summarises his father's reasons for committing patricide after all the details he has been told indicates that he has not been listening to his father, or, that he has deliberately distorted the story out of pure resentment for and mistrust in him.

Finally, another type of the Boy's replies includes accusations which make it clear that the Old Man, just like his father, has been trying to keep his son on his own level, so that he would not be alone in his misery and hardship. When the Old Man complains about his father not having given him any education, the Boy refutes: "What education have you given me?" (*VPl*, 1044). This is one of the rare instances when father and son address and respond to each other. The Old Man's answer helps us understand the profound mistrust and hostility that has been transmitted from the Old Man's relationship with his father to the Old Man's relationship with his son. This is also the first time the Old Man expresses his feelings about his son, which helps us understand where the son's unwillingness to validate his father's story comes from: "I gave the education that befits / A bastard that a pedlar got / Upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch" (*VPl*, 1044). This indicates that the Old Man intentionally held back his son's development, just like his self-development had been hindered intentionally by his father. Later in the play, the son's accusations continue:

*Boy.* You never gave me my right share.

*Old Man.* And had I given it, young as you are,  
You would have spent it upon drink.

*Boy.* What if I did? I had a right  
To get it and spend it as I chose.

*Old Man.* Give me that bag and no more words.

*Boy.* I will not.

*Old Man.* I will break your fingers. (*VPl*, 1047)

This passage displays not only deep resentment in the two men towards one another, but also defiance, disobedience, and the threat of physical violence. It is after this passage that the two men begin fighting for the bag of money the Boy has been carrying. It is also after this passage that the Boy threatens to kill his father, but their heated quarrel is interrupted by a Dreaming Back episode – the only one in which the son also participates, as I shall detail later.

I have found it important to outline the types of the Boy's answers and reactions and the underlying reasons for the deep hostility between father and son, as this is what makes the father's trauma hopelessly unshareable in the play. The so-called mirroring and containment by the traumatised individual's environment are two crucial factors needed for any trauma to become a processed past memory. Bakó and Zana explicate that people do not merely need functioning relationships – they also need a social mirror or milieu "in which they see themselves reflected, and which is able to contain them. The role of the social 'mother-mirror' is among

other things to reflect how the external world interprets what the individual has experienced, what for him is a traumatic experience” (2020, 10). As noted before, one of the Old Man’s trauma experiences is that his mother was not there for him as a social mirror to help him digest his father’s behaviour and action, and now that he tries to position his son as a social mirror, the son rejects this position. The phenomenon of mirroring is not to be confused with the similarities between the Old Man and the Boy – indeed, they mirror each other’s behaviour, but what transgenerational trauma studies imply by mirroring is the environment’s willingness to validate the traumatised individual’s experience, which is missing from the father-son relationship in the play. For the healing process to begin, it is indispensable that the individual’s immediate family, friends, community, or society reflect to the traumatised individual that what they have experienced is indeed traumatic, hence they have every right to feel what they feel. As Bakó and Zana observe, in case “the social mirror is blind, insensitive, or if society itself is the perpetrator, then the traumatised individual or group is left alone with the experience. If the social processing of the trauma, the mourning process, fails to happen later too, there is a high chance the trauma will become transgenerational, and affect not only the victims, but the whole of society, for generations” (*ibidem*). Therefore, if the trauma can be shared and narrated to a certain environment, there is a much greater chance for correction – however, it is also evident that sharing and narrating are not enough. In *Purgatory*, the trauma is clearly shared and narrated, even if in a hectic and non-linear manner, the environment (the son) though listens to it, refuses to validate it and, through that validation, help his father’s (and, in fact, his own) processing of their family’s transgenerational trauma.

When society or the individual’s immediate environment fail to fulfil their “container” function, it often leads to the emergence of violent actions or other primitive functions that further hinder the possibility of healing to begin. In *Purgatory*, the son refuses to act as the container of his father’s undigested feelings, and thus he obstructs the processing and re-integration of the experience. At the same time, his recurring and consistent rejections act as triggers of the Old Man’s violence. When the environment cannot operate as a container, “[d]ominance is given to more primitive functions working against integration – such as splitting, projection, and pathological projective identification. Without a container, the undigested experiences overwhelming the self find an archaic path for themselves, or are projected onto the external world” (11). In the Old Man’s behaviour, we can observe both types of archaic path as a reaction to his son’s dismissive conduct: first, he projects his own fears and hurts onto his son only to use these projections as justifications for stabbing him with the same knife he used to kill his own father. The above-mentioned “containers” are also referred to as witnesses in clinical psychology. It is crucial to note here that witness does not imply eye-witness – rather, it means someone who is willing to listen and validate the experience. This witness figure, as Bakó and Zana have pointed out, is most often the child of the traumatised individual who thus becomes part of the traumatic experience (16). This validation by a witness or container is necessary for the individual’s intrasubjective reality to become intersubjective, and therefore transformable, healable. The Dreaming Back episodes that pervade the play and make the father-son relationship even more dysfunctional serve as proof of the Old Man’s inability to turn his intrasubjective reality (Dreaming Back flashbacks) into an intersubjective one.

Bound up with the play’s Dreaming Back episodes, another explanation for the son’s unwillingness to understand his father’s story lies in the “dreamlike nature” of the Old Man’s self-narrative in the Dreaming Back episodes. The Old Man perceives these events as his present reality which, however, is impossible to grasp for his son. Although the vast bulk of the play consists of the Old Man’s factual description of what happened in his past – which equally

annoys and bores his son – what confuses the Boy is when his father claims to see his parents in the house they are staring at from a distance. It is important to note that a traumatic event can be shared in two ways with the witness: as a narrative memory and as a transgenerational atmosphere: “A crucial difference between the two ways of sharing the experience is that while in the case of narrative memory the traumatic event is transmitted in a digested, symbolized form, in the field of the atmosphere it is undigested feelings that are shared” (*ibidem*). While narrative memory exists in the past, the transgenerational atmosphere haunts the present and, more importantly, it is temporally unstructured, which means that past, present, and future are not clearly demarcated – instead, they seem to exist simultaneously for the traumatised individual (*ibidem*). I contend in this paper that the Dreaming Back episodes that appear in the play function as the Old Man’s intrasubjective field, an internal space where he can live out and seemingly share uncomfortable feelings: “He is able to share the internal world he inhabits, the atmosphere he lives in, by creating an extended intrasubjective state or field of experience, through which he is able to relate to and communicate with others. This extended intrasubjective field can be called a ‘transgenerational atmosphere’ ” (*ibidem*). Traumatized individuals tend to create such an internal space for themselves, because it feels safer for them than the external world which they often find threatening, as the Old Man perceives his own environment as a constant threat to his existence. This permanent sense of the external world as menacing is due to the loss of the so-called basic trust – more specifically, the individual’s sense of trust in the world (the basic trust) is replaced entirely with mistrust. In his research, psychoanalyst Michael Balint called the lack of basic trust “basic fault” which would eventually lead to a lack of equivalence between the individual and the external world (1979). The traumatized individual is thus characterised by a permanent state of preparedness and danger, because “the danger experienced in the past becomes timeless and infinite, and is projected onto the present day and the future, unable to become memory” (Bakó, Zana 2020, 19). Whether this sense of danger and vigilance is integrated or mitigated depends on whether there are any relationships which help the individual rebuild their trust in the environment. In *Purgatory*, however, this trust is shattered completely from the beginning and is gradually deepened during the script as the mutual hostility between father and son becomes painfully palpable.

There are three Dreaming Back episodes in the play that demonstrate the characteristics of the transgenerational atmosphere and the Old Man’s mistrust in the external world. The beginning of the first Dreaming Back episode is indicated with a stage direction that says that the house’s window is suddenly lit up, and it ends with an indication that the light in the window has faded out. The first Dreaming Back follows the Old Man’s confession of patricide and how that murder made him a pedlar without a proper home or sense of safety. In this episode, the Old Man witnesses the night of his own conception in his mind’s eyes, and judging by the intensity of these passages, the line between past and present, fantasy and reality, has been completely blurred for him. Strikingly, the Old Man attempts to talk to his mother’s younger self in this episode to prevent his own conception, and thus eliminate the beginning of the transgenerational trauma that he has fallen victim of:

Do not let him touch you! It is not true  
That drunken men cannot beget,  
And if he touch [*sic*] he must beget  
And you must bear his murderer.  
Deaf! Both deaf! If I should throw  
A stick or a stone they would not hear;  
And that’s a proof my wits are out. (*VPI*, 1046)

This passage attests to much guilt experienced by the Old Man in relation to the traumatic sequence of events in his past. Although in his earlier descriptions, he clearly seems to blame his mother and his father for everything that has been happening to him, this passage suggests that he considers his own existence as the root of the problem. The last line, however, is in stark contrast with the rest of his words – within the intensity of this intrasubjective reality that he clearly perceives as happening in real time, the Old Man seems to be drawn back a bit, noting that he must be mad to say such things. But immediately after stating that he thinks his “wits are out”, he continues to observe his mother and the night of his conception with the same desperate intensity. Interestingly, before this Dreaming Back episode ends (that is, before the indication that the light in the window has faded out), the Old Man begins to order his son around, demanding that he fetch him a book to help find a solution to how to stop the process of “begetting” him. This is when the Old Man notices that while he has been witnessing that tragic night, his own son has tried to slip away with the bag of money. This is what drags the Old Man back to the present and puts an end to the first Dreaming Back episode. But the fact that during the episode, he is alternately addressing his mother, his father, and his own son, is proof that the Old Man cannot distinguish between past and present – because of his undigested trauma, what happened in the past still haunts him as if it was his present.

The second Dreaming Back episode follows shortly after the first one – it is triggered by the Boy’s demands and defiance towards his father, as the Boy refuses to give his father the bag of money, which leads to a physical struggle between them for the bag as well as the Boy’s threat to kill him as a revenge for having killed his grandfather. This episode begins with the Old Man first staring at the window, then pointing at it. This moment represents a significant shift in the play, as for the first time, the Boy sees what his father has been witnessing:

My God! The window is lit up  
 And somebody stands there, although  
 The floorboards are all burnt away.  
 [...]
 A dead, living, murdered man!  
 [...]
 A body that was a bundle of old bones  
 Before I was born. Horrible! Horrible! (*VPl*, 1048)

This passage is symbolic of the inevitability of the father’s unprocessed trauma to be transmitted to the following generation. At this point, the Boy also begins to confuse past with present, and is so terrified by the experience that he covers his eyes, as the stage direction indicates (*VPl*, 1048). While the Boy is at his most vulnerable (terrified and with his eyes covered), his own father stabs him three times with the same jack-knife that he used to stab his father. This is the moment when the stage direction indicates that the window has grown dark, that is the second Dreaming Back episode has ended. What is interesting about this second episode is that here the Old Man seems much less involved or agitated than in the previous one – however, this is only a semblance, as the anger is there, which erupts at the end of the episode, culminating in filicide. The Old Man believes that by killing his own son, he will be able to put an end to the Dreaming Back episodes, and thus to his and his own mother’s suffering:

Dear mother, the window is dark again,  
 But you are in the light because  
 I finished all that consequence.

I killed that lad because had he grown up  
 He would have struck a woman's fancy,  
 Begot, and passed pollution on.  
 I am a wretched foul old man  
     And therefore harmless. When I have stuck  
 This old jack-knife into a sod  
     And pulled it out all bright again,  
 And picked up all the money that he dropped,  
 I'll to a distant place, and there  
     Tell my old jokes among new men. (*VPL*, 1049)

This passage reaffirms that the Old Man, due to his undigested and unhealed feelings about the past, has projected his father's and his own traits onto his son, generating in himself a significant amount of disgust for his only offspring, whom he calls "the lad" and a "sod" here. He describes the murder in the same factual, unemotional, and detached manner as he described the stabbing of his father to the Boy earlier in the play. This indicates the Old Man's inability to form any sort of connection with the present and the individuals who inhabit it. This is a significant symptom of individuals stuck in a transgenerational atmosphere in which "the parent's self is seriously damaged, 'unviable'" (Bakó, Zana 2020, 18), and thus it is unable to contain difficult feelings and to form mature relationships.

The function of triggers might help us better understand what happens at the end of this second Dreaming Back episode. It is noteworthy that the violence takes place right after the son would begin to understand that what his father has been talking about is indeed valid. In this episode, the Old Man witnesses how his own son dreams back and sees for the first time his murdered grandfather. In my interpretation of the script, this is what acts as the trigger that eventually leads to filicide. As Bakó and Zana explain it, when a traumatised individual is affected by a trigger, it can instantly recall the original experience which, suddenly, bursts into consciousness. This bursting into consciousness following a trigger is also called flash experience:

the flash experience is the undigested memory of the traumatic event, which as a consequence of the trigger experience overwhelms the self. The reaction and feeling in the given situation are not only disproportionately intense and destructive, but may also contain feelings such as shame, guilt, or aggression, which are impossible to understand in connection with the given event or the life history. (17)

Given that this is a script which includes the Old Man's detailed narrative of his past, we can easily see the connection between the destructive act and the life history, which, however, is not normally the case when such flash experiences happen in real life. The mention of a disproportionately intense and destructive reaction is crucial here and it can help us understand where the Old Man's sudden fury comes from: he does not merely stab his son: he impulsively stabs his three times.

Bakó and Zana equally highlight that in such flash experiences, the related emotions are often completely split off and considered not to have happened at all (*ibidem*). What we see in the Old Man's reaction after the filicide is that his related emotions are indeed split off, yet he is very much aware of what has just happened. Traumatized individuals are often characterised by feelings of emptiness or apathy, and these feelings reappear intensely after a flash experience too: "within his own self there are parts and feelings shut away that he is unable to connect to, as if these feelings did not exist or were lost to him" (*ibidem*). These shut off feelings in *Purgatory* could include remorse, empathy, sorrow, or affection for his son – but the Old Man is not familiar with such feelings, as there was no one in his past to demonstrate such feelings

towards him. Also, in the first Dreaming Back episode, it becomes clear that the Old Man has a significant amount of self-hatred – if he could, we would prevent his own conception. It is important to note that those who are stuck in an intrasubjective space or transgenerational atmosphere, possess a divided self-state, a so-called “we-self” (18). This means that once they are in such an intrasubjective space, they are no longer able to separate their own self from those closest to them. In this space, the traumatised individual “is able to relate to others, to share experiences and memories, and even to exist, only by making the partner, the child, a part of [their] self” (*ibidem*). Therefore, they inevitably interpret their immediate environment (in this case the Boy) as part of their own self – for the Old Man, the son does not constitute a separate self-state as would be the case in healthy relationships, but he sees him as part of his own self. Therefore, the impulsive filicide (three violent stabs following one another) can also be perceived in light of the Old Man’s inability to love himself and his wish for not having been born at all.

The Old Man seems to believe that the intrasubjective reality that he has created can offer him a sense of safety and stability, especially after killing “all that consequence,” yet the third Dreaming Back episode following the stabbing of his son shatters his hopes for freeing himself from mental suffering. The beginning of the third Dreaming Back episode is signalled with the sound of hoof-beats:

Hoof-beats! Dear God,  
 How quickly it returns – beat – beat – !  
 Her mind cannot hold up that dream.  
 Twice a murderer and all for nothing,  
 And she must animate that dead night  
 Not once but many times!  
 O God,  
 Release my mother’s soul from its dream!  
 Mankind can do no more. Appease  
 The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead. (*VPL*, 1049)

This passage elucidates the Old Man’s emotional identification with his mother whom he never knew, yet in her absence, he has formed that crucial bond with her that, had her mother survived his birth, would have helped him navigate the hardship generated by his father. In the first and in this final Dreaming Back episode, the Old Man addresses his mother, but given that he has lost his ability to differentiate between past and present, the realm of the living and the dead, and between fantasy and reality, it is more likely that he is talking about and to himself in these passages. He wishes to be released from the dreamlike state that has been haunting him, and it is his own misery that he wants to see appeased by his old age. In 1996, it was psychologist Teréz Virág’s book titled *Emlékezés egy szederfára* (*Memory of a Mulberry Tree*) that first discussed the interconnected nature of the parents’ and their child’s problems. The contention that “the child’s problems cannot be understood independently of its parents and the circumstances in society” (1996, 5) seems particularly apt here with the Old Man being the child who sees his problems as identical to the ones his mother had to endure before she had given birth to him. This is one of the main symptoms of transgenerational trauma, which is so visibly and tangibly depicted in *Purgatory*: “In the child’s symptoms is reflected the terrible past, often unspoken, of the parents and grandparents” (13). It is true that the Old Man in the play is not technically a child anymore, but those with unresolved traumas, especially with undigested familial traumas, are doomed to stay in a child-like state for their entire life whenever the trauma flashbacks overwhelm them – these trauma flashbacks, the Old Man’s

intrasubjective field, are the three Dreaming Back episodes that frame the play and determine its characters' tragedy.

It is, in fact, no surprise that the dysfunctional father-son dyad in *Purgatory* ends with a violent tragedy. The basic fault or mistrust mentioned earlier in this section has characterised their family for generations, therefore the Old Man's and the Boy's default state was already a deep mistrust in each other. The Old Man was forced to create an isolated intrasubjective space, a sort of "deadened state" (Bakó, Zana 2020, 20) in order to shield himself from unprocessable internal and external reality, but by doing so he also inevitably shut himself away from the possibility of a functional relationship between him and his son. This is a way of filtering reality for the sake of survival: "The traumatized person creates this intrasubjective reality in order to protect himself from the destructive threat which he ascribes to the outer world, but which is actually internal. Paradoxically, however, he preserves and stores it, maintaining the internal capsule that threatens him" (*ibidem*). Therefore, even if *Purgatory* seems to be about a father's and a parent's attempt to share a trauma with his son to help him begin to digest it, this mission and their relationship are doomed to failure because of the parent's seriously damaged state, who has locked himself up in the cage of his own unresolved trauma. The internal capsule that threatens him, the intrasubjective space, is what I have equated with the Dreaming Back episodes of the play. Whatever the Old Man does, this internal capsule cannot be dismantled, as there is no one to mirror his trauma experience and there has never been anyone, hence with the third and final Dreaming Back episode, the internal capsule continues to threaten him – as he admits it, too, there is no escape from this cycle; he is left alone in his misery, as he has always been.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has offered a new avenue of interpreting the motif of Dreaming Back in Yeats's drama. Even though it seems that the Dreaming Back episodes in *Purgatory* concern the dead (the Old Man's parents) rather than the living, I have argued that these moments in the play stem from the Old Man's unresolved familial traumas which prevent him from establishing a functional relationship with his son and with his own self. Instead of viewing *Purgatory's* Dreaming Back episodes as flashbacks of the Old Man's past memories, I have proposed that their presence in the play is proof of the pathological processing of the Old Man's traumas, namely that he has not been able to turn them into past memories, therefore these flash experiences continue to haunt his presence and prolong his misery. The tropes of patricide and filicide that appear in the play (the former in the subtext and offstage, while the latter onstage) are also closely related to the topic of patrilineage. What we can observe in *Purgatory* is that the Old Man is so aware of the dangers of transmitting the traits of his violent father and the resulting trauma that he opts for evading the consequences of patrilineage (the passing down of masculine power and dominance from fathers to sons) through filicide, and thus he is left alone to deal with the traumas caused by his own patrilineal inheritance. The three Dreaming Back episodes in the play can be regarded as the Old Man's intrasubjective space which prevents him from making his traumatic past intersubjective and thus healable. I have also proposed that one of the main reasons for the Old Man's trauma remaining unresolved and unprocessed is his environment's (his son's) refusal to act a social mirror, a container, or witness of his traumatic past. Even though the Boy in the play rejects this role due to a deep and mutual mistrust (basic fault) between him and his father, texts, images, music, or other works of art can play the role of witness for people who see themselves or parts of their lives mirrored in such works. Yeats's drama has an immense potential for more comprehensive and stimulating psychological readings

which, I believe, would be yet another way to make Yeats's works, and especially his play text, more relatable for contemporary audiences.

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