

# Analysis of the Dynamics of Hospitality and Hostility in Hugo Hamiltons' Novel "Hand in the Fire" (2010)

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**Analysis of the dynamics of hospitality and hostility in Hugo Hamilton's novel *Hand in the Fire* (2010).**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and Literature and German Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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## **ABSTRACT**

The thesis focuses on Hugo Hamilton's 2010 novel, *Hand in the Fire*, and, in particular, on its protagonist, Vid Ćosić, and the dynamics of hostility and hospitality that he faces as an immigrant in Ireland. The thesis examines how he is portrayed, and what this says about how Hamilton perceives Ireland's behaviour as a host of immigrants. Immigration is something Hamilton and the characters Vid Ćosić and Kevin Concannon have in common, although all of their migrant situations are different. I will show how Vid is welcomed as a guest, and how Ireland behaves as a host. To do this, it is also important to showcase the different relations Vid has with people, because each one is unique and contributes to the story.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

My thesis is an analysis of the dynamics of hospitality and hostility in Hugo Hamilton's 2010 novel *Hand in the Fire*, particularly as this is seen from the perspective of the protagonist, Vid Ćosić, who has emigrated from Serbia to Dublin. In Ireland he tries to adapt as much as he can by, amongst other things, learning the particular ways in which the locals use the English language, and by trying to learn about Irish history as much as he can. One day Vid finds a phone and decides to return it. The person whose phone he had was Kevin Concannon. Kevin thanked him by buying him a drink at the pub, and they quickly become friends. Their relationship is based on loyalty and owing a favour to each other all the time. Kevin's description of what a friend is, is someone who would put his hand in the fire to help you. Friendships in Ireland are formed pretty quickly, which might be due to years of emigration, urging people to form bonds. For Vid, this is great news. It means he can make friends quicker than it would usually take a person and have some connection to Ireland. The hospitality of the Irish gives him the feeling of being welcomed and accepted into the country.

Kevin gave Vid a job at his house. This gives Vid a feeling of belonging. Through the whole novel, all he wants is to feel as if he belongs, to just be a part of it all. He is at the Concannon's place most of the time, working and talking to the Concannon family, which consists of Kevin, Rita Concannon (Kevin's mother), and Kevin's sisters, Ellis and Jane. One night when Kevin and Vid were out at a pub, a character only known as the Electrician sees Vid talking to his daughter and mistakenly believes he's harassing her. Later he attacks Vid, but Kevin seriously beats him up. Later that day a person faking a Polish accent anonymously called a Garda station to alert them to the crime. The victim

claimed to know Vid and that Vid was the one who assaulted him. Vid had to stand trial. He took Kevin's place as the accused, but he did not accept the blame for the act. Kevin was still by Vid's side acting as his lawyer. Vid was suspicious of Kevin being the one who called the Garda in a fake Polish accent but could not believe it.

When Kevin and Vid went out on the sea on a boat, they got drunk together as usual. That is when Kevin stuck his tongue deep down into Vid's mouth. He realized his mistake the minute he did that. "This wasn't like him, he was quick to point out. It was just an experiment. A joke. Never to be repeated. Because this was purely male friendship, not to be confused with sexual heat." (Hamilton 2010: 101) Here we can see that there is a type of attraction present between them. It may be because Kevin sees his past self in Vid, the person who feels lost and does not fit in.

Their friendship is unpredictable. In chapter 15, Vid met Kevin's father for the first time. They started hanging out for a short while. Kevin's father, Johnny, wanted to give something to Kevin but Kevin did not want to see his father. Johnny gave it to Vid so that Kevin could still get the item, which was an All-Ireland hurling medal. When Vid gave the present to Kevin, it looked as if he was giving him an engagement ring, which alludes to the idea of them being romantically involved. Kevin was shocked and mad when he saw what was in the box and, as a result, punched and started insulting Vid, calling him all kinds of names like 'little Balkan creep' or 'Serbian cunt' (Hamilton 2010: 126). Kevin was hurt by Vid's seemingly innocent action. But this fight was enough for Vid to be angry for the first time in the novel, although it was only his thoughts that gave the impression of him being mad. He did not act out in any way to show he was anything but fine.

Adding on to their semi-romantic relationship, we see Kevin kneeling on a path with his head down in chapter 17 because he wanted to be on good terms with Vid again. Kevin then stood up and embraced Vid, making it hard for Vid to be angry at him. When Kevin hugged him, he embraced him with his head down, colliding against Vid's chest, making it look like they were lovers. (Hamilton 2010:131)

There is also a type of love triangle or a friendship triangle between Vid, Kevin, and Helen. Kevin and Helen were not on good terms after the incident with the Electrician., but they reconciled and got drunk together with Vid. That is the night when Vid remembered what happened during the car crash in which his family was killed on the way to a wedding. He realized that the car was on its side, the cake beside his head and his parents' heads hanging lifelessly in the car. The following day Helen and Vid walked around the town of Carrick, the town her father grew up in. This is the first time we see Helen and Vid bonding without Kevin's presence. When they met up with Kevin, Vid felt a bit awkward since it was like he had some kind of secret between Helen and him. This could also be seen as Kevin being jealous and suspicious of the two spending some time alone.

Even though Vid quickly befriends Kevin, Vid is still a stranger in Ireland. He doesn't form opinions because he cannot judge people. He lacks understanding of what is good or bad in this country. To him, everyone is the same. This shows the reader how easy it can be to change surroundings and live somewhere else, have friends there and still feel like one is not a part of the country. As a migrant, Vid feels like he needs to act in a similar way. To act like the locals is an easier way to be accepted by the people. The problems he faces can be somewhat connected to the general issues of immigrants. He is not the same as the people around him and he lacks the language code to be able to confidently talk to people without overthinking it. If we generalise about him, that's also (to use the language of this thesis) hostile. It assumes that all immigrants are the same on

some levels. Although they might share some difficulties, all immigrants face different obstacles when it comes to integrating into a society. Vid's language problem is a general problem that immigrants face, but his fear of being forgotten is unique since he went away to forget who he is, not to seek a better job offer to improve his family's well-being. As an immigrant without a family, you only have yourself and the people you surround yourself with. Vid wanted a fresh start and that is why it was important for him not to be treated as an immigrant. He did not miss his country or the people, we do not see that side of him. We only see Vid wanting to fit in and be like the Irish. He does not want to be classified as an immigrant or a Serbian, he wants to just be seen the same way the Irish see other Irish people. A migrant with a family has someone to fight for, a home to return to. Vid on the other side, left Serbia with a strong wish to change everything about himself. Immigrants are mostly proud of where they come from. Vid does not like talking about Serbia nor the fact that he is one of them.

Vid also becomes obsessed with the story of a drowned woman, Máire Concannon. She was Kevin's aunt on his father's side. She was from Furbo, in Connemara, where his father is from. She was the subject of controversy at the time. She was pregnant and unmarried, and the father of the child did not want to make himself known. This was frowned upon. The priest of the local church is reported as having said "if the men in the area were not men enough to drown her, then perhaps she would have the decency to drown herself." She was subsequently found drowned. Vid travelled to the place to try and find out more about whether it was a suicide or homicide. (Hamilton 2010: 88) He thought this could possibly be an explanation for all the darkness in Kevin's family. This gives him insight into the Irish history and how they behaved back in the day. He was trying to understand the circumstances of the time when Mary Concannon was alive. He was interested in every aspect of her life and death. He wanted to find out how she got



pregnant, why she did not run away, whether the foetus lived inside of her for a little bit longer while she was already dead. But the answers never came. The only one to know the answer was Johnny Concannon.

He identified with the woman. He wanted to know if she was abused, betrayed, whether somebody took advantage of her. (Hamilton 2010: 180) As Zamorano Llena wrote “the secret story provides Vid with a point of identification, since the inaction of the community towards the repressive power of the Catholic Church reminds him of ‘the way the secret police operated in [his] own country and the paralysis that people felt in the face of authority’” (Llena 2014)

The past is something all the characters try to forget. The methods vary from denial to sex. In Vid’s case, it is sex. He was with his girlfriend Liuda who distracted him from thinking about anything. “She produced such a powerful urge in me, pulling me vigorously inside herself that I became truly blank. In other words, we were fucking to forget. We created this little enclave of love and sex which inhibited us from getting a proper foothold in the real world.” (Hamilton 2010: 58) But one method that is common to all the characters is that they drink to forget. They are constantly in the pub drinking alcohol. This is also the time when friendships are made. Everyone tries to forget their problems and their past while making friends with strangers in pubs.

Throughout the novel, some characters want to find out more about Vid’s background. This always leaves the characters unsatisfied because Vid does not want to talk about his past and tries to avoid the subject as much as he can because he does not want to be perceived as broken like everyone in Serbia. This makes the characters feel as if the openness that they’ve provided was not returned. (Hamilton 2010: 79-80)

The Electrician found out Vid's name and address easily by asking his co-workers. During the trial, the judge later dismissed it because a witness, a person only known as the greyhound man, was lying in court. The Electrician was shocked and looked at Vid with pure hatred.

Vid saw the dark side of Ireland as well when he was accused of beating up the Electrician. People around him suffered because of him. His migrant friend Darius suffered the most because his workshop was burned down with all of his equipment inside. (Hamilton 2010: 216) This was his life and his pride. The way Darius felt at home in a foreign country was his workshop, which was now gone. No relatives, no history, no familiarity with the place. They do not feel at home so they create a safe space where they feel in control. When the one thing that makes you feel at home is taken from you, it takes a toll on a person. It was also how Darius managed to survive and earn money. The various hardships that immigrants go through makes it harder for them to open up to the place and its residents. This happened to Vid with the Concannons. The minute that Kevin realised it was the Electrician's men who tried to set the house on fire, he grew distant from Vid. "But something had changed utterly. I could see it by the way they were looking at me and speaking to me." (Hamilton 2010: 205)

At the beginning of chapter 24, Vid started to get death threats from anonymous callers. This later led to the callers burning down Darius' workshop and an attempt to burn down the Concannon's house. Because it was not safe for the Concannons to be around Vid, they started to stay away from him.

One day three guys were following Vid, questioning him about forcing himself onto the Electrician's daughter and even chasing him with the intention to kill him. Vid ran towards the place where Johnny was, calling for him to get help and waved his hands to

get noticed. While Vid was hiding underneath the jetty, they managed to kill Johnny with a gaff. At the funeral, Rita thought she had been unfair to Johnny, and it seemed that his death brought the family back together. Kevin was the only one who was angry at Vid for showing up at the funeral. He wanted him to stay away from them and from Helen.

After Vid's trip to Galway, Ellis ran away from home because she opened the letters that her father sent but Rita never opened. This was just the beginning of the problems between the Concannons, Ellis and Vid.

When Ellis got pregnant, Kevin immediately arranged an appointment for her to get an abortion. This was against Ellis' own wishes. Although she did not know what to do, she wanted to keep the baby. While all of this was going on, Helen and Vid started hanging out more and were in a relationship. They decided to help Ellis escape. One night they helped her to escape the Concannon household in order to miss the abortion appointment and instead keep the baby. Kevin ran after them but soon realized that he needed to let her go. Unlike the time that Vid did not interfere with the man beating his girlfriend, here he is actually taking action and acknowledging himself as a contributor to society.

This was where I entered into the story of the country at last. I became a participant, a player, an insider taking action. Not letting things happen around me as if I was still only an immigrant and it was none of my business. I was not trying to make a name for myself or anything like that, but I was entitled to play my role as an ordinary inhabitant who belonged here. (Hamilton 2010: 261)

Vid did not try to fit in, he simply did not see himself as an immigrant anymore, but a part of the society who can make a change if he wishes to do so. He does not think anymore that he cannot do anything to change a situation because he does not belong

there. In the end the only acceptance that he truly sought was his own and not those of others. Although, the reality is, being accepted is not as easy as Hamilton makes it seem. To accept yourself is an important part of being accepted by others. But it is still difficult to be accepted as an immigrant in a foreign country. They can accept that you live and work there, but what is the hardest part, is to be accepted as a human being equal to them. By taking action, he is not just being a guest, but beginning to feel that he can now assume some of the roles of a host. He still does not feel like a full host, but a better form of hospitality might involve one's guest to act a little bit like a host.

## 2. Hospitality and Hostility

The words ‘hospitality’ and ‘hostility’, as Emile Benveniste famously illustrated, come from the same root:

The primitive notion conveyed by *hostis* is that of equality by compensation: a *hostis* is one who repays my gift with a counter-gift. Thus, like its Gothic counterpart, *gasts*, Latin *hostis* at one period denoted the guest. The classical meaning ‘enemy’ must have been developed when reciprocal relations between clans were succeeded by the exclusive relations of *civitas* to *civitas* (cf. Gr. *xénos* ‘guest’ > ‘stranger’). (Benveniste 1973:71). In this manner, “the word *hostis* assumed a ‘hostile’ flavour (Benveniste 1973: 78).

This etymological link can be seen to be performed throughout the interactions in this novel. Vid encounters both hospitality and hostility. Sometimes the reader cannot tell if a deed was hospitable or hostile, and sometimes the reader can clearly see Vid choosing not to acknowledge it. For instance, when he went out drinking with some of the men from the site after work, they kept getting his name wrong. They called him Vim even though Vid corrected the men several times. They also tried calling him longer names, like Video. There were other versions such as Viduka, Vidukalić, Videolink, Vim the most effective detergent against household germs, or even Vid the Vibrator. (Hamilton 2010: 23). This could be perceived as the workers just having some fun and joking around, but it could also be seen as them making fun of his name since it is foreign and unusual. The name does not sound Irish and it makes him stand out and be immediately classified as some sort of an immigrant. By doing this, immigrants are not seen as individuals but as one group of people. Hamilton shows us, the readers, both aspects of an action although we perceive everything from Vid’s point of view.

Vid is an outsider yearning for acceptance. There were times when he felt the isolation and inability and the feeling of not belonging. At one point, Vid noticed a couple in a car arguing. The man then started to beat the woman but Vid could not help the woman. He felt like a coward. He still felt like an outsider who has no right to interfere with the locals' business. He considered himself not having the right to tell others what to do, he thought of himself the same way that the Irish thought of him, just an immigrant with no right to give his opinion. He is in need of hospitality. The time when the workers invited Vid to go out with them. This seemed like a very nice gesture and Vid saw it as him being included into their circle of friendship. But the truth was that the workers invited him because everyone was going. They did not like him. This is often the way with any groups.

The other instance is when Rita Concannon told Vid about her health problems and he avoided mentioning anything remarkable about his past. She tried to get some information out of him by providing him with some information about her health. We could see it as a normal conversation between acquaintances or even friends. The only reason why it is perceived as hostile is because Rita got mad at him for not telling her anything about his past. She was pushing him to give her some information about who he was or what his life was before coming to Ireland.

### 3. Hugo Hamilton as an immigrant in his own country

Hugo Hamilton is of Irish and German descent. He was born and raised in Dublin. He writes about his Irish childhood in his 2003 memoir *The Speckled People*. The memoir was written from a child's perspective in which Hugo gave himself a different name, Johannes. The memoir is about growing up with a nationalist Irish father and a German mother. Hamilton gives us various narratives in the memoir. Eamonn Hughes has astutely noted that the father is concerned with completing and fixing a present which is determined by a past structured by memory and tradition. As such, improvement and change are not welcomed in this narrative as it is all about going back to the old ways of life. The mother offers a different narrative. She talks about her past experiences as if there were a film that the children would be able to see when they are old enough. (Hughes 2012:135-136) The narrative has an effect of making it seem like something which did not happen to her in real life. It is taking the traumatic event and making it less traumatic and more story-like. It also could be a type of coping mechanism. The point of these different narratives is to show the different sides of Hamilton's childhood. Through his child-like narrative we can see how a child would perceive his surroundings and everything that happened to him and how he reacted to it, how he coped. Through the mother's narrative we see everything that happened to her described as a movie, not reality.

Hamilton grew up with a sense of isolation. He and his family would speak both in Irish and German, and wear clothing items that represented one country or the other. Growing up, Hamilton was not allowed to have a TV or play with children who could not speak Irish. He mostly played with his siblings and sometimes they would use English instead of Irish while their father was not around. The name 'speckled people' itself is

explained in the book by the father. It means people who are mixed/piebald, just as his family is half-Irish and half-German. To Johannes, this meant that they stood out, they were not like the rest of Ireland. For most of his childhood, he was forced to question ideas of belonging and identity. He is unsure if he belongs to more than one nationality, or to one more than the other, and this causes confusion about which habits to follow.

One response to this dilemma taken by Hamilton was to mix up these different identities. At one point, Hamilton tried being Irish by copying other people and saying things like “What the jaysus” in order to assimilate. But when he was called a Nazi, he stated: “I’m Eichenmann,” I said. ‘I’m going to kill people and laugh about it.’” (Hamilton 2009:226) It went as far as him trying to drown a dog and imitate the way the Nazis spoke and laughed. Troubling as this is, it is also, in a sense, his way of exploring who he was.

Later, when he was in Germany, he was treated differently. No one picked on him for being Irish or German, he could speak the same way everyone in Germany does. He would not be shamed for who he was since the Irish did not do the crimes that the Nazis did. He was like them. In an attempt to satisfy both sides, his mother and his father, he wore German leather pants and a hand-knit woollen Aran sweater. His identity was not one concept, it was always torn between being Irish and German at the same time. At the beginning of *The Speckled People*, Hamilton writes “When I was small, I woke up in Germany. I heard the bells and rubbed my eyes and saw the wind was pushing the curtains like a big belly. Then I got up and looked out the window and saw Ireland.” (Hamilton 2010:1)

It is also a question of language: in which language do you pray, curse or think? For Hamilton, home was where you get yelled at in Irish and get good-night stories in



German. German sweets but Irish prayers, Irish friends but counting in German. His father said “your language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag.” (Hamilton 2009: 3) His father believes in restoring Ireland, but his own family is not purely Irish. His own family speaks two languages- It is not so much a mission to restore Ireland and the Irish language, but to remove the English language. He has no problem with other languages. Hamilton speaks the Irish language, but this sets him apart from the Irish, as almost all the Irish speak English, and the Irish language is being forgotten. He is fully Irish in his household, but is a stranger in Ireland due to not being able to connect with the others by speaking a different language than them. This shows that the cultural identity is not necessarily linked to language. Cultural identity is more linked to what the majority does, no matter if it is a part of history or not. The collective traditions and customs are what creates cultural identity. You identify with the people, not the land. Hamilton was too Irish to be Irish. He tried so hard to be purely Irish, that he stood out, he was not like others living in Ireland, and that made him less Irish. Pure cultural identity is impossible, because cultural identity is always changing.

Both Hamilton and Vid tried to be purely Irish. Vid’s attempt to become Irish gave the opposite result. He mistakenly believed in a mythical ‘pure’ form of Irishness, sort of like a concept full of characteristics which have to be fulfilled. He tried very hard to learn everything there is to know about Ireland, the places, the celebrities, but it is not a normal thing to do. The Irish, and other people from different countries, probably know of certain celebrities and certain landmarks because they either heard about it on the news, it was taught in school, or it was a popular topic amongst people at a certain point in time. Trying to be as Irish as possible ultimately shows up precisely the opposite: one’s difference from the Irish. It shows a dynamic whereby one action brings its opposite. This made Vid seem even more like an outsider.

Based on all of this, it is safe to say that Hugo Hamilton was isolated and had a problematic connection to the rest of Ireland. He spoke different languages and grew up differently, being raised in a culture that did not exist outside his home. He was not the same as his neighbours or the kids he would play with. His language, his family, and his background all separated him from the others. People were hostile towards him for being half German. He would be interrogated and beaten. His mother showed hospitality while his father, although hospitable at times, mostly showed hostility, especially if Hamilton was speaking English or disobeying his orders. While Hamilton was accepted by some children, his father did not accept the other children for their inability to speak the Irish language. His father was also against anything modern and refused to buy him a TV so he could be up-to-date. Hamilton had experienced hostility both outside and inside his home. He had to put up with the standards of his father who promoted the Irish language. He also had to endure the constant pressure from outside to assimilate and speak in English as well as dress normally and avoid wearing *Lederhosen*.

The various characters in the novel *Hand in the Fire* represent some of the people in Hugo Hamilton's life. As Dervila Cooke has noted, Vid felt uneasy with the English language just like Hamilton. (Cooke 2016: 2) Vid represents Hamilton, Hamilton's mother and the wave of immigrants.

The other characters are also a representation of something else. Helen is open and lacks fear when it comes to her past, which is not the case with the rest of the characters in the novel. She helps Vid face his past and she is present when he decides to help Ellis. (Hamilton 2010: 230) Kevin sees his own past self in Vid and that caught his attention in the early stages of their relationship. Kevin represents Hamilton's father because Kevin is volatile, passionate and a towering figure full of helpless fury. His father and Kevin were both bullied and isolated from the rest of the children in school. (Cooke 2016: 2)

#### **4. Vid as a guest**

In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which Vid's character is developed through his ways of negotiating with friendship and language. Hamilton's experience of growing up in an Irish-German speaking household helped him create the main character

##### **4.1. Friendship**

When a person does not really originate from a place, it is hard to find friends who you can be very close and open with, especially friends who you can call family and who will stick around through thick and thin. The first time Vid meets Kevin, he invites him out for a drink. This seemed like a good start, but it was only to pay Vid back for returning his phone back to him. This is the basis of their friendship. They always do something so that the other owes them something in return and this is how they build a relationship. All human relationships are based on some kind of reciprocation. This is part of the inevitable hostility involved in the creation of the pact of hospitality. In the beginning a person might do something nice for the other, just because they want to. But that nice gesture could later be used against the person receiving it. This is the part that is hostile, although it does not have to be. It shows how deep their friendship actually is. Friendships do not exist without reciprocation, in this case, Kevin owes Vid his reputation and his job. (Hamilton, 2010:42). Kevin also did Vid a favour when he fought with the Electrician and when he gave Vid a job at his house.

Part of the dynamic of their relationship revolves around the ways Kevin sees himself in Vid. Kevin was born in England, and his father and mother are Irish. When he moved to Dublin, the change was difficult for him. He struggled to get rid of his English accent in order to be more Irish. He was excluded at school and tried to be Irish the best he

could. He is similar to Vid because he tried to run away from all the difficulties and his past just so he could belong just like Vid did. (Llena 2014: 14)

Vid's relationship with Helen and Kevin is unique. When it comes to Kevin, the friendship is more complicated than the one with Helen. They have a rushed friendship which is also quite explosive. They argue and bicker, but then get drunk and laugh like it was nothing. Helen is there for him and offers no judgement. She is different and is interested in the Balkan culture. She is supportive and thanks to her, Vid was able to be more open and daring when it comes to acting on his thoughts. They have a romance which is light and without complications. Helen cares more about Kevin, than he cares for her. He cheats on her with multiple women and does not really care if she finds out. Vid covered up for him until he could not hide it from Helen anymore. When the three of them are in the same room, it is pure chaos. Kevin acts out and does something stupid, like pee on Helen's car. Vid becomes more distant since it felt like third-wheeling, and Helen is mostly trying to include everyone. We can also see Vid not trying to say or do anything during the couple's fights which shows his inactivity due to him perceiving himself as an immigrant, not having the right to tell anyone what to do. Helen shows hospitality towards Vid by making him tea and apologising for Kevin's behaviour after the incident with the Electrician. Kevin also showed hostility. When Kevin came back after he probably called the Garda, he looked at Helen and Vid with suspicion, which shows his lack of trust.

#### 4.2. Vid's relationship with Rita Concannon

Vid and Rita formed a unique relationship while he was working for the Concannons. It is quite difficult to see whether Rita Concannon is looking for another son or a male figure that would, not romantically, take the place of her ex-husband Johnny Concannon.

While working at her house, Kevin's mother, Rita Concannon, and Vid would sometimes talk about his past, and her life in general. One afternoon, when Vid was in the kitchen, he came across Mrs. Concannon's belongings on a chair. She apologised for the bra, which Vid was not supposed to see. This allowed Rita Concannon to open up and tell Vid about having had breast cancer. Later, Rita made some tea and put scones on a plate in the kitchen in order to try to get information out of Vid. Because she opened up to him, she was expecting the same from him. Vid did not give her any information which was of any value to her and it showed: "I think she was a little disappointed because I had so little to tell her about myself. As if the family trust into which I had been received had not been reciprocated on my part." (Hamilton 2010:72-79) She tried to get Vid to talk about his past, but to no avail. When she could not, she was not very cheerful. "What you need is a girlfriend,' she said, smiling bitterly at her own failure to extract anything." (Hamilton 2010:80)

Vid considering Rita more than a mother figure is seen when she is talking about her breast cancer and Vid cannot help but imagine her naked and the silicone breast wobbling in his hand. When Rita allowed herself to be vulnerable in front of Vid, talking about breast cancer, she allowed him to worry about her. In Vid's mind, to be allowed to worry about someone and be happy that they are still alive, is the true certificate of belonging. He cares and worries for her, in a way that is typical for a mother-son relationship. The only odd part that stands out is him imagining her breast implant (Hamilton 2010: 72-73)

Relationships are always about exchanging information and sharing stories and secrets. But here we can sense the hostility in these actions; they are not selfless or pure acts. We see that there are motives behind these actions, be it in terms of simply having more information about your interlocutor and so being the dominant person in the relationship, or having to protect oneself by not divulging information. Moreover, Vid is

not sure how much to say about himself and his past. He does not know what is appropriate to mention and what is too much. Because he does not know the ‘language’ of the Irish, he is not comfortable in sharing details about his background and his past. One of his insecurities is that the Irish might try to pigeonhole him as a Serb who is seen as a criminal because of all the terrible things, that the Serbian army did to the Bosnian people such as the massacre of Srebrenica. He does not want to be judged based on that, so he avoids mentioning Serbia, his home, as much as he can. (Hamilton 2010: 103) Vid does not want to see or recognize any hostile behaviour. He turns a blind eye because of the insecurities that come with being an immigrant. He accepts them as facts, such as when someone called him names or when someone made advances toward Liuda. He does not see the malicious intent that Hamilton shows the reader. (Hamilton 2010: 63)

#### 4.3. Language

Language is something that is quite a complicated concept to think about in reference to this book, because Hugo Hamilton looks to privilege Vid’s perspective on Ireland.

Vid’s English is very simple. He uses short answers while speaking, like ‘why?’ ‘of course’, which could be to show how he does not want to accidentally say something wrong. Him using simple sentences and words could also be used to show that English is not his first language and the insecurity of not knowing if something could offend someone else. He also uses words that would usually not be used in everyday speech, and this is commented on by other characters: “She said I would sometimes sound like a letter from the bank, using words like ‘complete’, ‘commence’ and ‘with regard to’, words I picked up from the newspapers and which were not suited to everyday use.” (Hamilton 2010:9)

When it comes to knowing which words to use when talking about a particular situation, when it is appropriate to swear, or when to joke about a situation is kind of like a 'code' that is different for each country and that would be the reason that Vid does not fit in language-wise. We are told by other characters that the two styles, Vid speaking and Vid thinking, are different. Birdie was the one who pointed out Vid's usage of formal words in every day speech, but we could see his inner thoughts, which were well-structured. In his mind, he has a lot to say about a situation, about his feelings and about his own perception of his surroundings. On the other hand, when he is speaking, we only see short questions and short answers. There is not much material to go on when it comes to him actually speaking.

The person a novelist portrays can be shown in many different aspects, and that shows the reader what the character is like. Hamilton showed us how it sounded to the people around Vid and how Vid actually sounded in his head when he did not have to convert his language into another one. Although immigrants are not the best speakers of the language in the country that they emigrated to, that does not mean they are not equally intelligent as the people speaking a language perfectly. The language barrier makes it difficult to get a clear impression of a person, when you cannot communicate clearly and smoothly leading to a distorted picture of said person. Vid is trapped by language in the novel. He is unsure of how to express his thoughts and sticks to simple answers. He also does not want to convey his thoughts, his interests as to not reveal much about his past. This works in his favour because he can blame it on his inability to express himself in English. The insight the readers have, shows Vid actually having a thought process about a certain situation, him being insecure when it comes to revealing his past, and even him being happy when being cared for by the people around him. Language is just another way of connecting with another person. People who speak the same language in the same way,

pronounce words the same way, have the same vocabulary tend to feel more connected to each other, but when that is not the case, there is a feeling of not fitting in.

Hamilton avoided presenting Vid as a somewhat dimmer character by letting him speak short, easy sentences, but elaborating his answers through his inner monologue. Vid's inner thoughts in English were well formed, yet it lacked the characteristics which would belong to the Serbian language. He never used any words such as 'bre' which would be 'bro' in English, or the words usually used in everyday language such as 'keve mi', which would be 'I swear on my mother'. It is usual for Balkan people to express such things when something unforeseen happens. Also, the way he reacts to situations, without fighting or swearing, is also unusual. Vid also never translated some of the phrases into English while speaking or thinking, which is uncommon since he would think in Serbian rather than perfect English.

Not showing Vid using the language, or phrases, that Serbian people would normally use, removes a part of his identity. This turns him into the generalised 'other'. He does not stand out from other immigrants. Vid does not sound like a typical Serbian would. A Serbian person would use their mother tongue from time to time, since that is the language that they normally use to express their thoughts. There is also no indication that he listens to Balkan music or does anything characteristic for Serbian people, or Balkan people in general, such as drink Turkish coffee, be loud, be more outgoing, and have a bad temper. The reader would not have known Vid was a Serb if the novel did not name him as one. Hamilton, in trying to render Vid as a 'normal' guy for an Anglophone readership overdoes hospitality. In overdoing it, this hospitality becomes hostile in the sense that we lose sight of an individual with his own history. In *The Speckled People*, too much pure identity becomes difference. Here granting too little specific identity to Vid



renders him hardly anything. This could be a reaction of Hamilton's to the excess of 'pure' identity he grew up with.

## **5. Ireland as host**

In *Hand in the Fire* Ireland is a place where migrants have the chance to start their life over. It is a place where new and different friendships might be created, and where immigrants encounter new customs and new histories. In the novel, Ireland is a country where you can surround yourself by strangers and make them your friends in less than no time. This characteristic rendered it less lonely for Vid, because when he was at a pub people were singing with him and talking to him.

Vid thought these friendships were different, exciting and easy. It was a breath of fresh air for him. He idealized the Irish, their looks and their lifestyle. The friendly side is the side of Ireland that migrants generally tend to like since it gives them the opportunity to chat with people and to get to know them. Sometimes, that is enough for a person not to know when to be sensitive about a certain topic to avoid crossing the line. That happened to Vid when he wanted to give Kevin the present his father wanted him to have.

He looked shocked. I thought it was the weight of feeling pressing down on him. But his eyes began to narrow and his frown tightened into a fist. He took in a deep breath through his nose and looked away. Then he dropped the box out of his hands and as I looked down his arm came swinging towards me so fast that I had no time to escape the blow. (Hamilton 2010: 123)

Just like language, it is hard for Vid to know the boundaries of the people in Ireland since he does not know the “code” of the place. Vid tried to learn Irish history in order to understand the country better. He went to Furbo in order to see how life was for Mary Concannon. He also tried to learn every important musician, landmarks, where the Easter Revolution took place, where the bus to Galway leaves from. (Hamilton 2010: 2) He even visited Dursey Island just because he thought he needed to see it because everyone knows the place. He thought that through learning everything about Ireland he will become one of them. This is something that the Irish do not do, they do not try to memorize everything about their country. Learning history marks him out as being different, which shows a different version of the excess of purity. He tries to be Irish too hard and, in turn, has the opposite effect. Due to these actions, he stands out even more. An immigrant cannot blend in since he is not like the rest. The novel is suggesting that one does not need to do all this, but it still is not enough, because they are still different than the rest. The best option would be to accept that they are different from the rest and to embrace their own culture and identity, since that is the only one they have. For someone like Vid, who wants a new life, this is quite difficult to achieve. He wants to be anyone but himself.

Vid got interested in the Irish past because he wanted to integrate himself into this country, and in the process, he uncovered the story about the drowned pregnant woman. Carmen Zamorano Llana explains Vid’s urge to explore the Irish history by employing lines of Seamus Heaney:

the sense of identity with the land and its community can only be achieved by exploring the ‘silent’ ancestry that is engraved in the geographical spaces of the country where the individual is born, thus attaining ‘a marriage between the geographical country and the country of the him,’ where the latter ‘takes its tone unconsciously from a shared oral inherited culture’. (Llana 2014)

‘Learning’ about a tradition differs for those who were born and bred in one place and those who move there from elsewhere. There is a different sort of learning involved, as the immigrant does not have the sense of inheritance that Heaney mentions in the quite above. Those who were born in one place are surrounded by tradition their whole life and it becomes part of their habits and their everyday life. Immigrants have to unlearn and forget their own tradition in order to try and ‘learn’ about another tradition.

The pregnant woman died due to drowning but we do not know whether it was a suicide or homicide. She was pregnant and not married. She was denounced from the altar and because this was a controversial situation, nobody wanted to get involved. It shows how Ireland treats situations which are frowned upon. It reveals an ugly side of Ireland’s past. It changes his perspective on the Concannons. Vid understood that it was an explanation for the darkness in Kevin’s family. It also changed his view about Ireland. It showed that it does not matter whether a person was with friends or family, if you dare to do something no one condones, you will be shunned. It also drew a connection to the missing father figure. Kevin’s dad is not living with his family anymore and is ignored, and the father of the drowned lady’s baby was not in the picture as well.

Contemporary Ireland seems to be a better version of the older, more Catholic, Ireland. It seems more friendly and accepting of strangers. People are happy and very social. The issue with the acceptance of strangers is that they are accepting them, until they do something which does not align with the wishes of those around them. Their sudden change in behaviour shows the shallowness and the distrust of the Irish. It creates tension between the Irish and the immigrants. It is a situation in which questions emerge of whether Ireland is a land of hospitality or is it just a front, a land only hospitable for its own.

At the same time, the novel suggests that Ireland has not have really changed from its deeply Catholic past. The one thing in which they are the same is that they both still have secrets. In Catholic Ireland it is the secret of who drowned the Irish woman. This makes Ireland less like a home to him because of the similarity of the secret police because the feeling of not trusting authority and being scared is both characteristic for Catholic Ireland and the secret police. It is not something he particularly liked about Serbia to begin with. He wanted to get away from that. This was another point of identification for him and this was a part of why he was so interested in the story. Kevin's secret is that he made the call pretending to be Vid. Rita Concannon has secrets in the form of mail, she hides the letters that Johnny sent her. Vid has his past and his nationality which he tries to hide from the people around him. Vid's understanding of Irish friendships is the opposite of the title of the novel because that meaning of 'hand in the fire' is to stick your hand in the fire for someone, to risk your life for someone else you consider a friend or family. This meaning is also rather illogical, because risking yourself for someone is unnecessary, not really smart, and should only be done if there is a really good reason to do such a thing.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the story of the immigrant Vid shows how he is treated as an outsider. He treats himself as one too. He is the one who is restricting himself. He did not form his own opinion, did not judge others and did not participate in anything, he was just observing the world around him. The only thing that changed when he started interacting with others, was his own opinion of himself. It was not about people accepting him, it was about him being ready to be a part of it all. We mainly see the action of this novel through Vid's eyes, but Hamilton assumes the readers of this novel view Vid as an outsider. The connection the author made with the character shows his own struggle to fit in with the rest. It is only at the end that we get to see Vid starting to become a part of society, being his own person and taking action for what he believes in.

Vid is presented as a generalised other, not as a specific, Serbian, immigrant who has his own history. Presenting Vid as someone wanting to run away from his past, gave Hamilton an excuse for not presenting a fuller history of him. This is hostile on Hamilton's behalf as he does not show the uniqueness of his character. Although Hamilton did not make a character that is all about war, he still should have portrayed Vid in a way which shows he is a Serbian immigrant. The language he is given is too non-specific. He can forget his past, but he cannot forget his language, his Serbian formulations. The way he thinks and the specific words that he would use, would not disappear just because he travelled to Ireland.

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