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Surveillance-Induced Displacement: Fear, Family, and the Loss of Home in Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*

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Abstract

Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song* (2023) portrays the gradual collapse of ordinary life under an authoritarian regime in Ireland. Through the experiences of Eilish Stack and her family, the novel shows how surveillance and political repression affect personal freedom, privacy and the sense of belonging. This paper examines the relationship between surveillance, control and displacement, with particular attention to the changes in Eilish's everyday life. The study argues that displacement does not begin only when people are forced to leave their homes. It begins earlier, when fear and restrictions make familiar places feel unsafe. As the government expands its control, Eilish becomes cautious about communication, struggles to protect her children and gradually loses the security of her family life. Her home remains physically intact for much of the novel, but it no longer offers the privacy and protection she once enjoyed. The paper examines this gradual loss through the related ideas of the shrinking outside and the shrinking inside. It concludes that Eilish's final departure is the physical outcome of a displacement that has already taken place within her ordinary life.

Keywords: Surveillance, Displacement, Privacy, Authoritarianism, Family, *Prophet Song*, Paul Lynch.

1 INTRODUCTION

Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song* (2023) presents a familiar modern society gradually falling under authoritarian rule. Set in Dublin, the novel follows Eilish Stack, a microbiologist and mother of four, as political repression enters her family life. Ireland is governed by the National Alliance Party, which increasingly restricts civil liberties. The government establishes the Garda National Services Bureau (GNSB), a security organization that monitors suspected opponents of the regime.

Eilish lives with her husband Larry, a senior official of the Teachers' Union, and their children, Mark, Molly, Bailey and Ben. Their troubles begin when two GNSB officers arrive at their home looking for Larry. Soon, a teachers' demonstration is violently suppressed, and

Larry is detained. His disappearance leaves Eilish responsible for protecting the family while the country moves towards civil war.

The novel shows how political repression changes ordinary life. Telephone conversations become unsafe, familiar streets grow threatening, and the family home gradually loses its privacy. Eilish must watch what she says, decide whom to trust and conceal frightening information from her children. She remains in Dublin, but her freedom and sense of security steadily diminish.

This paper examines that gradual change through the relationship between surveillance, control and displacement. It distinguishes physical displacement from the earlier loss of privacy, family security and freedom of movement. The central argument is that Eilish begins to experience displacement while she is still living in her own home. Her eventual flight completes a process that has already transformed her life.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent studies of Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song* have examined its portrayal of authoritarianism, political repression and the loss of individual freedom. Wit Pietrzak, in "Living Through the State of Exception: Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*" (2026), approaches the novel through Giorgio Agamben's concept of the state of exception. He explains how a government can suspend ordinary legal protections and exercise extraordinary powers over its citizens. Pietrzak argues that the novel presents a situation in which the legal system is suspended, allowing the state to exercise increasing authority (732). His study helps explain Larry's disappearance and Eilish's loss of legal protection.

Ayelet Ben-Yishai, in "'A Look She Cannot Read': Novelistic Epistemology Between Genre and Narrative Mode in Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*" (2025), examines how the novel's narrative form shapes the presentation of Eilish's understanding of political events. Her study considers the relationship between dystopian fiction and free indirect discourse, particularly the difficulties Eilish faces in interpreting the changes around her. This perspective helps explain the uncertainty that accompanies her attempts to protect her family.

Michel Foucault's account of surveillance and self-regulation provides another useful perspective. In *Discipline and Punish*, he explains how the possibility of observation can influence behaviour even without continuous watching. David Lyon, in *The Electronic Eye*, examines the collection and use of personal information by modern institutions. These ideas help explain how surveillance can influence everyday behaviour and support wider systems of control.

These studies help explain the relationship between surveillance and political authority in the novel. The present paper focuses more closely on what happens to Eilish's private life as these conditions develop. It examines how restrictions, uncertainty and fear gradually weaken her family's security and sense of belonging. Displacement is therefore considered not only as the final act of leaving home but also as an experience that begins before physical departure.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This paper uses close textual reading to examine how surveillance and political repression affect Eilish Stack's everyday life. Foucault's account of surveillance helps explain how the possibility of being watched can influence individual behaviour. Lyon's work provides a broader understanding of institutional surveillance and the collection of personal information. These ideas are applied to selected incidents involving the GNSB, private communication, the workplace and the family home.

The analysis distinguishes between the shrinking outside and the shrinking inside. The

former refers to the gradual loss of freedom in public spaces, including workplaces and streets. The latter describes the weakening of privacy, trust and emotional security within the family. These changes are examined alongside detention, emergency laws and political violence, since surveillance alone does not account for Eilish's displacement.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Surveillance and the Beginning of Fear

Two GNSB officers arrive at Eilish Stack's door asking for her husband, Larry, a senior official of the Teachers' Union. They do not enter. Yet after they leave, Eilish looks towards the window and feels that "something of that darkness has come into the house" (Lynch 4). The visit seems ordinary enough on the surface, but it unsettles the household. Political scrutiny has reached the family's doorstep.

Larry initially believes that the officers are gathering information about the union's activities. He explains that "they gather information" and may be "building a case against a teacher" (Lynch 5). His explanation shows how easily surveillance can appear to be an ordinary administrative activity. Eilish, however, is already suspicious. She has heard troubling reports about the GNSB and fears that the officers may return. The couple respond differently to the same incident. Larry continues to trust the country's democratic institutions, while Eilish senses that their protection may no longer be reliable.

At Kevin Street Garda Station, Larry insists that he is merely "exercising my right under the constitution" (Lynch 11). The officers, however, treat trade union activity as a possible threat under the Emergency Powers Act. Larry still expects the law to protect him. The authorities are already using that law to intimidate people engaged in lawful protest. Information gathered about the union now carries the risk of punishment.

Fear soon begins to affect private communication. Eilish initially struggles to believe that telephone conversations could be intercepted in Ireland. She associates such practices with "other countries" (Lynch 14). As political conditions worsen, however, Larry begins using a burner phone, and ordinary conversations become increasingly uncertain. The family cannot know who may be listening or how information might be used against them.

This uncertainty matters because surveillance does not always require continuous observation to influence behaviour. Foucault explains that the possibility of being watched can make individuals regulate their own conduct (201). Eilish gradually experiences this change. She becomes more cautious about what she says and whom she trusts. Even familiar communication can carry risks.

Nothing in the house has visibly changed after the officers' visit. Eilish still lives with her family in Dublin, and their routines continue. Her confidence, however, has begun to fade. She cannot dismiss the possibility that someone is watching or listening. The first loss is not of property or shelter, but of the security she once took for granted.

4.2 The Shrinking Outside: Restrictions on Everyday Life

A cleared desk at work, a warning glance towards an open window, a meeting to which Eilish is no longer invited: these small incidents reveal how her public world is changing. The shrinking outside does not mean that Dublin has become physically smaller. It means that familiar places are becoming harder to enter, use or speak freely within. The change is gradual, and that makes it especially unsettling.

This change becomes clear at Eilish's workplace. When she returns to the office, she discovers that her colleague Rohit Singh has been arrested and his desk cleared. Another colleague, Alice Dealy, has been placed on indefinite leave (Lynch 114–15). Political suspicion has entered the workplace.

Employees must now think carefully about what they say and whom they associate with. Eilish, too, begins to feel insecure. During a conversation, Colm silently points towards an open ground-floor window, warning her that someone may overhear them (Lynch 115). Even a simple conversation at work can be dangerous.

Eilish remains employed, but her position is no longer secure. Paul Felsner excludes her from a strategy meeting concerning her own account; she discovers that she has received no invitation (Lynch 125). There is no formal dismissal. Instead, her place in the office is quietly reduced. The difference matters: political pressure can isolate someone without removing them from the workplace altogether.

Restrictions also spread through the streets and other public places. As political unrest develops into armed conflict, checkpoints, curfews and soldiers become part of everyday life. Movement is no longer simply a personal decision. People must consider where they can go, which routes remain accessible and what dangers they may encounter. Places that once connected Eilish to work, family and ordinary social life become sources of uncertainty.

Surveillance contributes to these restrictions, but it is not their only cause. The authorities also rely on emergency laws, arrests and physical force. This distinction is important. Watching and gathering information help the regime identify people and their activities, while legal and military powers allow it to act against them. The combined effect is a steady reduction in personal freedom.

Before speaking, travelling or asking for help, Eilish must consider risks that once seemed remote. The streets and workplaces are still familiar, but she cannot rely on them in the same way. Even an ordinary journey may depend on a checkpoint or a soldier's decision. Her choices narrow while she remains in the city she knows.

She has not crossed a border or abandoned her house. Yet Dublin is already becoming a place in which she struggles to live freely. This loss of access and confidence prepares the ground for the more painful changes within the family.

4.3 The Shrinking Inside: Family, Privacy and Psychological Displacement

The change reaches the Stack household well before the family is forced to leave it. Larry becomes withdrawn. Eilish watches for his return and worries about what the children should know. The house still offers walls, rooms and familiar routines, but these can no longer keep political fear outside. This is the shrinking inside: the gradual loss of privacy, trust and emotional security at home.

The process begins with the first visit by the GNSB officers. Although they remain outside, their presence leaves a lasting effect. Eilish notices that the atmosphere of the house has changed:

A strange, unsettled air has filled the house. It came with the two men who called to the door and has worked its way throughout their home, this feeling now as though some unity within the family has begun to unravel. (Lynch 22)

Eilish watches through the blinds for Larry, then lets them fall quickly "so as not to be seen" (Lynch 22). The gesture is small, almost instinctive. It follows the officers' visit, which has left the family unsettled even though the men never physically entered the house. Watching for a loved one's return now involves the fear of being watched herself. The home remains private in appearance, but its familiar ease is fading.

Political fear also changes communication within the family. After learning that Jim Sexton has been detained, Larry asks Eilish to "keep this quiet for the moment and don't tell the kids" (Lynch 17). Later, when Larry himself disappears, Eilish faces a much more difficult

situation. She tells Bailey that his father has "had to go away for work" (Lynch 33). Mark and Molly receive a fuller explanation, but she warns them that they "cannot speak about this outside the house" (Lynch 33). Eilish is trying to protect all three children, though she cannot speak to them in the same way. She knows that a lie, once told, cannot simply be withdrawn: there can be "no untelling it" (Lynch 34). Fear has made honesty within the family difficult. The danger lies outside, but its effects are felt between parent and child.

Larry's disappearance deepens this loss. Eilish continues to perform her responsibilities as a mother, but she has no idea whether her husband will return. Everyday activities continue alongside fear and uncertainty. She tries to maintain the children's routines while facing dangers she cannot fully explain to them. Her home still contains the familiar objects and relationships of family life, but it no longer offers the security associated with them.

Eilish's anxiety has real causes. The authorities have detained Larry, and the family has no reliable information about his fate. Secrecy and the threat of punishment shape everyday conversations. Surveillance makes Eilish cautious, while the regime's power to detain and punish gives that caution a practical urgency. The loss is not only personal peace of mind; it is the freedom to speak and trust within the household.

Eilish remains at home, but it no longer feels entirely safe. She cannot protect her family through the ordinary choices on which she once relied. Long before she leaves Dublin, she has begun to lose the sense of belonging that made the house a home.

4.4 From Loss of Home to Physical Displacement

When Simon urges Eilish to take the children to Canada, she thinks first of what they would have to leave behind: work, school, Larry's job, Molly's hockey and Simon himself (Lynch 22). Her response is understandable. Dublin is where the family's life has taken shape. Only later does departure become thinkable, as the losses around her make staying increasingly dangerous.

Larry is taken away, and Eilish receives no dependable account of what has happened to him. Is he alive? Will he return? She cannot answer either question. She continues running the household, but the absence is present in every decision. A family can remain under one roof and still be broken apart.

The separation becomes more painful when Mark faces the prospect of compulsory military service. He refuses to accept the government's authority and eventually joins the resistance. His declaration that "the only freedom left to me is to fight" (Lynch 135) reveals how severely his choices have been restricted. Mark believes that resistance offers the only remaining alternative to submission. For Eilish, his decision means losing another member of her family.

At the flat where Mark has been staying, Eilish finds a made bed, his belongings gone and his bicycle left behind (Lynch 132). Unlike Larry, Mark has chosen to leave. Yet Eilish cannot reach him or make him return. The neat room makes the separation painfully definite. Her authority as a mother cannot protect him from the choices imposed by the conflict.

The greatest tragedy comes through Bailey. After he is injured, Eilish takes him to hospital, hoping that medical treatment will save him. Instead, he is transferred to a military facility without her permission. She eventually discovers his body in a morgue, where he has been identified by a number rather than his name. His death shows how completely the authorities have disregarded the family's rights and suffering. Even a child's life is no longer protected.

After Bailey's death, the question of leaving changes. Eilish has already endured Larry's disappearance, Mark's departure and

the growing violence in Dublin. She has tried to hold the family together, but staying now threatens the children who remain. Home has ceased to offer the protection for which she has fought.

Eilish finally leaves Dublin with Molly and Ben. Their journey depends on money, documents, strangers and the possibility of crossing borders. The woman who once managed a settled family life must now seek safety as a refugee. As they approach the coast, she tells her children, "to the sea, we must go to the sea, the sea is life" (Lynch 309). The sea represents a possible escape, although their future remains uncertain.

The journey towards the coast brings together the earlier losses. Surveillance had made Eilish fearful and cautious; detention and armed violence have now destroyed the family's security. These forces are connected, but they are not identical. The novel does not suggest that observation alone drives people from their homes. It shows what happens when information-gathering serves a regime which is willing to use coercion.

Eilish leaves because she can no longer keep Molly and Ben safe by staying. Her departure is not an abandonment of home so much as a final effort to protect what remains of her family. The physical journey follows a much longer experience of losing freedom, privacy and belonging.

5. CONCLUSION

The most disturbing change in Prophet Song is not the moment Eilish leaves Ireland. It is how much she has already lost before that moment arrives. A visit from the GNSB, guarded conversations, Larry's disappearance and the growing violence in Dublin steadily undermine the family's ordinary life. By the time Eilish flees, home has ceased to provide safety.

The distinction between the shrinking outside and the shrinking inside helps explain this process. Restrictions on movement, work and speech narrow Eilish's public life. At home, secrecy and fear damage the trust and security on which family relationships depend. The two losses develop together rather than in separate stages.

Surveillance contributes to these changes, but it cannot explain them alone. Mechanisms like emergency powers, detention and military violence turn suspicion into direct harm. Larry's disappearance, Mark's departure and Bailey's death show how far that harm reaches into family life.

Eilish's flight is therefore both an ending and an act of care. She cannot recover the home or family life she has lost, but she can still try to save Molly and Ben. Lynch presents displacement as a gradual experience before it becomes a journey across borders.

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