Shifting Sympathies

The Representation of the IRA in Borstal Boy

B.A. Essay

Heiða Lind Sigurbjörnsdóttir

January 2015
Shifting Sympathies

The Representation of the IRA in Borstal Boy

B.A. Essay

Heiða Lind Sigurbjörnsdóttir
Kt.: 040990-2409

Supervisor: Alan Searles
January 2015
ABSTRACT

Brendan Behan’s autobiographical novel, *Borstal Boy*, was published in 1958 and it inspired Peter Sheridan to make a film of the same name in 2000. Although they share the same title, the novel and the film adaptation differ in some fundamental ways. The novel is an Irish Republican Army themed story which focuses on Brendan’s experience as a teenager in three prisons and his interactions with other inmates and prison officials. The film tones down the IRA’s influence on the story and transitions the theme to a bisexual love triangle.

The purpose of the essay is to investigate some of the differences between the novel and the film and to examine the reasons behind these changes, especially with regards to the theme shift from the main character’s nationalistic ideology in the novel to his sexual orientation in the movie. There are other shifts that occur as the story progresses, Brendan’s idealised view of the IRA and by extension his perception of all Englishmen as the enemy is gradually eroded as his friendship develops with other boys at Borstal. To support my thesis, I look at how the IRA is presented in both works and how it influences the story and I compare some facts about Behan with the works to try to explain where the bisexuality theme comes from.

The result is that the IRA’s influence on the story is more significant in the novel than in the film, which instead foregrounds Brendan’s sexuality. In both works, Brendan’s naïve nationalism and the influence that the IRA has on his young impressionable character can be sympathised with despite his being cast as an atypical hero. Furthermore, the IRA and the English are not presented as either good or bad in the story, indeed the portrayal of each shifts as the narrative progresses. Finally, the bisexual aspect of the film is inspired by facts about Brendan Behan’s own sexuality which came to light after the novel was published. This essay attempts to examine the shifts in sympathy from an ideological coming of age story in the novel to a sexual awakening theme in the film, as well as addressing some of the shifts in Brendan’s character in both works.
# Table of Contents

1. **Introduction** ................................................................................................................. 5  
   1.1 Summary ....................................................................................................................... 5  
2. **The IRA’s Influence on Brendan** .................................................................................. 6  
   2.1 Brendan as a Villain ..................................................................................................... 6  
   2.2 Sympathising with Brendan ......................................................................................... 8  
   2.3 The Shift from Criminal to Political Prisoner ............................................................ 11  
3. **The Depiction of the IRA in *Borstal Boy*** ................................................................. 13  
   3.1 Negative Depictions of the IRA ................................................................................... 14  
      3.1.1 Negative Depictions of the IRA in the Novel ....................................................... 14  
      3.1.2 Negative Depictions of the IRA in the Film ....................................................... 16  
   3.2 Positivity Towards Brendan Being in the IRA ............................................................ 16  
   3.3 The IRA as Depicted Through Brendan ....................................................................... 19  
      3.3.1 Shifting Depiction of the IRA in the Novel ....................................................... 20  
      3.3.2 Shifting Depiction of the IRA in the Film ....................................................... 23  
4. **Theme Shift from Ideology to Sexuality** .................................................................... 24  
   4.1 The Reasons Behind the Film’s Gay Theme .............................................................. 24  
   4.2 A Different Time .......................................................................................................... 27  
5. **Conclusion** .................................................................................................................. 29  
6. **Works Cited** ............................................................................................................... 30
1. Introduction

1.1 Summary

Brendan Behan’s autobiographical novel, *Borstal Boy*, was published in 1958 and in 2000 it was adapted into a film of the same name by Peter Sheridan. The story in both works begins in 1939 as the young Irish Nationalist Brendan is captured and put in prison for attempting to plant a bomb in Liverpool and it ends as he is released having served his sentence in Hollesley Bay Borstal in England. What happens between these events is different in each work. The novel is a coming of age story that portrays Brendan as a romanticized IRA sympathizer and focuses on his interactions and relationships with other boys and prison officials in the three different prisons at which he was interred. The film revolves around Brendan’s experience in the third prison only and it places the main emphasis on a failed escape attempt and a bisexual love story. The impact of the IRA’s presence in the story becomes less prominent in the film adaptation of the novel and the bisexuality aspect is foregrounded at its expense.

By identifying some similarities and differences between the novel and the film this essay hopes to show how the IRA influences each work differently. Firstly, it addresses the IRA’s influence on the character of Brendan and how that influence changes as the story progresses; secondly, it shows how the IRA is depicted in various ways in both works; and thirdly, it explores the reasons behind the shift in theme from Brendan’s nationalism to his sexual orientation. It also addresses some facts about Brendan Behan which are not mentioned in the novel and how these facts may have influenced the two works. It is important to note that whenever I talk about Brendan I am referring to his character as he is depicted in the novel and the film as opposed to Brendan Behan, the author, whom I refer to by using his last name.
2. The IRA’s Influence on Brendan

An important aspect to consider when assessing the influence of the IRA on the book and the film is the kind of character Brendan is and in what ways the film shows this influence differently than the novel. Obviously, Brendan was a real person but if we look at how he is depicted in the book and the film, it is interesting to see what kind of person the readers and viewers perceive him to be and whether he would be perceived differently if he had been incarcerated for something that was not IRA related. Brendan is the main character and in both the book and the film he is likeable, funny, and the one with whom the audience sympathise. He is the one telling the story and because the novel is written in the first person narrative we can see what he is thinking in between conversations. Even though Brendan comes across as a likeable character who elicits our sympathy, the fact that he is in prison for attempting to plant a bomb in Liverpool on behalf of the IRA must raise the question of whether he is actually a bad person or some kind of villain.

2.1 Brendan as a Villain

If we look at the facts of Brendan’s story in the novel one could simply state that he was a 16 year old boy from Dublin who was a member of the IRA and went to a youth prison for attempting to plant a bomb in Liverpool. Without context, this information by itself may lead a person to perceive Brendan simply as a criminal or terrorist who was willing to blow people up. On the other hand, some might forgive him if they agreed that he was fighting in a war and may consider that his crime was a result of a misplaced sense of duty committed for his country. In that case, he would perhaps not be considered a bad person willing to murder people but rather, a patriot fighting for his country. The way Behan presents the events in the novel he romanticises himself and the IRA and leaves the impression that what he did to get him sent to prison was a noble act committed on behalf of the IRA. He makes himself sound like a patriotic hero.

If Brendan had not been caught with the explosives it is fair to assume that he would have planted a bomb in Liverpool that might have killed people. This is argument enough for Brendan to be called a criminal who was ready to kill for the IRA or this “murder gang”, as the prison priest at Walton puts it when he is trying to talk Brendan
into denouncing the IRA (Behan 73). Furthermore, if the bomb had killed people, Brendan would not have looked at himself as a murderer according to what he says to inspector Vereker in beginning of the novel when he is being interrogated after he is caught with the explosives. The inspector tells him about sentences other members of the IRA have gotten for bombing murders and Brendan answers: “It was no murder” (Behan 31). So basically, Brendan was ready to kill people without considering it to be murder because he was doing what he felt necessary for the IRA’s cause. He was willing to kill people for a cause, for his country, but would not have killed without reason. This affords the audience a reason for not considering Brendan as a criminal or villain, he was simply a young idealistic man fighting for his country. But even for those who would still call him a criminal for being willing to blow up people, be it for a cause or not, we have to take a closer look at his reasons. Perhaps blowing people up for Ireland is not something he particularly wanted to do; but rather something he felt duty bound to do and was pressured into by the weight of history.

The film starts the same way as the novel where Brendan is caught by the police with explosives in Liverpool. A cursory perusal of the description on the back of the DVD-case might give a first impression of Brendan as a terrorist who was ready to kill people since we are not told much more than the fact that he is a teenage boy sent to prison because he was on a bombing mission. The film suggests that Brendan is a member of the IRA and that the bomb he was planning to set off was something that was initiated by the IRA. In other words, teenage Brendan appears to the audience as a sort of messenger for the IRA who is most likely just following orders and that he is happy to follow them because he wants to fight for a united Ireland. As in the novel, the film has a character refer to the IRA as a “murder gang” but in the film the words are taken out of the priest’s mouth and given to inspector Vereker in the beginning of the film.

The audience hardly get a chance to assume that Brendan is a bad person because even though he is obviously ready to plant a bomb in the beginning of the film he is shown almost immediately to be a good and likeable character who was just trying to fight for his country. In response to inspector Vereker’s question regarding why other IRA men had been hanged for murder, Brendan argues that they had died for their country. In the novel this conversation happens with a priest much later in the narrative.
Perhaps this conversation was moved to the beginning of the film and given to another character to be able to show right away that Brendan believes that he is fighting for his country and that he would not have considered himself a murderer if he had succeeded with his bombing plans. This change in the film adaptation shows the audience right away that this young boy is not simply a criminal and that the people who think that the IRA are a “murder gang” are the inspectors who in the previous scene had manhandled this teenager pretty badly. Consequently, despite being presented as an IRA bomber, Brendan is not perceived as a villain or a criminal.

2.2 Sympathising with Brendan

Regardless of whether Brendan’s motivation for planting the bomb was political rather than criminal and thereby perhaps deserving of our sympathy, there are numerous other examples in the novel which indicate that he is not a villain. To begin with, he is only 16 years old. It is not mentioned in Behan’s book whether he was pressured into this mission or not, but his father and grandfather had fought for Ireland and perhaps it is fair to assume that he idealised the nationalist struggle and wanted to follow in their footsteps. Certainly Behan gives the impression in his novel that as a 16-year-old he thought very highly of the IRA and what his father and grandfather had done to aid in the fight for a united Ireland and that it was only natural for him to continue the fight.

There are a number of episodes in the novel which endear Brendan to the reader and subtly shift the perception of him as simply a criminal to a more complex and quite likeable character. For example, once Brendan is in Borstal, he is very popular with most of the boys. He makes a lot of jokes and sings all the time to entertain the other boys. He is also generous and shares all the tobacco that he gets with his new found friends. On numerous occasions, he comes to his best friend Charlie’s rescue and he takes risks for his friends, often involving stealing fruit or tobacco. By reading what he is thinking we can also see that all these actions that make him popular are not just a scheme to gain popularity but something he genuinely wants to do. Brendan’s personality is overall very likeable and with his wit and good nature it is hard not to like him.

Perhaps the most significant factor that contributes to the reader sympathising with Brendan is the fact that we are aware of what he is thinking because the story is
told in the first person. From what he is thinking, it becomes apparent that he is not just a mindless soldier ready to kill anyone for a cause. Even though Brendan always expresses himself as if he would do anything for his country and for the cause of the IRA, his thoughts often betray the conviction of what he says. Brendan always expresses himself as a nationalist and remains loyal to the IRA for the entire story, refusing to divulge any information even under interrogation. Despite the loyalty that he shows, we can see from his thoughts that he is perhaps not really ready to do anything and hurt anyone for the cause. Though he does not show it on the outside, he is scared and does not really want to sacrifice as much for the IRA as he feels he should and he does not hate the English as much as he would want to.

An example of this shift in sentiment can be seen in the book when Brendan and the other young prisoners in Walton are waiting to be sentenced and he finds himself wondering whether he will get 14 years in a regular prison or three years in Borstal on account of his age. He is ashamed of himself because he would rather go to Borstal than to a regular prison where he would be with other IRA prisoners, and the reason is not the length of the sentence “for I had always believed that if a fellow went into the IRA at all he should be prepared to throw the handle after the hatchet, die dog or shite the licence” (Behan 129) but it is because he would rather be with his new English friends “than with my own comrades and countrymen any place else” (129). “It seemed a bit disloyal to me, that I should prefer to be with boys from English cities than with my own countrymen and comrades from Ireland’s hills and glens,” (129). It is interesting that Brendan feels more connected with working class English teenagers than with the idealistic nationalism and sense of duty which drew him to the IRA.

The previous example of how Brendan’s thoughts provide insight to his true nature is something we only see in the book and not in the film, because we cannot hear his thoughts in the film – it is not narrated. However, we do not need to know what he is thinking to know that he is a good person. There are scenes in the film which show with actions instead of thoughts that Brendan is a likeable character who deserves the audience’s sympathy. For instance he comes to the rescue for both his best friend Charlie and the added character of Elizabeth when they are in trouble. The film shows Brendan in similar light as Behan does in the novel, as a popular funny leader whom the other boys trust.
Even though he comes across as rather serious in the film, Brendan is still warm and witty. After the boys’ attempt to escape his excuse to the Governor is: “as a prisoner of war, it was my duty to escape”. This attempted escape is something that only happens in the film. Brendan never tries to escape in the novel and even turns down the opportunity to join Ken Jones in his escape plans because he actually likes Borstal, the other boys, the screws and the Governor, and he does not “like double-crossing the Governor” (Behan 241). The film does not have this Ken Jones character but takes his desire to escape and gives it to another character, the funny Scottish Jock, who together with Brendan, Charlie, and two other boys organizes an escape. The film focuses a great deal on this escape and Brendan shows his intelligence and leadership skills in the planning and executing of it. The escape scene provides a shift on two different levels. The first is a shift in the actual story, the addition of an escape plot to the film which is absent from the novel and Brendan’s contention that it was his duty to escape, perhaps serves to underline for the audience the fact that Brendan sees himself as a prisoner of war. His sympathy for the IRA and his national pride are expressed throughout the novel but are not as prevalent in the film. It is also worth noting the shift in his nationalistic ideals when a prison escape is proposed in the novel, not only does Brendan not feel duty bound to escape but he considers it a betrayal of the Governor. It may also be argued that the main reason for adding the escape to the film was to make the rather uneventful story from the novel more action-packed. The novel makes up for its uneventfulness with colourful conversations and descriptions which are for the most part missing from the film. The escape in the film also emphasises Brendan’s belief that he is a prisoner of war and that he is not like the other common prisoners. Of the five boys that try to escape, Charlie is the only one who is English, so it shows how these non-English boys stick together because they feel they should not be there.

Perhaps Brendan would get an even more sympathetic audience if he had been wrongly imprisoned, like Gerry Conlon in another IRA themed movie *In the Name of the Father*, and it must be taken into account that whether it was a war crime or not, Brendan was still guilty of it, only he was caught before he could finish his job. It is also worthy to wonder if he would come across as more of a villain if he had actually finished the job before he was caught.
Overall, in both the book and the film, Brendan comes across as a popular, loyal and caring patriot who is never short of a witty response. In his biography about Brendan Behan, O’Connor says about his popularity that “with his wealth of colourful phrases, his songs, and wit, his quaint proverbs, his laughing, joyful personality, Brendan was the most popular boy at Hollesley Bay” (59).

2.3 The Shift from Criminal to Political Prisoner

The fact that Brendan was sentenced for an IRA related activity plays a significant role in the fact that the reader or viewer still sympathises with him. The IRA strongly influences the way readers and viewers see Brendan. If the IRA were taken completely out of the story, they would get an entirely different impression of him. If Borstal Boy were a story about a 16 year old boy who had raped a girl, murdered someone, or even planted a bomb just for fun, despite possibly still being a funny character that cares about his friends, it would be much harder to sympathise with him. As Giovannelli points out, “one of the first things to be noticed about sympathy is that sympathizing with someone involves a favorable attitude toward the other, a desire, ceteris paribus [with other things constant], that the other persist in a positive situation or be freed of a negative one” (84). In other words, when we sympathise with a character, there is usually something likeable about them, and because we like them, we want them to do well. The readers of the book and the audience of the film want Brendan happy and free of violence.

If, for example, Brendan were in prison for rape, instead of what he believes to be war crimes, the reader or viewer of the story might not have the desire for him to do well. In the film, there is a fellow Borstal inmate called Dale, who is in fact in for rape and seems proud of it, and he is neither likeable nor worthy of any sympathy. Although there is a character in the novel called Dale, he does not have much in common with the Dale in the film. In the film, he is the antithesis of Brendan. Because Dale is such a horrible and despicable person, he provides a contrast to Brendan who looks like a saint compared to him. In a way, Dale in the film is a substitute for the first two parts of the novel that are for the most part omitted from the film. The first two parts of the novel, in which Brendan is at Walton and Feltham before going to Borstal, show the horrible mistreatment and abuse Brendan receives from prison guards and other inmates because
he is Irish. These two parts where Brendan is treated so badly provide numerous reasons for the reader to sympathise with Brendan and to think he is being mistreated just like Dale mistreats him and others in the film. From this it can be concluded that it is extremely important for the story and for Brendan’s character that his crime involves the IRA and not something else, as is the case with Dale. It is even more important in the film because as opposed to the novel the audience does not know by Brendan’s thoughts that he is a good person so with the character of Dale it is shown that even though someone wants to plant a bomb to fight for their country it is not as despicable as bragging about having raped someone.

Taking this into account, because of the IRA’s influence on Brendan’s character together with his friendly and caring nature, an appropriate way to describe him is by assuming he is an antihero. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary an antihero is “the main character in a story, but one who does not have the qualities of a typical hero, and is either more like an ordinary person or is very unpleasant” or according to Collins English Dictionary an antihero is “a central character in a novel, play, etc, who lacks the traditional heroic virtues.” These definitions seem to fit because Brendan is not the typical boy-next-door kind of hero. He is a likeable charming antihero who the readers and viewers root for because he ultimately means well even though he does not always use the most acceptable ways to get there. He may have intended to blow some people up but he fights for his country and he fights for his friends.
3. The Depiction of the IRA in *Borstal Boy*

Throughout the whole book and the movie, the IRA remains faceless. Brendan is a member of the IRA but through the course of the story, there is never any communication shown between Brendan and other members of the IRA. He is not shown receiving any orders or actually being pressured into doing anything for the IRA. The readers of the book and the audience of the film might assume that Brendan was ordered by the IRA to go on the bombing mission because nothing is ever implied to contradict that. However, in real life he was not ordered by the IRA to plant the bomb, in fact as Kearney points out “his action was not sanctioned by the IRA leadership and was against the advice of family and friends” (48). He then goes on to say that “[t]he unofficial nature of the invasion is not mentioned in the book where Behan presents himself as the traditional volunteer under arrest, making the customary statement of loyalty to the cause and the defiance of the Crown” (48). Therefore, it can be seen by the way Brendan Behan wrote *Borstal Boy*, that no matter what happened in reality, the teenage Brendan that is portrayed in the novel sees himself as a formal member of the IRA imprisoned for fighting for Ireland, and the film makes the same impression.

Despite the IRA being faceless in the story, it is depicted in certain ways, for example by what Brendan says and thinks about it, what the other boys have to say about it, and by the way the authority figures talk about it. In the end, these references from the characters leave an impression of the IRA with the reader or viewer, especially for those who read the book or watch the movie without any prior knowledge of the IRA. The impression that the book and film leave with the reader and viewer cannot be said to be that the IRA or the English are either good or bad. What we do see are the shifting sympathies of the main character from an anti-English IRA sympathizer to a more understanding less radical individual who eventually becomes friends with some of his fellow inmates at Borstal. Neither the novel nor the film takes clear-cut sides. They only show that first of all, the English (and some even Irish) prison guards and police officers and some of the prisoners at Walton and Feltham, where Brendan stays before he goes to Borstal, think that the IRA is a murder gang. Secondly, it shows that most of the Borstal boys do not mind about the IRA and tend to make jokes about it while a few of them even respect Brendan’s cause. Thirdly, the story shows that in the
beginning, the nationalistic Brendan thinks the IRA are the good guys just fighting for their country and that the English are the evil ones, but in the end he can see that the English are all right and he does not want to blow them up anymore. Or as Brendan says at the end of the film: “I was brought up to hate the English. I had to come here to learn about love.”

3.1 Negative Depictions of the IRA

A number of characters in the book and film talk negatively about the IRA and that could leave a negative impression of it with the reader or viewer. Since the IRA is faceless in the story, this input is the only thing that has the possibility of making the reader or viewer think of the IRA as villains or representing some kind of evil. However, these comments and attitudes of the characters that are against the IRA are perhaps not so likely to leave such an impression because the majority of these characters are themselves seen as evil and they are not very likeable.

3.1.1 Negative Depictions of the IRA in the Novel

In the novel, those characters who express the most negative views about the IRA are the prison guards, or “screws” as the boys call them, at Walton, the prison where Brendan spent two months before going to Feltham and then ultimately to the Borstal Institution. To put it another way, these characters are authority figures. An example of the mistreatment Brendan receives from the screws as a result of being in the IRA and defending it is when he is harshly beaten up after stating his opinions to the Walton prison priest. Brendan is brought to the priest who asks him when he is going to give up his “membership of this murder gang – the IRA” and tells him that he cannot attend mass unless he denounces the IRA (Behan 73). Brendan defends the IRA and talks about how the Catholic Church is “against Ireland and for the British Empire” (74) and points out that the Church keeps excommunicating people who refuse to sever their connection with the IRA. The priest and the screws try to convince Brendan that the IRA is scum but Brendan has an answer ready for everything. The screws end up calling him a swine and worse for insulting the priest – “You fughing shit-house, we’ll teach you ‘ow to be’ave, you dirty Irish fugh-pig” (76). They bring him back to his cell and beat him up:
They took me to the cell, and beat me in the face, slaps but not punches. The punches they gave me in the kidneys, and once or twice they hit me across the face with a bunch of keys, but concentrated mostly on the guts and a few kicks in my arse, when they sent me sprawling across the room and shouted all the time about killing me, and insulting the priest and me a half-starved Irish bastard, and they’d give me IRA . . . (Behan 76)

From this example, which is typical for the treatment Brendan receives in the first part of the book, the reader might wonder whether the IRA is perhaps some kind of a murder gang since the screws and the priest describe it as such and get all worked up when Brendan defends it. While the reader might consequently think of the IRA as villains, it seems they would not take these characters’ word for it because these are the same characters that are brutally beating up a 16 year old boy, the likeable charming antihero of the story. So, instead of being left with the impression that the IRA is evil, the reader is left with the impression that the prison guards and other officials at Walton who represent the English system are the real villains. Each reader will then have to decide for themselves whether they will make a generalization and equate these authority figures to the whole British authority being some kind of evil.

It is not just the screws but also the other prisoners at Walton that give Brendan a hard time in the novel for being in the IRA. One of them, called Dale (from the novel, not the same character as in the film), gives Brendan a particularly hard time for being Irish and for being in the IRA. He lets him know that he hates Irish people and bullies him. The screws join in on the bullying. When the boys are supposed to be sewing mailbags, Dale gets Brendan in trouble for talking when it was really Dale who was talking and threatening to hit Brendan. When the screw asks what is going on Dale says: “It’s this Irish bastard, sir, . . . ‘e keeps talking all the time – I just told ‘im ‘e’d get me in trouble.” And then when Brendan tries to explain the situation the screw replies: “I’m just about browned off with you, you gabby Irish bastard.” (Behan 84). Later, Brendan has to get Dale’s approval of the mailbag he made to be allowed to start a new one, and Dale keeps saying the bag is not good enough and that Brendan has to fix it. The screw agrees with Dale even though there is nothing wrong with the bag and calls Brendan a “stupid Irish bastard” (Behan 85). The only thing Brendan can do to get the bullies off his back is to beat up Dale’s friend, James who is an easier target, which he is of course
greatly punished for (Behan 87). However, the screws who think “every IRA bastard should get the rope,” (126) turn the other cheek if it is Brendan who is getting the beatings, and Brendan thinks in the novel: “The screws began saying, too, that the lags in Dartmoor had kicked the shit out of IRA men, and were nearly telling the prisoners here that they would not mind if they gave me a kicking.” (126). So, this shows that the characters who tend to speak lowly of the IRA in the story, the ones who call the IRA a murder gang, are the same ones who bully and beat up a teenage boy, mostly just for being Irish. Once again, these points show how important it is that it is the IRA and not something else that is involved in the story because Brendan is severely discriminated against for being a member of it, and even just for being Irish.

3.1.2 Negative Depictions of the IRA in the Film

Instances of Brendan being abused because of his affiliation with the IRA such as those found in the first two parts of the novel are barely existent in the film. More importantly, the IRA is mentioned far less times in the film than in the novel. There is one scene early on in the film where Brendan is beaten up with clubs by screws at Walton but that is the only time that happens. Although the film suggests Brendan is a proud IRA member fighting for his country, all of that falls into the shadow of the escape and the love stories that get the main focus in the film. Consequently, there are not really any negative depictions of the IRA in the film apart from implying that they use bombs to fight for their cause.

3.2 Positivity Towards Brendan Being in the IRA

As the story progresses and Brendan makes more friends and becomes quite popular, we start to see some more positivity towards the IRA, both in Feltham Boys’ Prison, where he was sent after Walton, and especially once Brendan is finally in Hollesley Bay Borstal. Or perhaps it is not exactly positivity; rather indifference about Brendan being an IRA man. In the novel, he only gets to the Borstal in Part Three so we can see that he has already had to face discrimination because of the IRA and simply his nationality for a long time before his jail experience takes a more positive spin once he is in Borstal. Once he is there, we start to see how most of the boys do not care that he is in the IRA and they even start joking about it. It does not matter anymore what Brendan
did to make him end up in Borstal because with his charisma, his “Irish social skills – the cunning wink, the cheerful blarney…” (Brown 194) he manages to win over most of the boys, gain their trust and their friendship.

As mentioned earlier, once Brendan is in Feltham and then in Hollesley Bay Borstal, the IRA is no longer depicted by any characters as a murder gang. Or at least, if the boys do think the IRA is bad, they do not judge Brendan for being a part of it. Instead of Brendan’s connection with the IRA being portrayed with violence, it starts to be portrayed in connection with humour and friendship. Charlie is an example of one of the English boys who likes Brendan for whom he is and he says early on while the boys are still at Walton after Brendan has been given a hard time by one of the screws: “I don’t care, Paddy, if you were in the IRA or what you were bleedin’ in. You’re my china [mate], Paddy.” (Behan 71).

Another example from the novel of how Brendan being an IRA man is not seen as such a negative thing by the other boys at Borstal is that he is much more accepted than Ken, who is middle or upper class and the boys all look down on. Brendan knows that just because Ken is upper class, the other boys will never accept him, and thinks “I was nearer to them than they would ever let Ken be,” (Behan 241) and “I couldn’t help being sorry for him, for he was more of a foreigner than I, and it’s a lonely thing to be a stranger in a strange land.” (242). Hence, attempting to blow up Englishmen is more acceptable than being an upper class Englishman. In fact, Brendan is the only one who accepts Ken and Ken likes Brendan too, and says he is a “decent fellow” and “[s]ome people don’t like the Irish – I do.” (Behan 243).

Additionally, there are some funny comments from the boys that suggest that they do not see the IRA as something terrible and do not judge Brendan for being a part of it. The novel shows Harty’s sadness over not being sent to the same Borstal as Brendan because he really liked him and thought they would be friends, or “chinas”, as the boys would say. Harty, who is from Liverpool, likens being Scouse to being Irish and says: “I didn’t care if you was an IRA man, though my old man was Irish, and I hated him.” (Behan 177). Another one of these comments is when Joe compliments Brendan’s trench coat when they are leaving Feltham to go to Borstal and says: “That’s a real IRA gunman’s coat, Paddy, like what you’d see Victor McLaglen [a successful English film actor] wearing on the pictures” (Behan 206). A further example of an IRA
joke the boys make is when Brendan gives the boys at Feltham some cigarettes and after thanking him and bidding goodnight, a character called Chewlips jokes: “and up the Hey R. Hey, or whatever they call it” and the boys all laugh (Behan 200). Furthermore, after Brendan sings at a Borstal concert, he receives great applause and one of the boys says: “Paddy, that was lovely . . . Best bloody singer in the ‘ole hi. hoR. hA. is our Pat” (Behan 293). After the concert, Brendan is once again singing in the bathroom and a boy called Cragg says to him: “Good on you, Paddy, lad,” and “I’d call one of me kids after you only they’re named already” (Behan 296). From this it is obvious that Cragg does not care about Brendan being an IRA man, he likes him all the same.

For the boys at Borstal, being in the IRA and having attempted to plant a bomb in Liverpool does not equal Brendan being a bad person. It does not necessarily mean that the boys are making the IRA sound good or that they support their methods of fighting. It is just that, when it comes to Brendan, being a member of the IRA is for them not a factor that defines him. It says more about the English boys than the IRA, and what kind of people they are. They do not judge a book by its cover or a boy by his crime. Again, it is not a generalization either that the English are good or bad, it just shows that these particular Borstal boys are good. Brendan knows about horrible treatment of IRA prisoners in other prisons and he considers himself lucky because “I could not say that the blokes had been unfair to me, nor could I say that the Borstal screws treated me any different to anyone else” (Behan 303).

While most of the boys do not mind that Brendan is an IRA man and make jokes about it, there are others that actually respect it and understand why he did what he did. Tom Meadows, an English boy who comes from a family line of painters just like Brendan, is one of them. He states that even though he is against the IRA and the bombings he says to Brendan that “when all is said and done you thought you was fighting for your country,” (Behan 358) and that he should not be in Borstal “among a lot of scum” (302). Of course, Tom is not only against the IRA but he is “also against the British upper class and the Royal Family” (302). In fact, Tom stated that “it was the fault of the British boss class that the Irish were forced always into terrorism to get their demands, which he allowed were just and right” (302). In summary, most of the Borstal boys in the novel do not judge Brendan for being an IRA man. While some of them joke about it, others respect him for it.
The film focuses mainly on the time Brendan spent in Borstal while his stay at Walton, where he faced the worst persecutions, is only shown briefly in the beginning. Therefore, there is far less IRA discrimination shown in the movie than in the novel. As in the novel, the Borstal boys in the film are shown to be indifferent to Brendan being in the IRA and they make jokes about it. It is shown for example when Brendan and Jock are talking about escaping and Brendan says to him “I’m a P.O.W. [Prisoner of War], it’s my duty to escape” and Jock answers in a mocking tone “Ooh, he’s a P.O.W.” and both boys laugh. At that point Brendan seems to realize that he does not have to present himself as any kind of martyr or hero, he is just a boy like anyone else there.

Also, in the film, upon his arrival at Borstal, Brendan is assured by the Governor that the rough time he had at Walton is all behind him now and he is always treated well by the prison guards at Borstal. In the film, an example of how it is shown that the Borstal prison guards do not think Brendan is the worst of the worst, as opposed to the guards at Walton, is when one guard is looking for a volunteer for a painting job. Dale, who in the film is in Borstal for rape, raises his hand but the prison guard says in a mocking tone: “No sex offenders, decent criminals only,” then looks at Brendan and says: “Irish?” So, Brendan is no longer considered the bottom of the barrel; rather, he is a “decent criminal”.

3.3 The IRA as Depicted Through Brendan

When wondering what impression of the IRA the reader or viewer of Borstal Boy gets, it must be considered how that impression is given by Brendan himself since he is the only face of it they see. There are no IRA members in the novel or in the film that are shown pressuring him into doing anything as in the 1992 film The Crying Game, where IRA Volunteer Fergus is forced and threatened by fellow IRA members to acts of violence. In Borstal Boy, the reader and viewer sees no such villain types that are to blame for the attempted bombing attack. There is just Brendan, the nationalist, who seems to want to do anything for Ireland, or what he believes is in the best interest of the Irish nation.
3.3.1 Shifting Depiction of the IRA in the Novel

So, let us look at Brendan, the teenage nationalistic IRA man in the story whose ethnicity the reader is constantly reminded of. After all, Andersen talks about the Irish flavour of the work and writes: “Borstal Boy is about Brendan Behan, Irishman” (47). From the way Brendan talks about the IRA in the book we can see that he is very passionate about their cause. From reading the book, we cannot really see why Brendan cares so much about a united Ireland; we just know that he does. As O’Connor points out about the reality of it, Brendan was one of the young IRA men who “were victims of the lack of opportunity in the new State, creaking from the results of the Civil War, where social progress had been slow” (27) and for them the source of Ireland’s trouble lay “in the partition of the country” and they believed that “[i]f the British were to clear out of the six north-eastern counties, then an all-Ireland Republic could be declared and the new dawn promised by the revolution would come at last” (28). Furthermore, O’Connor states about these young IRA men: “They were revolutionaries. They felt obliged to employ the methods of revolutions.” (28). Brendan really seems to care and he wants a united Ireland all throughout the story. He is extremely nationalistic and makes sure everyone knows it.

Although Brendan mentions the IRA in the book all the time, he does not mention much his interaction with other members of it. He idealises the IRA, talks about its heroes from the past, his father and grandfather, and what the IRA is and has been fighting for. He is proud to be an IRA man and proud to be an Irishman and he is not afraid to show it. As was mentioned above, Brendan believes that the way the IRA are going about their fight is right and necessary and that the English deserve the attacks but by the end, though he still believes in the cause, he cannot hate the English anymore.

The presence of the whole IRA element and how it influences the story can be seen in Brendan’s nationalism. He feels he needs to do whatever he can to fight for Ireland and he seems most concerned with uniting the country – getting the six counties back. In the beginning of the book, he is scared about getting a long prison sentence but he also feels that he could be proud of it because he is suffering for his country. He considers himself a “good Volunteer, captured carrying the struggle to England’s doorstep,” (Behan 13) and he thinks the people back home are proud of him, that they
are thinking that he “was a great lad all the same, and he only sixteen” (13). This is something Brendan is just imagining but the reader really knows nothing about what the Irish actually think of him. As Kearny points out: “While growing up, Behan had assumed that since the IRA Volunteer was fighting for Ireland against England he could count on the support of all Irishmen and the opposition of all Englishmen” (49).

Once again, the reader does not know that the bombing attack was not sanctioned by the IRA and no one knows if it might even be possible that instead of helping in the battle, he might even have caused damage to the cause if he had finished what he started. It is not even a given fact that the IRA would have wanted to take credit for the bombing since they did not support it so if Brendan had succeeded with his plans he might have ended up looking like some crazy teenager blowing up whatever he wanted for no reason. That is in a way what the senior figures in the IRA thought of him in reality, at the very least they “saw him as something of a liability and did not take him seriously” (O’Sullivan 74). But of course, the average reader who does no background check does not know about the bombing being unauthorised and will have to decide for themselves whether they believe Brendan has the support of the Irish nation and the IRA or not.

There are several occurrences that show how nationalistic Brendan is and how devoted to the IRA he is. In the novel, he proudly shouts “Up the Republic!” in the court room after the judge sentences him to three years’ Borstal Detention (Behan 144). Another example of Brendan’s acts of patriarchy in the novel is when he is waiting in a cell at the Assizes (the court) and he makes an inscription on the wall in Irish:

Brendán Ó Beachaín, Óglach,
2adh Cath, Briogaíd Atha Chliath,
IRA An Phoblacht abu! (Behan 146)

Which means:

Brendan Behan, Volunteer,
2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade,
IRA The Republic Forever! (Behan 146)

And he deliberately put “IRA” in English so everyone would understand it. This is not the only Irish language presented in the novel. Brendan frequently sings in Irish as well.
Another circumstance that shows Brendan’s nationalism is after Brendan sings at the concert, and afterwards, when everyone is about to stand for the British national anthem, Brendan slips to the bathroom and he thinks to himself that the reason is that “I did not want to insult my friends and I did not want to stand for ‘God Save the King’.” (Behan 293). At this point in the story, while staying true to Ireland and the IRA he obviously does not hate the English anymore because he has made such good friends at Borstal. O’Connor points out that for Brendan’s whole life he “had been conditioned by a hatred of England” but in Borstal got familiar with the image “of the decent Englishman” (59).

As has been mentioned before, Brendan frequently sings songs in the story, most of which are clever patriotic songs. The lyrics of the songs he sings, some of which are in Irish, are frequently presented in the novel in between the text. Brendan’s singing is a big part of his personality and contributes to his popularity. “Behan sings both popular and patriotic songs to the appreciation of his fellow-prisoners. He feels no need to conceal his membership of the IRA and when he gives a fervently obscene account of the damage inflicted by the IRA on a Black and Tan column outside the town of Macroom his English pals admire the wit and applaud the insubordination” (Kearney 58). He boldly sings:

On the eighteenth day of November just outside the town of Macroom,
The Tans in their big Crossley tenders, they hurried along to their doom,
For the boys of the column were waiting, with hand-grenades primed on the

spot,

And the Irish Republican Army made shit of the whole ——ing lot!

(Behan 216)

Another example of a song he sings to his fellow inmates’ amusement is:

Some of them came from Kerry,
Some of them came from Clare,
From Dublin, Wicklow, Donegal,
And the Boys from old Kildare,
Some from the land beyond the sea,
From Boston and New York,
But the boys that licked the Black and Tans,
Were the boys from the County Cork. (Behan 215)

What all this shows is that the only impression of an IRA member the reader of *Borstal Boy* gets is a nationalistic teenager who is passionate about a united Ireland and will do almost anything for that cause because he cares. Moreover, he is respectful of the English boys and considers them his peers and most importantly, his friends.

**3.3.2 Shifting Depiction of the IRA in the Film**

In the film, Brendan is still the only face of the IRA we see. We can see how much Brendan cares about the IRA’s cause and how much he wants a united Ireland just as in the novel. However, we are not given a reason why he cares so much in the film either. The phrase “Up the Republic!” occurs a few times, both in court and when Brendan says it to some Irish prisoners when he is first put in jail in the film. Later, he is offered early release if he denounces the IRA which he refuses to do, although he agrees not to fight England while they are still fighting Hitler. If Brendan Behan made such a promise in real life he certainly broke it because he was sentenced to prison again in 1942 for IRA activity (O’Connor 27).

The film shows just a little bit of Brendan’s romanticism of the IRA and of himself but as has been stated before, the IRA and whatever Brendan has to do with it is not foregrounded in the film and consequently, the audience does not really have much to build on in order to form an impression of the IRA after seeing the film. The IRA are not shown as bad people; in fact they are not really shown at all, apart from Brendan. The novel and the film do not place the Irish and the English in categories of good and bad, or right and wrong, but show that this Irish boy and English boys are the same when all is said and done.
4. Theme Shift from Ideology to Sexuality

Someone who reads *Borstal Boy* and then watches the film will notice that although the story in both works starts and ends in the same way, there is a whole lot of material in between that is vastly different. A major difference between the novel and the film regards the IRA’s presence in the story; namely, the main theme appears to change from concerning the IRA to homosexuality. A reader of the book might perhaps describe the story as “that IRA book about friendship” while a viewer of the film might say “that gay IRA movie.” For someone who has read the book and then watched the film and not read up on any background information might wonder where all the homosexual material in the movie came from. Furthermore, someone who watches the film first and assumes it is the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and completely by the book, and then reads the book might think: “Hang on, so Brendan Behan was not even bisexual or gay or anything? Was that just made up for the film?”

Certainly, the book does have a number of same sex attraction vibes, such as Joe’s many jokey gay references and Charlie being hinted at being in love with Brendan. Nevertheless, there is no mention of Charlie and Brendan kissing as they do twice in the film. The fact is, there are a lot more IRA references in the book and it seems to be much more about Brendan, the IRA man, than the film. This raises the question of why this coming of age story that first came out in 1958 has transitioned from an IRA themed friendship story into a gay love story in the film made 42 years later. It turns out that the homosexuality aspect of the story is not just made up or exaggerated for the film – it is actually closer to the real truth about Brendan Behan than his autobiographical novel suggests. Even though the theme of the story changes with the adaptation, the presence of the IRA in the story still influences it, just not as much as it does the novel.

4.1 The Reasons Behind the Film’s Gay Theme

On the subject of why the theme of the IRA is more prominent in the book than the film and why the gay or bisexual theme is more important in the film than in the book, it is fitting to explore where that comes from. With this in mind, it is worthy to mention the main differences between the book and the film. First of all, in the book
Brendan describes his story in much more detail. His membership of the IRA is much more relevant throughout the story and him being Irish and just how Irish he is is frequently brought up. The book is written in a conversational style and it shows Brendan’s friendships with the other boys develop. In contrast, the film is more action packed and focuses a lot on Brendan and his friends’ attempted escape – which is something that never happened in the book. Secondly, religion plays a big part in the book. The boys are divided again and again into Catholics and Protestants. However, in the film, there is nothing about this division into Catholics and Protestants. There is even one scene in the film where all the boys are shown leaving the same church, an event which did not happen in the book and seems unlikely. Thirdly, the film is more of a love story than the book. It introduces Elizabeth, the Governor’s daughter who is not in the book, who falls in love with Brendan. The film also shows some romance between Brendan and his best friend Charlie and features two scenes where the boys kiss. Though the boys never kiss in the book, there is a certain homosexual vibe lurking in the air and there are certainly indications that Charlie is in love with Brendan. It shows for instance with Charlie’s jealousy when Brendan chooses to work with Jock instead of him (Behan 259) and when Brendan soaps Charlie’s back in the shower one time (215). Subsequently, the novel “Borstal Boy does no more than hint at any desire its author felt for other inmates” (Kastan 156).

Also, as O’Sullivan points out about Brendan Behan “in Borstal Boy he alludes to homosexuality principally in the person of ‘Joe’, who avails of any opportunity to suggest fulfilling his fancy for homosexual sex” (70). So, the gay theme in the film is obviously not a complete invention. The question is then, why does the film adaptation of the book transform from an IRA friendship story to a gay themed love story? The answer may lie in the truth about Brendan Behan’s sexuality and in shift in attitudes towards homosexuality between the time that the book was published and the making of the film adaptation.

As was previously stated, the homosexual encounters of the boys in Borstal which occur in the film and not in the book are not made up out of thin air. O’Sullivan describes the reality of the situation which is not really mentioned in Borstal Boy, the novel, and writes: “The adolescent inmates of Hollesley Bay were almost totally deprived of female company. The only woman they regularly saw was the Matron. Not
surprisingly, there was a certain amount of homosexual activity” (69). He refers to an unpublished twelve-page manuscript that Brendan Behan wrote shortly after being released from Borstal which suggests that Brendan was in fact involved in homosexual activity in Borstal, even though it was not exactly of the same nature as the film shows. O’Sullivan quotes Behan’s manuscript:

I loved Borstal boys and they loved me. But the absence of girls made it that much imperfect. Homosexuality (of our sort) is not a substitute for normal sex. It’s a different thing, rather similar to that of which T.E. Lawrence writes in *The Seven Pillars*. The youth of healthy muscle and slim-wrought form is not the same as the powdered pansy (who I hasten to add, as good as anybody else, has every right to be that and a bloody good artist or anything he wants to be). Our lads saw themselves as beautiful and had to do something about it. About a third of them did. Another third, not so influential or less good-looking, would have liked to. As I say however, without women it could not be a pattern of life, only a prolonging of adolescence – it was as beautiful as that. (qtd. in O’Sullivan 69)

O’Connor points out that later in his life “Brendan would refer to his experiences at Borstal as having given him the first opportunity to recognize that he could enjoy sexual congress equally with either sex” (60) and that after having experienced homosexuality at Borstal, the consequence was that “[f]or the rest of his life he was to be bi-sexual” (60).

Kastan points out that despite Behan’s family denying his homosexuality or bisexuality that “since the publication of Michael O’Sullivan’s thoroughly researched *Life* (1997), it is difficult not to conclude that Behan was bisexual” (157). O’Sullivan provides various examples that contribute to the argument of Behan’s bisexuality. He quotes *Dead as Doornails* by Anthony Cronin where it is stated that Behan would on occasion make statements about his homosexuality, such as telling a bishop that he fancied the curate, but that these comments were only made in order to shock (qtd. in O’Sullivan 137). O’Sullivan concludes that comments from Behan’s brother, Brian, and many of Behan’s friends “present strong evidence that Behan’s sexuality was, at the very least, ambiguous” (137, 140). The reason for it remaining ambiguous throughout...
his life was perhaps that “when Brendan became famous he started to be very worried that knowledge of his sexual tastes would ruin his popular ‘hard man’ reputation” (O’Sullivan 137).

One of the reasons for the film’s focus on Brendan’s bisexuality is that director and writer Peter Sheridan found this tiny aspect of the book really interesting (Dwyer). Sheridan explains the reason behind the film being so different from the book by saying that “We are making a film different from the perception of Behan. I am not interested in period films which are museum pieces. And I'm not interested in putting books on screen” (Dwyer). He wanted to tell the story of a young boy who goes to England to plant a bomb but ends up loving those he thought were his enemies, and even falling in love with two of them, Charlie and Elizabeth. Moreover, he reasons that he added the story of Brendan not only loving Charlie but also falling for Elizabeth to show Brendan’s bisexuality as opposed to homosexuality and “to be fair to him” because Behan was also attracted to women (Dwyer). Furthermore, for anyone who might wonder why the film is so different from the novel it is crucial to point out that in the opening credits of the film it says “Inspired by the book Borstal Boy by Brendan Behan” as opposed to “based on”. Accordingly, although the film shares its title with Behan’s book it doesn’t pretend to be a direct adaptation of the novel – it is only inspired by it.

4.2 A Different Time

One important and quite obvious factor that contributes to this shift in focus from the IRA and relatively innocent friendship to a gay love story is the fact that the book, which can be described as fiction based on fact, came out in 1958 and the movie in 2000. If Behan had written every gory detail of his stay in Borstal, the book would probably have been banned and one can only imagine how he would have been treated. However, attitudes towards homosexuality shifted dramatically during the intervening 42 years and so the reason for Sheridan being able to tell this aspect of Brendan’s story is possibly simply that he can. The same sex attraction aspect of it did not need to be repressed anymore by the time the film came out. Of course, the bisexual story in the film is still a totally different story than what happened in reality but at least it acknowledges the aspect of Brendan’s bisexuality.
The reason for the IRA theme appearing to be more important in the book is possibly also that in the year 2000, awareness of homosexuality may have been more relevant and more universal than the IRA factor. After all, films need to make money and so by focusing on the sexuality part of the story it was probably more likely to succeed with the general public and not just IRA enthusiasts.

The point throughout this essay still applies to the movie and the love story aspect of it; namely that without the IRA aspect in the story, it would not be the same even though the bisexual love triangle element may steal the thunder from the IRA theme. On the other hand, as was previously stated about the IRA’s influence on Brendan’s character, Charlie and Elizabeth may not have fallen in love with him if he was not a member of the IRA fighting for his country. If it was not for the IRA element, there might not be a bisexual love element either. These two themes are after all intertwined and one does not work without the other.
5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are various ways in which the IRA influences *Borstal Boy*. By looking at the character of Brendan we can see that despite planning to plant a bomb, he is portrayed as a nationalist hero worthy of sympathy rather than a soulless terrorist. While this can be seen in the novel through his thoughts, wit and popularity, it is shown in the film mainly by contrasting Brendan to the villainous character of Dale.

Although the IRA remains faceless throughout the story in both the novel and the film, it is depicted mainly through the opinions of various characters. The ones who despise the IRA are unlikeable themselves while the story’s more likeable characters tend to be indifferent or even positive about Brendan’s involvement with it. Brendan himself romanticises the IRA and is passionate about a united Ireland. These IRA references are particularly frequent in the novel which constantly mentions the IRA whereas the film gives minimal attention to it.

Subsequently, the film minimizes the IRA’s presence in the story and instead magnifies the novel’s vague bisexual vibe and taps into what Behan conveniently left out of his novel. Consequently, the film is mainly a bisexual love story that is based as much on research into Behan’s own life as it on the novel.

Considering these points it is apparent that even though the IRA is important in both works, the extent to which it influences the story is greater in the novel than the film. As with any adaptation, the story is bound to change in the process and in the case of *Borstal Boy*, the change is tremendous.
6. Works Cited


