

**University of Alberta**

“Feminizing Ireland”: Cultural Revisionism and Feminist Writing in Celtic Tiger  
Ireland

by

Laura Erin Sydora

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

English and Film Studies

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Fall 2013

Edmonton, Alberta

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For my mum and pops,  
for never letting me settle for mediocrity

## Abstract

This thesis will engage with a multitude of critical theories, sociological studies, and political legislation in an attempt to demonstrate the role female-centered literature is playing in the cultural revision of the Irish nation at the turn of the twenty-first century. In an effort to interrogate the state of social change, I will draw on contemporary feminist novels and short stories in order to answer a question lingering behind the so-called “success” of Irish modernity: *How did we get here?* Literature is the very site in which Irish identity is being deconstructed, renegotiated, and rewritten, and the retrospective struggles of Irish women are the narratives through which authors are choosing to investigate the past and question the ideological forces of social transformation. However, this is not an all-encompassing study, merely a snapshot of some of the themes, questions, and concerns occupying the minds of Irish writers throughout the Celtic Tiger.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the various individuals and collective bodies who contributed to the betterment of both my academic and personal life throughout the writing of this thesis. A special thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Rob Brazeau, whose endless positivity, intellectual prodding, and good-natured joviality made this process worthwhile. To my friends and family, both near and far, for their continuous support and endless supplies of love and encouragement (and nourishment). Finally, to the University of Alberta, particularly the Department of English and Film Studies, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for supporting my academic research with a Master's Scholarship from the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarships Program.

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## Introduction

### *Historicizing the Republic of Ireland in the Twentieth Century*

The 1990s to early 2000s can be categorized as a culmination period for Ireland.<sup>1</sup> The neo-liberal governmental reforms implemented by the Lemass government in the late 1950s, designed to transition Ireland out of the inertia born from Éamon de Valera's chauvinistic economic nationalism and cultural isolationism, opened up a pathway for an unprecedented economic boom in the Free State.<sup>2</sup> For the first time in the nation's history, Ireland became a "country of net immigration" – a site of internationalization and globalization – no longer a nation bleeding from its long-standing wound of high emigration (Migration Policy Institute 2009). From the 1960s sexual revolution to the 1970s women's movement resulting in a regressive conservative backlash in the 1980s, the liberalizing and secularizing social structure effected "real and profound changes in women's economic power and position in public life," including the election of the first female President of the Republic of Ireland in 1991 (Cahill 5).<sup>3</sup> Finally, there was an increase in cultural production as the novel burst back into the public scene, guided by a troop of young novelists and a substantially expanded body of female writers (Jeffers 1). With the "success" of the Celtic Tiger ushering Ireland into a phase of liberal modernization, a new Irish citizenry emerged of "complex cosmopolitans, Irish-Europeans, [and] citizen-consumers" in a global market place (C. McCarthy

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<sup>1</sup> The Celtic Tiger is generally dated somewhere within the range of 1995-2007 when the rate of economic growth doubled and unemployment reached an all-time low of 4.5%, before the state underwent a dramatic reversal by 2008 (Kirby, Cronin, Gibbons 2002; Clark 2010; Cahill 2011).

<sup>2</sup> After Fianna Fail won the general election in 1959, the Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, adopted the First Programme for Economic Expansion. The economic program included a relaxation of protectionism, incentives for foreign corporate investors, rigid economic planning, as well as relaxed media reforms (C. McCarthy 13). Ireland endeavored to attract foreign investment, promote exports, and shift to a service sector that would contribute to education (Peillon 47). However, economic reform alone cannot account for the transformation of Ireland into one of the wealthiest countries in Europe during this time period.

<sup>3</sup> Notable progressive events that have positively contributed to the state of women's rights in Ireland in the 1990s to 2000s include: the establishment of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement in 1970; the Council for the Status of Women in 1971; the 1979 Health and Family Planning Act; the election of Mary Robinson in 1991; the legalization of divorce in 1995; Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act in 2013.

6). Amid the burgeoning post-industrial, knowledge-based economy, secularizing social atmosphere, and national narrative of achievement, a “new Ireland” emerged determined to break away from its “regressive” history. However, while contemporary society at large was not ready to disavow the past, political codes dictated otherwise.

Beneath the positivistic, one-sided, material face of the Tiger was a hidden reality of structural inequality, economic stratification, social marginalization and gender division encompassed by a collective memory trapped in cultural denial. In the midst of the economic, political, and social upheaval that accompanies modernization, the Irish populace began to turn a nostalgic gaze to the past, but a rather selectively gender-blind version of it. This fetishization of the past finds the nation caught up in a “crisis” of culture and identity. While turning toward the future raises “many questions about the ways in which the country had hitherto conceived of itself in relation to the wider world” as it struggles to deal with the material social, political, and economic changes brought forth with the advent of the Celtic Tiger (Hand 275), turning toward the past unveils a deeply problematic identity of dependence – an identity built on the adoption of bourgeois nationalism, hegemonic political subjectivity, and oppressive gender ideology. Faced with an uncertain future and confronted by a hypocritical past, Irish Studies found itself “caught up in the question of its own existence” (Sullivan 2000, 245). While change and confusion were experienced across the nation, the group most affected by the question of identity was women who, in only fifty years, saw their roles change from dutiful, homebound Mammy to President of the Republic. Like the narrative of Tiger affluence, however, the narrative of women’s progress was far from liberatory. But unlike their predecessors, by the end of the 1990s “women had made too many gains for them to be taken away” (Ingman 24). With an increasing sense of mobilization, visibility, and conviction, women began to interrogate the state of contemporary social change, asking a question lingering behind the so-called “success” of Irish modernity: *How did we get here?*

Ireland has long been represented through the figure of the female: Cathleen ni Houlihan, Hibernia, Dark Rosaleen, Seán Van Vocht, and Erin are all incarnations of a conflation of a weakened and powerless female figure with a colonized body of land (Á. McCarthy 99). According to Siobhán Kilfeather, this “intertwining of feminist and nationalist discourses is the most distinctive feature in the evolution of Irish feminism” (Kilfeather 98). As Irish feminist critic Moynagh Sullivan expands, the national subject of Irish Studies continues to deploy the feminine as a material other from which the masculine-Irish subject is distanced in order to assert its subjecthood (Sullivan 2000, 248-9). Such an objectification of femininity for the purpose of counter-identification has been a national trope employed by Ireland from the onset of Independence in 1922. The anxiety of the newly formed state’s need to assert its masculinity manifested itself in the legislative actions of the young male-dominated government, specifically through its efforts to enforce a unified national identity that universalized the conception of gender. Beginning with the 1929 Irish Censorship Act, which prohibited the printing of material relating to abortion and contraception, women were driven to accept the state-imposed ideology of motherhood as their singularly available subjectivity (Weekes 2000, 102). The role of woman as mother later became solidified in the De Valera Constitution of 1937, which posited sexual and familial roles as the essence of Irishness. Article 41.2 states: 1° *In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.* 2° *The State shall, therefore, endeavor to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labor to the neglect of their duties in the home* (*Bunreacht Na hEireann*).<sup>4</sup> Within De Valera’s vision of romantic paternalism, the family became the building block of Irish society and women were tasked with their choiceless role as private

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<sup>4</sup> According to Yvonne Scannell, women were not able to contribute to the creation of the *Bunreacht Na hEireann*, as “of the 152 TDs who had an opportunity to comment on the draft, only three were women” (Scannell 123). As Carol Coulter expands, Irish women were more involved in the creation of the 1916 Proclamation and the 1922 Constitution of the Free State than they were in the development of the 1937 Constitution: “women’s access to politics was cut off and driven into the domestic sphere to an extent which had not existed under British colonization” (Coulter 28).



transmitters of public culture – “guardians of the hearth to the exclusion of political and economic identity” (Valiulis 129). As Anne McClintock asserts, in male nationalisms, women are often excluded from direct action as national citizens and instead, are "subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit" (McClintock 62). Cultural nationalism and femininity were one and the same, but the conception of the feminine as weak, powerless, and colonized meant that women’s bodies represented the territory that had to be controlled by the new patriarchal state.

Ireland’s post-Independence project aimed at the gendered division of social spaces reinforces David Lloyd’s argument that “the nationalist modernization of Ireland is inseparable from its project of masculinization of Irish public culture and the regulation of a feminine domestic space” (Lloyd 2000, 200). However, in seeking to liberate Ireland from its former feminized and colonized identity, the newly formed state adopted a national ideology dependent upon the logical structure of British hegemony (Lloyd 1993, 2000; Rockett 1990). This “transvaluation”<sup>5</sup> of stereotypes has had significant consequences for the identity formation of both women *and* men throughout the evolution of Irish society. While men have been obligated to mimic a publicly-defined masculinity dependent upon the colonial values of “labor” and “regularity,” they have been left without a model of how to negotiate an identity within the private sphere of domesticity (Lloyd 2000, 199). Women, on the other hand, have been oppressed by a highly regulated and privately-relegated vision of femininity based on domestic servitude, maternal asexuality, and public exclusion; denied access to alternative subjectivities by both the state and Church. In choosing to replicate a hegemonic nationalist ideology, Irish nationalism has “ordered the politics of gender within the narratives of the nation” and violently repressed and opposed differences of gender and sexuality that have been found incompatible with a singular, unified conception of political subjectivity (Irving 296; Lloyd 1993, 4). Although nationalist

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<sup>5</sup> Terminology borrowed from David Lloyd.

ideology, reinforced by a heavily influential Catholic Church body, consequentially affected the whole of its citizenry, women's rights were more drastically infringed upon.

Between the 1930s and 1960s, the position of women in Irish society remained relatively stagnant (Scannell 1988; Coulter 1993; Weekes 2000). Previous legislation enacted by the Cumann na nGaedheal government<sup>6</sup> prohibited divorce and contraception,<sup>7</sup> barred women from jury service, and restricted women's access to employment and education (Coulter 25). The final blow struck with the implementation of the 1937 Constitution. Many women found it difficult to overcome the economic, social, political, and familial restriction of their access to a public female identity.<sup>8</sup> However, after Lemass executed his sequence of economic plans and inaugurated a series of culturally modernizing media reforms, such as the 1960 Broadcasting Act,<sup>9</sup> an avenue opened for social critique and cultural transformation. Influenced by the 1960s sexual revolution occurring in Western countries and watching the reformation of the Irish economy from afar, a sense of dissatisfaction began to bubble underneath the surface of the patriarchal realm amongst women. Still relegated to the sidelines as their country began to progress economically, their earlier efforts for change not yet met, women began to grow more restless regarding the paradoxical nature of their roles as Irish citizens and found new ways to proactively vocalize their discontent. As women's rights activist June Levine wrote of the period, there was a "female

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<sup>6</sup> The ruling party of the Irish Free State from 1923 to 1932.

<sup>7</sup> As of July 30, 2013 President Michael D. Higgins signed The Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013 into effect. According to *The Irish Times*, the Bill "sets out procedures for obtaining abortion in cases of risk to a woman's life and will provide legal clarity for women and doctors in applying the X case test" (Bacik 2013).

<sup>8</sup> However, the most frequently documented sources of resistance to the dominant patriarchal gender ideology are the Irish Housewives' Association (1941) and the Irish Countrywomen's Association, which focused on improving the social conditions of men and women (Ingman 103; Coulter 29). Additionally, recent research suggests that feminist energies failed to register on the national scale from 1922 to 1960 because women were blurring the lines between patriarchal and oppositional discourse. Rather than directly confront the state, many female activists, such as Geraldine Cummins and Rosamund Jacob, turned to cultural critique, particularly in the field of journalism (Meaney 2002).

<sup>9</sup> According to John Horgan, the Act was a "relatively forward-thinking piece of legislation" (Horgan 83): "It gave the broadcasting authority a great measure of autonomy, protected by legislation, and it ensured that any government directives which would affect programming had to be served on the Authority in writing" (Fisher 27).

anger, subtle, veiled, but there. [...] It was an anger which clearly said: ‘ok the awful fifties are gone, things were going right for the change. Going right for the boys. But what about us?’” (Levine 12-13). This “female anger” would mount itself, more effectively than the first wave of feminist resistance in the early decades of the twentieth century, in the form of the Women’s Movement in the Republic of Ireland, the first two stages of which lay the precedent for the radical 1980s and 1990s.<sup>10</sup>

While the position of women in Irish society has largely been one of powerlessness, oppression, and marginalization, it has not been accurately represented, particularly within the traditional Irish literary canon. In canonical figurations, women have been portrayed as emblematic figures, such as Mother Ireland and Cathleen ni Houlihan (Weekes 104), and mothers whose existence remains the finite result of sex rather than a continuing condition (Mhac an tSaoi 89). The most frequent stereotypes of women reproduced in Irish fiction involve maternal identities, including: 1) Good Mammy: an idealized figure who is dutiful, self-sacrificing, devoted to God and family, and the provider of selfless love and good food; 2) Moaning Mammy: a whining or silent martyr, exhausted by her feckless or alcoholic husband and numerous children; and 3) Smother Mother: a dominant matriarch who insists on her children adhering to social principles, thus exemplifying her role as transmitter of culture (A. McCarthy 97). These representations neither portrayed the everyday experiences of women accurately, nor did they demonstrate the role of women as anything more than a function of their bodies. Women were

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<sup>10</sup> The International Women’s Liberation Movement is divided into four phases: 1) From 1970-1974 the emergent Irish feminist movement brought basic equal rights and legal reform issues to the forefront: equal pay, education, and legal rights, as well as the low-key treatment of contraception and the recognition of single motherhood (Smyth 253). 2) The second phase of the movement (1974-1977) targeted the removal of all legal and bureaucratic obstacles to equality, free legal contraception, and most importantly, the right of all women to “self-determined sexuality” (Smyth 258). 3) The third phase is categorized by diversification and diffusion from 1977-1983. During this period, the movement did not undergo significant change except the addition of issues such as violence against women to the platform. 4) The fourth and final phase of the IWLM (1983-1990) demonstrates the extent to which the state still operated through the cultural values of the 1930s, as the advancements made by the women’s movement were quenched by fundamentalist repression from the ranks of the Church and state (Meaney 1993, 231). Fortunately, the movement is capped by the election of Mary Robinson to office in November of 1990.

rendered invisible amidst the high culture, male-dominated narratives indebted to patriarchal values. As Sullivan explains, women's writing "functions as a body of *loss* in Irish studies, and this loss is a necessary functioning of Irish heterosexual masculine culture's self-representation in its building of a national cultural body" (Sullivan 2008, 249; emphasis in original). Although female writers have gained increasing attention in the past thirty years, in part due to the creation of feminist publishing houses in Ireland (Ingman 1),<sup>11</sup> only in the past decade have scholars begun to critique the state of Irish Studies for its continuous sub-categorization of Women's Studies within the larger field of Irish Studies itself (Sullivan 2000; Fogarty 2002; Kelleher 2003; Meaney 2010). According to David Lloyd, there is still much "to be done by way of producing a 'gender history' of Irish social spaces and their refiguration within nationalist as well as colonial projects of modernization" (Lloyd 1993, 194).

Significantly, this public "lack of an Irish female literary tradition with which contemporary Irish women writers can identify" has produced a structural and thematic trend amongst female-centered writing today (Bracken 228). In examining literature published during the 1990s and 2000s, rather than focus solely on the present day, contemporary authors often turn an interrogative lens to the past, forcing their protagonists to confront fragmented temporal narratives and reexamine their lives, repeatedly, from the 1950s through the 1980s. Although the publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol. 1-3* in 1991 brought increasing attention to the fact that women's writing has largely been ignored or misrepresented throughout Irish history, and therefore female experiences have lacked "historicized expressions of variable womanhood" (Sullivan 2000, 150), the continuing peripheral status of women's cultural work as well as the under-researched areas of "health, family relations, and sexuality" have contributed to the contemporary quest to uncover the history of female subjectivity (Luddy 461).<sup>12</sup> While the

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<sup>11</sup> Significant feminist publishing houses include: Arlen House (1975), Attic Press, and Carysfort Press (1998).

<sup>12</sup> This is not to discredit the work of feminist scholarship over the past thirty years devoted to uncovering the literary history of female writers. Anthologies, such as *Woman's Part: An*

dialectic of the Celtic Tiger premised on a rigid distinction between Ireland's "backward" past and "contemporary" present attempted to write over the "exclusionary constructions of Irishness and hegemonic narratives of Irish history" in order to create a *tabula rasa* for the "new Ireland," it left women with a fragmented understanding of their identity, struggling to determine where they fit into the new discourse of Irishness (Cahill 14; 7).

Shining a light on the country's dark and silent past, unveiling the gap between ideology and the reality of a generation, female *and* male authors have made a vested effort to grapple with the hidden narrative of the feminine in Ireland amidst the country's canonical history of dominant male voices. Although it is difficult to claim an overlying critical framework connecting the multitude of literary works produced during the Celtic Tiger, there is a notable fixation on recovering the past. According to Robert F. Garratt, engaging with the past allows authors to "assume as part of the intellectual climate of the work the interpretation of history over the past seventy years, including both Irish cultural studies and revisionist Irish historiography" (Garratt 4). In contemporary Irish writing, the novel and the short story have allotted authors a place to engage with discourses of the past and present, charting the processes of social transformation, specifically the under-documented issues of family, gender, and sexuality. Throughout this thesis, I will highlight the works of contemporary authors that give voice to the individual experiences of women, unveiling aspects of Irish culture that have long been hidden.

In the following chapters, I will examine the way in which the novels of contemporary Irish authors Anne Enright and Roddy Doyle and the short story collections of Claire Keegan challenge the notion of the "new Ireland" that emerged during the Celtic Tiger by charting the individual struggles of present day Irish women in their efforts to renegotiate an identity through

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*Anthology of Short Fiction By and About Irish Women 1890-1960* (1984), *Ireland's Women: Writings Past and Present* (1994), and *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol. 4-5: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (2002), have argued for the importance of women's writing in Ireland (Boyle and St. Peter 2); however, "the work of feminist intellectuals of note seems not to find recognition as part of the Irish *public* culture," as the most publicized and acclaimed works of literary work continue to be dominated by men (Sullivan 2008, 246; emphasis in original).

a (re)writing of their pasts. Through their intimate portraits of women and their private, familial domestic lives, Enright, Doyle, and Keegan contribute to the contemporary feminist effort to study the subject of women and their material conditions in order to help unsettle “any articulation of Irishness specifically predicated on the object’s silence and ahistoricity” (Sullivan 2000, 250). As current Irish feminist scholars have argued, it is “through the production of feminocentric fictions that rewrite and confront the personal, psychic conflicts of the past, [that] fresh insights into the politics and ethics of identity in contemporary Irish society might emerge” (Fogarty 2002, 16). The argument is often made that female writing centered on the domestic sphere and private self is “lacking in universality,” “too particularist,” or “reveals nothing more than a non-artistic transcription of the identity quest” (Fogarty 2002, 2; St. Peter 2000, 15); however, as these three authors display, the personal lives of Irish women are the foremost sites of Irish cultural, political, and identitarian disputes.

The following three chapters span varying demographic perspectives and divergent authorial styles. Chapter One focuses on Anne Enright’s novel *The Gathering* (2007). Enright’s tale of an upper-middle class Dublin woman is motivated by a desire to uncover the psychological ramifications of female oppression and denial. Her portrayal of three generations of Irish women is an attempt to write a version of a maternal historiography, scrutinizing the past in order to reposition the mother within the traditionally accepted narrative of the nation. Enright’s specific attention to femininity and sexual ideology locates the female body as a site of national wounding and implicates both the macro-level forces of Church and state and micro-level agents of family and self complicit in the regulation and denial of female sexuality.

Chapter Two portrays the story of a working-class domestic abuse victim written from the perspective of a male author. According to Emma Donoghue, “The best book I know about being a battered wife is Roddy Doyle’s *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*” (Crown 2010). Doyle’s novel has been critically applauded for its insight into the psychology of a “battered woman,” but not much else. I argue that Doyle’s profile of Dublin working-class life strikingly counters the

narrative of progress championed by proponents of the Celtic Tiger. Filling the role of cultural ethnographer, similar to that of James Joyce in *Dubliners*, Doyle gives a voice to the voiceless and highlights the prevailing problem of patriarchal violence against women and counters the predominant attitudes on family, gender, and identity within the nation. I have chosen to include a male author in my study of women's writing because while the traditional perception of Irish masculinity and male writing is understood as oppressing and stereotyping the feminine, it is important to include those male voices that attempt to understand their role in the perpetuation of female victimization.

Chapter Three will take a rural turn in perspective in Claire Keegan's short story collection *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007). I have included a collection of short stories rather than focus solely on the novel genre in order to exhibit the varying literary forms portraying a feminist perspective being used to capture the nation in change. According to Alfred Markey, "historically it has often been held that the short story amongst all narratives is the form most quintessentially Irish," and Keegan is nothing if not a writer who engages with canonical configurations in order to de-center the "value structure of the narrative tradition" (Markey 94; St. Peter 2000, 15). In her short stories, Keegan is able to unpack varying stages of female experience and development, challenging and reappropriating the stereotypes that have defined Irish women for over a century.

However, this is not an all-encompassing study, merely a snapshot of some of the themes, questions, and concerns occupying the minds of Irish writers throughout the Celtic Tiger. This thesis will engage with a multitude of critical theories, sociological studies, and political legislation in an attempt to demonstrate the role female-centered literature is playing in the cultural revision of the nation. Literature is the very site in which Irish identity is being deconstructed, renegotiated, and rewritten, and the retrospective struggles of individual Irish women are the narratives in which authors are choosing to investigate the past and question the ideological forces of social transformation.

## Chapter 1

### “Everyone wants a bit of me”: Historicizing Motherhood in Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*

Since winning the Man Booker Prize in 2007 for her novel *The Gathering*, Anne Enright has emerged as one of the foremost literary voices of Irish culture – a somewhat surprising feat considering her candid portrayals of female sexuality, maternity, and abuse counter an extensive national history of patriarchal hegemony. However, Enright’s work speaks to a latent concern beneath a burgeoning post-industrial, consumerist economy and an increasingly secular social atmosphere. *The Gathering* exemplifies a desire to investigate contemporary societal change in an effort to recover what has been silenced in Ireland’s public historiography, particularly female identity. Enright makes the personal political by tracing three generations of Hegarty women from post-Independence to the Celtic Tiger in order to re-envision the archaeology of motherhood in Ireland. Situating her protagonist Veronica Hegarty in “new Ireland,” Enright critiques the inability of modern Irish women to reconstitute an identity amidst an unreliable, silent, patriarchal past. On the verge of invisibility herself, Veronica, prompted by her brother’s suicide, catapults into her own past in order to (re)write her history, exposing the political, social, and familial factors complicit in the silencing of Irish femininity, and thereby reclaiming her subjectivity. *The Gathering* illuminates the specter of feminism haunting the narrative of the state, ultimately materializing the real conditions of womanhood and historicizing maternity within the national narrative.

With the beginning of the economic boom in the 1990s leading the way into the liberal modernization of the social realm of the state itself, the collective desire that Ireland could finally put its nationalist past behind it and enter the world stage as a “new Ireland” became a priority for state and society. At first glance, Veronica Hegarty’s present day life is a prototypical



representation of the consumption, commodification, and construction characteristic of the modern, neoliberal progressive Republic. According to postcolonial literary critic Carol Dell'Amico, Veronica and Tom are the epitome of a “boom couple whose fortunes mirror Ireland’s move from an inward-looking post-Independence nation to an economic ‘tiger’” (Dell'Amico 67). Having recently purchased their large “Tudor-red-brick-with-Queen-Anne-overtones” (Enright 36) house in an upscale Dublin suburb, theirs is a world of “the housewife in her Saab” (Enright 150), “a stainless-steel Miele dishwasher” (Enright 89), and “Pampers” (Enright 71). Enright’s employment of product names and consumerist goods points to Ireland’s emergence into the global market place as well as the one-sided narrative of the positivistic impact of affluence on the Irish citizenry;<sup>13</sup> however, as Irish literary critic Geradine Meaney is quick to point out, this version of national progress is “dependent on suppression of the evidence of the persistence of structures of conformity, domination and exclusion at the heart of Irish society and culture” (Meaney 2010, xv). The rhetoric of “new Ireland” suggested that the country had suddenly blossomed into a newly evolved state, forfeiting the ideology of the past in order to successively transition into modernity when, in actuality, the prosperity of the Celtic Tiger coincided with the liberalization of Irish society, catching Ireland in a contradiction between an oppressive, traumatic past and an aspiring, modernizing present. To borrow a term from Dell'Amico, this is the traumatic “underbelly” of the Celtic Tiger haunting the Hegarty family, most notably Veronica, herself (Dell'Amico 68). In an attempt to uncover the origin of Liam’s story and her own, simultaneously, Veronica struggles to write the true history of her family against the nostalgic act of national imagining: “this is the tale that I *would* love to write: history is such a romantic place [...]. If it would just stay still, I think, and settle down” (Enright 13; emphasis added). The conditionality of Veronica’s statement on history suggests that it would be

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<sup>13</sup> According to Michael Parker, although between 1995 and 2001 growth in the industrial sector averaged fifteen percent, emigration dropped significantly, and unemployment fell to four percent, this wealth was not distributed equally (Parker 7). Most “beneficiaries” of this sudden wealth were “located in major cities and suburbs, and of a middle class persuasion” (Parker 7). As of 2007, twenty percent of the Irish population still remained below the poverty line.

much easier to write the past as a “romantic” place, revising that which is seen as counter-cultural; however, in order to break the silence of an oppressive patriarchal national narrative, she must re-write it. In the omnipresent contradictions of modernity, cultural nation-wide nostalgia merely expands upon the hegemonic role of culture in the formation of the national subject and the silencing of “anomalous” identities (Lloyd 7).

One of the most dangerous aspects of the fetishization of the past in “modern” Ireland is the continued acceptance of a national narrative that excludes a feminine subjectivity in both public and private life; a subjectivity apart from the essentialized and over-determined prescriptions of femininity in Irish nationalism that necessitate the devaluation of women’s roles throughout Irish history (Brazeau 2004). Constitutionally consigned to the realm of motherhood, the politically motivated construction of female identity as silent, idealistic, and overgeneralized has rendered women largely invisible within the hegemonic historical narrative of the state. Enright’s work seeks to fill the void concerning motherhood as a subject position outside the delimiting realms of nationalist politics and Irish Catholicism.<sup>14</sup> As evidenced within Veronica’s own attempts to write her mother, Mrs. Hegarty encodes the “lack of subjectivity and invisibility accorded to motherhood” (Cahill 180). Veronica admits, “some days I don’t remember my mother” (Enright 3), but to be fair “it is possible she can’t even remember herself” (Enright 4). Mrs. Hegarty’s role as a mother has erased her identity to the point where her name is never even stated. In both her state-sanctioned and self-assumed role as “Mammy,” Veronica’s mother has become a victim of the violent monopolization of identity formation for women within the state, a stranger to herself and her family.<sup>15</sup> However, the formation of female identity in the cultural climate of the Celtic

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<sup>14</sup> According to Heather Ingman, positive mother-daughter stories came late to Irish fiction: “The iconization of the mother-son relationship in both Irish Catholicism and Irish nationalism ensured that for a long time the mother-daughter story remained unwritten in Irish literature” (Ingman 75).

<sup>15</sup> David Lloyd’s crucial text *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (1993) theorizes the implicit violence of national identity formation and its explicit role within nationalism in post-Independence Ireland. Although Lloyd does not specifically address the political ramifications inherent in the production of female identity, I propose that his argument on the effects of decolonization can be applied to gender identity construction in the Republic.

Tiger does not become any less problematic. Although the 1990s witnessed the rapid transformation of Irish society by capitalism, particularly a distinct step in the advancement of women's rights in both public and private life, it is incorrect to believe in a simple "before-and-after" narrative of progressivism in Ireland, especially in terms of women's status and freedoms because the "inherited cultural construction of the Irish mother still functions as a powerful background ideal" (Coughlan 176-177).<sup>16</sup> Both the nostalgic gaze and the commodification of the past as "backward" forget the realities of women's histories in Ireland and continue to replicate the same structures of oppression. This poses significant difficulties in the process of self-constitution for a woman like Veronica who grew up during the remnants of old Ireland but is now living out adulthood in new Ireland.<sup>17</sup> Even before her brother's death fully shatters her sense of self, Veronica alludes to a sense of fractured subjectivity: "I saw my reflection in the window [...] the sky in the window pane was a wonderful, thick blue, and in my dark face moving past was the streak of a smile. And I remember thinking, 'So, I am happy. That's nice to know'" (Enright 68). The disjunction between Veronica's past and present has manifested itself in her conception of her identity, or rather resulted in a sense of dislocation from the self. Veronica's inability to understand herself other than through reflections suggests that she has constructed a "falsely stable subjectivity" through her interaction with the "ideological world" (Gardam 102). In order to reconstitute her identity, Veronica must bear witness to her forgotten past and tell her story before history threatens to erase her too.

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<sup>16</sup> In her discussion of the Citizenship Referendum of 2004, which voted to change the rules concerning the constitutional entitlement to citizenship by birth, Heather Ingman explains, "maternity continues to be the force through which the boundaries of the nation, now defined so as to exclude the threat of the pregnant immigrant body, are worked out" (Ingman 25). The alteration means that people born in Ireland after the constitutional amendment took effect would not have a constitutional right to be Irish citizens, unless, at the time of their birth, one of their parents was an Irish citizen or was entitled to be an Irish citizen.

<sup>17</sup> In an interview Enright herself comments on the difficulty of growing up during the tumultuous economic and cultural changes of the 1960s to 1990s: "For a woman of my generation, the break between the old and the new Ireland happened in my head: it was a confusing and disturbing time" (Maloney 53-54).

In the wake of Liam's death the realization of potential invisibility enables Veronica to (re)-examine the past of her grandmother, Ada (1920s post-Independence), as well as her own childhood and her mother's adult life (1960s-1980s pre-Celtic Tiger), thereby exposing the "prejudices, practices, and institutions that facilitated the perpetration and repression of violence against vulnerable individuals at various state-sanctioned levels" (Harte 199). More specifically, Veronica's feminist interrogation into the microcosmic history of Irish women in her family can be read as a large-scale exposition of the patriarchal political, social, and familial structures responsible for the national victimization of Irish women.<sup>18</sup> At the level of the state, Veronica implicates the political ideology of motherhood as a postcolonial anxiety confining all women to a subordinate, domestic, and universalized identity. As she reflects upon Liam's fate, Veronica explains "what is written for the future is written in the body" (Enright 163). The idea that fate and flesh are inextricably intertwined and that "history is only biological" (Enright 163) hits at the crux of female identity in Irish history. In the 1937 Irish Constitution, *Bunreacht Na hÉireann*, motherhood as a state-imposed ideology not only ties women to a singular restrictive political and social identity, but also imprisons them within their bodies.<sup>19</sup> The oblivious idealization of the female as an asexual, devoted, and pious mother greatly limits the political and social identity of women, as the conflation of "woman" with "mother" aligns femaleness with the maternal, thereby denying women an individual subjectivity apart from the conventions of maternal femininity. Furthermore, the sexual identity available to women as mothers is an identity that renders the female body a merely passive site for reproduction and negates any potential for sexual desire.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For the purpose of my thesis, I will only address the victimization of women in *The Gathering*, not children and mental patients, although, I do see Enright engaging in a national critique of all such groups rendered invisible in Irish historiography. For a more explicit analysis of Enright's portrayal of social groups misrepresented in Irish history, see the discussion of child sexual abuse in Liam Harte (2010) and Carol Dell'Amico (2010).

<sup>19</sup> For further explanation on the Constitution and motherhood, see Introduction and Chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> The notion of female asexuality coincides with Julia Kristeva's discussion of Christianity and maternity. According to Kristeva, the mother participates in the symbolic community of Christianity, "not by giving birth to her children, but merely by preparing them for baptism" (Kristeva 146). Motherhood and female pleasure are only acknowledged enough to "imagine that

Forced to accept the sole identity available, motherhood becomes a political tool, costing women their bodies and their sexuality and writes the future of womanhood into their bones (Weekes 102). Veronica's assertion, "everyone wants a bit of me. And it has nothing to do with what I might want, or what my body might want, whatever that might be," could very well be the motto for Irish women throughout history (Enright 244). Her subjectivity eroded and her body subject to the will of others, Veronica exemplifies the violent consequences of national identity formation in postcolonial Ireland, specifically the implications for women.

Veronica's rewriting of the past indicts "familial, communal, and state complicity" in the conditioning of female victimization (Harte 189). However, it is her specific attention to the domestic and the family that receives the most virulent attack. Motherhood as a macro-level political and social ideology has repercussions within the micro-level of the family.<sup>21</sup> Although Irish Studies critic Michael Cronin points to the trope of the unhappy Irish family as a potentially tiresome staple of twentieth-century Irish fiction, it is "worth considering the collapse of a certain idea of *muintir*<sup>22</sup> or family, not as yet another tired sally in the battle against Mother Church or Mother Ireland, but as relating to a very real crisis in how wider communities are to function in an Ireland deeply implicated in global socioeconomic relations" (Cronin 77). Historically, the Irish family was predicated on Éamon de Valera's constitutional collectivist model of heterosexual patriarchy, positing sexual and familial roles as the essence of Irishness. Veronica explicitly implicates her own family in adhering to this flawed patriarchal ideology as she recalls the mantra of their childhood:

*Don't tell Mammy, because 'Mammy' would – what? Expire? [...] It was, after all, of her own making, this family. It had all come – singly and painfully – out of her.*

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she bears children, while censuring the fact that she has experienced jouissance in an act of coitus, that there was a 'primal scene'" (Kristeva 146).

<sup>21</sup> The terms "macro-level" and "micro-level" are used here to denote levels of analysis. I use "macro-level" as a placeholder for "domestic" or "intrastate," emphasizing the nation-state as the scope of focus. Similarly, "micro-level" is meant to indicate a smaller unit of analysis, particularly the individual, as a subnational actor.

<sup>22</sup> Irish word for parents, relatives, or folks.

And my father said it more than anyone; level, gallant, *There's no need to tell your mother now*, as if the reality of his bed was all the reality that this woman should be asked to bear. (Enright 9)

The position of the wife in the traditional nuclear Irish family is painted as nothing more than asexual, devoted, and silent procreator. Mrs. Hegarty's reality is not that of "familial affection and social respect" supposedly conferred in the national idealization of the mother; rather, her reality is one confined to that of the private sphere, more specifically the bed, where both her husband and her children deny her agency (Weekes 100). Both Ada and Mrs. Hegarty's relationships to their families are defined by this ability to provide silent and devoted domestic comfort, and reproduce "cups of tea," "descendants," "money," and "heterosexuals" (Enright 185-86). Not only do these stated forms of female contribution expose a form of institutional subordination where a woman's family is her only contribution to the state, but they also reinforce an ideology where a woman can only fully realize her duties within the home.<sup>23</sup> But, to address Cronin's statement further, how do the relations prescribed in the mythology of the nuclear Irish family play out in the globalized, "progressive" Ireland of Veronica's present-day?

In an important moment of self-accusation, Veronica admits her own complicity in the perpetuation of the silencing of her mother: "We pity our mothers, what they had to put up with in bed or in the kitchen, and we hate them or we worship them, but we always cry for them – at least I do. The imponderable pain of my mother, against which I have hardened my heart" (Enright 185). This depiction of motherhood rehearses the representation of the archetypal Irish Mammy reproduced in Irish fiction, where the reality of the idealized vision of motherhood does not extend beyond the kitchen or the bed.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, the image of womanhood against which Veronica has hardened her heart is the very image she herself has become. As she reflects upon her own history, Veronica caustically refers to her "better, faster, life" as "cooking for a man who

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<sup>23</sup> See Article 41.2 *Bunreacht Na hÉireann*.

<sup>24</sup> For more on the three major stereotypes of motherhood reproduced in Irish fiction, see Introduction.

doesn't show up before nine and for two girls who will shortly stop showing up too" and "having tear-streaked sex, once in a blue moon, with my middle-aged husband" (Enright 82). She gave up her job as a journalist because it was clear to Veronica that Tom's money was more important than any money she might earn herself and instead, took to looking after the children so that the whole family "would not be so much *in his way*" (Enright 39,71; emphasis in original).

Veronica's inability to forgive her mother and supersede the traditional role her mother embodies is symptomatic of what Geradine Meaney suggests is patriarchy's ability to promote an internal division in women, thereby inhibiting women's will for change (Meaney 1993, 231). On the one hand, Veronica is veritable proof that Irish society has not truly been able to distance itself from the gendered effects of decolonization, as women in Irish society compared to other European Union countries in the 1990s were still performing the majority of domestic labor and expected to fulfill the emotional, material, and sexual needs of men (O'Connor 69-70).<sup>25</sup> Like her mother and her grandmother before her, Veronica has been conditioned for a patriarchal version of motherhood. However, it must be added, the increased liberalization of social structures has created greater opportunities for women to reevaluate and potentially alter their familial roles. Ursula Barry and Clair Wills have stated that since the 1970s the Irish family, while still maintaining a potent force, has undergone vast changes because "an increasing gap opened up between the official ideology of the state, strongly influenced by Catholic doctrine, and the way in which Irish people actually lived their lives" (Barry and Wills 1410).<sup>26</sup> Resultantly, Veronica is able to better understand the world she has both been trapped in and entrapped herself in: "I could pick up my keys and go 'home' where I could 'have sex' with my 'husband' just like lots of other

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<sup>25</sup> According to Patricia Coughlan, in Irish postmodernity women's liberation is an incomplete project: "cultural alternation is slow to take effect, but the nation's sexual repressions, in-turned emotional culture, and misogynist containment of female sexuality were strongly affected by a remarkable series of painful events emerging from the 1980s onward" (Coughlan 176).

<sup>26</sup> Additionally, over the past thirty years, the positive correlation between the increase in premarital sexual activity, particularly among Irish youth, and the steep decline in the overall birth rate indicates the "widespread flouting of the teaching of the Catholic church on contraception" and points to the invigorated efforts to dismantle the subjugating political, social, and religious codes (Barry and Wills 1410).

people did. This is what I had been doing for years. And I didn't seem to mind the inverted commas, or even notice that I was living in them, until my brother died" (Enright 181). Veronica has been living her life in quotations where the terms "home," "sex," and "husband" are already defined for her by a postcolonial masculine-dominated ideology. When the death of her brother shatters the rose-colored glasses of her victimization, it is up to her whether or not to face the reality of her past, and fortunately, she does.

As she turns her focus to the past, Veronica deliberately chooses to implicate the domestic and point to the failure of motherhood as a political ideology within the private sphere. Her admittedly falsified recollection of the location of Liam's abuse as taking place in Ada's good room instead of the garage reveals an element of betrayal at the level of the family home: "Whatever happened to Liam did not take place in Ada's good room – no matter what picture I have in my head. Nugent would not have been so stupid. The abuse happened in the garage, among the cars and bits of engine that Liam loved" (Enright 223). Dell'Amico perceptively argues that this particular imaginative act is "evidence of the insecurity of the family home, breaking the myth of family solidarity and normativity in Irish history" (Dell'Amico 62).<sup>27</sup> The home, as a space of psychological and emotional protection from the anxieties of modern life, as well as a place of physical protection from the hostile outer world, fails to adequately safeguard the Irish family.<sup>28</sup> This failure manifests itself in the physical structure of the various Hegarty houses: from the walls that run too close together, to the smell of the family that permeates every room and evokes a gag, to the colorless walls that simultaneously hold all history and threaten to erase it at the same time, "the place is all extension and no house" (Enright 4-5). As Susan Cahill

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<sup>27</sup> As Anne McClintock has argued, "nations are frequently configured through the iconography of familial and domestic space" (McClintock 63). This sentiment is reiterated by Gerardine Meaney in her analysis of the 1937 Constitution: "the identification of the family as the basic building block of society is more than pious rhetoric in the Irish Constitution. In post-colonial southern Ireland a particular construction of sexual and familial roles became the very substance of what it meant to be Irish" (Meaney 1993, 233).

<sup>28</sup> Definition borrowed from John Ruskin's Victorian notion of "home" in "Of Queen's Gardens" (68). As Irish society did not adopt Victorian ideology until after Independence, it is not unlikely that Ruskin's definition is appropriate in the context of Irish domesticity.



notes, there is no boundary between the internal and external in the novel: “the imagery of invaded spaces is all-pervasive [...] rooms do not stay discrete, the outside of the house becomes part of the inside” (Cahill 177).

More explicitly, however, Veronica seems to indict maternal figures in their failings to uphold the realm specifically designated under the protection of the mother. For instance, Veronica blames her own mother for Liam’s death: “I am saying that, the year you sent us away, your dead son was interfered with, when you were not there to comfort or protect him, and that interference was enough to send him on a path that ends in the box downstairs” (Enright 213).<sup>29</sup> Veronica’s accusation reveals the contradictions inherent within the patriarchal-induced relegation of women to the domestic sphere. Veronica is angry with her mother for failing to uphold her nationally mandated duties. This resentment is directed at the female ignorance that sustains a culture of silent victimhood. Veronica prosecutes her mother in acting as an agent of the state, rather than acting in the best interest of her immediate family, thereby embodying a silent and oppressive ideology and encoding its tenets within her children. The inability to cultivate a safe domestic space points to a crisis in maternity. According to Margaret O’Callaghan, women are not entirely blameless in their indoctrination of patriarchal values: “Irish Catholic women cannot be seen as having views merely imposed upon them, they frequently embraced restraining self-images and imposed them rigidly on their daughters for their protection and advancement in a deeply conservative society” (O’Callaghan 125). Without any other women than her mother and grandmother to model her life after, Veronica is, to a certain extent, doomed to repeat the ways of her female predecessors because, as O’Callaghan expands, “the private lives of families and individuals are at least partly a product of the lived historical experiences of parents and grandparents” (O’Callaghan 130).

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<sup>29</sup> Liam Harte explains that it is was not until the 1990s that “the endemic nature of sexual violence against Irish children surfaced into public consciousness” as a result of increasing media coverage and official inquiries into child abuse scandals, revealing how the public and private spaces of patriarchal, postcolonial Irish society were “fundamentally inhospitable to children’s welfare and well-being” (Harte 198).

Although Veronica blames her mother (and her grandmother before her) for not providing a model of counter-hegemonic female identity, she also points to her own sense of guilt in her patriarchal inculcation. Not only did Veronica fail to recognize and vocalize Liam's abuse as occurring within the space of her own family home, "it went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it" (Enright 172-73), but she too identifies her inability to protect her own daughters as she drives her Saab in the dead of night, "abandoning her children while they sleep, leaving them unprotected from their dreams" (Enright 150). What Veronica is unveiling in her critique of female ignorance is also the ways in which the realities of gender divisions within the public sphere unfold within the privacy of the home. Female subjectivity, as constructed by the state, is encoded in a sexual politics that defines the home as a space where women alone are simultaneously morally empowered and politically disempowered.<sup>30</sup> As exemplified in three generations of Hegarty women, in an all-important yet entirely subjugated position, women are never really anything but prisoners within their own home. Veronica does not believe her home is her own until Tom finally goes to sleep (Enright 38); Mrs. Hegarty lives in a home that physically bears the mark of her victimization (the kitchen – the most domestic of spaces) where Liam attempted to throw a knife at her (Enright 6); and Ada's home belonged to Nugent who made a constant appearance in the house for thirty-eight years and watched her charm and dribble away her life into his hands "because he thought it was his due" (Enright 235). The home simply becomes a male-designated "feminine" space in which to privatize and confine female identity. Consequently, Enright exposes internal and external contradictions inherent in the political ideology of motherhood designed to guarantee the silence of a feminine subjectivity and perpetuate the mythology of the nuclear Irish family. Patriarchy might be utterly destroying the family from the inside out, but as long as no one chooses to acknowledge the abuse, the flaws in

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<sup>30</sup> As women's duties in the home are constitutionally reinforced, "the most basic civil right, the right to life, is constitutionally compromised in the case of women" (Meaney 1993, 234). As Moynagh Sullivan explains, "the conflation of the feminine as woman projected as non-subject has been an impediment to the full achieving of political, social, and cultural participation of women in public symbolic systems" (Sullivan 2000, 247).

the national narrative will never be explicated. For Veronica, the hypocrisy of feminine subjectivity in a patriarchal state registers in the form of shame that appears in the gap between both the impossibility of speaking and the impossibility of not speaking (Bewes 42).<sup>31</sup>

Shame becomes the defining attribute of Veronica's subjectivity, shame not only for what she has done but also for who she has become.<sup>32</sup> Veronica has become a silent victim of patriarchal abuse while also enabling that abuse herself, specifically with regard to her sexual identity. Not only does Veronica expose the hypocrisy of patriarchal maternity as a political and familial ideology, but also as an (a)sexual ideology. According to Meaney, since independence, "sexuality has been an important, if somewhat confusing, marker of Irish national difference" (Meaney 2002, 1039). The idealized concept of the pure, asexual, but reproductive mother is an inherent contradiction in Irish society, the byproduct of a history of Irish nationalism conceived in the wake of violent decolonization which subjugated the feminine in order to meet the demands of the nation. Furthermore, this figures as a concept conflating sexual and national identity in order to support a postcolonial patriarchal political agenda (McCarthy 97). The problem with this institutional materialization of a normative femininity is, in the words of Judith Butler, "not that the feminine is made to stand for matter or universality; rather, the feminine is cast outside the form/matter and universal/particular binarism" (Butler 1993, 42). Woman is the permanent and unchangeable condition of both sets of binaries, a term Butler refers to as "nonthematisable materiality" (Butler 1993, 42). Thus, the materialization of the "feminine" in Irish culture simply becomes a regulatory principle enacted in order to condition subordination. In an interview in 2003, Enright vocalizes her desire to explore the consequences of such a universalized and

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<sup>31</sup> In her work *Gender and Colonialism: A Psychological Analysis of Oppression and Liberation*, Geraldine Moane cites C.S. Kasl's phrase "internalized oppression syndrome" to describe the psychological mindsets of subordinates, in this case women. Borrowing from Kasl, Moane explains that the fundamental dynamic is a denial of the self and attunement to dominants, resulting in an inner duality or conflict: "the constant struggle between speaking out and being silent winds like a thread through the fabric of one's existence" (Moane 64-65).

<sup>32</sup> Borrowed from Timothy Bewes' conceptualization of shame as a response "not merely for something we have done, but for who or what we are" (Bewes 2).

prioritized conception of motherhood: “I am very interested in the iconized mother figure in Irish literature, because the men can’t actually write them. They are very often dead, or left out of the narrative. The mother gets half a sentence and there is an awful lot about fathers” (Maloney and Thompson 61). True to her word, in *The Gathering* Enright foregrounds the realities of maternal femininity in order to unsettle any articulation of Irishness predicated on femininity’s “silence and ahistoricity” (Sullivan 250).

The prioritization of the family as a woman’s greatest contribution to the state converts the female body into a passive receptacle for childbearing and reduces the act of sex to its capacity for reproduction. Veronica points to the different expectations demanded of men and women during sex by categorizing the experiences of her own parents: “My father was never pious and I do not think he was afraid of hellfire – so when he had the sex that produced the twelve children and seven miscarriages that happened inside my mother’s body [...] then that was all he was doing – he was having sex” (Enright 227). For men, sex is merely sex – a purely pleasurable act; however, for women, sex is a teleological event. All female sexual experiences are unified into one: that of the mother who only engages in sexual activity in order to procreate. This reveals the contradiction at the heart of motherhood: to be a woman and be sexual was to become a mother, but to become a mother was to become nonsexual (Ireland 5). Consequently, the private body becomes the public body and, by extension, is subject to the control of the state. Mrs. Hegarty is a striking example of the ideological implications of the patriarchal functionality of the female body entrapping women in an all-inclusive identity that de-individualizes and threatens to erase them: “There is a gap in my mother’s reproducing around then, and I think of these as the dead children years, the ones that marked her and turned her into the creature I later knew” (Enright 46). Mrs. Hegarty is only defined through her ability or inability to reproduce, a silent martyr weighed down by both her dead and alive children. The creature she has become, as a result of her repeated impregnation, is a piece of “benign human meat” (Enright 47) revealing the extent to which she has been imprisoned by her body and reduced to its capacity to serve both her family

and the state. Veronica exposes sex as a patriarchal tool used to eliminate a woman's agency and to control the territory of her body. This sentiment is echoed by Ada who warns Veronica that "sex gets you nowhere in this world" (Enright 102), further signifying the reality of the limitations of sexual activity for women.

Although the contestation of the female body is the heart of political, religious, and social regulation, its "materiality is lost within both the private and public sphere" because female subjectivity within the Irish state requires the absence of the maternal body in order to sustain its continuation (Jeffers 29). The nation-wide concern with the purity of female corporeality and the boundaries of its existence can, in some part, be attributed to the hegemonic presence of the Catholic Church in all aspects of public and private life: "The dominance of Catholicism as a set of moral principles, an ideology, and a collection of imagery, despite being one of the more bodily oriented religions, contributed to a repression of the physical on a widespread scale in Ireland's independent nation" (Cahill 15; 2).<sup>33</sup> This puritanical Catholic prioritization of feminine purity is indicative of the church-induced, patriarchal stronghold over gender inequality within the state. Combined with a Victorian notion of femininity, the ideal Catholic Irish female – a paragon of the Virgin Mary – is conceptualized without regards to her body. As a result, patriarchal ideology posits and promotes an acceptable obliviousness with regards to the true physicality of women and instills within women a distinct sense of alienation from their own bodies. Female bodily alienation is best conveyed in Veronica's multiple instances of violent bodily self-harm, from sewing her fingertips together with Ada's sewing needle to puncturing her thigh with needles and knives: "I also remember a night with Michael Weiss, hacking away at my inner leg, with a biro of all things, and then later, running through the effectual blue lines with a kitchen knife. I remember the coolness of the cut" (Enright 130). Veronica's self-mutilation

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<sup>33</sup> Jennifer E. Spreng suggests that Catholicism as a communitarian principle of Irish society was a guiding hand in the formation of the *Bunreacht Na hÉireann*. Eamon de Valera wanted to draft a Catholic constitution for a Catholic country (Spreng 43). In his eyes, the British had imposed the Free State Constitution on the Irish to preserve what was British in Irish society.

locates the female body as the site of national wounding. At once attempting to contain her body and transcend it, Veronica's bloody, gendered martyrdom is symptomatic of what Dell'Amico suggests are "traumas of a national scope stemming from the dour extremities of Irish Catholicism, as well as from the patriarchal nature of Irish culture that was advanced by the Catholic church in collusion with the state" (Dell'Amico 66). Veronica's eventual realization that the female body is a site of patriarchal violation ignites repulsion for her own "maternal flesh" (Harte 196).

Liam's suicide fuels a "profound alienation from sexual desire, copulation, and procreation" in Veronica (Harte 195). After she visits Liam's body in the funeral home, she becomes repelled by the corporeality of her own body: "I look at my hands on the railings, and they are old, and my child-battered body, that I was proud of, in a way, for the new people that came out of it, just feeding the grave, *just feeding the grave!* I want to shout it at these strangers, as they pass. I want to call for an end to procreation" (Enright 79). Although she was once proud of her body for its ability to reproduce life, Veronica is now unable to see it in the same light. The silent sexual suffering of her brother forces Veronica to realize her own corporeal subjugation.<sup>34</sup> Veronica's choice of the phrase "child-battered" points to the physical effects of patriarchal appropriation of the female body, specifically the violence implicit within maternity. Her sense of corporeal manipulation results in an estrangement from her previous sexual desire because Veronica realizes that she is part of a vicious cycle in which female sexual desire can only lead to procreation, which in turn only results in death. The connection of sex, the force of pregnancy, to the end of life, all contained within the body of the mother, questions the nature of transgenerationality. The female body becomes the source of all human failings, all victimization because the origin of sin, of "flesh, of family, of biology" begins with the mother (Ewins 130).

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<sup>34</sup> As numerous scholars (Meaney 2002; Sullivan 2000; Weekes 2000) have cited "it is particularly in relation to issues surrounding the female body, especially the reproductive body, that repression and regulation became most profound," seen especially clearly in debates relating to abortion and the Citizenship Referendum (Cahill 5).

“This is the moment when we realise that it was Ada’s fault all along. [...] The vague daughter’s endlessly vague pregnancies, the way each and every one of her grandchildren went vaguely wrong. This is the moment when we ask what Ada did [...] to bring so much death into the world” (Enright 223). For the Hegartys, the origin of the dysfunctionality of their family, the reason they “were all so fucked up” (Enright 85) is Ada. The conflation of motherhood with the birth of death, of sin, of familial malaise conveys an image of destructive maternity, further expanding on the notion that what is written for the future is written in the body. Enright’s identification of the individual female body as, what Harte calls, the “operative site of trauma” for a specific family history becomes a metaphor for the larger-scale national perpetration of female victimization (Harte 188).

The patriarchal containment of female sexuality as a passive, sexless, subjugated, and universalized sexual identity is inherently hypocritical. Not only does it objectify the female body and negate any form of female sexual desire, but it also sustains an excessive masculine sexuality. Nowhere is this more explicit than in Veronica’s college paper entitled “Paying for Sex in the Irish Free State”: “I was suddenly certain of many things. Including the fact that people fucked, that was one of the things they did: men fucked women – it did not happen the other way around” (Enright 92). Sexuality is a “violent, corrupt economy” in which women are merely objects of sexual commodification (Gardam 20). This sentiment is reiterated in Veronica’s statement: “I have an expensive body, I realized, sometime in 1979. [...] Lawyers want to breed out of me and architects want me to sit on their new Eames chairs” (Enright 21). According to Debbie Ging, in Ireland “the broadly celebratory acceptance of the commercialization of sex many have been intensified by a collective sense of liberation from a censorious and highly repressive brand of Catholicism” (Ging 56).<sup>35</sup> However, this neoliberal rhetoric is still encoded in an antiquated and coercive politics of female corporeal and sexual regulation. In response to the conflation of

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<sup>35</sup> Irish literary censorship was more concerned with sexuality than anything else. See Censorship of Publications Act 1929, 1967.

colonial and sexual history of mother Ireland penetrated by masculine England, female sexuality had to be controlled in order to stymie the fear of Ireland as a powerless female victim (McCarthy 99). The result of this nationalist ideology was that female sexuality was denied to compensate for an overdeveloped sense of nationalist masculinity. Importantly, Veronica implicates her husband, as she previously indicted her father and Nugent before him, as subject to his overdetermined sexuality. As she imagines the many indiscretions of her husband and dreams of a male organ overbearing his body, Veronica becomes suspicious of her husband's, and by extension all men's, sexuality: "There are men who would do anything, asleep, and I am not sure what stops them when they wake. I do not know how they draw a line" (Enright 134). As Harte aptly explains, Veronica's bodily repulsion is not limited to her own maternal flesh, but also Tom's because she is no longer able to remain blind to "the male body's latent capacity to inflict sexual suffering" (Harte 196). Veronica's condemnation of masculine sexuality is not only a "deliberate exposure of sexuality-as-excess" within the paradigms of post-Independence patriarchy, but also underlines the ways in which men too could not escape the consequences of a nationalized sexual subjectivity (Gardam 14).<sup>36</sup>

Although Enright's novel is an attempt to write the oppressive experiences and effects of a feminine subjectivity into the historiography of Ireland, she also divulges the ways in which female sexuality has always been haunting the narrative of the state – the specter of patriarchy – but has more often than none been quelled by structures and institutions of power. According to Marjorie Howes, the 1960s was a "watershed decade for Irish sexuality; it set in motion a number of changes which prepared the ground for the profound alterations of the 1970s and 1980s"

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<sup>36</sup> According to David Lloyd, the nationalist inculcation of a domestic economy that occurred post-Independence is about "the reconstitution of the social formation and the establishment of the domestic sphere as the counterpart to an invigorated masculine public sphere of economic and political labor" (Lloyd 2000, 207). The effects of such a nationalist hyper-masculinized ideology often tied men to an over-determined sense of male sexuality. A similar oppressive masculinity will also be seen in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*.



(Howes 930).<sup>37</sup> Veronica attests to this change in female sexuality by confessing to her possession of birth control: “Apart from anything else they were illegal. Everyone had them. Whether we needed them or not” (Enright 96). Although contraception was not legal until 1980, and even then it was only available to married couples that were medically advised to use it for “legitimate family planning purposes,” many women were finding ways to subvert state legislation and church doctrine in the 1960s and 1970s (Spreng 87).<sup>38</sup> Veronica’s allegation that everyone had condoms whether they needed them or not is an important detail emphasizing the collective gaining of momentum in women’s efforts to fight for control of their bodies, regulate the terms of their motherhood, and assert their right to a self-determined sexuality. Furthermore, Veronica’s admission of her and her friends’ engagement in pre-marital sexual activity disrupts the notion that the Virgin Mary stereotype existed as a unifying reality for all women in Irish society: “my best friend Deirdre Moloney had just been thrown out by her mother for nothing at all: a very low-key sort of girl, she’d only ever had sex twice” (Enright 96). Veronica’s casual attitude toward sex is conveyed further when she lists the men she slept with, including her college boyfriend Michael Weiss, the Australian who shared a flat with her and Liam in London, and Tom, who was dating someone else the first time they slept together. Here, sex serves a purpose other than procreation, and Enright’s view is that sex *can* enable a type of corporeal liberation.

However, this attempt by women to create a sexual identity for themselves apart from that of asexual procreator is constantly met with societal and familial backlash, unveiling the depth to which the private realm of sexuality is dictated by a public body. According to Veronica, “Children were being chucked out all over Dublin. All our parents were mad, in those days”

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<sup>37</sup> Between 1970 and 1971, the Fianna Fail government set up the first national Commission on the Status of Women and the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement came into the public scene. According to Irish feminist journalist and activist June Levine, most people saw the IWLM as the women’s movement of the seventies, but its roots went back to 1967, “when the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women issued a directive to the International Alliance of Women’s Groups to ask their affiliates to examine the status of women in their own countries and, where necessary, urge their respective governments to set up a national commission on the status of women” (Levine 177).

<sup>38</sup> For example, in 1971 the “pill train” was a highly publicized event supporting a women’s right to choose, following the illegal transport of contraceptives by train from Belfast to Dublin.

(Enright 96). Girls, like her friend Deirdre Moloney, were thrown out of their homes if they were discovered as sexually active, revealing that despite the transition from economic nationalism and cultural isolationism into the early stages of social modernization and progressive liberalization, the rights enjoyed by women still represented an anomaly within a forward-thinking nation. Denying women the choice to control their own bodies demonstrates the reluctance on the part of the state and church to discuss issues such as sexuality, pregnancy, and sex education, choosing instead, to reinstate ignorance and reinforce fear and shame (Ferriter, 713). Attempting to keep women in a position of silence about their experiences and allotting them secondary access to their bodies exemplifies the contradiction between the desire of the state to achieve an aspirant future while holding on to an oppressive past. Shame becomes the mechanism through which women come to understand their subjectivity. According to Timothy Bewes, shame in a “postcolonial” setting mounts itself as an event of incommensurability: “a profound disorientation of the subject by the confrontation with an object it cannot comprehend, an object that renders incoherent every form available to the subject” (Bewes 3). In terms of her sexual subjectivity, Veronica cannot seem to overcome the incommensurability between what she herself wants and what society dictates she should want. In Ireland, shame becomes “the anatomy and mechanism of a family – a whole fucking country – drowning in shame” (Enright 168). Women are socialized to feel ashamed of their bodies because such a feeling caters to masculine hegemony.<sup>39</sup>

Veronica learns to internalize the shame surrounding her sexuality, specifically through her family. In the Hegarty household, shame is reinforced through the figure of the father. According to Veronica, her father could ignore the late-night homecomings and drunkenness as long as he did not see his daughters, but “when he asks you for a cigarette and you pull out your box of

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<sup>39</sup> The institutionalization of feminine shame demonstrates the control of sexuality under the guidance of the Catholic Church. It “has been a central feature of Irish society since before the foundation of the present state, and provides a historical example of sexual exploitation in practice” (Smyth 1992; cited in Moane 52). As Tamar Mayer expands: “Nationalism becomes the language through which sexual control and repression is justified and masculine prowess is expressed and exercised” (Mayer 1).

Durex, like a catastrophic schoolgirl, then he is obliged to erupt, and keep erupting, like Old Faithful, until you have found yourself *alternative accommodation*” (Enright 95; emphasis in original). Mr. Hegarty’s reaction suggests that he is divided by social forces, but when faced with a blatant, visible violation of patriarchal female ideology, he chooses to reinforce the opinion of the state. Although Veronica does not seem to think much of her father’s outbursts, they have a profound effect on her maturing subjectivity. While Veronica admits wanting to experience elements of sexual liberalization, such as casual sex and a self-determined sexuality, and subvert the subject positions she sees as oppressing Irish women, she expresses an inherent inability to reconcile her internal desires with external forces.<sup>40</sup> Initially enjoying the “freedom and chaos of fucking whoever caught your eye,” Veronica suddenly finds herself inexplicably in love with the Australian; however, it is a love demanded, not chosen: “I realized, too, that I was not in love with him, but condemned instead to a lifetime of such false intensities, that I would have to love each man I slept with in order not to hate myself” (Enright 120). Love becomes a mode of self-censorship for women who are confronted with the possibility of sexual freedom but have internalized societal constraints, and are therefore unable to embrace their counter-hegemonic desires. If Veronica tells herself that she is in love, then the “immorality” of her sexual actions is transformed into a more socially acceptable version of femininity. As Marjorie Howes argues, this inability to accept sexual gratification is a trope employed amongst female writers in the middle of the twentieth century: “The most common sexual tragedy in these selections is the tragedy of a character who voluntarily renounces sexual happiness or is unable to embrace it when it is offered” (Howes 929). These “false intensities” deny women sexual experiences apart

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<sup>40</sup> Veronica’s internal division between conservatism and liberation is indicative of the cultural backlash women faced while attempting to change their roles and self-concepts. While progress was made in the name of cultural change during the 1970s, the “1980s saw the Catholic Church and the Right expend considerable energy in an attempt to contain women within their traditional role” (Meaney 1993, 231). This feminine repression still manifests itself today as the “idealized image of Irish woman as virgin may be less powerful in contemporary writing now we are aware of its artifice,” it remains “pernicious with the continued stigmatization of sexually active single women as ‘sluts’” (Bacik 101).

from those with a state-mandated purpose, and are a byproduct of female shame resulting from the discrepancy between the reality of a Victorian Catholic mythology and the ideology of a more liberal, subversive feminist desire.

Seventeen years later, Veronica realizes who she really loves is Michael Weiss, who “refused to own me, no matter how much I tried to be owned. It was the way he would not take me, he would only meet me, and that only ever half way” (Enright 82). This is the place Veronica is trapped in now: living in a state of wanting both to be owned and to be free and having neither. It was never about the sex with Michael, but merely the fact that he allowed her to have her own agency; to create her own identity. He enabled a situation where liberation was an actuality, but Veronica could not meet him. Although she did not realize it at the time, Veronica’s desire to be owned was a consequence of a socialized victimhood, promoting a sense of alienation from her body, her sexuality, and her subjectivity. How, then, can women be expected to uphold the ideology of domesticity and maternity if it is designed to ensure their failure? Drawing on Butler’s theory of gender performativity, a subject (woman) only remains a subject through a “reiteration or rearticulation of itself as a subject” (Butler 1997, 99) and if maternal subjectivity is a product of a paternal discourse that invents a notion of “feminine” in order to repress it, wherein lies the power for resistance (Butler 1990, 90)? According to Butler, however, repetition is not always reaffirmation for “it is in the possibility of a repletion that repeats against its origin that subjection might be understood to draw its inadvertently enabling power” (Butler 1997, 94).<sup>41</sup> With the trauma of her brother’s death at the hands of patriarchal oppression, Veronica is now ready to make herself under the conditions of her own choosing, by re-embracing motherhood as a potentially “subjectivating norm that can redirect its normativity” (Butler 1997, 99): “I think I am ready for that now. I think I am ready to be met” (Enright 82). Agreeably, Susan Cahill underlines Veronica’s acceptance of the knowledge that “she cannot run away from her body,

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<sup>41</sup> The idea for this line of argumentation comes from Dr. Robert Brazeau’s essay, “Troubling language: avant-garde strategies in the poetry of Medbh McGuckian” (2004), on gender and embodiment in the work of Medbh McGuckian.

from her family, from her history any longer and she must learn to live in them instead” (Cahill 183). In order to “be met,” Veronica must tell her individual story to “rip away the historical lining” and (re)write her identity (Maloney and Thompson 63).

For Veronica, writing a feminine subjectivity begins with the reclamation of the female body and motherhood as her own. As Veronica writes the event of her brother’s sexual abuse into existence, she returns to her body for comfort: “I pause as I write this, and place my own hand over my face, and lick the thick skin of my palm with a girl’s tongue. I inhale. The odd comforts of the flesh. Of being me” (Enright 146). There is also a need to recognize the body as a source of national trauma before she can heal and understand her body apart from political, familial, and sexual subjugation.<sup>42</sup> Veronica must cease to be a stranger in her body, and rediscover the origins of her flesh in order to render it visible. Furthermore, female corporeality must be written into history apart from its sexualization. Veronica does this by detailing the fleshy facts of her grandmother’s body: “Her thigh was surprisingly little. It had an inky map of broken veins in a cluster, above the sag of her stocking. [...] I remember the soft clench of the rubber snaps around nylon that would not stay still, and the cool of her leg, and the sour smell of her respectability” (Enright 91). From an objective, feminine perspective, Veronica is writing her grandmother’s physicality into existence, individualizing it as an independent physical structure. Women are not merely sexual objects, but possess an individual form, scent, and shape that is rarely paid any attention in Irish society. Simply the act of writing Ada’s “thigh,” “broken veins,” and “smell of her respectability” into existence allows Veronica to confront the taboos surrounding the feminine in Irish society and combat the “nonthematizable materiality” of patriarchal ideology in the conceptualization of the female body (Butler 1993, 42).

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<sup>42</sup> Susan Cahill notes “recourse to the body is often the means by which contemporary Irish novelists structure engagements with the past,” however, Irish Studies as a discipline tends to “avoid explicit focus on the corporeal” (Cahill 1;2). Enright’s attention to the various constructions of the female body is an attempt to understand feminine corporeality in its wholeness.

The rewriting of a Veronica's identity begins when she is able to "come to terms with her mother and with her own role as a wife and a mother" (Dell'Amico 70). Although she has spent a large part of the novel blaming her mother as the harbinger of Hegarty pain, Veronica acknowledges that her mother is a victim: "The past is not a happy place. And the pain of it belongs to her more than it does to me, I think. Who am I to claim it for my own? My poor mother had twelve children" (Enright 233). Accepting her mother's reality as one of patriarchal abuse de-romanticizes the national narrative of the past and breaks the cycle of silence perpetuating female victimization. Although this realization does not reconcile Veronica with her mother, it provides an impetus for Veronica to redefine the parameters of her own vision of motherhood. Rather than repeat the pattern of female passivity, Veronica wants to stop performing the role of the mother that patriarchy has created for her and choose to define herself as the mother she wants to be. Julia Kristeva argues that while society's representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood, "it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the relationship that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized" (Kristeva 161). Enright's prescriptive vision of motherhood calls for the rediscovery of the mother, of her role, her identity, and her relationships. The focus must be localized on the figure of the mother, herself. "I turn from the high to the humble and believe, for many seconds at a time, in the smallness and the necessity of being a mother" (Enright 228). Turning to motherhood as a self-appointed individuality as opposed to a politically restricted identity is a conscious choice on Veronica's behalf to determine her personal subjectivity; it is repetition without reaffirmation. Believing in motherhood and its potential for change gives Veronica a new purpose: "I want to find the person that I built from my body's own stuff [...] I want to squeeze every part of her tight, until she is moulded and compact. I want to finish the job of making her, because when she is fully made she will be strong" (Enright 152). Veronica wants to finish the job of mothering that her own mother never could: to nurture, educate, and strengthen her daughters so that they will not fall prey to the violent cycle of womanhood.

*The Gathering* peels away the layers of a personal history in order to contribute to the construction of feminist historiography. As she exposes the interconnection between national and maternal identity, Enright spares no one in her critique of political, social, and economic institutions and agents that have produced a failing maternal populace, including women themselves; however, she does provide an avenue for change. Within motherhood and female corporeality, there lies the potential for resistance. If she can reclaim her maternal subjectivity, without reaffirming the material conditions of her oppression, Veronica can create an alternative identity for the new generation of women, one of self-authoring and self-awareness. Within her daughters Veronica sees the potential for redefining female identity and re-envisioning the complexity of the female position within Irish society.

## Chapter 2

“I was a slut”: Working-Class Identity and Feminine Socialization in Roddy Doyle’s

### *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*

Roddy Doyle is widely recognized as one of the most popular writers in contemporary Ireland. Prior to winning the Man Booker Prize in 1993 for his novel *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, Doyle became a household name with the publication of his Barrytown Trilogy produced from 1987 to 1991. These works garnered Doyle a reputation as a comedic writer, unthreateningly detailing the real lives of working-class Irish families. Conversely, it was the sobering portrayal of a collapsing marriage culminating in domestic abuse and severe alcoholism in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* (1996) that altered the image of one of Ireland’s most popular entertainers.<sup>43</sup> Although Doyle’s novels have achieved commercial success among the reading public, critics are quick to dismiss the literary merits of Doyle’s work, citing the narrow range of thematic concerns, lack of engagement with Irish public history, and excess of narrative intrusion as attributes of lowbrow, not literary, writing. However, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* offers a striking example of the politics of the personal. Doyle’s deliberate choice to profile the daily life of a working-class thirty-nine year old mother of four, Paula Spencer, in inner city Dublin during the beginning of the Celtic Tiger unveils the consequential effects of a non-secularized state ideology on the formation of a personal subjectivity. The focalization on the Spencer family details the manner in which Irish bodies become attached to public culture. Whereas labor attaches men’s bodies to public discourse, it is the discourse of sexuality that attaches women’s bodies to the state. Although Doyle engages with the realities of political and social life for both men and women

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<sup>43</sup> *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* is an extension of a four part BBC series entitled *Family* (1994), in which Doyle was invited to write on a subject of his own choosing. Doyle’s turn to familial crisis and gendered violence received widespread attention and fierce public backlash.



throughout this time period, it is his attention to the construction of female Irishness by institutions affected by a state/church ideology, the education system, medical establishment, and family, and the influence of an oppressive state culture that cements *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* as a significant work of cultural criticism in the liberalizing era.

Contrary to Enright, Doyle combats the technocratic optimism and neo-liberal economic progression hailed by proponents of the Celtic Tiger by shifting his focus to working-class Dublin in order to highlight the uneven effects of growth and prosperity on the Irish classes.<sup>44</sup> Dermot McCarthy argues, “Doyle shows a society and culture whose superficial modernity of supermarkets, Walkmans, home videos and DART coexists with traditions of silence, acquiescence and denial,” exposing the shallowness concealing the lack of structural change at the heart of the Celtic Tiger (D. McCarthy 155-56). Although globalization ushered in a visual material culture celebrated as the sign of substantive change, this discourse of progress continued to mask and silence structural inequality.<sup>45</sup> In *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, Paula Spencer’s life is an everyday battle against poverty. Nowhere is this more evident than in her job as a house cleaner: “I like seeing into other people’s houses. Funny, I hardly ever feel jealous. And I should, because some of the houses are incredible. [...] Dark furniture, flat-screened tellies, CD players with tiny little speakers” (Doyle 93). Economic prosperity has increased inequality and augmented social marginalization in Ireland, and the home is where this prosperity (or lack thereof) appears most evident. Importantly, the owners of the homes are not much different than Paula. One of the houses she cleans belongs to a woman named Miriam who use to attend the same dances as Paula, implying a similarity in childhood economic and social situations; the only

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<sup>44</sup> Brian Donnelly suggests that Doyle’s books attempt to “articulate a part of late twentieth-century Irish experience that had largely remained outside the horizons of Irish literature, ways of life hidden from the concerns of people who typically buy and read literary fiction in Ireland” (Donnelly 27).

<sup>45</sup> According to Constanza del Río Álvaro, “feelings of liberation are frequently expressed as a tendency to jettison a potato-ridden past” (Del Río Álvaro 4) or, in the words of Peadar Kirby et al., “to dispense with the most deeply rooted conflicts in Irish society” (Kirby, Gibbons, and Cronin 12).

difference is “[s]he married a doctor” and “I [Paula] married Charlo” (Doyle 93). This traditional conflation of “husband” with “breadwinner” reveals the extent to which the repressive and pervasive social and cultural codes of patriarchy have persisted in contemporary Ireland. What Paula unveils is a deeply systemic gendering of social spaces in twentieth century Ireland, the result of a post-Independence nationalist discourse of modernization inseparable from its “project of masculinization of Irish public culture and the regulation of a feminine domestic space” (Lloyd 2000, 200).<sup>46</sup>

The election of Mary Robinson as President of the Republic in the early stages of the Celtic Tiger was hailed as a triumph in social change for those who supported a culturally modernizing, liberal agenda and considered a defeat for those associated with conservative and traditionalist values (Coulter 1) – the beginning of a “new Ireland.” In her acceptance, Robinson thanked the people who voted for a new society, especially, women “who instead of rocking the cradle rocked the system” (Parker 6); however, the system, even a supposedly changing one, still acted as a very real barrier to many women *and* men’s social and economic equality. The Celtic Tiger, much like the project of post-Independence nationalism, resulted in consequences in gender identity formation, particularly for those in lower economic classes. Doyle engages with the realities of economic and social life during this era of social transformation. In *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, there still remains an inherent association between men and the public body in working-class Irish culture. For example, when Paula picks up her children from school, she pointedly comments on the number of fathers engaging in “women’s work”: “There are a few fathers there as well. They don’t talk, not even to one another. They’re embarrassed. No jobs to go to. Women’s work” (Doyle 96). Contrary to the belief that systematic change will fundamentally alter the terms of gender roles, when Dublin working-class men take on “women’s work” in

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<sup>46</sup> This sentiment is further endorsed by Jennifer M. Jeffers’ exposition of the reality of single motherhood in the wake of the Celtic Tiger: “Women, especially single mothers, have not fared well from Dublin’s prosperity; Intel’s investment has no impact on their lives – while Dublin booms all around them, some residents feel as if they are starving at the feast” (Jeffers 17).

Doyle's novel, they are viewed as failed men. This alteration in male responsibilities is not a voluntary or willing change.

*The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* opens up a critique of the Celtic Tiger as victimizing the male Irish worker, resulting in the formation of a recalcitrant working-class masculine identity<sup>47</sup> to combat the effects of modernization, which in turn impedes the production of an alternate feminine subjectivity. As Paula attempts to sort out the root of Charlo's violence and anger, she analyzes the educational and professional opportunities available to him: "If he'd had the education. If he'd had other work when all the building around Dublin stopped and there was nothing left for him to do. He would have put that anger to use" (Doyle 191). In an anachronistic school system where economic class, as opposed to academic merit, determines placement, Doyle exposes the failure of the urban education system to adequately equip its working-class citizens with the tools to ensure their livelihood.<sup>48</sup> More important, however, is the fact that in the modernizing economic climate, the male Irish worker is left unprotected. The shift to a service sector to fuel consumerist prosperity, technocratic innovation to aid the transition into a majority knowledge economy,<sup>49</sup> and foreign investment to help the nation participate on the global stage negatively affects the role of the Irish laborer. Modernization was accompanied by sporadic employment opportunities, lack of job security, decrease in wages, increase in competition with

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<sup>47</sup> In his essay "Counterparts: *Dubliners*, Masculinity, and Temperance Nationalism" on James Joyce's short story "Counterparts" (1914), David Lloyd examines Irish male drinking practices as a counter-modern effect of a recalcitrant, counter-nationalist masculinity in the building stages of the Republic.

<sup>48</sup> In her ground-breaking ethnographic study of sexual attitudes among Irish society in the 1970s, Rosita Sweetman correctly predicts the tumultuous future of young Irish working-class men: "The working-class estates around Dublin are heading towards some crisis; expanding populations and shrinking job markets are an explosive mixture" (Sweetman 29). A government report on the school leaves in North Central Dublin in December of 1978 revealed that "unemployment, not sex, was the main problem for young men," as 90% of boys left school with no formal qualifications and 50% were still unemployed four years after leaving (Sweetman 29).

<sup>49</sup> A knowledge economy is defined by intellectual capital and accounts for the majority of economic activity in developed countries. The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development's (OECD) definition of knowledge-based industries includes "high to medium tech manufacturing, finance, business services, telecommunications, education, [and] health" (Brinkley 15). According to the OECD, Ireland was the most knowledge-based economy in the OECD by 2002, with these industries accounting for 48 percent of GDP (Brinkley 15-16).

immigrants, and increase in the cost of living (Flood 2000). However, as Paula comes to understand, the reason men like Charlo turn to violence in the home, excessive drinking, and abandonment of the family is not as simple as the lack of employment, because Charlo was employed the first time he hit Paula:

Charlo Spencer lost his job and started beating his wife. It's not as simple as that. [...]

Because he didn't have a job, was rejected by society. It would be nice if it was that easy. If I could just look back and say Yes, that was how it was. Charlo Spencer lost his job and started beating his wife. I could rest if I believed that; I could rest. But I keep on thinking and I'll never come to a tidy ending. (Doyle 192)

Doyle draws attention to the pervasive social problem by pointing to the reasons why working-class men revert to deficient modes of masculinity. As the definition of Irishness (in the Republic) changes from a concept of national identity to economic identity,<sup>50</sup> the mode of successful participation in public culture alters, as well. For a working-class body out of step with the “equalizing” economic forces of the Celtic Tiger, the performance of masculinity must take an alternate form. Charlo’s domestic abuse toward Paula is not an episodic case; rather, it is the byproduct of systemic inequality. As the Women’s Health Council described in their 2007 report on Violence Against Women and Health, “the underlying gender inequality and unequal power relations in society underpin all causes of gender-based violence” (Women’s Health Council 2007, 6). Charlo’s behavior is linked to a feeling of social exclusion and economic marginalization experienced by his class of men in the wake of a changing nation unwilling to acknowledge a history of identity politics that witnessed a “counter-hegemonic concept” of Irish identity gradually transform into a hegemonic reality (Lloyd 1993, 3). Doyle’s novel delves into a recalcitrant masculine identity that rejects the values of the Celtic Tiger. *The Woman Who Walked*

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<sup>50</sup> According to Jeffers, Irish identity throughout the last decade of the twentieth century becomes associated with economics, as the “Republic of Ireland’s postmodern place in the Eurocommunity becomes more important than its postcoloniality” (Jeffers 1). The change in national identity in the Republic is largely due to the prosperous economy of the 1990s.

*Into Doors* demonstrates the way in which state ideology enables a set of restrictive masculine codes that does not explicitly make violence against women but does not condemn violence either.

Charlo's masculinity is defined by a violent and oppressive sexuality, physical abuse, alcoholism, and to a certain extent, laziness. Lloyd contends that Irish drinking is the residue of what he terms a "counter-modern" tendency within Irish modernity. Borrowing from Partha Chatterjee, he suggests that Irish drinking is "a practice of difference, but a dependent one" (Lloyd 2000, 196). Lloyd continues: "as a practice that rejects the values of the colonial economy, values of labor, regularity, or thrift [...], drinking resists the incorporation of the colonized male into the colonial enterprise; as a practice that entails debt as well as psychic dependence, it is at once the cause and effect of an individual and national lack of autonomy" (Lloyd 2000, 199).<sup>51</sup> Irish alcoholism is the result of a dependent nationalist identity that adopted imperialist values and identity constructs in the transition from colonized to liberalized. It is the "transvaluation" of a previously negative stereotype in an effort to counteract bourgeois nationalism and resist cultural incorporation. Similar to the recalcitrant form of masculinity developing during the early stages of the Republic, Celtic Tiger alternative masculinity is dependent, dependent upon the maintenance of economic and social inequality.<sup>52</sup> Rather than provide a productive and stable means through which to combat the discourse of modernity, this alternate mode of Irish masculinity is damaging, and not just for the Irish male. As evidenced throughout Paula's narrative, this version of Irish working-class masculinity toxifies the domestic sphere and thwarts the formation of alternate female subjectivities.

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<sup>51</sup> Gregory Dobbins makes a similar case for "idleness" as the counter-hegemonic form of masculinity in the Irish male in the early twentieth century. Idleness "marks the difference of the colonized Irish from the colonizer, and bears the traces of an otherness that resists assimilation to conventional forms of bourgeois nationalism derived from colonial models" (Dobbins 26-27).

<sup>52</sup> In her analysis of Doyle's writing, Marisol Morales Ladrón explains that in his "attempt to expose the victimization of an all-too-sudden modern and unequal society, he [Doyle] has dismantled traditional socio-moral values and, even more, he has contributed to reconceptualize the notion of Irishness" (Ladrón 167).

Although working-class Celtic Tiger masculinity is not defined by employment, there remains an exclusionary association of men with public culture and a newly intensified backlash against female economic independence.<sup>53</sup> The Celtic Tiger is often lauded for its substantial increase in female employment, however, the majority of positions available to women, especially during the early stages of the economic boom, were in service and low-paying jobs (O'Connor 191).<sup>54</sup> Even though Paula is the sole source of income for her family, her day job consists of cleaning homes, still defined as domestic work, and her night job is cleaning office buildings. As she makes her way through the office, Paula notes her isolation within the space of work: "The building is so empty, except for the noise of the other Hoover. [...] I'd like to see the offices when they're being used and full of people and noise. They'd look completely different. It's not like cleaning a house" (Doyle 106). Paula cleans the office at night when it is no longer a masculine space. The fact that Paula has no idea what the offices look like when they are full of people working during business hours and finds it "strange really, not knowing who you're working for" (Doyle 107) indicates the extent to which the civic sphere depends upon a "modern division of gendered social spaces" (Lloyd 2000, 200). In the public sphere, Paula is only capable of inhabiting spaces that are ungendered. Not only are women still largely exempt from public participation, but also their efforts to gain economic equality are met by violent patriarchal repression within the domestic sphere.

Female oppression is not a new phenomenon in Irish society, but its vocalization as a reoccurring female reality is.<sup>55</sup> Post-Independence, the anxiety of the newly formed state's need to

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<sup>53</sup> In a post-Famine culture, the cult of the Virgin Mary strengthened the construction of an "asexual, maternal and domestic femininity upon which hypermasculinity and socio-economic and sexual regulation depended" (Nash 115).

<sup>54</sup> Patricia Coughlan reproves the types of employment available to women during the Celtic Tiger, as many of the jobs left women particularly susceptible to "poor pay, instability and lack of union protection" (Coughlan 178).

<sup>55</sup> According to Anne Fogarty, "writing by women seems to be considered unworthy of consideration in the Irish public sphere because it is viewed as lacking in universality and as being to particularist" (Fogarty 2007, 2). Moynagh Sullivan expands that while both male and female Irish feminists have long been developing discourses for dealing with sexuality, gender and power,

assert its masculinity manifested itself in a restrictive and universalized domestic ideology opposed to a rigorous masculine economy. In a newly developing Celtic Tiger economy, premised on social and economic marginalization, both Mr. O’Leary and Charlo demonstrate the intensified backlash against female public participation, particularly as they fail to achieve a traditional sense of masculinity. Paula’s recollection of her sister Carmel and her father’s physical confrontations express a deep misogyny and fear of female autonomy:

He tore clothes off her. He set fire to a blouse she’d bought with her first pay money. He dragged her up to the bathroom. He washed her face with a nailbrush. He locked her in our bedroom. He went after her when she got out. He took his belt to her in front of all her friends. (Doyle 46)

Raised during the 1960s and 1970s, women had just begun to enter the service sector work force, and the smallest hints of gender role reformation were in sight. Carmel’s ability to buy a blouse with her own money indicates that she is the first female in the house to attain a low-paying job; however, Roger’s physically abusive reaction to her newfound independence, as well as his restrictive response to her sexuality, is indicative of the resistance to cultural change and the desire to retain the gender roles under cultural nationalism. Roger O’Leary’s desire to stymie his daughters’ burgeoning liberation stems from a nationalist desire to repress the feminine in traditional Irish culture. Paula tries to justify her father’s actions by claiming that this was his way of showing love, when in reality it displays the intensified regulation and repression of the domestic sphere. Over twenty years later, Charlo reacts similarly to Nicola’s newfound economic independence. After a night of drinking, Charlo encounters Nicola making a sandwich (with the “private ham” she has purchased to make her lunches) before heading out to catch the factory bus: “He looked back at her, up and down. Jesus – looking at it. Up and down. That was the thing in his face that killed me: the hate. [...] He wanted to ruin her, to kill her. His own daughter”

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“the work of feminist intellectuals of note seems not to find recognition as part of the Irish *public* sphere” (Sullivan 2008, 246; emphasis in original).

(Doyle 215-216). Like Mr. O’Leary, Charlo responds to Nicola’s engagement with the public sphere in a violent manner. This is not a father’s attempt to protect his daughter from the outside world; it is a deeply systemic and unchecked violence against the potential of an unregulated feminine subjectivity. Conor McCarthy suggests that this contemporary nostalgia for traditional family values, such as husband as breadwinner, is evidence of the contradictions of Irish modernity: “We have prematurely entered the post-modern era. We are experiencing, for example – [...] at the social level, a return to family values without the advances of feminism; at the cultural level, the nostalgia and historical pastiche of ‘post-modernism’” (C. McCarthy 34). However, this is more than a quixotic reaction to the pains of modernity. Daughter or no daughter, this is an issue concerning the changing gendered opportunities and responsibilities of men versus women, and amidst an altering exclusionary sense of masculinity, women often pay the price.

One of the main questions that emerges in Doyle’s novel is why doesn’t Paula simply tell someone that she is being abused by her husband? What is it about Irish feminism that forces women to accept this silent role? As the previous discussion of Mr. O’Leary and Charlo demonstrates, institutions such as the family play a significant role in dictating the terms of Irish femininity. Borrowing from Michel Foucault, Judith Butler argues, “the regulated cultural mechanism of transforming biological males and females into discrete and hierarchized genders, is at once mandated by cultural institutions (the family, the residual forms of ‘the exchange of women,’ obligatory heterosexuality) and inculcated through the laws which structure and propel individual psychic development” (Butler 1990, 100). Gender performativity is legitimated through a set of repetitions that are “at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (Butler 1990, 191). These socially established sets of meanings are mediated by “social alignments,” or an interplay of social relations that depend upon the “reenactment or reproduction” of themselves over time as a sustained power relationship



(Rouse 110).<sup>56</sup> These public codes of behavior and identity are repeated and reenacted through various cultural bodies. However, in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, Doyle provides a more specific diagnosis of gender performativity; Doyle delves into the consequences of a non-secularized state. Power is maintained and reinforced by a heavily religious state (or public) ideology victimizing the whole of its members, but more stringently its female citizens. In *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, Paula's narrative indicates that female identity is structured through three important institutions affected by state/church ideology: education, medicine, and, most significantly, family.<sup>57</sup>

Doyle implicates educational structures in the attachment of the female body to a public discourse. Paula attends a technical school (the tech), which heightens communal stratification and social division, ultimately impeding the potential of upward mobility for working-class citizens. School is the first establishment Paula comes to recognize as part of a wide-scale systematic effort to actively shape and condition the hierarchy of gender in Irish society: "It was a fright, finding out that I was stupid. Before I even got in the door," explains Paula as she recalls her first day of secondary school (Doyle 28). In an educational system that categorizes students according to gender and economic class, Paula's gendered identity is always made salient to her. In order to survive in her school, Paula must transform herself: "I had to act rough and think dirty. I had to fight. I had to be hard" (Doyle 35). Ultimately, she must internalize her position as a sexual object. As Paula discusses her position of (what she believes to be) "power" in the

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<sup>56</sup> Joseph Rouse uses Thomas Wartenberg's discussion of power as always mediated by "social alignments" to help make sense of Foucault's claim that "power is employed by a net-like organization" (Foucault, as cited in Rouse 98): "To be an alignment [...] the coordinated practice of these social agents need to be comprehensive enough that the social agent facing the alignment encounters that alignment as having control over certain things that she might either need or desire" (Wartenberg 150).

<sup>57</sup> Brian Donnelly has argued that Doyle's novels are devoid of the historic literary themes that have dominated Irish literature, such as nationality, language, and religion, and that the social and economic consequences of his characters' day-to-day lives are only ever viewed "exclusively within the personal and domestic sphere" (Donnelly 18; 20). However, as the following sections will demonstrate, the daily personal concerns of Doyle's characters in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* can be read as a microcosmic view of national and political issues.

classroom, she recollects instances of sexual activity. When she masturbates Martin Kavanagh during class, Paula proclaims: “I did it to him; he didn’t do it to me. I did it./ My First Wank./ I was proud. I was a woman” (Doyle 41). The poignancy of Paula’s “First Wank” is that it takes place in a Religion class, designed to promote the values of Catholicism, such as the immorality of sex before marriage and the ideal of virginal purity. Paula’s admission of pre-marital sexual activity counters the politically prescribed vision of Irish womanhood. More importantly, Paula points to sexual activity as a definitive element of her womanhood. She is not a passive bystander in her sexual encounter; rather, she is the proactive instigator. In doing so, Paula becomes one of Ireland’s worst fears: a sexual female. However, as Carmine White is apt to point out, “sexual power is not real power if the woman must degrade herself to wield it” (White 132). Although Paula believes she is achieving a modicum of power, she is merely adopting a falsely conceived identity construct imposed by patriarchal society in order to legitimize the oppression, control, and containment of femininity. The subjection of women to a culturally and socially imposed sexualized identity acts as a violation against the female body that Paula must battle against in her everyday life.

Paula’s experiences in school teach her to feel guilty about her body because it is vulnerable and uncontrollable.<sup>58</sup> For example, her English teacher, Mister Waters, constantly engages in the sexual harassment of his female students: “There was nothing exciting about it, a grown-up man feeling me, feeling me while he was correcting my mistakes. The thumb said that he could hurt me, that was all” (Doyle 34). As the male schoolteacher asserts his dominance over Paula, he reminds her of his superiority in terms of both intelligence and strength, not just as a teacher but also as a man. This situation enforces a certain type of gender dynamics, one in which the male/master ideal contrasts with that of female/submissive. According to Dermot McCarthy, “Doyle shows how Paula was not allowed to grow into her own body or sexuality but rather was

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<sup>58</sup> A similar point concerning shame and the female body is made in the previous chapter on *The Gathering*. Shame becomes the defining attribute of the protagonist Veronica’s subjectivity, as she learns to internalize the guilt surrounding her body, particularly through her family.

alienated from the former even as the latter was prescribed for her by the omnivorous and omnipresent male gaze of her reptilian teachers” (D. McCarthy 175). Paula’s alienation from her body and her sexuality is further augmented by her sense of bodily objectification in the eyes of men, like Mister Waters: “There was something about me that drew them to me, that made them touch me. It was my tits that I was too young for; I’d no right to them. [...] There were things about me that were wrong and dirty. [...] I was a dirty slut in some way that I didn’t understand and couldn’t control” (Doyle 35). Paula’s admitted lack of control over the way in which others, particularly men, react to her body further fuels the version of Irish femininity constructed in postcolonial Ireland – a femininity predicated on a female sexuality that had to be controlled in order to stymie the fear of the nation as the powerless female (Meaney 1993, 233). Sexuality is not a woman’s choice, but the main way through which identity is projected onto her. Even before she has a chance to define herself, society defines her. As Paula explains, there was no space to be anything other than “a dirty slut” (Doyle 35). The equation of female sexuality with sluttishness exemplifies Ailbhe Smyth’s definition of the term “woman” as a hollow category of identification: “‘Woman’ is an empty signifier, or to put it another way, can be construed to mean whatever ‘we’ want it to mean. Transparent, transmutable, not generatrix of meaning but receiver carrier site of passage” (Smyth 10). In a patriarchal society, “woman” is unable to identify with any other terms of signification than those prescribed by her culture. Confined to the role of “slut,” Paula learns to internalize the shame and guilt equated with the female body. In inner city Dublin, school is the first perpetrator of female victimization.

Geraldine Moane, citing Sylvia Walby, demonstrates that violence against women is also routinized at the institutional level (Moane 43): “Male violence against women is sufficiently common and repetitive with routinized consequences for women and routinized modes of processing by juridical agencies to constitute a social structure” (Walby 1990, 143). Not only do such institutions fail to prevent the reoccurrence of violence, but they also deny women a source of refuge and help. Nowhere is this practice more evident in the public sphere of Doyle’s novel

than in the hospital system. While labor attaches Charlo's body to the public economy, in the hospital Paula's sexuality attaches her to the state.<sup>59</sup> As Paula waits to be examined after one of Charlo's beatings, she silently pleads, "Ask me. Ask me. Ask me. I'd tell her," to the complacent hospital nurse (Doyle 164). "Ask me./ In the hospital./ Please, ask me. / In the clinic./ In the church./ Ask me ask me ask me" (Doyle 187). In a report based upon admissions to St. James' Hospital Accident and Emergency Department published in 1993, it was discovered that disclosure of domestic violence was most likely to occur "as a result of an individual nurse or doctor making time for private discussion with the woman" (Cronin and O'Connor 1993, 8). Paula's indictment of the medical institution's failure to provide her with an avenue for liberation points to the "implicit colluding" of the state with this manifestation of violent domestic power (Jeffers 53). Pat O'Connor argues that violence in Ireland at this time is considered a private family problem, primarily because of a lack of funding dedicated to the service of training workers in social programs and medical facilities to recognize abuse and abusers (P. O'Connor 72). Regardless, this lack of support for victims of domestic abuse clearly illustrates the institutionally enforced silence surrounding female victimization.

One of the most notable problems with the medical system is that it remains subjected to the codes of the public sphere, thus a male-controlled space. The hospital is the place where a body meets a state discourse; victimizing women by making their private bodies public. Charlo is always in control of his and Paula's visits to the hospital, and remains a constant shadow lurking behind the curtains. Jamila Mildorf suggests that Charlo is able to render his violent acts invisible to a public audience through linguistic acts, essentially denying Paula the right to define her own existence: "One of the ways that Charlo gains and maintains power over Paula is through

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<sup>59</sup> In a recent case in Galway, a pregnant woman miscarrying her baby was denied an abortion by doctors who responded, "this is a Catholic country." Savita Halappanavar died in the Galway University Hospital on October 28, 2012 after suffering a miscarriage and contracting septicaemia. This incident clearly defines the extent to which the state values the function of the mother over the rights of the woman as an individual. The female body in peril was not enough to sway doctors on the issue of abortion, revealing the consequences of a state/church ideology (McDermott 2012).

redefining her experiences of violence. In renaming his violent acts, Charlo not only puts the blame on Paula but even manages to obliterate his own deeds” (Mildorf 114-115). Charlo tells the nurse that Paula fell down the stairs; he asks Paula how she got her black eye to which she responds, “I walked into a door”. In turn, Paula adopts these falsities as truths and feeds them back to the nurses and doctors because she has no space in which to contradict them, as Charlo is lurking behind the curtains during her exams: “He always came with me. Always stayed at my side. Always brought me home after I’d been fixed up” (Doyle 199). In a Foucaultian manner, this maintenance of power between the medical institution and Charlo not only produces the boundaries of Paula’s subjection, but also pervades her interiority (Butler 1997, 89). The reality dictated to Paula is the one she accepts as the truth and internalizes. Further evidence of Paula’s interpellation of Charlo’s version of reality can be seen in her reaction to another woman in the hospital explaining to a nurse that she too walked into a door: “Once, I heard a woman near me telling the nurse that she’d walked into a door, and I believed her. I felt sorry for her. [...] It never dawned on me that she was lying, the same way I always lied. I believed her completely” (Doyle 200). Although Doyle is critiquing the medical system for its role as handmaiden of a conservative doctrine, he is also pointing to women’s complicity in the perpetuation of silent victimization. Paula has so completely bought into Charlo’s version of reality that she fails to recognize the symptoms of abuse surrounding her. Gerardine Meaney argues that women who fail to engage in pro-women’s efforts are unable to accept themselves as “thinking, choosing, sexual, intellectual, and complex” individuals (Meaney 1993, 231). Without a communal support system, without the recognition that this is a systemic and not episodic problem, women have no way in which to begin to combat the cycle of violence. Women are not only victims but also accomplices. Doyle’s exposition of the medical system indicts not only a state-mandated institution, but women as well.

Although *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* forays into the effects of the public sphere on female subjectivity, it is Doyle’s attention to the private sphere of the home and the institution of

the family that most definitively displays the “breaking point of gendered representations of Irish identity” (Jackson 228). Accordingly, Ellen-Raissa Jackson argues that in Doyle’s novel, “the family is no longer the inviolate space of freedom and solidarity which the 1937 constitution revered and sought to protect” (Jackson 228).<sup>60</sup> Paula Spencer grew up with six siblings and two parents in inner city Dublin during the 1960s and 1970s. In light of her abusive marriage, Paula often looks back to her childhood to recall the days when she thought she was happy, and when she thought she understood what it meant to be part of a family:

When I think of *happy* and *home* together I see the curtain blowing and the sun on the wall and being snug and ready for the day, before I start thinking about it like an adult. I see flowers on the curtains – but there were never flowers on the curtains in our room. I asked my mammy when I was over there last week did we ever have flowery curtains and she said No, they’d never changed them, always stripes. (Doyle 7; emphasis in the original)

As Paula revisits the memories of her past in an attempt to understand how she became a middle-aged, alcoholic, domestic abuse victim now widowed with four children, she realizes that the past she so often clings to for hope is not her own; rather, it is a revised version of history.<sup>61</sup>

Something about her home-life made her rewrite history. Paula’s re-examination of her past family life and intimate portrayal of her present day family situation unveils a complex system of silence, denial, oppression, and acquiescence existent within the institution of the family.

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<sup>60</sup> In a response to the widespread public condemnation of his screenplay *Family* (1994), the predecessor to his novel *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, Roddy Doyle asserted the necessity for Irish writers to speak the truth against the hypocrisy of Irish society: “I wanted to force the reality that it’s [marital breakdown] always been a modern problem. I wanted to make a rosy period [1960s] in Irish history clash with what’s considered to be a modern reality” (Sbrockey 1999).

<sup>61</sup> The project of historical revisionism has dominated the writing of Irish history from the 1960s to 1990s (Whelan 2004, 179). Doyle uses Paula’s troubling personal narrative as a reason to combat and correct this trend in public historiography. *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* calls for a feminist revision of history.

According to Foucault, power over sex exists in the same way at all levels of social and political life: “it operates according to the simple and endlessly reproduced mechanisms of law, taboo, and censorship: from state to family” (Foucault 84). Doyle’s move into the gendered realm of the familial demonstrates the way in which “public structures of identity and behavior shape both national *and* domestic politics” (Jackson 226; emphasis added). Doyle opens up the Irish home to uncover the intimate socialization of female sexuality within the Irish working-class and reveal what happens when a public discourse invades the private sphere. Although the Republic seeks to establish the feminized domestic sphere as the “foundation of a reformed and independent nation state,” the home is always regulated by a paternal logic of domestic ideology (Lloyd 2000, 206). The most pointed example of the merging of nation and home appears when Paula and Charlo visit their first house together: “The new smell of the house would rub off on us. A new start. I remember: [...]. Charlo hummed the national anthem as I filled the kettle for the first time in our new kitchen” (Doyle 194). Though Paula believes that possessing her own home will allow her the chance to construct a different life for herself than that of her parents, Charlo’s choice of song tells a different story. The national anthem pervades the house, foretelling a particular construction of sexual and familial roles in which femininity is relegated to the domestic sphere, constantly under the watchful eye of the patriarch. This patriarchal surveillance of domestic duties becomes a reality when Charlo begins to abuse Paula. As Paula hypothesizes one of the reasons for Charlo’s abuse, she explains: “When he’d hit me he’d been keeping me in my place, putting me back in my box. I said there was a smell off his breath: whack. I signed up to do a night class, I gave him a too-soft egg: whack.” (Doyle 157). Charlo searches for flaws and errors in how Paula carries out her domestic duties. If his laundry is not done properly, if his meal is not to his satisfaction, if the house is not clean enough, Paula receives a punishment: “Because I scorched one of his shirts. Because his egg was too hard. Because the toilet seat was wet. Because because because” (Doyle 176-177). This sentiment reinforces the ideal of a vigorously regulated domestic ideology. Female abuse within the home, as validated by these “because,”

becomes a private mode of reinforcing a state-mandated sense of domesticity and maintaining a rigid gender hierarchy.

Doyle's portrayal of domestic abuse, then, is primarily directed against the De Valera concept of the traditional family unit.<sup>62</sup> Doyle focuses on the figure of the Irish Mammy and her role within the family, in her simultaneous positions of subjugation and authority in the home, in order to expose the reasons behind the dualistic perpetuation of silence and violence. Although Paula never explicitly states that her father abused her mother, glimpses into her childhood suggest that there was a high probability that intimate violence occurred.<sup>63</sup> As Paula recalls Carmel's wars with her father, Paula can remember her father telling her mother to stay where she was as he assaulted Carmel: "She nodded. She agreed with him even though she was shaking. I remember being terrified" (Doyle 46). Paula intuits her mother's powerlessness in the sphere of the home and is terrified by the lack of protection home offers her. The immediacy of intimate violence and domestic abuse forces young women to search for alternative safe havens; unfortunately, particularly for working-class women, without many options set before them – such as full equal employment opportunities or the potential to sustain romantic relationships without contraceptives in a society that deeply disapproved of pregnancy before marriage – women saw no other way to support themselves other than to marry in order to escape oppressive home situations. In a 1979 survey of young girls in inner city Dublin, journalist Rosita Sweetman confirms this reality: "All women said they wanted to get married. Why? To get out of home, which was overcrowded, and get a place of their own; and to get out of work which was unskilled and underpaid" (Sweetman 127). Desperate to escape a life like her mother's, Carmel explains, "I'd have married anyone to get out of that house [...]. I'd have married any invalid that asked

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<sup>62</sup> Ellen-Raissa Jackson makes the argument that *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* "disrupts the national allegory in which Mother Ireland is threatened by a colonial violator by situating the abuser within the home" (Jackson 228). Here, the home has replaced the nation as a site of patriarchal colonization in post-Independence Ireland.

<sup>63</sup> In *Making the Links*, one of the first national surveys on domestic violence in Ireland, it was reported that one in five women in Ireland who have been in a relationship have been abused by a current or former partner (Kelleher and O'Connor 1995).



me” (Doyle 47). However, such desperation to escape home life also leads to the discovery that heterosexual marriage is itself a political institution that subscribes to a certain understanding of masculinity and femininity (Jeffers 51). As Paula soon discovers, marriage is not a form of “hoped-for-protection that many underprivileged women are looking for” (P. O’Connor 54). Eventually, like her mother, Paula experiences the war of intimate terrorism, and the house becomes her battle zone.

Patriarchy tears apart the very structure of the family, pitting husband against wife, father against child, and most importantly, mother against child. Mrs. O’Leary may be the victim of patriarchal abuse, a Moaning Mammy weighed down by her seven children and suffering under the abuse and neglect of her husband, but in her failure to protect herself and her daughters, Hilda is also failing in her duties as a devoted mother. The idea of a Mammy unable to protect her children from the abuses of their father denotes a crisis within the traditional definition of the Good Mammy as devoted to and self-sacrificing for her children.<sup>64</sup> It is through the figure of the mother that the repetition of hegemonic identity constructs becomes most dangerous. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias have argued that one of the main ways in which women have been implicated in nationalism is “as active transmitters and producers of the national culture” (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 7). Mrs. O’Leary is just as responsible for her daughter’s indoctrination into a lifelong position of shame, subjugation, and bodily alienation as the education system and medical organization. Paula learns to interpellate the shame surrounding her sexuality, specifically, through her mother. The first time Paula truly feels ashamed of her body is when she notices her mother look at her differently as she dries herself off after a bath: “I saw Mammy looking at me, at my chest. Then at me, my face. [...] Then the part that killed me: she was blushing” (Doyle 16). She continues: “I’ll never forget it, the look on my mammy’s face. It left me feeling like I’d done something terrible to her. I’d hurt her badly and I didn’t know how, just that I’d done it” (Doyle 16). The moment Paula’s figure begins to change is the moment that she

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<sup>64</sup> For more information on the role of the Mammy in Irish writing, see Introduction.

loses ownership of her body, as it now belongs to society. Hilda's panic is not only a reaction to losing her child to a subsuming patriarchal ideology, but also reveals the damaging effect of state ideology. Paula is confused as to why her mother is looking at her body with embarrassment because, as women, they share the same basic physicality. However, Hilda no longer sees the body of her daughter: she sees the body of a woman – a body that arguably does not exist in Irish culture.<sup>65</sup> The mother is now an agent of the state, embodying and teaching a specific gendered ideology to the next generation of women. Paula learns that in becoming a woman she now belongs to a culture of silence surrounding the female body and this is exhibited in her mother's sudden disregard of her.<sup>66</sup> This silence is solidified when her family, particularly her mother, fails to acknowledge the visual signs of Charlo's physical abuse: "My mother looked and saw nothing. My father saw nothing, and he loved what he didn't see. My brothers saw nothing. [...] The woman who kept walking into doors" (Doyle 187). The Mammy acts as a repository for social ideals within the microcosm of the family. Without her mother's empathy or support, Paula learns to suffer in silence, thus continuing the vicious cycle of unchecked patriarchal domination. In the socialization of their identity through the public spheres of education and medicine, and the private sphere of the home, women are being conditioned by patriarchal structures for victimhood.

While these institutions are destructive, they are not the only sources contributing to Paula's sense of fragmented identity. As Margaret McKimmey Harada proposes, in Doyle's novel a "postmodern identity crisis has resulted from American popular culture's saturation of working-class Ireland" (Harada 130). A significant aspect of Paula's identity is structured by the conflict

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<sup>65</sup> The Victorian sexual cultural climate of Ireland contributed to the lack of education of both men and women on the topics of female physicality, resulting in a lack of knowledge concerning the realities of the female body. See extended discussion of the absence of female corporeality in Irish culture in Chapter 1, pp.14-15.

<sup>66</sup> As Susan Cahill explains, Ireland's "corporeal figurations and body politic" have been problematic, historically: "The dominance of Catholicism as a set of moral principles, an ideology, and a collection of imagery, despite being one of the more bodily oriented religions, contributed to a repression of the physical on a widespread scale in Ireland's independent nation" (Cahill 2).

between high and mass culture that reaches a point of crisis during the decades of modernization leading into the Celtic Tiger. According to David Lloyd, in the period following Independence, the emergent institutions of cultural nationalism dedicated themselves to the production of gendered identities with “the project of organizing Irish political desire around feminized symbols of the nation which became the object of a heterosexual male devotion” (Lloyd 2000, 202). However, this notion of a separate cultural nationalism is dependent upon the adoption of an “imperialist bourgeois hegemony” (Rockett 1990, 21).<sup>67</sup> Until the introduction of relaxed media reforms in the early 1960s that sought to overturn the isolationist policies and cultural conservatism of a young Ireland, cultural “protectionism and separatism” served to “disguise, not reveal, the nature of the hegemonic relationship of Irish nationalism to its imperial neighbor” while inhibiting the production of a truly separate Irish identity (Rockett 1990, 25).<sup>68</sup> Essentially, the Irish remain a colonized people suffering the lingering effects of psychological damage through the censorship of identity by the implementation of high culture. Furthermore, they are unable to overturn the persistence of the singular modes of subjectivity that prevent new modes of identity from forming. As Gregory Dobbins asserts, “a community committed to the centrality of one singular identity does not allow for the possibility of the inclusion of otherness” (Dobbins 76).<sup>69</sup> This exclusionary sense of identity becomes problematic in a modernizing nation.

In the wake of globalization, state culture (particularly the ideologies of masculinity and nationalism) begins to separate from mass culture, susceptible and open to the influences of foreign popular culture. Doyle points to the effects of these cultural tensions on the identity

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<sup>67</sup> Kevin Rockett borrows this line of argumentation from David Lloyd’s work *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (Lloyd 1987, 242).

<sup>68</sup> The Catholic Church and the Irish Free State combined to colonize Irish national culture. Guided by a sense of Victorian moralism, censorship and juridical law, this governing body enforced a singular cultural identity: “restrictions on books, dances, music, and the cinema were only the more formal processes of surveillance and protectionism which permeated the society” (Rockett 2000, 292).

<sup>69</sup> Gregory Dobbins borrows this idea of community from Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community* (Nancy 31).

formation of the everyday Irish citizen. As the nation looks to cultural resources to stabilize its sense of identity in the face of global mass capital and social transformation, Paula begins to realize that the reality of Irish high culture and the ideology of American mass culture are at fundamental odds with one another. *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* is inundated with popular music, movie celebrities, and television shows that alter the way in which Paula begins to conceive of her sexuality and subjectivity. As Paula describes the first time she and Charlo engage in sexual activity, she uses Robert Redford as a point of comparison: “I felt terrible after it, scared and soggy, guilty and sore. It would have helped if he’d [Charlo] been gorgeous, like Robert Redford or Lee Majors. They would have picked me up and carried me home; they wouldn’t have fucked me in a field in the first place” (Doyle 21-22). Paula’s knowledge about sex prior to her first experience comes from her favorite American films and their leading men. However, Paula’s actual experience is that of pain and illness, and the psychological ramifications include fear of impregnation and guilt at societal disapproval of pre-marital sex.<sup>70</sup> The most notable fact, however, is that the impromptu and unromantic encounter takes place in a field. Paula’s quip about Robert Redford having the decency to carry her home before he would have slept with her suggests that Paula views of sexual activity are linked with romance, which unfortunately plays little to no role in her soon-to-be failing marriage.

The discrepancy between what Paula imagines and what she encounters in reality is problematic in that it forces her into a dream world. American culture serves as a model she aspires to achieve, and yet it serves no place in her everyday life other than that of fantasy. Paula retreats into her daydreams once Charlo’s abuse begins in order to fill the days and comfort herself in the face of a loveless reality. “I was never a slut in these daydreams,” Paula explains (Doyle 100): “I was seriously into Mickey Dolenz, as Leanne would say. Holding hands, that was all, walking down the beach while he sang Take A Giant Step all around us. I’d run and he’d run

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<sup>70</sup> According to Sweetman in her survey of Irish youth, “young people in Ireland have adopted, somewhat haphazardly, the sexual style portrayed on the screen and in magazines abroad. But this has been pasted over an inherited morality which was Victorian and Catholic” (Sweetman 17).

after me” (Doyle 97). Paula’s idealized identity, one of innocence, romance, and happiness, is incompatible with her current identity as a “slut.” This safe haven world of cultural otherness only serves to damage Paula’s psyche for it provides her with the false hope that Charlo will change, that there is a reason that she fell in love with him, and that there is a reason why she should stay. Charlo’s abuse serves to shatter Paula’s hopes, oppressing the possibility of other cultural identities and ultimately solidifying national dependence. For the urban working-class, Irish conservatism and American popular culture combine to create a hybrid monstrosity encouraging more violent forms of masculinity and more repressed forms of femininity.

However, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* is not a hopeless narrative of wide scale female abuse and oppression. All Irish spaces are contaminated and cannot be nostalgically restored, but they can be resurrected. For Paula, the battle against the nationalist project of engenderment hostile to feminine subjectivity begins with the reclamation and re-gendering of a feminine sphere: the home. The domestic space may be a damaged space but it is not spoiled. Although Paula feels trapped in her home by her family, her children are ultimately the only things that keep her going: “Sometimes I hated them. He’d put them there to trap me; they were in it with him. They never stopped crying. They never stopped eating. They wouldn’t let me lie down. They were on his side” (Doyle 188). Father and child collude in an ideology of maternity designed to entrap women in a submissive role, and yet, as much as Paula’s children depend on her, she depends on them. Paula finally chooses to fight back against Charlo and the cycle of violence once he turns his abuse to Nicola. “He wanted to hurt *my* daughter,” Paula explains. “I wasn’t going to pretend any more” (Doyle 216; emphasis added). According to Jennifer M. Jeffers, it is Paula’s “repetition with difference over her mother’s lack of agency that clearly emerges in the novel” (Jeffers 63). Unlike her mother, Paula’s epiphany transpires in the realization that Charlo’s violence against her is not episodic, but systemic. She does not want the

same life for her daughter that she had.<sup>71</sup> She no longer cares about keeping the false façade of her family together because her daughter needs her, and that becomes more important than adhering to a flawed ideology. Although Paula does not assert a liberalized identity by constructing a radically alternative female identity, it is her repossession of motherhood and the home that allows her to combat the patriarchal ideology of Irish maternity.

In describing the moment that led to her knocking Charlo out with a frying pan in the kitchen, Paula notably re-genders the domestic sphere: “The frying pan had no weight. I’d groaned picking it out of the press a few minutes before. It was one of those old-fashioned ones. I hated it; a present from his mother. Maybe there was a secret message in it all along” (Doyle 213). One moment the frying pan symbolizes the confinement the domestic sphere imposes on women, weighing Paula down by its nationalist demands, the next moment it symbolizes a weapon of femininity. There is a message in the frying pan, a pan passed down from one generation of women to another, calling for a break in the cycle of silence. As she throws Charlo out of the house, Paula admits, “I couldn’t go through the door, so I fucked him through it instead” (Doyle 214). Paula acknowledges that she is a victim of a repressive domestic ideology, which allows her to reclaim an element of power, but she is not in a position to leave the home yet. Gluing together a fragmented subjectivity begins by recovering the pieces that broke her in the first place. Paula’s act of defiance actively engages in Butler’s discussion of the possibility of resistance in subjection: “Repetitions of hegemonic forms of power which fail to repeat loyally and, in that failure open possibilities for resignifying the terms of violations against their violating aims” (Butler 1993, 124). While Paula seems to be engaging in the process of subjection by repeating a hegemonic identity in order to naturalize its oppressive operation, in reality she is consciously repeating against the origin in order to subvert and redefine the process of subjection. Paula’s

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<sup>71</sup> Fogarty, among many contemporary critics, suggests “the very turbulence of the mother-daughter bond becomes paradoxically the means by which feminine identity with all its painful intergenerational entanglements can be reimagined” (Fogarty 2002, 89).

repetitions of maternity provide the first steps for resignifying the terms of Irish motherhood and constructing an alternative feminine subjectivity.

Throughout the novel, Paula's life centers around one question "*Why did I marry Charlo?*," but in searching through her memory, Paula finds herself lost in limbo between the worlds of reality and fiction. As she searches for answers, Paula exposes a complex web of social, economic, and familial actors responsible for her victimization and indoctrination into a silent and restrictive femininity. In the sequel to *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, *Paula Spencer* (2006), Doyle drops in on Paula ten years later and examines her successful struggle to become sober and rediscover her role as a mother. The novel is the culmination of the project Doyle set forth in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*: the rearticulation of working-class Irish femininity amidst a socially marginalizing and culturally conflicting era of national transition. Doyle cites the family, particularly women, as the heart of change in contemporary Ireland and points to day-to-day life as the site in which such change is most likely to be felt. *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* is more than just an act of authorial imagination; it is a snapshot of the modes and conditions of public and private culture in "new Ireland" and prescribes a potential model for reconstructing the terms of female subjectivity in a modernizing nation.

### Chapter 3

#### “There’s pleasure to be had in history”: Contemporizing Rural Traditionalism and Uncovering Gender Unorthodoxy in Claire Keegan’s *Walk the Blue Fields*

Claire Keegan is not a prolific writer. *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007) is only her second body of work produced since her first collection of short stories, *Antarctica*, was published in 1999.<sup>72</sup> However, she has quickly gained a reputation as one of the most promising new writers to come out of Ireland, earning the praise and respect of her fellow Irish literary greats, such as Anne Enright, Colm Tóibín, and Joseph O’Connor. *Walk the Blue Fields* won Keegan numerous accolades, from the Francis MacManus Award to the Olive Cook Award, and has invited comparisons to the likes of John McGahern and Edna O’Brien, but Keegan’s thematic choices and adept grasp of prose have individualized her among the sea of authors writing today. At first glance, Keegan’s collection of short stories, published during the tail end of the Celtic Tiger, seems out of place.<sup>73</sup> While her contemporaries situate their counter-narratives of wealth disparity, gender identity crisis, and familial demise within urban high-rises, impoverished slums, and brooding cityscapes, Keegan’s priests, farmers, and housewives inhabit a seemingly timeless rural Ireland filled with sprawling farmlands, Protestant estates, and ancient cliffs. Within her five stories “The Parting Gift,” “Walk the Blue Fields,” “The Forester’s Daughter,” “Surrender,” and “Night of the Quicken Trees,”<sup>74</sup> Keegan addresses the traditional precepts of gender and the nationalist processes of communal socialization that still threaten to prevent Ireland from truly entering the culturally modernizing era. Through her intimate portraits of rural family life,

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<sup>72</sup> Keegan recently published a third piece of work, her long short story, *Foster*, in 2010.

<sup>73</sup> However, as Gerardine Meaney indicates, “peasant life was increasingly identified as *the* life of the nation” up until the 1960s (Meaney 2002, 977; emphasis in original). The turn to urban portraits of female life by contemporary Irish writers has only really begun to take shape within the past fifty years.

<sup>74</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I will not address Keegan’s other two stories “Dark Horses” and “Close to the Water’s Edge”.



Keegan exposes the hypocritical and dependent codes of private and public femininity *and* masculinity that have victimized a nation, stifled the formation of alternate subjectivities, and fostered a culture of silence.

Keegan is often criticized for her “old-fashioned” choices, and yet, as Brooke Allen argues, her collection captures “the poetic essence of this land in transition, a country tentatively facing the future while still consumed by ancient customs, outlooks, legends, fears and fantasies” (Allen 2008).<sup>75</sup> The settings in which Keegan’s stories take place – the rural spaces close to yet just beyond the reach of the urban – “are on the outer margin of the daily commute zone and are consequently territories of dispute as local, rural identity rivals for protagonism with the suburban identity increasingly pushing out its sphere of influence and staking claim on the land” (Markey 96). These spaces provide a rich terrain in which to engage in a critique of the rampant social, economic, and technological changes of urban Ireland, while combating the fixity of rural stereotypes and ideologies still lingering beneath the face of the Celtic Tiger. Keegan’s stories delve into pastoral tropes of a “bygone” era in order to combat the invention of a Celtic Ireland constructed on the disavowal of the past while engaging with the highly contrived canonical invention of a Romantic Ireland that has largely informed public consciousness for the past century. For example, in “Night of the Quicken Trees,” Stack, a middle-aged turf farmer, accounts for his disapproval of the new generation:

Young people couldn’t catch a fish or skim cream off milk. They went around in cars they couldn’t afford, with small children who’d never tasted their mother’s milk, committing adultery at the drop of a hat. [...] They drank beer straight from the

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<sup>75</sup> In an interview with Páraic Breathnach, Keegan addresses the concern of critics that *Walk the Blue Fields* is about a rural past that no longer exists in Ireland: “I find it really interesting that I’m criticized to some extent for writing something that is old-fashioned. But this book is concerned with child abuse, there’s a woman who wants to have a child without a man, there’s alcoholism, there’s marriage, a priest falling in love [...]. I think it comes out of the country I live in now” (*The Eleventh Hour* 2007).

bottle, came back from America and Prague looking for pizzas, and couldn't tell a golden wonder from a Victoria plum. (Keegan 128)

Stack's view of the current generation of Irish citizens reveals an element of hostility toward modernization and points to the nostalgia for the ways of the "immemorial Ireland of Synge and Yeats" hidden beneath the affluent surface of "new Ireland" (Allen 2008). Stack critiques the consumer-driven spending habits, scandalous immoral behavior, and disregard of traditional cultural values as attributes of Ireland's young populace. While there is merit to Stack's view of present Irish culture, his valuation of the past ("Nothing would ever compare to the past" (Keegan 136)) is also flawed. According to Conor McCarthy, Stack's nostalgia is problematic in that in the wake of disruptive cultural change, the fearful Irish citizen chooses to valorize an idyllic and fallacious past dependent upon a hegemonic national identity instead of undertaking a transitory phase.<sup>76</sup> "rather than a renewal of adversarial cultural aspirations in the form of critical regionalism, people in Ireland are faced with a provincial flight into nostalgia in the face of the ever-present contradictions of modernity" (C. McCarthy 34). In the world of Keegan's narratives, the future is in danger of becoming the past and the state is at risk of rendering itself inert. This is the hypocrisy of the "new Ireland" Keegan addresses within her rural setting: that beneath all the material markers of affluence and progress still exists a world not far removed from the values and ideals espoused nearly a century earlier by the Celtic Revivalists during the birth of the nation. "We've more money," Keegan explains in an interview with Páraic Breathnach, "but I don't think our attitudes have changed drastically [...]. The people don't die off because we've had an economic boom" (*The Eleventh Hour* 2007).

Although it is often difficult to discern a timeline within Keegan's narratives, there are small hints indicating that this is not entirely the era of Yeats and Synge, at least not temporally. The clues are few and far between, but if anything is to be gleaned from Keegan's writing, it is

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<sup>76</sup> For further analysis of Irish national identity and hegemonic dependence, see discussion of David Lloyd and Kevin Rockett in Chapter 2.

that the details matter. From the starter of “crab meat in an avocado pear” at the wedding in “Walk the Blue Fields” (Keegan 24) to the smell of “perfume and roasted coffee beans, expensive things” (Keegan 13) the narrator of “The Parting Gift” encounters in the airport, the trappings of Celtic Tiger Ireland present themselves in the everyday lives of Keegan’s characters; however, at times they seem inconsistent with the setting. This is a familiar, traditional Ireland, but with notable differences. As the title of Keegan’s work, *Walk the Blue Fields*, suggests, the collection polemicizes an Ireland that is uncanny, producing a sensation of unease resulting from the dissonance between that which is simultaneously familiar and foreign.<sup>77</sup> By replacing “green” fields with “blue” fields, Keegan hints at the impending violation of expectations set to take place within her work.<sup>78</sup> This is not a text calling for the rolling green fields of Ireland’s past, nor is it a satirical jab at the rural community of contemporary Ireland. As Tessa Hadley suggests, this is a “border country where exchanges happen between myth, a historical past and a contemporary Ireland” (Hadley 2007). In the titular story, as the priest walks to the wedding reception held at a former Protestant estate, “something about the place conjures up the ancient past: the hound, the spear, the spinning wheel. There’s pleasure to be had in history. What’s recent is another matter and painful to recall” (Keegan 18). The same can be said of Keegan’s collection. While there is a certain pleasure to be had in recalling the long forgotten past, the more recent past is still waiting to be retrieved. Amidst the pastoral setting are hidden stories of pain and suffering, most of which are the present consequences of anterior decisions: incest, infidelity, loveless marriages, illegitimate births, and alcoholism are only some of the ailments troubling the rural community. Keegan destabilizes and reappropriates traditional Ireland, making the rural a resource for challenging the ideals of “new Ireland” and suggesting that going backward is the first step to go

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<sup>77</sup> The term “uncanny” is borrowed from Sigmund Freud’s article “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919) describing “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 220).

<sup>78</sup> As David Lloyd has suggested, “with the possible exception of *greenness*, no quality has been more frequently and repetitiously attributed to Ireland than violence” (Lloyd 1993, 125; emphasis added). Keegan’s choice of “blue” fields is a poignant usurpation of traditional notions of the Emerald Isle.

forward. As Anne Enright notes in her review of Keegan's collection: "Keegan sends a flock of ostriches down the street to remind us either that Ireland is changing, or that we are not reading about Ireland after all, but about that distinctive place where her fiction exists; her own country" (Enright 2007). This "distinctive place" is not something born entirely from Keegan's imagination, however; it is a hidden Ireland yet to be uncovered – fact and fiction are not mutually exclusive. Keegan's collection encapsulates the change, cleansing, and healing necessary for Ireland to move forward as a modern nation.

*Walk the Blue Fields* highlights the difficulty of negotiating an identity amidst the changing cultural environment of the Celtic Tiger within the "confines of family and local community" (D'hoker 2). In the majority of Keegan's stories, her characters struggle between conforming to a regressive and fictitious past and breaking into a potentially painful and isolating present, while trying to repent for decisions that were made in their pasts. Nowhere is this problem more evident than when the figure of the outsider penetrates the restrictive sphere of the rural community. In reference to an editorial from the *Irish Times* entitled "The Rebranding of Ourselves published on St. Patrick's Day, 2007, reflecting on the current state of affairs and the imagining of the national sense of self, Alfred Markey suggests: "If the country is to move in the right direction, the other, the outsider must be made to feel at home and for the [*Irish*] *Times* this begins with 'trying to understand and then engaging with the myriad new communities in our midst'" (Markey 94). In choosing to stage her stories within a rural setting, Keegan is able to provide a more intimate, localized view into the way in which the socialization process of the Irish nation prohibits the inclusion of anything other than singular subjectivities.<sup>79</sup> Historically, as David Lloyd explains, "the constitution and reconstitution of the terms of Irish identity has principally been aimed at the integration of a highly differentiated population into the modern nation state, a project which has always sought to transcend antagonisms, contradictions and social differences for the sake of a

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<sup>79</sup> See discussion of Jean-Luc Nancy's consideration of the exclusionary relationships of communities committed to singular identities in Chapter 2.

unified conception of political subjectivity” (Lloyd 1993, 5). Essentially, the project of nationalism has centered on the violent formation of a homogeneous Irish identity. The local community is a formative example of the micro-level effects of state and church ideology on the construction of Irishness, and points to the difficulty in affecting wide-scale, productive, and progressive change. In both “Walk the Blue Fields” and “Night of the Quicken Trees,” traditional positions of authority are brought into question by the recent additions of the outsider, pagan figures of the “Chinaman”<sup>80</sup> and Margaret Flusk to the Co. Wexford parish and the village of Dunagore, respectively, in order to challenge the monocultural prescriptions of a patriarchal state.

The role of Catholicism and its centrality to Irish identity is called into question by the juxtaposition of the priest protagonist with his “other” counterpart, the Chinaman in “Walk the Blue Fields.” The Chinaman is a “refugee, some relation of them people wud the Chinese” (Keegan 25). His status as an outsider within the village is emphasized by his absence from the communal wedding reception, as well as the continuous replacement of his name (which is never acknowledged in the story) with his nation of birth; however, what most clearly exempts him from his socialization into the community is his lack of affiliation with Christianity. As one of the parishioners explains to the priest, who was unaware of the Chinaman’s presence until tonight, “Well, you wouldn’t know him – he’s not a Christian – but there’s people goes down to him for the cure” (Keegan 25). The parishioner’s understanding of inclusiveness posits the priest as the figure of authority and morality and Catholicism as essential to a social habitus.<sup>81</sup> According to Tom Inglis, “the embodiment of this Catholic *habitus* became a central element of cultural capital, central to survival and achievement within the educational system [...] to developing and maintaining contacts and alliances, to attaining the honor and respect of the people, to being

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<sup>80</sup> Further usage of Keegan’s term “Chinaman” within the chapter will not include quotations.

<sup>81</sup> The term “habitus” is borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu and cited by Loic Wacquant as, “the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them” (Wacquant 2005, 316).

promoted, chosen or elected as a leader” (Inglis 68-69). Problematically, this traditional symbolic system of socialization creates an imbalance of power by re-imagining a historically monocultural Ireland. This “hierarchy of Irishness” suggests that “anything that unsettles a normative definition of Irishness is treated with suspicion” (Harrington 2013), and such is the case for the Chinaman. The townsfolk stay clear of his caravan, question when “he doesn’t always do it our way” (Keegan 25), and display xenophobic tendencies in expressing degrading stereotypes – “Sure he’s a Chink: ates dog and shites tay!” says Sinnott (Keegan 26) – essentially enacting a form of symbolic violence. However, in spite of the espoused belief in Christian orthodoxy, this is no longer the age of unquestionable religious authority. As Keegan expounds: “we’re changing so quickly from a place where there was quite a stiff hierarchy of people – of the doctor, of the big fam, or of the priest – [...] to now, where the aristocracy is kind of shattered and the priests have kind of disappeared from that pedestal of authority” (*The Eleventh Hour* 2007).

In the contemporary state, the Irish priest is becoming an outsider as well. The wedding reception is continuously interrupted by dubious remarks. Early in the stage of the reception, Sinnott quips, “and we all know the white cloth is aisy stained”<sup>82</sup> (Keegan 26). Similarly, the priest encounters laughter when he leaves the men’s bathroom where the groomsman is struggling to stuff himself back into rented trousers: “‘A fucken ornament, Father,’ he says. ‘Much like your own.’ [...] There was a time, not too long ago, when they would have waited until he could not have heard” (Keegan 23). Sexual flagrancy, uncertain morality, and mockery are all signs that the office of the priest and the social function of Catholicism are changing. As Hadley remarks, this is a story about more than a priest struggling to choose between the institution of the Church and sex; it’s about a man struggling to choose “between the solitude of the priest-role and the heat of

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<sup>82</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s a series of scandals came to light sparking public debates over issues to do with “privacy, reproductive rights and alternative sexualities,” all of which were informed by Catholic doctrine (Kilfeather 111). The sensationalized cases of Ann Lovett, Joanne Hayes, Lavinia Kerwick, Case X, as well as the Magdalen Laundries served to disillusion the Irish populace with the Church’s rigid position on “contraception, divorce, and mixed marriage,” further driving the public away from Catholic teaching (Ingman 23).

emerging with the human crowd” (Hadley 21).<sup>83</sup> Does the priest continue in his current office and remain an outsider to both himself and his community, or does he embrace the changes of his community and adapt to the times? Like the Chinaman, the priest exists within the margins of his community, and yet it is the Chinaman who provides the priest with a model for rediscovering his position of work: “Here is a man living happily in a clean place on his own. A man who believes in what he does and takes pleasure in the work” (Keegan 37). By engaging with the supposed outsider and acknowledging the past while embracing the present, the priest uncovers the solace to his solitude and redefines the terms of community. Here, internationalization is a site of liberation for Ireland.

Again, in “Night of the Quicken Trees” Keegan examines the position of the outsider, but from an alternate gender perspective. The narrative portrays the life of a pagan “healer” living on the outskirts of her community and identifies the dangers of socialization. Like the Chinaman, Margaret Flusk is an outsider in her community because she lives an unconventional life: she is “banished to the west by her family for giving birth to a child conceived with her cousin, a priest, moves into his house after his death and takes over his pastoral role, [...] before setting up another unorthodox family with Stack, a bog-farming bachelor next door” (Markey 100). Margaret’s past, misanthropic behavior, and self-imposed reclusion make her the constant “subject of curiosity” and separate her from the social collectivity of Dunagore (Keegan 130). Margaret’s outsider status is the combination of both self-imposed and other-defined difference, for as Elliot Weininger expands on Bourdieu’s notion of social collectivities: “Any social collectivity is the result of the combined symbolic acts of self-classification and classification by others that are applied to its members (and, therefore, also, to those who are excluded)”

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<sup>83</sup> In her interview with Páraic Breathnach, Keegan states that in “Walk the Blue Fields” she wanted to write a story about “how a priest would manage with the passage of time, with how time changes, and therefore, with how his work would change over time. [...] it’s a story about a man who’s lost. He just doesn’t know how to be a priest” (*The Eleventh Hour* 2007).

(Weininger 142). It is only when Margaret accepts the replacement office of ministry formerly held by her cousin and takes up with Stack that she becomes intertwined in the community.<sup>84</sup>

The first time Margaret agrees to employ the powers of healing conferred to her as a “seventh child,” she “receives the first letter she ever got in Dunagore” followed by the gift of a load of birch, thereby subjecting her to the system of biopolitics within the rural locality (Keegan 151). According to Roberto Esposito, once one has accepted the “*munus*” (gift) then one is obliged to return the “*onus*” (obligation) in the form of “*officium*” (services or office) (Esposito xiii; emphasis in original). This cycle of gift-obligation-office is the way in which Margaret becomes socialized into the community: “Soon the whole parish started to come. [...]. The people left in good faith and their ailments and their apparitions disappeared. She’d wake and find new spuds and rhubarb and pots of jam and bags of apples and sticks outside her back door” (Keegan 151-152). Margaret’s inclusion is predicated on her ability to fulfill a socially-mandated role within the structure of biopolitics. Although Margaret now occupies a normative social function within Dunagore, her identity is also restricted to a singular subjectivity and operates around a contractual system of indebtedness. According to Esposito, “accepting the *munus* directly undermines the capacity of the individual to identify himself or herself as such and not as part of the community” because “this debt or obligation of gift-giving operates as a kind of originary defect for all those belonging to a community” (Campbell 4; emphasis in original). The rigidity of this form of identity formation is dangerous because it homogenizes newness or otherness in order to fit a traditional and exclusionary collective hierarchy. Although Margaret’s mysterious powers are derived from a counter-Christian source, she replaces the office held by the priest within the parish. Resultantly, when Margaret attempts to break free from her role, she is met with backlash from the community: “it was a long time before the people of Clare gave up hope

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<sup>84</sup> The definition of community employed in this chapter is borrowed from Roberto Esposito’s *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (1998). According to Esposito, community is “that which is not my own, indeed which begins where ‘my own’ ends” (Esposito xii; cited in Campbell 2006, 3).



and stopped leaving jam and sticks and herrings for Margaret Flusk and started doing her harm. One morning she got up and found peacock feathers stuffed through the letter-box. On another morning, all her tyres were flat” (Keegan 159). The violent reaction to Margaret’s effort to redefine her identity functions as a type of allegory of gender and community. Margaret’s narrative highlights the difficulty for a woman to overcome the standards and precepts surrounding her position of office, as socialization in the wake of her upheaval becomes violent and misdirected. The implicit violence of Margaret’s identity formation typifies David Lloyd’s understanding of the Irish nationalist project to negate the possibility of the existence of other forms of identity: “This negation can take many forms, ranging from openly violent suppression to the liberal narrative of development which relegates incompatible modes of life to ‘pre-modern’ or underdeveloped stages of humanity” (Lloyd 1993, 4). In “Walk the Blue Fields,” negation takes the shape of symbolic violence which is seen specifically in the communal critique of the Chinaman’s “incompatible modes of life,” whereas in “Night of the Quicken Trees” negation takes the form of actual “violent suppression,” indicating that socialization plays a different role in the lives of men and women. It is only in leaving Dunagore and traveling further west that Margaret believes she can safely go forward with her and her son’s life. While the narratives of the Chinaman and Margaret illuminate the modes through which otherness becomes classified in relation to the community, Keegan further intimates the process of socialization by examining the way in which public conceptions of gender and sexual identity are systematized at the level of the family.

In her narratives centered on female protagonists, “The Parting Gift,” “The Forester’s Daughter,” and “Night of the Quicken Trees,” Keegan exposes the cultural precepts and expectations surrounding womanhood, wifehood, and motherhood that have negatively impacted the construction of female identity and, thereby, the production of the Irish family. According to Ann Owens Weekes, the “national idealization of the mother inevitably engendered an unquestioning cultural acceptance that motherhood should be the goal of every Irish woman, a

guarantor of social prestige and respect” (Weekes 2000, 100).<sup>85</sup> As one of the neighbors at Deegan’s dinner table asserts in “The Forester’s Daughter,” “I think there must be nothing worse than being married and not being able to have a child” (Keegan 83). However, this idea of femininity based on maternity constructed by the state was created by patriarchy to replicate patriarchy and did not accurately reflect the realities, wishes, and desires of women. These virgin/mother stereotypes so “embedded in Irish law and culture portray women as de-sexualized, monstrous, colonized and maternalized, yet they represented the visible identity of Irish women for most of the twentieth century” (Bacik 103). As Keegan demonstrates, these available forms of female identity become oppressive and stultifying when women encounter situations or express desires that run counter to the traditional form of maternal femininity. The seeming inextricability of “woman” and “mother” exposes the level at which an Irish female subjectivity is dependent upon a hegemonic form of masculinity.

Although Keegan’s work is different than that of her fellow feminist contemporaries, she nevertheless approaches themes discussed by Irish women writers since the late 1960s, specifically female sexuality (D’hoker 3). As previously discussed, the state’s prioritization of maternity as woman’s most significant aspiration reduces the female body to its passive capacity for cultural reproduction and disregards the possibility of female sexual desire. This form of sexual differentiation adopted by Ireland in the early twentieth century was influenced by the common belief in England during the nineteenth century that women were “not much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind” (Brown 115),<sup>86</sup> and contributed to the construction of Victorian femininity. Similarly, Julia Kristeva argues that in Christian ideology “motherhood is perceived as a conspicuous sign of the *jouissance* of the female (or maternal) body, a pleasure that must at all costs be repressed: the function of procreation must be kept strictly subordinated to the rule of

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<sup>85</sup> For more information, see detailed discussion of motherhood and the Constitution of 1937 in the Introduction.

<sup>86</sup> Terence Brown attributes this specific line of argumentation to William Action in *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* (1865).

the Father's name" (Kristeva 138). Christianity serves to render the female body a passive vessel for a paternal discourse. In a state heavily ruled by Catholic ideology and guided by Victorian morality, maternity often becomes the sexual dead-end of female subjectivity. In her three stories portraying female perspectives on varying sexual experiences, Keegan unveils the consequences of state ideology on the sexual realities of women both within and outside of marriage.

In both "The Parting Gift" and "The Forester's Daughter," sexual activity within the institution of marriage becomes an obligation, a responsibility to contribute to the state and fulfill the ideal of the traditional Irish family. In these stories, the views of the maternal figures are not taken into consideration. As Martha recounts the story of Nowlan to her neighbors, her pseudonym for Deegan, she dictates the circumstances surrounding the creation of their family: "Nowlan [Deegan], knowing what people were saying, began to feel sorry for himself because [...] he thought, like many a man who hasn't a babby, that his seed was falling on bad ground. Naturally, he blamed his wife for, no matter how many times they –" (Keegan 83). After a few years of marriage and no sign of a child, Deegan and Martha's private lives become a matter of public interest. Although Deegan is more in love with his home than his wife and Martha is struck sore by the "futility of married life" and her loveless marriage, Deegan feels the pressure of public (state) opinion and believes that the natural outcome of his marital activities should be procreation (Keegan 53). Additionally, Deegan's pointed blame at Martha is evidence of the purely patriarchal functionality of the female body. Rather than considering the reality of his own potential impotency, Deegan's accusation suggests that he understands sex as a passive, receptive, and teleological event for women and perhaps nothing more, essentially asexualizing the female body and essentializing female sexual activity.

Similarly, the narrator of "The Parting Gift" explains that her "mother didn't want a big family" but she gave her husband quick and noiseless "sex on his birthday" every year (Keegan 5-6). Despite the mother's wishes, this annual, pleasureless duty seems to produce a large family whose number is never actually given. Powerless in the face of her husband, the mother turns to

drastic measures and sacrifices her daughter in order to subvert the crippling obligations of maternity: “the archetypal put-upon wife of a cruel, authoritarian husband and mother of too many children offers her own daughter up for some personal peace by sending her to her husband for his monthly allowance of sex” (D’hoker 10). Just as that day the mother “drowned the pups” the family setter had and “turned her head and looked at you, and smiled,” the mother metaphorically drowns her own pup, the narrator, in an effort to control the size of her family (Keegan 7). The pointed fact that “you haven’t gone through this door since the blood started, since you were twelve” suggests that part of the reason the mother acquiesces her daughter to the husband is in order to engage in an extreme form of birth control (Keegan 8).<sup>87</sup> According to the *Orange Report*<sup>88</sup> published by the National Women’s Council of Ireland for the Department of Justice in 1996, silence on issues such as father-daughter incest in Ireland has been “strongly maintained, given the dominant ethos of family life as sacred, private and protected from outside” with “Roman Catholic ideology [...] a major factor in the construction of traditional family frameworks and roles, which maintained gendered systems of dominance and subordination, control and acquiescence” (*Report of the Working Party* 1996, 32).<sup>89</sup> The situations of Martha and the mother in “The Parting Gift” exemplify the consequences of allowing this type of public discourse to dictate the terms of a private identity, equating sexuality with “matrimonial reproduction and indisputable norms of familial reproductive heterosexuality” (Nash 115). By

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<sup>87</sup> Although the Health (Family Planning) (Amendment) Act is enacted in 1992, lowering the age at which a person can buy condoms from 18 to 17 without a prescription, it is not until 1993 that condoms are no longer defined as contraceptives and can therefore be deregulated, also removing the age ban (Irish Family Planning Association 2013). Despite the introduction of contraception to Ireland throughout the period just prior to the era Keegan is writing about, resistance to anti-Catholic modes of family planning would have been more heavily resisted within rural communities; therefore, it would not be inaccurate to suggest that the reasoning behind the mother’s actions is family planning-oriented.

<sup>88</sup> The full title of the publication is *Report of the Working Party on the Legal and Judicial Process for Victims of Sexual and Other Crimes of Violence Against Women and Children* (Dublin: National Women’s Council of Ireland, 1996).

<sup>89</sup> Significantly, further evidence of the pervasive effects of a public state/Church ideology on the private construction of sexuality is “there are no national statistics on the prevalence of child sexual abuse” in Ireland because this absence is perpetuated in part by the “persistent socio-cultural resistance to recognizing the reality and prevalence of the sexual abuse of children” (*Report of the Working Party* 1996, 53).

containing her narratives within the private sphere, Keegan presents the terms through which nationalist ideals remain unchecked and uncontested by a public consciousness. As a household remains a patriarchal realm, Keegan consciously sets up a situation in which we are forced to accept the narrative content at face value; however, this dynamic is also meant to explicate the way in which a social unconscious is formed. Although Deegan is clearly incorrect in his accusations and assumptions and the father's request in "The Parting Gift" is abusive and misogynistic, these paternal figures remain unchallenged, initially. As the stories progress, Keegan opens up an avenue for looking at the difference between what is actually true and what is simply unchallenged.

Keegan continues her exposition of the lived realities of women under the patriarchal constructions of nationhood and gender. Examining one of the fundamental bodies structuring female identity, Article 41.2 in the Constitution of 1937, Yvonne Scannell explains that the clause "speaks of woman's *life* within the home (not just her work there), implying that the natural vocation of woman (the generic is used, so it means *all* women) is in the home" but "fails to recognize that a woman's place is a woman's choice" (Scannell 124).<sup>90</sup> According to Anne Fogarty, these ideals of femininity and maternity were "set up in the constitution as a bulwark against social disorder and the ills of modernity," but they only served to reinforce cultural autonomy and masculine hegemony (Fogarty 2002, 88). The problem with this conceptualization of womanhood is that it is pitted against a naturalized cultural construct of masculinity. As Moynagh Sullivan suggests, "in Irish Studies, the category of Irishness (Irish subjectivity) is repeatedly deconstructed, questioned, recontextualized and interrogated, but masculinity remains an unquestioned, presumptively static template for such identity politics" (Sullivan 2008, 247). Through her conceptions of wifedom in "The Forester's Daughter" and "Night of the Quicken Trees," Keegan reveals the contradictions inherent in the patriarchal relegation of women to the

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<sup>90</sup> One of the most significant pieces of legislation that influenced the position of women in Irish society post-Independence is the Constitution of 1937, Article 41.2.

domestic sphere. For example, after Deegan meets Martha for the first time, he begins to imagine her fitting into his image of Aghowle: “As he described his home he began to imagine her there buttering swede, patching his trousers, hanging his shirts to dry” (Keegan 52). Similarly, Margaret expresses a desire to have another child, but the thought of creating life with a man seems an unpleasant venture: “If only I could cut out the man, Margaret thought, I might have a child. A man was a nuisance and a necessity. If she’d a man she’d have to persuade him to take baths and use his knife and fork” (Keegan 138). Deegan hardly knows Martha, but it does not matter to him because his idea of a wife is set in stone – all he requires is a body to fill the role he has envisioned. Margaret’s reluctance to partake in this strikingly parallel role of devoted caretaker and loyal subject suggests that this is not a position of choice in a marriage but one of obligation, an obligation that conforms to gendered norms and expectations. Ironically, Stack does not want a wife because “a woman would be a terrible disadvantage: she’d make him match his clothes and take baths” (Keegan 131). Stack’s unconventional attitude toward women casts him as an outsider to national cultural constructions. His unconventionality is essentially what bridges him and Margaret together, as both are non-nationalist figures. However, in a highly static state, heterosexual bonds are the mechanism through which normative integration into the community occurs. Stack may be a categorical anomaly, but he is merely the catalyst for socialization as opposed to a prescriptive model for alternate masculinity. In both these narratives are images of women as servants, required to undertake the domestic care of their husbands. However, lacking employment opportunities as well as prospects to engage in “normal” relationships with men, women like Margaret and Martha often saw no other way to support themselves other than to marry (Walzl 46).

Both Martha and Margaret are socialized in their youth to envision marriage as the only option available to them as adults, an ideal put in place by the patriarchal social institutions that

govern the lives of women.<sup>91</sup> While the priest strings Margaret along promising her a life of vain romantic longings – “as a young man, he said they would marry, that they would get the bishop’s permission, rear Shorthorns and have two children, a pigeon’s clutch” – this promise quickly reveals itself to be built upon a notion of female love dependent upon male-identification inherently toxic to the formation of female subjectivity in Irish society (Keegan 129-130). Instead of following through on his word, the priest enters the seminary but succumbs to his sexual desire and impregnates Margaret, thereby tying her to a “terrible shame” (Keegan 148) – a shame that only results in consequences for Margaret because she alone bears the physical markers of premarital sex. As they “lay down without a word on the wet grass [...] she knew while he was planting his seed in her that *she* would pay for it” (Keegan 134; emphasis added). Contrary to Margaret, Martha’s idea of married life is less romantic than pragmatic. Recounting her reasons for marrying Deegan, Martha explains, “the woman knew the match wasn’t right. But like every woman, she wanted something of her own. She thought about living in the place Nowlan [Deegan] had described” (Keegan 81).<sup>92</sup> Nearly thirty years of age when Deegan asks her to accept his marriage proposal, Martha is afraid that she will not be presented with another offer, so she settles for Deegan and Aghowle; however, their home quickly becomes a space of physical entrapment. The reality of married life is “a husband who hardly spoke now that he’d married her, an empty house and no income of her own” (Keegan 55). Martha realizes there was never any hope for her to become anything more than the ideological product of Deegan’s imagination within Aghowle, as his home has all but erased her sense of subjectivity. She craves productive

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<sup>91</sup> Keegan has expressed a keen interest in uncovering the reasons why people decide to enter into the institution of marriage: “I’m not married and I know very little about it, but it seems the thing to do. And I’ve often been interested in why people marry and what goes on under the roof, and every house is different and nobody really knows what’s really going on in anybody else’s mind” (*The Eleventh Hour* 2007).

<sup>92</sup> In her interviews for *On Our Backs*, Rosita Sweetman documents some of the reasons working-class women marry. One of her interviewees, Molly, a twenty-eight-year-old single mother, explains: “You get married to get away from home, To have a different kind of life. You imagine yourself married: how you’ll move out of the area, save for a new home, have a different life to what you’ve been living” (Sweetman 94).

work and economic self-sufficiency, but by the time she “thought about finding a job [...] it was too late: a child was near ready for the cradle” (Keegan 55). Martha wants autonomy within the domestic sphere, but as Deegan constantly points out, “you didn’t bring so much as a penny into this place” (Keegan 55).<sup>93</sup> Marriage and maternity are not the catalysts for opportunity Martha thought they might become. Although she is miserable, Martha cannot fully validate leaving Deegan because she does not have the financial means to support herself independently. Diarmuid Ferriter’s observations on women and marriage in Irish culture can be used here to clarify Martha’s hesitancy as representing the extent to which “on the whole, women’s fears of marriage break-up were economic as opposed to moral or emotional” (Ferriter 571). Through their dependence on male-identification, obligation to fulfill maternal duties, and confinement in the home, Martha and Margaret are victims of a homogenizing and subjugating process of female socialization.

The common theme in “The Parting Gift,” “The Forester’s Daughter,” and “Night of the Quicken Trees” is that the female protagonists are living out the consequences of past experiences. None of the women are capable of moving beyond anterior decisions, as no matter where they go the communities they engage with continue to tie them to past identities. What does it mean, then, for women’s rights if women are not given the space in which to successfully liberate themselves from subjugating subjectivities? Keegan’s parables of gender and community critique a polity not changing enough to meet female expectations. Although the cultural atmosphere of the nation is changing, the country remains in a state of inertia in regard to women’s liberation and nationalism continues to disempower women. Rather than condemn women for their “failures,” Keegan argues for the need to redress society. Like Enright and

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<sup>93</sup> Women in Ireland have long been denied access to a full economic role. In 1922, measures to restrict women’s access to employment in both the civil service and industry were implemented. In 1961, women accounted for only 29% of the work force and most of them were single women (Ferriter 569). Additionally, today Patricia Coughlan expands that although “many more middle-class women now enter the professions,” the “second shift” prevails and “power is still differentially enjoyed according to gender” in the work place (Coughlan 177).



Doyle, however, Keegan does not lay blame on the system of patriarchy in the victimization of women, or at least not entirely; she also turns a lens on mothers themselves, particularly in the education of their daughters.<sup>94</sup> This renewed interest in understanding the mother-daughter struggle, as argued by Fogarty, “effectively counters the calcified, static, and outmoded images of maternal completion and wholeness insisted on by patriarchal culture. However, it also indicates that the ambiguities and divisions which define female subjectivity cannot easily be banished” (Fogarty 2002, 88). Keegan’s narratives do not necessarily make the ambiguities surrounding female subjectivity any clearer. While Keegan presents good mothers, bad mothers, powerless and rebellious mothers, it is up to their new generation of daughters to decide which role they will create for themselves. In “The Parting Gift” and “Night of the Quicken Trees,” the narrator’s mother and Margaret’s mother are the guardians of gender divisions: “they teach the girls the chores around the house, collude in serving the men, and instruct their daughters into ‘proper femininity’” (D’hoker 7). The narrator’s mother in “The Parting Gift” literally replaces herself with her daughter, as “you were sent instead [of your mother], to sleep with your father” (Keegan 6). She perpetuates the silent cycle of female submission and servitude, forcing her daughter to fulfill the position of the mother when she is unwilling to fulfill the duties herself. In “Night of the Quicken Trees,” Margaret’s mother protects the gendered expectations of women within the family by exiling Margaret when she discovers her daughter has violated the virgin/mother stereotype by conceiving an illegitimate child out of wedlock. Although this is never addressed directly, Margaret states that she has not had contact with her mother since the birth of her child. Margaret’s mother failed to accept the alternative sexual identity of her daughter, as the fortune-teller “sees” that Margaret’s people “turned their backs on you over this religious man” (Keegan 148). In the end, Margaret’s mother prioritizes religious doctrine over the well-being of her daughter. The actions of both the narrator’s mother and Margaret’s mother reveal the amount of

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<sup>94</sup> For a more detailed history of the portrayal of mother-daughter relationships in Irish fiction and Keegan’s position within the canon, see Elke D’hoker (2012).

energy, repression, and affliction required to maintain stasis in Irish society, particularly on the part of women. Rather than redefine the terms of femininity, contemporary society continues to exert energy on sustaining dysfunctional female relationships and disavowing the past. As Coughlan expands, “despite a self-image stressing close communal bonding, warmth and moral probity,” Irish society has been “secretive, narrowly patriarchal, and obsessed with the concealment and repression of emotional and sexual life” (Coughlan 176).

In the case of the narrator of “The Parting Gift,” it is clear that the effects of such a traumatic mother-daughter relationship have undeniably shattered the daughter’s sense of subjectivity.<sup>95</sup> Not only does the daughter’s inability to articulate her own story in the first person enact “her failure to realize a confident sense of self” (D’hoker 10), but also this passivity “suggests the reluctance of the nameless young woman to acknowledge her mother’s role, even to herself” (Weekes 2010, 299).<sup>96</sup> The model the narrator’s mother offers of womanhood is one of powerlessness, sacrifice, and collusion. As the daughter packs for departure to the United States, she contemplates the future of her mother: “You wonder what it will be like for her when you leave. Part of you doesn’t care. She talks through the door” (Keegan 3). Although the daughter expresses empathy for her mother’s situation, their relationship is beyond repair while the daughter remains at home. The door enacts a metaphorical barrier within the mother-daughter relationship, as their continued silence on the issue of father-daughter incest prevents an avenue for healing and a break in the cycle of abuse. Mothers may not consciously collude in the construction of their own powerlessness, but when the mother represents “the primary,

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<sup>95</sup> The narrator’s mind/body split is also a psychological adaptation to trauma, a complex dissociative response that denies the self as body: “Dissociating serves many purposes. It provides a way out of the intolerable and psychologically incongruous situation (double-bind), it erects memory barriers (amnesia) to keep painful events and memories out of awareness, it functions as an analgesic to prevent feeling pain, it allows escape from experiencing the event and from responsibility/guilt, and it may serve as a hypnotic negation of the sense of self” (Courtois 155; as cited in Jacobs 129-130).

<sup>96</sup> The narrator of the story may not be able to tell her story in first person, but Keegan’s choice of thematic material demonstrates the important social function of Irish women writers as agents in the struggle for cultural change, as over the past two decades female writers have “played a crucial role in the promethean task of illuminating the secrets of father-daughter incest” (St. Peter 127).

uncontrollable source of the world's goods," their daughters are reduced to rage and disappointment as the "'powerful maternal presence' they have relied upon subsequently becomes the 'powerless woman in front of the father, the teacher, the doctor, the judge, the landlord – the world'" (Ruddick 343; cited in Weekes 2000, 106).

Similarly, Margaret's rage at her helplessness in the face of her family and her community pushes her to the point of suicide, initially. Although both Margaret *and* the priest are responsible for the pregnancy of their child, Margaret is the only one who suffers. Shame becomes the mechanism through which Margaret comes to understand her subjectivity.<sup>97</sup> Conditioned to internalize the shame surrounding her sexuality, Margaret blames herself for the death of her child as punishment for her actions – "always she blamed herself" (Keegan 145) – and bears the physical marks of her shame, her caesarean section, to Stack explaining, "I lost his child. Look" (Keegan 149; emphasis added); however, it takes some intervention on the part of a divine force, the fortune-teller, to help Margaret realize that she is not to blame for this incomplete version of traditional motherhood. It was the priest who broke his solemn vows of celibacy, and the priest who took advantage of her innocence and naiveté leaving her to endure the communal backlash alone. However, the blame extends beyond specific individual responsibility. Keegan implicates the communal and familial bodies that sustain the prevailing gender ideology premised on inequality, as well as the systemic conflation of state and church that contains female sexuality and localizes shame onto women alone. While in the case of the narrator in "The Parting Gift" healing over paternal violation can only begin by leaving the home that has become a symbol of her oppression and the country that has silently supported her victimhood, for Margaret healing begins by embracing her unconventional form of maternity and starting over again. Margaret's sense of motherhood becomes indispensable to her discovery, "not of the plentitude, but of the complexity of the female experience, with all that this complexity comprises in joy and pain"

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<sup>97</sup> See the discussion of shame and female subjectivity offered in Chapter 1.

(Kristeva 205).<sup>98</sup> Martha in “The Forester’s Daughter” also enacts this form of rebellious maternity. According to Elke D’hoker, Martha subverts the submissive position of the mother by engaging in the act of self-authoring, thereby providing an alternative model of womanhood for her daughter. She takes revenge on Deegan’s betrayal of Victoria’s trust by sharing the story of her adulteration with the neighbors, “thus upsetting both the power relations in the family and the iron Irish law of keeping everything within the family unit” (D’hoker 7). These varying forms of motherhood reveal the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship within a patriarchal society. Although Keegan vocalizes the resentment and hurt existent within un-reconciled mother-daughter relationships in which silence and conformity are the maternal values passed on from one generation to another, she also describes models of difference that provide the new generation with the primary tools to redefine their own visions of femininity.

Although *Walk the Blue Fields* has been examined by scholars in terms of its consideration of female gender norms, expectations, and relations within both the private sphere of domesticity and the rural community, little attention has been paid to its critique of the masculinization of public culture in relation to the male figures within Keegan’s narratives. In the short stories “The Forester’s Daughter” and “Surrender,” Keegan highlights the difficulty in translating the public, communal notion of masculinity to the private realm of the familial. Although “Surrender” would seem to present a temporal hiccup within the time frame of Keegan’s work, its staging within the early 1940s just following the implementation of the Constitution of 1937 and the birth of De Valera’s nation presents a more fully realized nationalist sense of Irish masculinity. The striking parallels between the Sergeant in the 1940s narrative “Surrender” and Deegan in the 1990s story “The Forester’s Daughter” reveals the extent to which public constructions of Irish masculinity have changed little throughout the modernization of the nation. According to David Lloyd, the post-Independence project of modernization witnessed “a reformed masculine labor, as the

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<sup>98</sup> Kristeva argues that contrary to the preceding generation of feminists who considered the desire to be a mother both alienating and reactionary, the new generation of women are seeking ways in which to combine maternity with professional life and feminist involvement (Kristeva 205).

foundation of a reformed and independent nation state” (Lloyd 2000, 206). This version of manhood dependent upon “the values of the colonial economy, values of labor, regularity, or thrift” (Lloyd 2000, 199) took effect with the intervention of a new discourse on the Irish, “which asserts their femininity as part of the set of characteristics that make them incapable of self-government, [and] demands a response in the form of a remasculinization of the Irish public sphere” (Lloyd 2000, 202). Thus, the opposition of public male and private female spaces and practices in the Constitution, as well as a delayed adoption of Victorian sexual ideology,<sup>99</sup> has had significant effects on the role of men in Irish society (Coulter 11). Both the Sergeant and Deegan are defined by this publicly acknowledged rigid work ethic. As the Sergeant chastises a young man for idling in the town and chatting with a young girl, he retorts: “What would suit me is to see the youth of their country rolling up their sleeves. [...] Men didn’t risk their lives so the likes of ye could stand around idle” (Keegan 110). In the Sergeant’s opinion the public sphere is a man’s sphere; therefore, to see a young man lazily lingering around the town within full view of the community is to present a counter-masculine, even feminized image. Similarly, Deegan is defined continuously, by his neighbors, by his ability to provide for his family: “One thing the neighbours can’t say is that Victor Deegan is a bad provider. There isn’t so much as a lazy notion in the man’s head. Fifty-nine more payments” (Keegan 71). Deegan spends most of his days in the field and strives to make increasing improvements to his home, thereby displaying a visibly acknowledgeable image of proper masculinity. However, these portraits of publicized masculine authority negatively affect the construction of the family, particularly the role of women, when this form of authority is not surrendered in the private sphere.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain witnessed the rise of the separate spheres. For women, this meant the prioritization of domesticity, particularly popularized in conduct literature and domestic novels perpetuating the “cult of true womanhood.” This had both negative sexual and political implications for women.

<sup>100</sup> Keegan, like Doyle, points to the way in which nationalist terms of masculinity have not only crippled female identity, but also stultified masculine subjectivity. Expanding on Lloyd’s notion of Irishness as “a different discourse, yet one that is dominated by another” (Lloyd 2000, 199), Keegan exposes the inherent dependence of masculinity. Public masculinity is an identity that can

In “Surrender,” Keegan explicates the limits of masculinity and the challenges the Sergeant faces within privatized settings. As he enters the home of the Duignan woman to purchase oranges and bread, the Sergeant overhears a conversation between the women in the kitchen concerning him: “Sure hasn’t he the uniform?” one woman exclaims, to which she receives a cackling response, “A cold bloody thing it would be to lie up against in the middle of the night” (Keegan 111). While the women acknowledge that the Sergeant’s public persona is a thing of respect and authority, that form of masculinity does not fit well within the domestic sphere. This sentiment is further endorsed as the Sergeant transitions into the physical space of the home: “The talk that had seized up when his presence was made known had risen back to neutral speech. This, too, seized up on his entry. Walking in through the silence, he felt the same old distance and superiority he always felt” (Keegan 113-114). Aware of his singular alienation within this domestic space, the Sergeant must learn to turn off his public image in order to become a father figure, a husband, and a partner within the privacy of the home or risk perpetuating an unhealthy form of masculinity. Deegan, too, suffers to negotiate a private identity separable from his public identity as Deegan, the hard-working provider. In “The Forester’s Daughter,” Deegan’s obsession with bettering his home and sustaining the neighbors good opinion of him prevents him from seeing the effects his public persona has on his family. As Alfred Markey argues: “Here the house doesn’t stand for the home, the hearth of a community in harmony, instead it symbolizes the forester’s obsession with perpetuating the family line and the family farm” (Markey 99). Deegan admits that secretly, “he knew that the place gave him more satisfaction than his wife and children ever would” (Keegan 57), but this is because he has never taken the time to communicate or understand his family. For Deegan, family has always been a social requirement that came second to his plans for his home. As on the day he mortgaged Aghowle and “drove to Courtown

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be mimicked, as it follows a set of codes and behaviors held in check by a public body, but in the home this mimicry is re-introduced as violence, ignorance, and inertia. With no model of private masculinity to emulate, public masculinity is repeated and mimicked within the private sphere to tragic ends.

Harbour to find a wife” (Keegan 51), Deegan’s future plans are for himself and no one else: “For him, retirement will be the reward for all the risks he’s ever taken. By the time his pension comes, his children will be reared. He envisages himself in Aghowle with one Shorthorn for the house” (Keegan 57). Deegan’s reward for his work will be a life in which his children are already brought up by his wife, and he can be left to enjoy the house for himself. Deegan’s goals may be commendable, but his fixation on his work keeps him at a distance from his family to the point where he does not realize his wife has cheated on him and one of his children is not his own. This form of authoritative, public masculinity is dangerous in that it provides men with no model for successful manhood to enact within the private sphere of domesticity.

Change in both the Sergeant and Deegan’s understanding of masculinity, however, is affected by crisis. For the Sergeant, an ultimatum is issued: either he returns home and marries Susan or he remains a bachelor. Keegan has stated that this narrative was influenced by an incident recollected in John McGahern’s *Memoir*, “concerning his father who sat on a bench in Galway and ate twenty-four oranges before he married” (Keegan 161). As Keegan notes, “the fact that this terrible, mean-spirited man saw marriage as the opposite of pleasure and fulfillment so he had to gorge himself like that before he made the leap. As an image, it was irresistible” (O’Hagan 2010). As the Sergeant sits alone in his room thinking about the women he has encountered in his life, and contemplating his future, “he ate the oranges and thought about these women, concluding that there was little difference between them. By the time the last seed was on the gaols, he was gluttoned. ‘Another casualty,’ he said aloud in the empty room” (Keegan 119).<sup>101</sup> The “casualty” the Sergeant is referring to is himself, as the man he once was and can no longer be with Susan. He has acquiesced to the knowledge that the “big IRA man” is a nationalized

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<sup>101</sup> As he re-examines the women of his life, the Sergeant’s thoughts point to the consequences of the contrived ideology of patriarchal femininity: “He tried to think of each one separately – of what she said or how, exactly, she was dressed – but they were not so much mixed up in his mind as all the one: the same bulge at the top of the stocking, the shallow gasp, the smell of malt vinegar in their hair” (Keegan 119). The Sergeant’s superficial description of female physicality essentializes women and renders them a homogenizing entity. Herein lies the tension between ideological expectations and veritable realities concerning women.

identity, a masculinity constructed on the basis of a universalizing gendered ideology in opposition to a feminized domesticity. He may not be an entirely changed man as he rides his bicycle to give Susan his answer, but as he cycles a cold feeling surges through him, and “like all new feelings it made him anxious” (Keegan 120). Change is certainly a possibility in the Sergeant’s future. In “The Forester’s Daughter,” Deegan’s crisis takes a more drastic turn with the burning down of Aghowle. Deegan’s understanding of masculinity, which is inseparably bound up with his home, is only broken once the material marker no longer exists through which to define himself. As Keegan has expressed, herself: “It is only a house; it is only the material thing. It’s been the thing that’s been in the way of their marriage [...] And when that is gone, the family finds a freedom at the end of that story they didn’t have until then” (*The Eleventh Hour* 2007). As Deegan watches his house burn to the ground, he explains, “‘I didn’t know what I was doing.’ It’s the first admission he’s ever made” (Keegan 89). The fire, ironically initiated by the youngest son, is a cathartic moment, for it is no longer the foundation upon which Deegan can base his life. All that remains is his family, and therefore, a chance at redemption. As Deegan watches Aghowle extinguish, he “is numb and yet he feels lighter than before. The drudgery of the past is gone and the new work has not yet started. [...] Deegan grasps at thoughts: of having work, that it’s just a house, that they are alive” (Keegan 90). The family will stay together, and Deegan will start anew. Keegan’s narratives of gendered paradigms unveil the consequences of a nationalized masculine identity, and ultimately points to the domestic sphere and the family as the starting points for the re-conceptualization of masculinity.

*Walk the Blue Fields* engages with the tropes of a Romantic canonical body that has largely informed the Irish public body for the past century in order to challenge the discourse of progress hailed by a nation in transition. Keegan points to the expectations and assumptions of gender and community that have perpetuated a culture of inertia, specifically with regard to the formation of alternate subjectivities. While she is often cited as concerned with writing deeply dark thematic stories, Keegan’s narratives are not beyond the realm of hope and change. “I think people



sometimes confuse difficulty with darkness,” but “when you’re in pain, you’re learning,” she explains to Páraic Breathnach (*The Eleventh Hour* 2007). Although her collection is fraught with taboo subjects, such as broken families, paternal incest, and repressed sexuality, Keegan also counters these national failings with the tools necessary for cleansing and healing. Keegan may be a writer concerned with the past, but it is the past that still informs the social unconscious. In *Walk the Blue Fields*, progress can only proceed by taking a step back.

## Conclusion

*Where do we go from here?*

David Lloyd has argued that as a literary form, “the novel is not simply the product and reflection of certain social conditions, but actively contributes to producing them as the very condition of its own reception” (Lloyd 1993, 131). In Ireland, historically, male-dominated narratives reinforced the ideological values of the patriarchal state and reproduced the structures of political, economic, and cultural hegemony, and these narratives were legitimated through the state apparatus. As a case in point, the Censorship of Publications Act, which remained unchallenged from 1929 to 1979, was highly concerned with regulating any literary work that expressed interest in or dealt with issues concerning female sexuality. The Censorship Board’s authority to ban books on contraception targeted “sexual immorality,” “the advocacy of the unnatural prevention of conception,” and “the procurement of abortion or miscarriage” (Howes 1929). As a result, social knowledge of female sexuality (or the absence of female sexuality) was shaped and conditioned by silence, shame, and immorality because there were no publicly legitimated alternative representations of femininity. What the writings of Enright, Doyle, and Keegan reveal is that while public opinion may still be shaped largely by masculinist narratives, the increasing publication of literature discussing women’s issues is helping affect social change and advance Irish cultural modernity. As previously mentioned, Roddy Doyle received widespread criticism, from housewives to church officials, when he published the domestic abuse narrative, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*. *Walk the Blue Fields* was attacked for its focus on a “bygone” era and challenged by proponents of a discourse of progress that is predicated on a post-feminist framing of gender issues. Anne Enright’s novel, *The Gathering*, was disparaged for its excessive, frank, and perverse description of male and female sexuality. True or not, all of these critiques are informed by a particular understanding of gender dynamics, one in which women are “incorporated and disincorporated” into the Irish state in order to fit the current

prevailing masculinist paradigms (Sullivan 2008, 262). While these criticisms demonstrate that what is consumed by the public and validated by critics often occludes alternative female experiences, they also open an avenue for social dialogue and cultural critique.

Feminist literature has allotted contemporary Irish authors a space in which to confront and unpack discourses of the past and present in order to combat the invisibility of women's cultural history. According to Christine St. Peter, fiction may be termed "feminist" if "it treats gender as a social construction that specifically disadvantages women; that recognizes, however implicitly, that what has been constructed may at least be questioned, could be transgressed, and might be reconstructed; and that uses narrative as a tool in this project" (St. Peter 2000, 151). The fictions of Enright, Doyle, and Keegan, while questioning the micro-narratives of individual female subjectivity may be deemed "feminist," are also partaking in a national questioning of Irish identity constructions. These stories expose the consequences of an Irishness predicated on an oppressive and rigid form of masculinity, particularly as that discourse writes itself on the formation of a feminine subjectivity. Although these tales may be criticized for their over-dramatization of isolated, individual, and extreme cases of paternal ideology – broken families, incest, pedophilia, domestic violence, and suicide – these incidents are symptomatic of the larger condition of a patriarchal state/church discourse, the effects of which have plagued the Irish home and negated the formation of plural subjectivities.

As Ann Owens Weekes has noted, "writers whose careers began in the 1990s worked in a very different climate from that of their mothers and grandmothers" (Weekes 2010, 299).

Although I have mostly taken to rebuking the Celtic Tiger throughout this thesis, the effects of globalization and modernization<sup>102</sup> have prompted a more secular atmosphere, a liberalizing gender ideology, and an increasingly diversifying population, altering the atmosphere in which contemporary authors are writing. The contemporary Irish author has become a historical

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<sup>102</sup> Again, this is not to suggest that the transformation that has occurred in Ireland is only the product of recent events. Irish economic and cultural modernity have been in a process of transition since the 1950s, the effect of governmental reforms and feminist movements.

revisionist now “conscious of the debate in Irish historiography over the way Irish history was used in the last thirty years to both explain and justify political decisions and actions” (Garratt 12), and this “probing and questioning of the past, and of received ideas is perhaps the most important intellectual activity that is taking place in contemporary Ireland” (D. McCarthy 7). The exposition of female-centered issues in the recent works of Enright, Doyle, and Keegan, while interrogating the paternal historiography of the Republic, also provide an avenue to combat the trending post-Celtic Tiger discourse of gender progress predicated on the intertwining of a “post-feminist culture” and a “neoliberal political agenda” hiding a distinctively antiquated and coercive regressive sexism (Ging 56).

While the underlying frameworks of *The Gathering*, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, and *Walk the Blue Fields* are connected by an interrogative temporal lens, a self-conscious questioning of identity, and a thematic focus on the domestic sphere, family life, and social taboos, their stylistic motivations are divergent. Anne Enright states: “I’m really interested in the gap, but I see it as part of a feminist aesthetic. When women have been silent so long, you have to read the silences really urgently. The silences and also the illusions and the slippages” (Maloney and Thompson 63). *The Gathering* is characterized by deafening silences: unreliable truths, things that were never said, events that have been repressed, and corpses that refuse to remain dead but wordlessly haunt the lives of the Hegartys. However, Enright refuses to let these silences that surround her protagonist, Veronica, remain distant, thereby subsuming and rejecting the feminine. In this novel that prioritizes scenes of introspection and description over intra-textual dialogue, what is more important is what is not said. While Veronica’s personal quest for self-truths in the face of a traumatic past reflects Enright’s interest in “philosophy and psychoanalysis” (Schwall 206), this individual desire to “‘bear witness’ to the past is not an attempt to uncover the truth, but rather to open space for other stories and voices, repressed in the past, to be heard” (Bracken and Cahill 6). Enright connects “personal and national trauma,” specifically through the figure of the female

body (Harte 188). Her attention to the female body and its divergent representations – sexual, corporeal, violated, invisible – highlight the various national misappropriations of women’s bodies in Ireland. Most importantly, however, in her writing of a maternal historiography, Enright “suggests a need to redress society rather than condemn mothers’ failures” (Weekes 2000, 121). This narrator’s struggle for personal subjectivity amidst a history of silence exposes the structures of female oppression while engaging with the silences that have defined the “feminist aesthetic” in order to deconstruct and reappropriate the traditional masculinist values of identity categorization.

*The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* does not rely on lengthy descriptions of landscapes or traditional plot devices. In his novel, Roddy Doyle emphasizes dialogue – both internal and external – literally giving a voice to the historically voiceless. While Doyle has often been cited explaining that his decision to tell the story of an abused woman from the point of view of the victim (Paula) “posed a huge artistic challenge,” *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* is more than an exercise in psychology (Reynolds 169). Doyle renders visible the ongoing problem of patriarchal violence consciously unacknowledged by the state and maintaining the secondary status of women. In his exposition of the post-Independence project of modernization that gendered social spaces and hierarchized institutions of power, consequentially effecting the formation of both female and male identities, Doyle also implicates the socio-modernizing discourse of the Celtic Tiger in its redefinition of exclusionary modes of Irishness that have ultimately altered the forms of gender oppression. While Doyle does not espouse to have the solutions to any of these gender issues, he is not afraid to nod his head toward the agents and forces responsible for female victimization, including women themselves. However, Doyle’s writing is a potential solution in itself. In reference to *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, Carmine White states: “A man writing convincingly and unpatronizingly in a woman’s voice is an accomplishment in itself; a man writing successfully from the perspective of a woman who is uncertain about her status both

as a person and as a woman, and who is trying to discover her identity by examining her history, is extraordinary” (White 119). Men’s writing of female-centered issues has the potential to transform the gender socialization process. As Doyle’s writing has revealed, domestic abuse is largely a male issue and male attitudes have to change before the nature of patriarchal violence fundamentally alters. In her evaluation of a domestic violence intervention program, Úna Stapleton asserts that all too often approaches to violence intervention focus on the reason women stay in an abusive relationship rather than investigate why men abuse their female partners: “Seeking an effective and sustainable solution to the problem of men’s violence against intimate partners involves recognizing the issue and addressing it as a problem. This cannot be undertaken without including concerted efforts to engage violent men” (Stapleton 2). Doyle’s account of patriarchal violence combats the invisibility of female victimization and seeks to affect change and social transformation by addressing issues of male socialization in the study of gender violence.

*Walk the Blue Fields* is less psychologically motivated than both *The Gathering* and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*. Instead, Keegan invests in a literary redaction of psychological themes in order to engage with the Irish literary canon in a highly contrived manner. In an act of performativity, Keegan consciously repeats against the origin of canonical female stereotypes in order to subvert and redefine the process of subject formation. In doing so, she also pays a nod toward her female literary predecessors, such as Edna O’Brien and Mary Lavin, employing former women’s themes and motifs in a way that seems to conflict with the postmodernist feminist tendencies of Enright and Doyle. What is most important, however, is the way in which Keegan records change amidst these repetitions. As Elke D’hoker explains, “these changes are often small and barely visibly beneath the surface layer of the rural life” seeming to adhere to Keegan’s valuation of traditional Ireland, “nevertheless, these small changes are important for Keegan’s daughters, as they enable them to move beyond their mothers without repudiating them” (D’hoker 14).

*Walk the Blue Fields* is rooted in a response to a site of the social unconscious. Keegan's awareness of the way in which literature is received by the public and reflected in the process of socialization is a self-conscious attempt to subvert the processes of social transformation and re-envision cultural change. Like Doyle and Enright, however, Keegan also points to the home, the domestic sphere, as the site in which ideological change must first occur before it unfurls into the social collective. The traditional Irish family conceived by Eamon de Valera in his 1930s conception of Irishness was flawed. The Irish family is a myth, and it is a myth that has perpetuated an inequitable set of gender relationships and acted as one of the most oppressive agents of subject formation. Keegan's narratives, focusing on various stages of female development, shed light on the difficulty of negotiating a gendered identity within the mythological bonds of family and community.

Women's rights, especially issues concerning self-determined sexuality, abortion rights, and equal employment opportunities, are still at the forefront of Irish political and social debates. The works of writers like Enright, Doyle, and Keegan contribute to the current efforts to challenge the idealized images of Irish women and confront the realities of women's lives, as well as identify key issues concerning women today and encourage social and political reform efforts sought by women and men. Understanding women within the context of modern Irish history and their relation to the state will allow for the rethinking of questions of authorship, genre, and canon-formation and the "self-conscious questioning" of conventional versions of literary, political, and social history (Kelleher 89). Reading this alternative space of Irish feminist writing is assisting in a critical examination of the "feminine" in the field of Irish Studies, helping to re-imagine the canon of Irish writing, and participating in the reevaluation of the role of women in Irish society, not to mention prompting the education and discussion of the gendered history of the Republic. By engaging in an interdisciplinary analysis of *The Gathering*, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, and *Walk the Blue Fields*, I have attempted to demonstrate the role contemporary literature plays in the process of social transformation. Nearly a century ago, James Joyce

reflected on the cultural disavowal of women and the conditions of their existence in Irish society: “They don’t know what it is to be a woman and a mother,” explains Molly Bloom at the end of *Ulysses* (*U* 18.778). The “them” she is referring to is men, and she was correct – twentieth century Ireland had little conception of what it meant to be a woman. Although Ireland is still revisiting the past in order to uncover the meaning of Irishness today, Molly Bloom’s words no longer bear the weight of truth they once did.



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