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Tenacious, Determined and Challenged
Women in short stories by Edna O'Brien and Maeve Binchy

Joana Filipa Cordeiro Ferreira Miranda

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For all the people who love stories

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Declaration

I declare that the present thesis is of my own authorship and was not used previously in another degree or curricular unit, in this or any other institution. The references to other authored (affirmations, ideas, thoughts) scrupulous respect the rules of attribution, and are correctly indicated in the text and bibliographic references, in accord with the referencing norms. I am completely aware that the practice of plagiarism and self-plagiarism is an academic infringement.

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Declaro que o presente dissertação é de minha autoria e não foi utilizado previamente noutro curso ou unidade curricular, desta ou de outra instituição. As referências a outros autores (afirmações, ideias, pensamentos) respeitam escrupulosamente as regras da atribuição, e encontram-se devidamente indicadas no texto e nas referências bibliográficas, de acordo com as normas de referenciação. Tenho consciência de que a prática de plágio e auto-plágio constitui um ilícito académico.

Porto, 2021

Joana Filipa Cordeiro Ferreira Miranda

Ackwnoledgements

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Abstract

This dissertation occupies itself with exploring several short stories by Maeve Binchy and Edna O'Brien, through the light of feminism and literary criticism. The objective is to shed light on the depiction that the two authors have given of problematic aspects of Irish society, dissecting it through their female protagonists' eyes. The argument stands for the presentation of a feminist approach to their work in attempts to unveil what lies beyond the written word and to focus on the challenges faced by women in Ireland.

Key-words: [Maeve Binchy, Edna O'Brien, Feminism, Literary Fiction]

Resumo

[máximo 300 palavras]

O tema desta dissertação prende-se com a exploração de várias histórias da autoria de Maeve Binchy e Edna O'Brien através da teoria feminista e critica literária. O objetivo é esclarecer a representação que as duas autoras deram aos aspetos problemáticos da sociedade irlandesa, dessecando-a através dos olhos das suas protagonistas femininas. Os argumentos para a exploração feminista dos seus trabalhos na tentativa de revelar o que está para lá da palavra escrita e focar-nos nos desafios que as mulheres irlandesas enfrentam.

Palavras-Chave: [Maeve Binchy, Edna O'Brien, Feminismo, Ficção Literária]

Introduction

This dissertation will focus on three short stories by Edna O'Brien and another three by Maeve Binchy in which the two authors focus on comparable aspects in the life experience of women., starting by dissecting them individually and then comparing them, briefly, to each other. The objective is to present a feminist approach to the work of these celebrated authors in attempts to unveil what lies beyond the written word and to focus on the challenges faced by women in Ireland.

Edna O'Brien, born in 1930, is renowned for probing women's feelings, experiences and their emotions toward men in her writing. Novelist, short fiction and nonfiction writer and screenwriter, her magnum opus, The Country Girls Trilogy (1960) was a smashing beginning to a successful and bright career. Her other novels include several successful publications, like *August is a Wicked Month* (1965), *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), *Down by the River* (1996), *The Light of Evening* (2006), *The Little Red Chairs* (2015) and, most recently *Girl* (2019). She has also several collections of the short-fiction genre, including *The Love Object* (1968), *A Scandalous Woman and Other Stories* (1974), *A Fanatic Heart* (1984), *Lantern Slides* (1990) and *Saints and Sinners* (2011).

O'Brien is one of the most beloved Irish female authors and has won many awards for the thoroughly haunting representations of her characters. Her first trilogy was the subject of many derogatory remarks – at one point, even, her books were banned – due to its explorations of feminine sexuality, transgressions, and desires. O'Brien recalls a critic saying that her "talent resided in my knickers."(O'Brien, 2012, as cited in *The Guardian*, 12th of October, 2012). As Anne Enright ironically puts it: "Edna O'Brien was the first Irish woman ever to have sex. For some decades, indeed, she was the only Irish woman to have had sex - the rest just had children." (Enright, 2006)

Writing for *The Guardian* about Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening*, Enright remarks on O'Brien's talent for breaking social taboos relating to sex, sexual encounters, abortion, extramarital affairs, violence, and the abuse that were subjects in her semi-biographical *The Country Girls Trilogy*. O'Brien's work, Enright argues, is infused with a sense of candour that seemed to be lacking in previous literature: "It became apparent what was actually remarkable about her writing, what had been remarkable all along: it was not sex, at all, but honesty." (Enright, 2006)

Honesty about the experiences of women, varied as they might have been and might be, which was, of course "a heroic and sometimes difficult position to maintain in the national imagination" (Enright, 2006). O'Brien was, most of her life, seen as an outcast in Ireland, a wild, peculiar girl, whose childhood was, as she herself states in 'Country Girl', "at once beautiful and frightening, tender and savage" (O'Brien, 2012:8). Product of a marriage between a peasant mother and a gentleman – and

later, drunk – of a father, she does not hide her two divergent sides, stating that they were due to her very contrasting grandmothers – one a lady, the other a peasant.

She does not, however, shy away from her roots in the rural side of Ireland, prefers to critique it from afar, guided by the light of her experiences, and of others like her, with a sense of wonder, injustice, sadness and awe. This leads Maureen O'Connor to state that O'Brien is unlike any other woman writer. "Edna O'Brien is remarkable in the sense that she wrote and got out. … The class of women who wrote were rich: they had that confidence built in already. But Edna O'Brien is the great, the wonderful mistake in all of that scheme of things." (O'Connor, 2005:48)

It is also apparent, not only to the reader, but also to O'Brien herself, that James Joyce seems to be like a forefather to her, a tutor. While Joyce was one of the first Catholic Irishmen to be widely heard in the world, so Edna O'Brien was one of the first Irishwomen who achieved wide popularity while recounting the love trials and experiences of women. In an interview with Phillip Roth, she explores her relationship with relationships:

> First of all, I think love replaced religion for me in my sense of fervour. When I began to look for earthly love (i.e., sex), I felt that I was cutting myself off from God. (O'Brien, 2014)

This religious separation did much to lead O'Brien into expatriation, her denouncement by the Catholic Church and consequent burning of her books. Not only that, but she did have firm beliefs in case of the role of women in society, and the toll the current state of law and society inflicted upon young girls, adult women and old (and young) widows. As a profoundly Christian environment, the whole of the island seemed to not allow her to have these opinions. When speaking of the differences between men and women, in an interview with Phillip Roth, she admits that, when she left Dublin for London as a young adult "I do not think that I would have written anything if I had stayed. I feel I would have been watched, would have been judged (even more!), and would have lost that priceless commodity called freedom." (O'Brien, 2014) It is also amusing to consider that her books, which were so incredibly scandalous in Ireland, were a downright success in England, having been made into movies – specifically *The Country Girls* and *Wild Decembers* – and included in BBC News's list of the *100 most influential novels*.

Maureen O'Connor in her essay "Edna O'Brien, Irish Dandy" (2005:472), links O'Brien and her work with Baudelaire's Dandy, arguing that she attracts a large audience from multiple layers of society and is constantly shifting in terms of style. From this perspective, O'Brien seems a sort of chameleon, appearing to be an insider and an outsider in Ireland with such effortlessness, shifting the critics' perception of her and her work so that, to confine her to a genre or in only one theme would be barbaric. She has come from being an outcast, to being Irelands' "literary darling".

Furthermore, she also explores the differentiation in the nature of being a female author and a male author:

> I think it is different being a man and a woman, it is very different. I think you (Roth) as a man have waiting for you in the wings of the world a whole cortege of women—potential wives, mistresses, muses, nurses. (O'Brien, 2014)

The characters in Edna O'Brien fiction were arguably different, and recognisably so, from the women that featured in most writing by male authors at the time she launched her career. Her somewhat Joycean attention to detail and her depictions of women's lives as challenging and plagued with oppression, have awarded her a firm place on the global literature canon. Her frequently positioning young females in the throes of unwanted or complicated situations – and their ability to overcome them – supports her self-appointed status as "someone who spoke the truth" (O'Brien, 2020). Among her peers she is described as something of a rebel. Sinéad Gleeson describes her choice topic for her narratives as:

> transgressive, and courageous of O'Brien in misogynistic, uber-Catholic Ireland to address sexuality and to challenge the idea of what an Irish women could be (for her trouble, she was accused of "corrupting the minds of young women) (Gleeson, 2020).

Maureen O'Connor has said of her work:

> The truth and beauty of Edna O'Brien's often painfully honest prose have, finally, achieved something like universal recognition. The timelessness of her observations about human emotion and relationships is rarely connected to another distinguishing quality of her writing, her astonishing powers of description of the natural world. (Maureen O'Connor,2020)

In the themes of expatriation, style, themes, and beliefs, is where the connections are most visible between Edna O'Brien and Maeve Binchy. Both women are renowned Irish authors and figures, both share themes and formats, both of them allowed space in their texts to represent characters that confirm their feminist perceptions, further implementing the imaginative processing of women's predicaments in the Irish narrative. Both writers have also had an important place in chronicling Ireland and its problems and both, despite the difficulties, have managed to attract large readerships, firmly positioning themselves as canonical Irish writers. The topics discussed by both include abortion, parent-child relationships, the rural/urban divide and the tensions between modern life and the deeply religious Irish society of their childhood. Their work stands as a narrative fictionalisation of the developments in Irish feminist history, politics, economics, and society. The politicization of women's bodies has been of central discussion in political circles, and they shine through their work.

Maeve Binchy, the second author discussed in this dissertation, as garnered a place for herself in the literary canon, as her discussions of women's life experiences and

friendships have awarded her much praise. Known as "the queen of Irish popular fiction" (McKittrick, 2012) and a "larger-than-life author and journalist" (O'Clery, 2012) her work impacted a generation of women who were shaped by her.

A journalist, teacher, playwriter and best-selling author, her literary production started in 1982 when she published her first novel *Light a Penny Candle* (1982) – which garnered her many compliments[1] – and was turned into a playwright and performed in the Spring of 2019. *Circle of Friends* (1991) and *Tara Road* (1998) were her two best-sellers that had a book-to-screen adaptation (1995 and 2005 respectively), and her short story collection *The Lilac Bus (1984*) was directed into a television movie in 1990. Of her short-story collections stand out *Dublin Four* (1982), *Chestnut Street* (2014) and *A Few of the Girls* (2016) – these last two posted posthumously.

Born in 1940, just outside of Dublin, Binchy speaks of an idyllic, happy infancy in the countryside, but she, too, left Ireland after her soon-to-be husband and fellow writer, Gordon Snell. What is most striking in the relationship of the two, and what I think is somewhat revealed in her work as an author, is the nature of the two's courtship. Of it, Binchy has stated that she pursued Snell persistently and continually. It should not, then, be of wonder why she chooses to focus her writing on relationships – be they broken, deceitful and loveless, or happy, hopeful and kind.

Of her, Anne Enright commented on Binchy's palpable affection through her words, describing her as "wise, generous, funny and full-hearted, she was the best of good company on the page and off it." (Enright, 2012 as cited by O'Clery, 2012)

Maeve Binchy and Gordon Snell faced fertility problems and eventually ended up being unable to conceive. Of it the author said to the Daily Mail:

> Of course I wanted children. Bright, gorgeous, loving children. I could almost see them. But it was not to be and 30 years ago things were very different. Fertility drugs were not as developed, and adoption was impossible after the age of 40.
>
> So my husband and I went through the sad, disappointed bit and then decided to count the blessings that we already had and 'get on with it'. (Binchy to the *Daily Mail* 17th of September, 2008)

The inability some women have to have children – be it because they physically cannot, or they just do not have stable partners – features prominently in her writing. Despite this she still achieved success and notoriety, embedding herself in the education of young girls as she did have a position as a schoolteacher in the 1960s –

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[1]The New York Times Book Review called her "A remarkably gifted writer … a wonderful student of human nature; The Washington Post exclaimed that "Reading one of Maeve Binchy's novels is like coming homme"; The Chicago Tribune argues that "Binchy's tales combine warmth and spunk in a quintessentially Celtic way … in the field of women's popular fiction, the Dublin storytellers sticks out like a faultless solitaire on a Woolworth's jewelry counter," (as cited from Penguin Random House)

while free education was being introduced in Ireland in 1967. Of her female students, she answered in her personal blog that:

> I was very anxious to give the girls I taught confidence, to tell them that they were responsible for their own lives. It didn't matter about being married, or rich or good-looking or thin, inner happiness is what we create for ourselves. … Women don't need to be rescued, they rescue themselves. (Binchy)

A The Telegraph obituary, written by Amanda Craig, seems to diminish her to something missing, reducing being a woman to being a mother:

> No matter what your experience of adult love, there is nothing as strong as the bond between a mother and a child... Putting yourself last is one of the best things that can happen to a writer. I make no moral claims for motherhood -- which can bring out the worst in a person, in the form of vicarious rivalry, bitchiness, envy and even mental illness - but going through the ring of fire does change you and bring about a deeper understanding of human nature. (Craig, 2012)

Of course, we are shaped by our experiences in life, but it seems insulting to link her writing with her not having been a mother, when generations upon generations of Irish women have fought to throw that archetype into the shadows, arguing that men do not have to subject themselves to such standards. And yet, they do not, which is precisely the point Binchy has tried to make in some of her work as a novelist and a journalist.

Under her belt as a journalist, she had an opinion column in the *Irish Times*. Devoted entirely to questioning society's rules for women, it is a certainty that Binchy was leading the ladies to the front of Irish society. Confronted with a review of one of her books, calling her a "quiet feminist" (McKervey,2018), Binchy stated that she was absolutely thrilled, further explaining that she thought sometimes women took themselves too seriously and too humbly, cutting themselves short because of their timidity and supposed frailty. She wanted to show said women that success came when they took the reins of their own lives.

While she is considered to be what is commonly known as a chick-lit author (Chonchúir, 2007; Jackson, 2013; Keyes, 2012) – sometimes with negative connotation – we would be wise to remember that chick-lit literature was one of the most prominent of genres in the matter of advancing feminism and women in Ireland. It is through her refusal – or incapability – to conform, that she sets a standard for newer women, newer feminists.

As many reviewers have stated, Binchy's work is focused on the real concerns of women: not if they have to marry or conform to beauty stereotypes, but the ploys they sometimes have to resort to escape a male-dominated world, or the unhappiness they feel in their loveless marriages, or of the economic problems that affect the family. Though a canonical figure in Irish literature, she does not enjoy the same

recognition as Edna O'Brien. She is certainly well accomplished and celebrated, and her work has inspired a whole generation of women.

Her written pieces give immense importance to the tightness and steadiness of female friendship and its ability to conquer all adversities. Binchy is an expert at depicting human relationships and successfully depicted her characters in the most realistic way possible. She said of her characters. "I don't think you're happier if you're thin or beautiful or rich or married. You have to make your own happiness. My heroines do not become beautiful, elegant swans, they become confident ducks and get on with life." (Binchy, 2000 as cited in the *Los Angeles Times*, 2012).

In a statement given on the day of her death, the Irish prime minister Enda Kenny stated that her loss was to be felt "wherever stories of love, hope, generosity and possibility are read and cherished." (Kenny, 2021 as cited in *The New York Times*, 2012).

Despite their similarities, the differences between the authors still stand out. Their approach to the various topics of feminism and feminine representation differs from each other in their tone. Edna O'Brien's depiction of her female characters is of marked insurgence and revolt. Their wish for an uprising against the established society and the push given for such insurrection is palpable in her representation of her female characters, allowing readers to find, in some cases, a mirror of their own experiences and beliefs. Her insurrectionist stance on topics of feminine rights and liberation is felt in her novels and collections make her characters reliable and ordinary. Maeve Binchy's tone is considerably less of insurgence and more of representation. Her representation of female characters represents the understanding that the accepted social status of women is not one to be maintained. Her portrayal of characters that explicitly break the fragile mould of the patriarchal society she lived in and expresses a hope for a future not far away. Maeve Binchy's countryside is idyllic while Edna O'Brien's is oppressive. The Christian faith is a topic approached by both, and while Edna O'Brien exposes the flaws of Catholicism in Ireland, Maeve Binchy's approach is much more nuanced.

The Ireland they knew and abandoned was deeply patriarchal and Christian. Because of the resistance found when discussing the secularization of the country, religion came to have a heavy weight in all matters of society. Public displays of religiosity – like prayers and processions – were common throughout the land a point where being a devout Christian granted you social, cultural and political prominence.

Church and State were established as the two essential aspects to Irish society from the very beginning of the country's partial independence in the early 1920s. To quote Tom Inglis "Together they emerged as the two pillars that symbolically dominated Irish society and dictated how the political game should be played. The Church cooperated with the state in the distribution and allocation of resources, goods and services." (Inglis, 2005:65) This cooperation was more of a power move by the

church to establish its hold on Irish society and control such aspects as politics, social and personal lives of Irishmen and Irishwomen, education, health and sexuality.

While many countries in Europe were moving forward and relegating religion to the private, inner space of the self, in Ireland it was a social activity. Religion thrives on tradition, and in keeping with it implements its powerful grab on the population with the intention that the people would not develop the ability to deny or question the church and its actions, creating what Inglis describes as an "orthodox Catholic disposition". Questions of development into modernity were slowed by the Catholic church, and feminism, the focus of this dissertation, was one of them, a matter which is now the object of much study by literary, political, social and history scholars.

Knowing the position women hold in clerical hierarchy, it is no surprise that the clergy believes society must emulate it. What is more paradoxical, is that several accounts of Irish society during the 19th and 20th century have pinpointed women as the main pursuers of Christian piety and purity, sometimes forcing a cruel and oppressive regime upon their younger counterparts. However, these women were simply atoning for being considered 'others', for being denied dignity and equality with males.

Long before the Constitutional problem, women were always positioned beneath males in societal stratification. And because Christianity was deeply embedded in what it meant to be Irish, these women tried to compensate for being 'others' by being deeply and vehemently Christian, which in their perception moved them toward the 'whole', towards being a part of society in full. Before Christianity took hold and citing Kiberd "ancient Irish laws were remarkably liberal in their attitude to women" in the sense that a "woman could divorce a sterile, impotent, or homosexual husband, could marry a priest, and could give an honourable birth to a child outside of wedlock". (Kiberd, 1995:215 as cited by Ryan, 2010:93.) With Christianity taking a hold overregulating the moral and ethical parts of society, these were no longer considered viable paths to follow.

During the 1920s and 1930s, fears grew – not only in Ireland – about the welfare and moral high ground of the inhabitants of the country. In Catholic schools, girls were taught the importance of preserving their purity, to be kind, modest and obedient. These teachings went all the way to how women dressed, to a point where rules were established so that dresses should never be cut less than 10 centimetres below the knee, the arms should always be covered by sleeves usually 5 centimetres below the elbow and stockings should never be the colour of the skin, which could provoke thoughts of indecency in men. Smoking was banned, and so was laughing in public, plays and dances were also prohibited. Citing Catriona Beaumont "Women were expected to be modest and well behaved because the responsibility of preserving the moral fibre of Irish life lay in their hands" (Beaumont, 1998:568). So, women were the

first line of defence against the immorality – read, agnosticism or atheism – that was looming over western civilization.

While in the Constitution of 1922 all persons, despite their gender, were allowed the right to vote, the right to equal opportunities and equal religious and civil liberties, that would all change in a few short years. The future seemed bright for women in Ireland to live an unbiased and prejudice-free life, and feminist Irish women were looking forward to what they thought to be a brighter future for themselves and their daughters. However, pronouncements by Pope Leo XIII and later by Pope Pius XI, indicating that the natural place for women was the home changed this perspective for the worse.

As a deeply Catholic country, as it has previously been stated, the opinion of the highest representation of God on earth had a huge weight on the population in general, be they men or women. This statement was then considered the basis for the deeply unequal and profoundly biased legislation that was used to limit and oppress women into certain, previously elected roles. The differentiation of women and men became even more serious when in 1924, an Act was passed that gave women, exclusively, the right to be excused from jury duty – which was an equal right based on the 1919 Sex Disqualification Removal Act – suggesting that women had different responsibilities from men, and hence should be given 'a break'. This Act was defended with the absurd claim that women should be allowed to excuse themselves from this duty – this privilege – because they were supposedly busy with their lives at home and with their children. This was perceived by feminists at the time to be a bad omen for the women's movement in Ireland.

These fears reached their apex when in 1927, Minister Kevin O'Higgins attempted to ban women altogether, from serving on juries. This was opposed, and of course, feminists held protests against this attempt, being supported in the Senate by Senators Jennie Wyse Power and Eileen Costello. Setting a precedent for women to be treated 'specially' because they were busy with their family life was a dangerous thing. If women were excluded because of their duties in the home, what was to stop them from confining them to their homes?

Despite this second Act not having passed, it did provide a basis for women to be discriminated against solely on the basis of sex. Women, now, had to apply to be jurors voluntarily, meaning that the number of female jurors seriously diminished. The worry felt by Irish feminists was completely grounded, and within a few more years, the promise of equality in the Irish Free State vanished.

In 1932, Eamon De Valera rose to power as the new Prime Minister – the Taoiseach – and the leader of the Fianna Fail party. In 1934, his administration passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which included the ban on the sale and import of any type of birth control. Contraception and Birth Control are a matter of public and national health; however, women were constantly seen as breeders, almost animals

themselves. Several other laws were passed to bar women's participation in society, in the work force, in politics – everything that was not inside the household was seen as 'impure' for women to participate in. Under Eamon de Valera's party – Fianna Fail – the threat was upon these liberties, these duties and privileges, for women. Laws were passed that denied women the opportunity to have a career after marriage, another that established how many female workers a company could and should have – an attempt to reduce male unemployment at the cost of female jobs. This slow, but vigorous, attack on women and their status in Irish society culminated with the elaboration of a Constitution by Eamon de Valera's party, the draft of which represented, again, a big threat to women and women's rights in Ireland. It also put a lot of power in the Church's hands, giving it the ability to control Irish politics. In this draft, many Catholic beliefs were reaffirmed (Beaumont, 1997; Cleary, 2006).

This new constitution prohibited divorce and the enactment of any law on divorce from then on. A kind of shift also occurred, where the primary unit of society was not the individual, but the family, from then on considered to be the "natural primary and fundamental unit group of society" (Article 41:1.1). Women were thrown back to their life inside the home as "the State recognises that by *her* life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common ground cannot be achieved" (Article 41.2 italics by me). Article 41.2.2 added that mothers would not feel the need to look for paid work and forget their duties in the home, which reflected the (church's) belief that the women's place was, again, the home. De Valera blamed his unwillingness to amend this Article by stating that "the State pledges itself to have special care for the family. Everyone knows there is little chance of having a home in the real sense if there is no woman in it, the woman is really the home-maker." (De Valera,1937 cited in Beaumont, 1997:578), showing, not only a complete disregard for women who were not inclined to have a family and a family-home but a disregard to those who did not wish to remain in an unhappy, failed marriage.

Another great problem in this draft of a Constitution was, as Catriona Beaumont points out, "The absence of the term "distinction of sex" (Beaumont, 1997:575) This, she also states, paired with the wording of Article 40.1 was problematic as it affirmed that all citizens were equal in the law, but that "this shall not be held to mean that the State shall not in its enactments have due regard to differences of capacity, physical and oral, and of social function" (Article 40.1 of the Irish Constitution)

De Valera, a clearly pious and devoted man, argued that there was no gender inequality in this draft constitution, arguing that the term "distinction of sex" was unnecessary. However, due to pressure from women groups – such as the National University Graduate's Women Association – NUWGA; the Irish Women Workers Union; the Joint Committee for Women's Societies and Social Workers – this expression ended up being added to two articles of the draft.".

In this new constitution of the Free State, now women were uniquely defined through their relationship to their husbands, or to the household or even to their job as educators. Catriona Beaumont states that the constitution implied that "women would be relegated to permanent inferiority…". Women could have three roles in Irish society, they could conform to the norms and be single maidens or dutiful wives, or they could be harlots, shamed by society.

Without most of these concerns being addressed, the Constitution of 1937 was passed by a means of a plebiscite with a majority of 685,105 votes in favour, enacted seven years into Edna O'Brien's life, and two years before Maeve Binchy was born, and deeply controversial in the eyes of many blossoming feminists in Ireland. While it did not establish the Catholic church as the official church of Ireland, it gave the church a uniquely privileged position in Irish society. Hence, State and Church were united in declaring the home the natural place for the women of Ireland.

The Eight Amendment of 1983 saw another degradation of female rights and choice in Ireland by imposing a ban on abortion. Another Amendment was made, in 1992, after the case of Attorney General vs. X, an infamous case of a fourteen-year-old – named only as "X" to protect her identity – who had fallen victim of rape in December 1991 and became pregnant. The young girl told her mother of suicidal thoughts, and the courts ruled in her favour. Thus, a precedent was established for an abortion when it represented a risk for the mother, even if that risk was suicide.[2] But even so, the topic remained frowned upon amongst society. As Geraldine Meaney puts it, in her essay "Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics":

> The extent to which women only exist as a function of their maternity in the dominant ideology of southern Ireland became apparent during the referendum of the eighth amendment to the constitution. (Meaney, 1991:3)

The constant stifling of female sexuality is in tone, seeing as Ireland has a proud tradition of considering itself a romanticised, Feminine entity. However, this had to fall in line with the narrative of male domination, so the Island was reinvented as a woman who clamoured for men to fight for her. Irishwomen were left with the task to emulate her passivity and loyalty, religiosity, and fertility.

This tradition is a remnant from the history of colonisation in Ireland and how it is intimately connected to the way the colonisers saw the land. Ashis Nandy (1983)[3]

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[2] The Eight Amendment, however, was only completely removed as late as May 25th, 2018, when the Irish people voted, by 66.4%, to repeal the amendment, substituting it with the text, "Provision may be made by law for the regulation of termination of pregnancy". The Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy Act of 2018 defined the terms for legal abortion in Ireland. It permitted abortions to be carried out up to twelve weeks of pregnancy or when there is risk of the mother's life.

[3] See "*The Intimate Enemy* by Ashis Nandy;

theorizes that colonized countries are perceived as feminine by their colonizers. Seen as passive, passionate and innocent, but at the same time barbaric and incapable of self-governing. It seems that Irish people have integrated this proudly in their conception of the island, seeing the land as a "weak, ineffectual women that needed to be controlled by a strong, resolute man." (Stevens & Brown, 2000:408)

This, alongside with the proclamations (Arnold, 1860s; Renan, 1980s) that the Celts were a deeply feminine race, impractical and emotional, unable to rule themselves. This opinion of the land did not shift with the country's partial independence in the 1920s, but it had become clear that being a Celt had become problematic. Irishmen needed to project a strong front of masculinity that conveyed a sense of power. So, the opinion of the Ireland as a weak, dependant woman was perpetuated – with some of its reincarnations being relatively modern ones. Yeats's Cathleen Ni Houlihan is one of the most recent and most interesting ones to evoke here.

Cathleen Ni Houlihan, deriving from a play by Yeats with the same name, is in some ways a reincarnation of the Shan Van Vocht[4]. She too, needs young Irishmen to fight for her cause and help free Ireland from colonisation. A symbol of nationalism originating from literature, she appears in Yeats's play (1902) as an old woman who arrives in a typical Irish home on the day of a wedding. She then convinces the groom to fight for the Irish Rebellion of 1798 in which he dies. After the groom made his choice, he notices that the old woman is no longer old, but young and beautiful and his decision to join the rebellion has rejuvenated her – given her new life. This could be also taken to mean, as Richard Kearney has stated (1988) that the myth of the Shan Van Vocht and Cathleen Ni Houlihan hints that there is a need for blood to be spilled to liberate Ireland, tying these images to the pagan concepts of seasonal rejuvenation through sacrifice and martyrdom.

And on the topic of sacrifice, some of our leading ladies are just that. Sacrificial Women.

With this thesis I hope to shed light on the depiction that the two authors have given of problematic aspects of Irish society, dissecting it through their female protagonists' eyes and subsequently giving us a hint of their opinion on Irish society.

The first chapter will focus on Edna O'Brien's "The Widow" and Maeve Binchy's "The Consultant Aunt" which explore how impactful religion is on the life of a woman whose first marriage is not the only love affair she lives in her one life, and how the

[4] A mythological figure in the Irish lore, the Shan Van Vocht is the embodiment of Mother Ireland. She is the destitute, moribund Ireland who needs young men to die a martyr's death for her restitution and rejuvenation.

pursuit of such love affairs can affect and ruin family bonds. Familial ties, enmity and (un)expectable behaviours will also be at the forefront of this chapter.

The second chapter will have at its nucleus O'Brien's "The Favourite" and Binchy's "Bella and the Marriage Counsellor". These short stories show how women's appearance, and the gradual loss of beauty and tyranny of time, are a woman's biggest source of pressure from society. It seems beauty is the only thing that matters to these characters, the brilliance of social life on the arm of the husband. However, when such beauty is lost same is the happiness that follows. Either because they are left for another or because they realise, they are old and have not led the life they wanted to, both main female characters seem to fault their appearance for the lack of desire on the part of their (ex)husbands.

The third chapter will consist of a reflection upon social identity, the dispersion of personality of women, - against what popular authors might believe – female friendship, – or lack thereof – and connubiality present in Edna O'Brien's "Lantern Slides" and Maeve Binchy's "Just a Few of the Girls". Both of these tales, which are certainly the ones that most resemble each other within the corpus of this dissertation, focus on different groups of women, with different experiences, perspectives, personalities and end goals but united in their grievances against their husbands.

The conclusion will consist of a set of final, combined impressions on the works of both authors and their similarities.

1. Chapter One: Refusing to Conform: The Women that Break the Stereotypes of Society

The family unit and religion were, for many years, the foundation blocks of the Irish society. Women are often "… victims of a patriarchal society always subjected to the pressure of restrictive degendered expectations." (Argáiz 2012:85). This chapter will mainly focus on the deconstruction of familial and societal ties and the complete demoralization and destruction of two women – one who is allowed to survive although her hope for a happy future were compromised, the other meets a fatal end but her spirit remains intact – by discussing the short stories "The Consultant Aunt" by Maeve Binchy and "The Widow" by Edna O'Brien deconstructing their female characters and showing how two very different women adapt – or not– to Irish society.

In the 1990s, Irish female writers made a valiant effort to reconstruct the image of the young Irish woman: she is no longer the virginal, dependant, concerned-with-marriage-and-children, shy and non-opinionated girl. She now takes control of her own life, she goes into the workforce, follows a career, personal relationships and constituting a family takes second place on the podium of her life. Her opinions shine through and burst out of her like rays of sunshine. She constantly defies the traditions and the morals of Irish society, rebuilding the image of the pious, innocent female to fit her persona and to reflect the progression of times (Meaney, 1991; Griffin, 2005; Coughlan, 2004). And while this new presence in literature was wide and visible, and its presence continually and exponentially felt in Irish society, they still are an exception. As Tom Inglis argues: "The stereotypical image of the shy Irish colleen, silent about herself and her emotional needs, reflects a historical reality in which there was a strict silence imposed on sex and sexuality in general and on female sexuality in particular." (Inglis, 2005:26)

I would argue that the banning – and even burning in some cases – of books containing sexual scenes, discussions of and on sexual acts, contraception, or orientations serves only one purpose: that of stifling sexualities. In a carefully Christian society, where those who did not conform to the rules were cast as outsiders, the only purpose of intercourse was breeding. When pleasure, specifically and especially female pleasure, was depicted or discussed, the book was deemed dangerous, as it would incite the weak to turn to the pleasures of the flesh. Ways of living seen as rake-ish or immoral would not be tolerated in Irish society.

As Inglis, again, points out: "in the way that sexuality is written and not written about, such works are like a sample of skin; they are a micro-representation of a macro-culture of silence, denial and secrecy." (Inglis, 2005:28). And while the main characters of the short stories may represent an advancement in the discussion of topics about female experiences and desires, the standard remains that real women who behaved the same way as these heroines were repudiated shames and destitute from society. There was no in-between of the Victorian paradigm of the domestic angel and the prostitute. You were one, or you were the other. While, since the 1970s, serious progress has been made on several issues involving the equality of genders, this does mean that society and its stern regulations have become less ruthless. Now

that sexuality has left the private domain and became a public topic of discussion – through women demanding their independence and their needs to be heard, and protesting ancient, decaying laws that impeded them from taking care of their health and represented health issues.

In this 'newer' regime, the pressure is put on the single mother, who became pregnant outside of wedlock or the unattached and unapologetic young woman. This ostracization is less and less felt, as children, no matter the condition of their parents, are considered a bliss to the world and to society, deserving of no side-glance by moralists who have glass ceilings. And while, slowly, a view of women as having sexual desires – and sometimes even initiating an advance towards the male partner – is being accommodated and integrated in society, it has put an impediment on older women who cannot watch erotic content without being uncomfortable or having to struggle with a part of themselves who knows sexuality is ordinary, but who have been taught that it does not belong in the public sphere and are, unconsciously, afraid of judgement from their peers. It was ingrained in society that women were meant to remain ignorant and innocent. In an essay on female sexuality and its oppression, Inglis states that

> Prevention is generally deemed better than cure and so from the end of the nineteenth century a number of voluntary organisations emerged whose aims were preserving female moral standards. (…) This was a particular concern for an event or activity in which women take too much pleasure, such as the cinema, dances and the ice-cream parlour. Their innocence had to be protected and this extended to them being left sexually ignorant. (Inglis, 2010:678)

Societal pressures are not a new topic, but it has been a subject, sometimes, studied solely with the purpose of understanding the meaning behind their enforcement upon women – not only in the fields of literature but also history, psychology, philosophy, etc. While we know Christian values are valued widely in Ireland, here I would like to focus less on the determining power of Christianity and Catholicism on the Irish mind, and more on how ordinary people, – particularly women –hypocritically or not, enforce the patriarchal values of society upon one another and how the protagonists of both stories break with these same values.

The collection of stories in which we find our Maeve Binchy short story is named *A Few of The Girls*. This was a collection put together posthumously – published in 2015 – with short stories Binchy had written over several decades. Gordon Snell, her widower, writes an introduction to the volume compiled by Christine Green, Juliet Ewers, Carole Baron and Pauline Proctor. Generally, the stories focus on topics that recur in Binchy's writing, like female friendship, marriage, divorce, careers for women and motherhood.

In "The Consultant Aunt", Maeve Binchy's short story that will be tackled in this chapter, we get an exploration of familial ties, agency, female innocence as well as a comment on the widely-used stereotypes of the woman in power in the chick-lit genre – in which many of Binchy's works are situated.

Although the story focuses on Sara's – the niece – perspective, Miriam – the Machiavellian aunt who "resembles a villainess from the 1978-91 television melodrama, *Dallas*" (Shumaker 2016) – is the true protagonist of the short story for it is within her character that we find the most to disentangle and explore in the topic of female experience. While the one experiencing things for the first time, Sara is constantly speculating on her aunt's experiences.

Miriam is a successful young woman, who breaks with traditions, gets herself a job, is yet to be married and is the mentor and example for her young niece who feels like she is more a cousin than an aunt. The story takes us through the solutions for different problems in Sara's life with the help of Miriam.

Miriam is a management consultant – which is a point of interest for her young niece:

> Sara had always been fascinated by the stories of how they got to the root of the problem here, spotted the trouble there, cut out the deadwood somewhere else. Miriam must have lived a very exciting life, Sara had always thought. Compared to everyone around her it was positively star quality. (Binchy, 2016:41)

Her mother disapproves of Miriam's life of course, which results in a very interesting exchange of words between the two sisters:

> 'You're too definite, dead, that's your weakness. Men don't like women with such very forthright views.'
>
> 'Oh, I think they do.' Miriam said.
>
> 'Well, you haven't shown any proof of it.' Mother sniffed.
>
> 'Oh, by not being *married*, is that what you mean?'
>
> 'Don't get me wrong, dear, you are very attractive – much, much the best-looking in out family, but how was it that the rest of us were all well married by your age?'
>
> 'I don't know.' Miriam pretended to consider it seriously 'It's a mystery.' (Binchy, 2016:41-42)

This is clearly a point of reference for the relationship between the sisters as they hold different views of what it means to be successful at relationships. Miriam seems only interested in the physical aspects of a relationship – at least for the time being – and her sister thinks that marriage is the most important aspect of any relationship. While both are credible, Miriam's older sister only shows a continuation of the patriarchal goal of making women wish only for marriage and children. This way,

women can be better controlled, their bodies policed over, their pristine ‘image’ maintained.

A tiny hint of superficial aspirations is also present in the excerpt, as Miriam’s beauty seems to be a point of admiration and would score highly in the quest for a husband. However, Miriam breaks with this tradition of female subjugation, apparently hinting that she has no troubles finding men who like her attitude and “forthright views” and does not try to keep an aura of innocence around herself either.

> … Mother said it wasn’t natural for Miriam to prowl the world in that expensive outfit and that glossy hairdo. She should have settled down like everyone else. (Binchy, 2016:44)

This comes to play a page later, when Sara is discussing a problem with her aunt about her boyfriend, Simon, wanting to have intercourse with her. While intercourse out of wedlock is a theme that surely, Sara’s mother would not even tolerate in her house, Miriam hears her niece and asks her point blank: “… would you like to make love with him?” (Binchy, 2016:43). Of course, this gifts agency to her niece, who actually gets to choose, a topic which will be discussed further.

While the rest of the family seems to be unaware of the pressure the teenager is facing from her companion, her aunt Miriam asks her point blank if she wants to lose her virginity to her boyfriend, leading Sarah to think:

> Things were always beautifully simple with Miriam. You decided what you wanted and then you went ahead and did it (Binchy 2016:43)

However, this is certainly an egotistical, selfish way of thinking – which comes to fruition at the end of the story – because here we get the first hint of Miriam’s way of thinking: that if you have to step over someone to get what you want, then you go ahead and you do it. Her “let’s go and get him” attitude describes her attitude in life perfectly.

Sara, however, makes the mistake of letting her aunt run her life for her. After she breaks up with Simon, her aunt decides that it is best for her to start a new relationship. She finds the perfect candidate in Peter, a very handsome thirtyish man who was not in any rush to settle down. Through her aunt’s advice, Sara manipulated Peter into seeing that he wanted to settle down with her and marry. However, the thrill of the chase was lost for Sara, leading her aunt to promptly affirm, “I think you’ve outgrown him” (Binchy, 2016:48)

Sara breaks up with Peter, a civilized ordeal and Sara promises to focus only on her work for two or three years. During this time, working in the same Consultant Agency as her aunt, she rises rapidly and learns things from her aunt – like never, in any circumstances, pour the coffee or pick up the cups after a meeting. However, Sara’s admiration for her aunt seems to have turned her into some kind of stage puppet.

Sara, a young adult by now, successful and independent like her aunt, is introduced to the senior partner and managing director of Miriam's company. Robert is successful and married with young children, to a wife who adores him. Sara falls deeply in love with Robert, and goes running to her aunt in despair, who insists that you should not go into things unless you're going to go the distance.

By summer Robert and Sara are lovers, by Autumn he says he can not live without her, but he cannot leave his wife. By winter – after Sara takes some vacations – he says he will do anything. Here is when Sara starts to question the morality of their plan. Her aunt answers with a question:

> What do we do in business everyday except take advantage of people more trusting and simple than we are? (Binchy 2016:52)

Here, her stage puppet status becomes clear, as her aunt advises Sara to not speak to her lover until after New Year's, manipulating her into showing indifference towards him. Sara never realises what her aunt is doing until it's too late, and she is 'played' by her own family member, who stole the man she loved away from her and went to the West Indies with him – but not before leaving her a note:

> The note from her aunt was shorter. It was the kind of note that could have been shown in a court of law without revealing anything. It said that in business you always had to take advantage of those more trusting and simple than you. It said that unless you were prepared to go the distance there was no point in stating the journey.
>
> It wished Sara well for the New Year. (Binchy 2016:53)

Of course, her aunt's manipulation could have to do with the fact that she now wants to settle down, and she knows somehow that Robert is the one for her. Or it could be that he presented the biggest challenge for her, and she wanted to prove to herself that she could steal him from his wife and her niece. Of course, this is largely speculative and works outside of the written text which raises many intriguing issues. No matter how simple the story seems at first glance, there are several layers that are interesting to explore, like the topic of family ties, the decay of moral values, the topic of virginity, the topic of agency, female innocence and the archetype of the 'girl boss'

As we have explored previously, familial ties in Irish society are important to the point where the family was considered the most important unit. In the space of the traditional family, bonds are firmly drawn and delineated to specifically take care, support, and protect their loved ones. Parents educate their children, prepare them for adulthood and transmit values to their children and also provide emotional support. Family is also connected to pressing your own to follow a certain path, to follow along the lines drawn up for them by society and to occupy their supposedly

correct place within said sphere. It is relevant, at this point, to mention the edification of values about the world and about femininity, in which the relation daughters have with their mothers is a key dimension.

The mother/daughter relation and its relevance for feminism has been widely explored in various essays (Flax, 1978; Jordan & Surrey, 1986; Sanches, 2014), and its particular importance in Irish culture has been explored in the context of psychoanalysis as to better understand the identity relayed to women by their mothers, and their mothers' mother, and so on.

In "Science of Literature: The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volumes IV and V, and the Making of Irish Feminism", Zuzanna Sanches questions if "…mothers fail too often to empower their daughters?" (Sanches, 2014:72)

In response to this, it can be argued that while a more lenient verdict may be reached – as literature and studying helped shape their ideas and break the mould of traditional values – it remains true that much of the traditional values of subservience are transmitted to young girls by their more traditional mothers.

Sanches also argues that because of this, women narratives between the 1960s and 1990s depict women who have seen the future that awaits them in the lives of their mothers and choose to depart – from their mothers, from their motherland. Most of the times strained and corrosive, mother-daughter relationships tend to impact the way daughters face womanhood. If the mother is resentful, somewhat ashamed even, of her status as a woman, then her daughter will probably grow to feel the same, even if she tries to escape this view of the world. Sanches states:

> The daughters learn from the mothers' often negative attitudes to sexuality, embodiment, foreignness, fragility and responsibility as well as love and justice. (…) The fear of the *vagina dentata,* of the vicious Undine and of a vengeful Lilith continues to have a stronghold… (Sanches, 2014:72-73)

In "The Consultant Aunt" this is exemplified by Sara's relationship with her mother – whom she does not seem to identify with – her values, her choices, her comments about Miriam. Sara's mother, who remains unnamed – possibly to hint that these types of mentalities have no place in contemporary society – represents traditional values. Miriam represents the exact opposite and is a way for young Sara to escape the pressures of society and the destiny of subservience and oppression that awaits her in the future if she follows the traditional values and rules of society.

Miriam, as the stand-in for this mother figure, is the female character who impacts Sarah's life the most and the one who nudges her forth into her eventual break with traditional values, hence impacting the way she sees and interacts with the world. She makes her aunt her feminine role model.

While the ending leaves it all open, we can imagine three different paths for Sara – she becomes like her mother, she becomes like her aunt, or she makes a path of

her own in life. Miriam's dubious character is first hinted to the reader by Sarah's mother when she states that Miriam "Thinks she knows everything, that's always been her problem" (Binchy, 2016:41)

Maybe because of this, Sara goes to her and not to her mother with questions about her relationships, school, life, and career. Miriam's unreliability becomes more and more pronounced as the story moves forward, culminating in Sara having a very ominous thought: "… was it healthy for her aunt to take such an interest in manipulating people's lives" (Binchy, 2016:52)

These words seem to the reader a caveat of sorts. While Sara is capable of having these distrusting thoughts, she is never able to fully form a distrusting attitude towards her aunt – not even to entertain the idea that she could be playing with her, her life, and her feelings. The fact is that Miriam always helped Sara obtain anything she wanted. She became successful and independent, maintained relationships, even turned down an engagement proposal. An important passage, for the parallel it provides, is spoken by Miriam at the beginning of the story about Simon:

> I honestly don't know what he's complaining about. As a result of you, he's saved money, he's got promotions, and he's had you as a date every Friday. It's not as if you took everything and gave nothing. (Binchy, 2016:44)

But is not this true for Sara as well? Hasn't she accepted every bit of advice and help her aunt had to give? And gave nothing back? Perhaps she felt secure for the fact that Miriam was her family, but what we are led to believe is that Miriam owes no loyalty to her family, and certainly not to her niece. Miriam is very manipulative and calculating and, when drafting the plan to steal Robert from his adoring wife – and while the plan had no morality to begin with – Sara showed remorse, while Miriam did not.

In the end, this is where the two women differ: Sara, educated by a traditional mother, guided in life by an advanced and a little egotistical aunt is able to feel remorse and to "love thy neighbour". Miriam, on the other hand, has broken so completely with the traditional values of society and has reneged on the gender and social roles she's supposed to play, that she becomes eccentrically individualist – she thinks of nothing her ultimate goals, as possibly indicated, too, by the job she has chosen.

This story allows us to ponder the question of how and why women see each other as rivals. One of the main arguments, put forward by Noam Shpancer (2014), posits that women are aggressive towards each other so as to be prized by men, and because of this females are compelled to battle each other for the better males. A less than feminist way of seeing female rivalry, anchored in patriarchal society's way of seeing women as breeders and carriers of babies.

Instead, I would argue that the stories focus not so much on this idea that women are innately competitive towards each other, presenting them rather as deeply

complex individuals with flaws and insecurities like their male counterparts. Because beauty is a deeply societal – and due to it, patriarchal – construct, some qualities are better appreciated in women than other, less 'feminine' traits. And while the majority of women have those 'other' traits, they would still prefer to conform. The desire to fit in is embedded since the early childhood in some girls with the choice of toys or of clothes – the same happens with boys – as a way to ingrain in them their supposed place in society (Freeman, 2007). As major psychological studies have proved, little girls and pre-teenagers are the most susceptible to this sort of pressures, not only by their parents, but – indirectly – by their friends' parents who embed in their children the same societal construct. To this phenomenon is given the word: peer pressure (Clansen & Brown, 1985; Mangleburget al., 2004; Haun & Tomasello, 2011).

Beauty and physical shape are the most patrolled and frequently commented upon aspects of the female bodies and attributing a 'rating' to a body is aggressive to the minds and self-worth of young girls and women who, in extreme cases, are shamed into being disgusted by themselves because they do not look just like one of their friends. This is reaffirmed, throughout our lives, through scathing comments about other women, through malicious gossip and newspaper tabloids. However, the ostracization of a part of the female population because they are or are not conventionally beautiful is harmful to younger generations. Many outcries – be them in protests, songs, written form[5], etc. – have been heard, in the last few decades, against this excessive sexualization of female bodies. We are so aggressively shoved into a box with the titles 'girl, woman, sister, female, wife, mother, grandmother, womb' that, if feminists do not actively search out new ways to break glass ceilings, then society would remain at a standstill in time, much like what seems to have happened to Sara's mother: "Men don't like women with such forthright views." (Binchy, 2016:41)

Miriam has broken out of this mould put forth by her sister. She does not care about what men think, the best way to 'snatch' one up or how to get married right away and start a family. She sees her younger self in her niece. We can theorize that a part of her wants to squash the innocent young-woman to show her that a female in business, a powerful one, cannot give herself the luxury to be innocent. One could also argue that, while Binchy does not endow the story with much sentimentality, that Miriam is made out to be the villain in the story. The lack of emotional tears in the text allows the reader to ponder why that is so, why Sara has not broken out in a rage-fuelled tirade against her aunt. Binchy presents the reader with a problematization of the feminist mentality. What if sisterly solidarity ceases to exist? What if the romance world becomes, quite literally, everyone for themselves?

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[5] More recent publications that are clearly protests against this stereotyping are *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories by* Carmen Maria Machado – a collection of short storis that relates the violence female bodies often face; *Milk Fed* by Melissa Broder – an exploration on diet culture and body dysmorphia due to birthing; *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* by Mona Awad – which depicts the struggle young women face to conform to the standards of beauty put forth by society.

Because of the expanding competitiveness felt in the world of business – arguably never felt before in Ireland before the Celtic tiger years – it seems that society becomes divided in two: the ones who still abide by the moral values, and those that completely break free from these constraints set upon them by older generations. Miriam is torn between the pressure to conform to traditional life – marriage, children, dedication to your husband – and throwing away all the effort she has made to become a partner at the firm. Instead, she makes the traditional life her own, she seduces someone else's husband, someone else's boyfriend.

Investigation into biblical texts and subtext has brought forward two images of women who can be indicated as two very different types of women: Lilith and Eve.

Lilith, believed to be the first wife of Adam, is a biblical character mentioned once in the Bible, who lends a helping hand to the stereotype of the conniving, defiant woman. According to medieval Hebrew folklore, Lilith who was made from the same matter as Adam, refused to obey him and escaped. Her depiction in modern culture and literature is of prime interest. Sometimes depicted as a shapeshifter – mostly transforms into a snake – sometimes the queen of demons, she is used in male narratives to depict the power-hungry woman who looks at no means to justify her ends, often linked to male castration, rebelliousness of wives towards their husbands and female sexual freedom. And because Lilith came to be a negative figure, so are rebellious female characters who disagree and disobey their male counterparts, negative. And while renewed interest in her character has been felt and linked to intellectual circles, none is as explored and used as a means of oppressing women who partake in religious faith as Eve. More so, Lilith came to symbolise a struggle for independence that is endearing to modern feminists, who have taken her name and given it to important projects (literacy program, magazine, music festival) (Osherow, 2000; Spoto, 2012; Hurwitz, 2012).

Eve, then, is the foolish woman who was deceived and invited evil into her home. The Book of Genesis recounts to us how Eve was created through a rib of Adam's. She was the one who was tempted by the serpent to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge, and when she does, she shares it with Adam. Since Eve is responsible, and she is the mother of all women, then all women are equally guilty of Man's Fall from Eden. [("For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression." (Timothy 2:13-14)]. Tertullian, a prolific Christian author, used to preach that woman were the door of the devil and that because of them, the 'son of Christ' had to die. (Church, 1975; Wood, 2017; Thostenson, 2019).

In typical patriarchal and Christian narratives, men are put in charge of controlling women. In Ireland, a deeply Christian country, feminist critics, philosophers and historians have studied the connection between the myths and reality and how myth was used to control women (Donnelly, 2005; Meaney, 2013), to make them believe that they were born impure – the myth of the Original Sin – and because of this they had to try twice as hard to be faithful to the Lord and twice as hard on themselves. The myth of Genesis has been a basis for denying women the right to

equality for centuries – the Catholic church still maintains this segregation of genders and bars women from obtaining certain roles within the church.

Yet, there could be suggestions that Miriam acts like the stereotypical man, who is used to using and abusing women and their good will at their pleasure. Although having ulterior motives is not a solely masculine trait, women are many times, attributed the characteristic of manipulation. As readers, we can interpret Miriam, a self-made woman, who is challenging this widely accepted perspective that women are to be dependent on men, while at the same time playing into the belief that women are cunning, manipulating creatures, capable of doing anything to get what they want. However, an overview of novels on female experiences will show that women are not always represented as innocent, virtuous or too susceptible to being corrupted by tricksters and talking serpents.

Due to this we can ask ourselves about the importance of agency in the story. Seeing as Sara is not the one controlling her life herself, Miriam can take a part of a sort-of-man. She pulls the strings in Sarah's life. We never get action-to-consequence because Sarah's actions are not her own.

For example, when discussing Sarah's loss of her virginity with Simon, her aunt ignores Catholic values altogether. She does not immediately tell her not to, that she will blotch her purity, and she does not hide behind preconceptions of how, when and with whom she should lose her virginity to. The nonchalant way in which tradition is overlooked at that point seems to relegate the character of Saint and Mother to a distant place in their minds.

Irish Catholicism often calls to Virgin Mary as a patron, guide and mentor. Geraldine Meaney argues that "A twentieth-century theological construction of Mary is rendered timeless by reference to an ancient Celtic past and the purity and continuity of the Irish nation validated by the attribution to it of devotion to a changeless icon of feminine purity." (Meaney, 2007:54) She further points out that this relationship with Marianism explains why Irish maidenhood is characterized by an "unusual moral rectitude" (Meaney, 2007:55). In the home, girls were taught by their mothers – who in turn were taught by their mothers and so on – that self-denial and chastity were two of the most important things in a female's life. In turn, this means that a deeply Irish "Social order was maintained as long as individuals did not seek to satisfy their pleasures and desires – as long as they practiced self-denial" (Inglis, 2005:11). In an effort to regulate not only the social, communal self, the inner self was also repressed and downtrodden.

The Virgin, in her asexuality of sorts, is a woman to serve as example to other women – they do not have desires, they do not copulate for the pleasure of it, but rather for breeding only, they must remain sexual objects to one man and one man only, and only after marriage. Simone de Beauvoir links the figure of virgin Mary to the "supreme victory of masculinity" (Beauvoir, 1949:188), symbolizing how the figure of the Virgin Mary was utilized to rob women of their agency and worked to propagate male supremacy. This only reinforces the existence of only two possible types of women, presented in the virgin/whore dichotomy. "Such dichotomous thinking is

embedded within religious ideologies where Holy Scriptures have been used in order to create the sociological frameworks that enable women's identities to be manipulated into patriarchal constructions of womanhood" (Parker, 2020) an unattainable pinnacle of womanhood.

In this way, the figure of the virgin problematizes the topic of female sexuality even more. The perpetual virginity of the saint is not an-agreed-upon affirmation. There is a possibility that she could have had other children, the Bible and by proxy the church, simply choose to ignore this fact – perpetuating the replication of the sainthood of the Virgin Mary to further oppress women and put them in the path of self-denial once more. In truth, Mary the mother of Christ was a leader, a figure of female authority of which males were so intimidated by that they scaled her down so she could just be the passive mother who carried Christ, who educated him, who was the first follower of his religion and was an irreplaceable presence in the founding of the church of Pentecost.

When Miriam asks her niece if she "wants to?", the oppressive figure of the Virgin Mary is dispelled. Now Sarah can, too, be a figure of female authority instead of playing into patriarchal society's rules. Losing her virginity becomes not only her choice, but it is also interconnected with female sexual desire and agency, being excused from the construction that the Virgin Mary represents.

The sexual repression that Irish people faced due to the Church's pressure was tremendous, to a point where ethnographers and other commentators have commented on the state of sexuality in Ireland. As Tom Inglis puts it:

> …the locus classicus for the key components of chastity, virginity, and modesty as well as the piety and sobriety that had taken firm hold of most Irish people was the home with its parents (mostly mothers) and the schools with their teachers.
>
> (…)
>
> Social order was maintained as long as individuals did not seek to satisfy their pressures and desires – as long as they practiced self-denial (Inglis 2005:10 - 11)

By breaking this cyclic approach to her virginity, Binchy gifts Sara with agency to choose. Sara deserves the power to choose – to wait for marriage, to not wait for marriage, to not lose her virginity at all – a privilege, often denied to women through pressures on the fabric of social life. She also deserves to feel pleasure without pressures from other persons or institutions. Maintaining lack of knowledge about sexuality and sex was central to impede and control pleasure. For a long time, pleasure and specifically carnal pleasures were a non-topic in Ireland, so the gifting of agency by the author permits Sara – and presumably Miriam – to break free from the established Catholic male rule.

Sara is, in some ways, a bridge. Educated and raised in the 'old traditional' ways by her mother, but still been given a proper education, she is perpetually encased in a bubble of doubt and regret, uncertainty, and inaction. She asks her aunt for advice because she cannot reconcile these two parts of herself. Her reluctance to go along with her aunts' plans of manipulation and her powerful conscience reflects the moral of the 'old' guard but her desire to move forward in life and fight for a career reflects the changes happening within her generation and the usual 'generational gap' that is felt between new and older generations. Miriam represents full-fledged individualism while Sara is being initiated into it by her aunt. Her aunt's ultimately reproachful behaviour could be Binchy's way of telling the reader that individualism is not the answer for breaking the patriarchal cycle.

While many of Maeve Binchy's novels have been considered to fall in the genre of Chick-Lit, for this story I will only focus on the literary trope of the *girl-boss*. In Chick-Lit, this trope is usually used to symbolize how a successful woman, who got to her position in society alone, finds it difficult to balance the time between work and a serious relationship – sometimes ending up having to give up said career to keep moving forward with the relationship (Ferriss & Young, 2006; Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2007; Butler & Desay, 2012; Smith, 2008). This is, sometimes, the plot of the chick-lit romance, and while becoming a housewife is a totally acceptable job, it is key that women actually want to become it – the important, and in my opinion, most ignored aspect is precisely this one: choice. However, the dichotomy of family vs. career should be one that we strive to end, as being successful and pursuing your dreams begging the cost of family and children should not be the standard set for modern times. Instead of the woman-who-gives-it-all-up-for-a-family trope, we also get the stereotype of the workaholic woman, who does choose her career instead of a love-life and a family. These women are portrayed as frigid females, emulating the toxic behaviours of men, and stepping on other people to get to their place of power. Representation for women in positions of power is scarce and, as depicted, not very accurate. Rarely can a woman, represented in literature or movies, balance these two sides of her life successfully.

These types of representation only serve to discourage women from striving to be in positions of power, because the representation is intended to instil fear in the possibility of becoming a frigid, workaholic, 'dragon-lady' type woman who cannot settle down with a man – which is best represented in ultimate chick lit novel and consequently chick flick movie "The Devil Wears Prada" by the character of Miranda Priestly.

To mind comes Jeanette Roberts Schumaker's short review of Binchy's collection:

> While it is fun to read about such a well-drawn monstress, doing so may reinforce readers' harsh stereotypes of women who are successful both in the boardroom and in the bedroom. (Schumaker 2016)

Mostly, these types of narratives focus on stereotypes – women have to be the first caregivers in the family; men work; men are intimidated by powerful women; the nuclear family archetype has to be achieved – that mostly reproduce what is/was common in society and work to downgrade women to second-class citizens.

Miriam does, in fact, start the short story single, successful, opinionated and being criticized for it by her sister. She wants to fully focus on her career presumably, before settling down with anyone – if settling down even is her goal. Only when she achieves a prominent place in her firm – partner – does she consider starting a serious relationship with someone. Her focus is clearly defined. However, her actions to reach her goal are reprimandable at best. It is true that a higher standard is held for women in positions of power, but that's because we expect better from each other. By tricking her niece, Miriam is emulating the toxic behaviour of men who want to become successful at all costs – be it in the business place or the romantic sphere – and do not care who they step on. Women can, in fact, have it all. Giving a successful career up just to appease the other side of life is not a common thing anymore.

No matter how reprehensible Miriam's actions were, the point here is not to consider one of the characters villainous. Because of her possible experiences in oppressive Ireland, she has felt that the only way to get what she wants is to behave like a stereotypical man, to take it for herself and not apologizing. Understanding what motivations and experiences are behind actions is the main goal.

While the shift from housewife to working female has been achieved in the present day, the fact remains that the condition for women on the work force is still not amenable in Ireland. Focus has now shifted to various other problems: like the Pay Gap, the rate of sexual harassment suffered by women, workplace harassment, etc. Women are out there in the workforce; they just need to be better protected for their conditions as 'others'. Miriam, however, does integrate the workforce and has excelled in her field of marketing. She is othered – by her family – due to her gender *and* the unconventionality of wanting to break the glass ceiling.

And speaking of 'othering', that is something that happens in "The Widow", Edna O'Brien's short story that we will approach in this chapter. The collection we find the story in, "Lantern Slides", was published in 1990 and begins with the epigraph:

> Each human life must work through all the joys and sorrows, gains and losses, which make up the history of the world. Thomas Mann. (O'Brien, 1990:6)

The Thomas Mann quotation gives the reader a hint that these tales will mostly be unhappy ones which explore the themes we grow accustomed to when reading O'Brien's work: transgression; religion; sexual encounters; marriages; etc.

Of the story discussed here, first published in the New Yorker in 1989, O'Brien has stated that she was rereading Chekov at the time she wrote it, and that:

> He has great sympathy for the foolish, unconventional women, the yearners, because they don't belong in the confined and confining spaces that they happen to be born into. They're quite often punished for their supposed flightiness. Bridget, inspired by someone I slightly knew, struck me as a heroine at the mercy of the vigilante, and by not losing her wild spirit she surpassed them, certainly in my imagination. (O'Brien, 1989)

When first reading this story, what struck me the most was the type of orality that it transmitted to the reader, a sort of imitation of the folklore tradition of the Irish to tell tales around the fireplace. It pays homage of sorts to the first type of literature in the Irish isles, mouth-to-mouth literature where something new was added every time someone told the story (Khsawneh, 2014). In fact, there is a reference to a beginning of a limerick in the tale – "Biddy the Whore, who lived in a hotel without any door" – which is very humorous and somewhat rude. This certainly fits the type of story to be telling at night, about a woman who is too different, too irreverent for her time.

It tells the tale of Bridget, a widow and the protagonist of the story, whose sin is to yearn for a better life and to not conform to the societal rules that are otherwise imposed on her. Living in a small town, Bridget was the focus of much town gossip and judgement. Her husband had died, drowned, years before the time of the story. They were lovebirds, in the first few months of their marriage. Her suffering was said to be so brutal that her painful and deafening roar was heard in distant parishes and deaf people were said to have heard it. Her pain was so great that she could not even go to the wake.

After this episode, she moved out of the village to go live with a brother and a deaf-mute sister. She returned to the same village years later, when her brother died, and her sister was taken to an institution. She got a job as a bookkeeper and started to build her own house, a pebbledash one, which she would turn into a guesthouse. This, of course, led to many rumours, one of which was that she had another husband in mind, one that came from America. The news of her drinking did not help these rumours, and so she was deemed unfit to partake in society, "the verdict was that she could bend the elbow with any man" (O'Brien, 1990:43). Her house was sarcastically called the Pleasure Dome and it was in it that she met the creamery manager, Michael.

Sometime later, and after a scandalous engagement with a girl named Mea, Michael and Bridget were courting openly. Michael, who had a fondness for drinking and for flirting with girls, stopped doing so. Bridget would soon announce her engagement, perceived as something scandalous by the townspeople who vowed to keep an eye on the two, "to see if they had separate bedrooms or were living in mortal sin" (O'Brien, 1990:47) To the townspeople, a widow, who was also in her forties – much, much older than the creamery manager – about to marry again was nefariously scandalous. So much so, that they attempted to bring the parishes' own priest to the middle of the whole affair, to see if they could stop the couple from getting married.

Bridget learned how to drive – taught by Michael – and got herself a red car, which was said to "always to be seen flying …, a menace to pedestrians and cattle that strayed on the roadside." (O'Brien, 1990:48) Shortly before their wedding, a rumour started going around that her first husband had committed suicide because of her and how horrible she was. "His predicament, it was said, was so grinding that he saw no way out of it. He went down to the docks that evening, after yet another hideous row with her, pen and paper in his pocket, and wrote his farewell note" (O'Brien, 1990:49)

This rumour spread all over town, and when it reached Bridget, she was so appalled that she tried to go around and bribe the people in town, asking them to not mention anything to Michael. She went everywhere with her husband-to-be, afraid that someone would tell him the story – not because it was true of course. She decided that she was going to visit an old woman who lived near the house she had with her dead husband, she would know and tell that Bridget was not the one to blame for Bill's death.

When Michael decided to go to his parents' house for a week, Bridget saw her chance to visit the older woman and left the next day.

> No one of us ever knew what ensued with the old woman, because it was on the way back that it happened. (O'Brien, 1990:52)

Bridget crashed her red car against her tree and died. The townspeople gossiped about how drunk she was, about how a witch used to live near the place she had died.

In her coffin, she lay still and with a face full of makeup to hide her bruises and gashes because of the accident. And Michael, left a widow without being married "…knew everything now; he knew her plight and was helpless to do anything about it." (O'Brien, 1990:61). Even at her funeral, people gossiped: about how drunk she was, about the makeup she was wearing, about the silly attempt of the nurse to cover her bruises.

While reading this short-story, the point Edna O'Brien was trying to make is loud and clear: townspeople gossip and that gossip can destroy someone completely – their private lives, their social lives, their actual lives. The choice of wording is so very important in this story, it being a 'living' proof of how exacerbated rumours can be. We can read it, the evolution of opinions, of cusses and insults thrown at Bridget. While this is not the only layer of the story, it is the one that is brought home most clearly to the reader.

The setting is rural and a very judgemental one. The inhabitants of this unnamed town are hung up on their morality and the rules set upon them by the Catholic church. And of rural spaces represented in Edna O'Brien's short stories – which could also be applied to her written work in general – Pillar Argáiz argues that O'Brien's critique of the rural aspect is characterized by a feminine sensibility, and how

rural Ireland thwarted any female who dared step outside the line. According to Argáiz:

> In particular, her critique is oriented towards three interrelated forms of organicity which have determined the orthodoxies of her childhood upbringing in Ireland: a rigid parochialism; an insular, narrow-minded nationalism; and a restricted religious doctrine. These three saturated communal forms are described as utterly patriarchal, and therefore, they act as powerful oppressive forces for 'Brien's female characters. (Argáiz 2012:87)

And while Argaíz's essay focuses on three stories written forty to fifty years before the collection "Lantern Slides" was published, this citation could be applied to this short story just as easily. O'Brien's Catholic education, which she categorized as oppressive is treated as it is, a stifling force in women's lives:

> That is why O'Brien denounces in her fiction the inordinate influence of Catholicism upon the lives of Irish women. (Argáiz, 2012)

This influence, deeply impactful on women's day-to-day life is a major theme in Edna O'Brien's work and one that is very much a common one in other female Irish writers' work – like Kate O'Brien[6] or Julia O'Faolain[7] – a theme that we find represented in this short story.

Evolutionary psychology has deemed that gossip is essential for people to be monitored. Frank McAndrew states that one of the many functions of gossiping is to reinforce or punish the lack of morality and to make the transgressor account for said transgression. (McAndrew, 2008). The only correct response is to shun the transgressor to maintain the community intact and unified under the same values. Historically, gossiping did not have pejorative connotations, however, under the umbrella of Christianity, the terms adopts a negative side. While many texts in the

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[6] A popular Irish author who also had her publications banned in Ireland. Creator of works such as *Without My Cloak* (1931), *Mary Lavelle* (1936), *The Flower of May* (1953) – winner of the Women Writers Association in Ireland – and *The Land of Spices* (1941). She is often recognized for her work as a feminist and queer activist and praised for her concern with the place women had on the literary world. (see Paige Reynolds's article "The banned Irish Feminist writer who took on De Valera"; *Košta, 2013 & 2014*).

[7] Another author who is considered to be as influential in the world of literature as O'Brien. Her works include *Man in the Cellar* (1974), *No Country for Young Men* (1980), *The Obedient Wife* (1982) and Daughters of Passion (1982). Recently deceased, President Michael Higgins said "Julia O'Faolain leaves behind not only a legacy of outstanding writing. She is rightly celebrated as a writer who explored and shone a light on the role of women in society and who did so with a radical realism." (President, 2020) (see Rooks-Hughes, 1996; St Peter, 2012)

New Testament that concern gossip and its negative connotations by associating it with sexual transgressions the stern, oppressive catholic church chose to use tattling to patrol the civilians – much like an authoritative regime would (McAndrews, 2008; Kartzow, 2005; Kartzow 2009; Kartzow 2010).

Rurality is very important for the type of short story that we are presented with here. In rural, most times isolated, small towns, there is a sense of a microsystem being established. In this small ecosystem of people, the need to be monitored is enormous.

> In this sense, O'Brien describes an Irish rural community chiefly determined by convention and by the authority of religious doctrine (Argaíz, 2012:91)

In this particular small town, we get the sense that the townspeople choose to judge and tattle on a woman who is independent, content and in love. Women usually are more coldly judged for their 'immorality' than men. As discussed previously, women, blamed from the primordial times for The Fall, tend themselves to be harsher and more rigid and oppressive in their faith than men. In the story we get a sense that the townspeople, often women, adopt a posture that conveys they are holier than thou, that they are better than Bridget. "Biddy" who is a widow, in itself a word that carries a very dark, grim connotation of death.

In popular fiction widows are often depicted as either eternally suffering and waiting for their own time to die to re-join their husband – a very subservient depiction in my personal opinion – or harlots who try to get money by marrying older, rich men or cougars who just want to be sexually fulfilled.

Bridget fits neither of those two categories despite the townspeople wanting to confine her to those two diminishing roles. She is free and independent. There even is a passage, filled with supposed disdain and judgement, about how Bridget changes from dark clothes to bright ones when inside the house, about how instead of dwelling in the cold, in suffering, she chose to light a fire:

> It was rumoured that she changed from her dark shop overall into brighter clothes. A child had seen her carrying in a scuttle of coal. So there was a fire in the parlour, people were heard to say. (O'Brien, 1990:40)

There are also rumours going around that she is meeting an American man in the tracks in Limerick, which would place her in the second stereotype of widows: "… the verdict was that she could bend the elbow with any man." (O'Brien, 1990:43)

The implications here are clear: Bridget, by choosing to not follow the social rules and stereotypes tied directly with widowhood, has ostracized herself from her community. She was seen complimenting a new mother on her new-born, or showing

respect to someone whose partner passed away, but she was not necessarily friendly to anyone. Her refusal to adopt the townspeople's manners and impositions boggles them. That after her husband's death she is moving forward with her life, to refuse to cave and live in constant despair and become another nosey old crone.

Everything in the tale is connected to some sort of pressure and Christian morality, which, in turn, is directly linked to the pressures, monitorization and policing that women face daily under a harsh Christian 'regime'. Bridget, by refusing these constraints and by being indifferent to this judgemental attitude of the townspeople, breaks with tradition and shows a capability of female agency that almost all women of the town cannot in good faith say they partake in. She chooses to have parties, and to drink, and light fires, and have men stay in her hotel. She falls in love again, is about to be married, and her soon-to-be husband is much, much younger than her. She works in a bookshop, does not pass around gossip and learns to drive.

This of course, is tied to the aspect of prudish morality which divides individuals into gender-specific groups. Bridget, who is too much for her year, age, country and town is subjected to adjudications by her fellow Irishmen and Irishwomen for not conforming.

Rachel Vorona Cote expands this sense of being Too Much in a society ruled by those who want to hear little from women. Her book discusses the aspects in which women are constrained in society and she states in a clear way why women that are 'too much' do not fit:

> A weeping woman is a monster. So too is a fat woman, a horny woman, a woman shrieking with laughter. Women who are one or more of these things have heard, or perhaps simply intuited, that we are repugnantly excessive, that we have taken illicit liberties… A woman who is Too Much is a woman who reacts to the world with ardent intensity is a woman familiar to lashes of shame and disapproval, from within as well as without. (Cote, 2020:9)

She also states that women who are too much are usually reprimanded by the society with patriarchal building blocks, as society prefers much more subdued women:

> Our muchness oozes from our pores like acidic sweat: ranker, more caustic, less concealable than ever. But however brutal the stigma may sizzle in this political moment, this sense that we are somehow Too Much is hardly new to us . (…) This term, Too Much, pernicious in its ambiguity, attacks with the force of history. It's the overdetermined exponent of ideologies, centuries old, structured by misogyny, racism and homophobia. … it (society) wants girls pliable and demure – girls who safeguard both tears and sex for the privacy of the bedroom, who keep their voices measured during meetings, and who brush their hair and blot their lipstick. It worships the woman who, is she should

> experience distress, will wear her sadness (…) with genteel sensuality and relative quiet. Anything more – well, that would be excessive, (Cote 2020:10)

Too muchness is what Bridget displays with her reaction to her husband's death, with her parties and new house – with her engagement.

> 'You're just too much!' is the threat of patriarchy disguised as playful admonition. It is a warning, even a diagnosis. …. Systemic oppression relies on the careful positioning of social space. Specifically, it requires that marginalized peoples – of which women are one bread example, and women of colour and queer persons are more pointedly targeted ones – dwell within the corners, that we shrink inside walls that loom and compress. (Cote 2020:10)

This compression is what the townspeople want Bridget to adhere to. She must realise women have a designed place in society, men another. When she does not, her fate is a tragic one. Death, for Bridget, is the only true escape from the judgemental eyes and mouths of society.

One other very interesting aspect of the story, which is also linked with the patriarchal aspect of the 'rules' of society and with its supposed main inflictors, is that Edna O'Brien, through her choice of portrayal of priesthood and priests in general, shows a clear disillusionment with and inaction of the Catholic Church.

Catholicism is a prevalent topic in many O'Brien stories and there is an underlying tone of disillusionment with the church in this short story. Eamon Maher affirms that the Edna O'Brien who wrote the *Country Girls* trilogy possesses what he calls a "Catholic sensibility." (Maher 2014:59). This sensibility is not lost in this short story. Although the proportions of the representations of actual papal figures are insubstantial, the two priests who do appear in the short story represent the hypocritical aspect that O'Brien has been – vocally – accusing the church and its priests of.

The first appearance of a clergyman is at one fatal accident at one of Bridget's parties in her new house: "A priest died in the house." (O'Brien, 2015:290). However, it is not the death that sticks with the reader – the priest never to be mentioned again, never been gifted a name to begin with. What sticks with the reader is that Bridget, recounting the story to the townspeople: the priest never took an alcoholic drink, and kept talking about how he had been finally admitted into the Vatican. While Bridget and her guests were expecting him to be excited for a position or an audience with the pope, the priest was only interested in the treasures.

In the Bible, two of the most relevant passages about accumulating wealth are the following ones:

> No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (Luke 16:13)

> For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (Timothy 6:10)

In true Catholic fashion, having faith in God is the single most important thing. Must we remember that Christ said to Peter and his brother: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Matthew 4:18-20). For many this, alongside the passage when God fills baskets with food for the hungry, is taken as an allegory for money as a trifling, unimportant thing in the matters of heaven. Having faith, blind faith, was better than having money.

However, the priest seems to covet the treasures stashed deep inside the Vatican, and by coveting it, he fulfils the warning given in Proverbs 28:20:

> A faithful man will abound with blessings, but whoever hastens to be rich will not go unpunished. (Proverbs 28:20)

For his desire, his yearning, to see the treasures of the Vatican, he has sin. And as a sinner, he must be punished. In this case, it was the capital punishment, right before he was to see the treasures he so deeply wanted.

The second instance of a very subliminal criticism to Catholicism and priests comes with the second appearance of a priest. Not the same one, the older women in the parish go to him when they want to break up Bridget and Michael’s engagement. (“Her happiness was too much for people to take;” (O’Brien, 1990:47) When confronted with this reproval from the community, the father is again more worried about money:

> Some of the older women went to the parish priest about it, but when they arrived the parish priest was in such a grump about the contributions towards a new altar that he told them to pull their socks up and try to raise money by selling cakes and jellies and things at a bazaar. He suspected why they had come, because the creamery manager had gone to him alone, and stayed an hour, and no doubt gave him a substantial offering for Masses. (O’Brien, 1990:47-48)

Priesthood in small towns is considered almost like a tutor’s job by the church, the consensus being that the parishes must be guided by their pastor to a morality that

is almost saint-like. The church – and by proxy its priests – are given the burden of patrolling the parish and to counsel and guide citizens to a better, more Christian path.

However, this priest seems to lack that role that was assigned to him – and that he chose – by the patriarchal society of men who look to oppress women and their 'muchness'. When confronted with a possible breach of promise, and a second marriage of a widow much older than her soon-to-be-husband, he is much more worried about money. This priest – also without a name – tells the old maids in town to find a way to raise money so he can build a new altar, which in true Catholic style would not be without its baroque characteristics – which are costly. While this priest does not meet an unhappy ending, we truly judge him as readers for his focus on money and a new altar which will surely allows him some pride – one of the capital sins.

Edna O'Brien seems to have no difficulty implying that the Catholic church has, for too long, been in itself, hypocritical. While it preaches to 'help thy neighbour' and 'feed the hungry', they accumulate wealth, while the Bible talks about taking no praise or value in earthly objects. O'Brien has not been shy about commenting on sexual scandals of the church, calling the church hypocritical for looking down on her books while within they held a much bigger, much darker secret.

Without the church fulfilling its duties as the guide of souls, those same souls join to attack someone for being different. The accusations of her husband having committed suicide because of her disturb Bridget so thoroughly that she starts to lose her confidence. While at first, she pays no attention to the rumours, when they start getting closer to her relationship with Michael in a way that she thinks is threatening, she starts to question herself.

We readers do not get to know what exactly happened with the old woman whom Bridget visited, we are not privy to that information in O'Brien's world. What remains, however, is the gossip, which is almost begging for Bridget's crash to have been caused by drunk driving. It never hits the townspeople that their constant speculation is what leads Bridget to her death. Their insistence on circulating a rumour, instigating this woman to visit another to prove her word, is the factual culprit of Bridget's death. If she were a man, there would be no need for proof, her word would be believed instantly if it came from a 'man of honour'.

Near the place of the crash there used to live a witch, who concocted pagan cures from herbs, and whom was the rumoured cause for so many accidents there before Bridget's to a point where holy water was poured on that spot several times. Of course, the implication of religion is again felt here as Ireland has remained solidly Catholic despite colonization and Anglican religion being forced upon Irish people. Witchcraft is historically linked to unruly women, especially in small towns in mostly rural countries. It's not unusual to hear of a town witch in small rural communities. The mention of Bridget and a witch almost establishes a connection between the two – Bridget an unruly woman, the witch a woman who does not conform to the established religion.

Her car crash in itself can be dissected to mean that her spirit was not meant to roam the earth free. The fact that she was even able to get a license to drive and a car represent her freedom. In patriarchal societies, women being passive, the men were the ones driving and women took the passenger seat right next to them. Bridget, driving herself, getting herself a car, meant that she did not fit in the social hierarchy.

The car crash also takes another proportion when we consider the events of the story. As quickly as Bridget's prospects start to rise, she is struck with a sense of doubt after she hears the rumours that went around about her.

Bridget is unruly and controversial even after her death. In her coffin, her face was so smooth and perfect that the mourners were "aghast" by her otherworldly appearance. This, they blamed on makeup, no doubt put on her by a young nurse to hide her bruises, "perfect makeup". This insistence that Bridget was wearing makeup when in her casket could be interpreted as a symbol that Bridget had nothing to hide, no bruises to show in life or in death. She was, as they say, an open book. The townspeople, on the other hand, try to hide their defaults and ugliness, their constant gossiping and meddlesome behaviour. It could be that Bridget was, in her last days, so constantly and repeatedly being pressured that she was not in herself, so much so that when at peace, she looked perfect. Edna O'Brien seems to represent Bridget's death as a haven. Finally, she was free from the gossip, from the pressures of society, from judgemental opinions and suffering.

While this paints a somewhat gloomy picture for women and female figures who do not conform to the prevalent gender politics in Ireland, I would argue that it is important nonetheless, as no person could read the story and not feel Edna O'Brien using presumable emotion to make the reader suffer alongside this woman. Presumable emotion because while emotion is demonstrated in the short story, it is never described in a way that the reader can directly imagine it. We can imagine Bridget thrashing against the women who held her down on the day of her husband's funeral, but we have no description of how she felt inside.

As readers, positioned outside looking in – we are always placed beside the town gossipers and never with Bridget herself – helplessness starts to settle in. O'Brien could also mean to convey the perception that the standards for women have been the same for a very long time – since we get no date. By choosing a typical name, connected to a typical nickname, in a town with no name, Bridget could represent every Irishwoman in the country.

And although Bridget could represent this middle-aged generation of Irishwomen, Mea – a wife-to-be of Michael's – represents a new generation, which will not remain quiet in the face of men's wrongdoings. She runs to the local newspaper, tells her story of how Michael incurred in a breach of promise, and will take a hefty amount of money for herself.

Although often criticized for the use of it in her work, we cannot forget the impact that memory has on Edna O'Brien's work.

> Because O'Brien relies strongly on the power of memory, using places, personas, and events from her life (especially from childhood and adolescence) as bases from which to construct her fiction, and because she seems to be emotionally involved with her female protagonists she has often been accused of a damaging and self-defeating subjectivity. (Grogan 1996:9)

To mind comes O'Brien's self-imposed exile, when reading this quotation and when thinking about Bridget. Different women are not allowed to thrive, and so they must leave – be it spatially, be it in spiritual form.

In the end that is exactly what the two main characters of the short stories are, daring women, untamed women, souls who refuse to bow down and cave into the pressure set upon them from birth. Miriam ends the story by leaving the country, Bridget ends the story by leaving the physical world.

Both of these characters battle with the stereotypes and inequality assigned to them because of their gender and both confront such challenges in a headstrong way that defines them as nonconforming. Women face inequalities in the distribution of work, in childcare, in politics and economics, in wages and status. But both these characters are embodiments of a strong will to break the cyclic oppression of their gender.

2. Chapter Two: A Tale from the Countryside: the female landscape of Bucolic Ireland

To cite Heather Ingman in the 5th chapter of her book *Ageing in Irish Writing*, "The short story form lends itself particularly well to the subject of ageing, its brevity facilitating attention to moments when middle-aged characters (…) become aware of time passing and cast a questioning or nostalgic glance back on their youth." (Ingman, 2018:125)

This remark is especially true about the two short stories approached in this chapter as our heroines problematically deal with their gradual loss of beauty and how their appearance and presentability is one of the main ways that societal pressure is exerted upon females. Once ephemeral beauty is perceived as lost, the blissful existence and peaceful life associated with women's experience is replaced with self-doubt, sadness, and in some cases – like one we will discuss here –body dysmorphia. These female characters were led to believe that their appearance is the most important aspect of their existence, and their ageing is the primal reason for their (ex)husbands' loss of interest in them – personally and sexually.

While the two main protagonists of the short stories – *The Favourite* by Edna O'Brien and Maeve Binchy's *Bella and the Marriage Counsellor* – are not members of the geriatric community and are a long way from being frail old women, they nonetheless feel the passing of time as if they were already too old to incur in some aspects of socialization that they previously did. Especially in deeply rural communities, like the ones described in the short stories, beauty is a defining trait in young women – there is always a girl who rises above the others as the 'town beauty', with a brighter future as the wife of some well-off man, who will have many children and a big house to run. When this feeling of being 'above' the other girls, lucky in all aspects, ends the woman falls into a deep state of insecurity that something was left behind in their youth days and is unattainable in the present. Ingman described this sentiment, in Ireland specifically, affirming that "youth is at a premium in the Irish countryside" (Ingman, 2018:127)

A 2005 study has shown that old age in the countryside is not particularly easy for older people: isolation, lack of appropriate healthcare and seclusion presenting the biggest problems for older women (McNerney and Gillmor, 2005). However, there is no evidence that shows that these women want to leave the countryside, preferring to maintain their rurality instead of moving to a larger city to change lifestyle or experiences. While both of our heroines reside in the countryside and feel this pressure of time slipping away, they never think of moving away to escape this feeling of smothering by the rural way of life.

The first short story to be explored is "The Favourite", authored by Edna O'Brien. Included in the collection *A Scandalous Woman*, published in 1974, the epigraph assigned to the book is a citation found in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782), a French epistolary novel authored by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos: "I assure you the world is not as amusing as we imagined" (de Laclos, 1782: 1.3.5)

A fitting choice for the theme of the book, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is a depiction of manipulation, seduction, depravity, and corruption. This novel, too, was considered a scandalous publication at its time.

The third story in the collection by O'Brien, and the one we will focus on in this chapter, is aptly named "The Favourite" and vaguely describes the life of a woman – Tess – that at the end of her seemingly perfect life, realises that she lacks a certain passion that her elder sisters had and now that her children are older and educated, she starts to feel the setting in of a perpetual sadness, understanding that she has no true passion in life.

The story starts with an observation that Tess was the third child, and lucky in all sorts of ways: she was not a fussy baby, she was beautiful and happy and contracted no serious illnesses. When a child she managed to stay up in her bicycle the first time she ever tried it and at school she was the best student in the cookery classes but not the other 'regular ones' as she "was not over brainy like her elder sister or fanciful like her younger sister, always came a few marks above a pass." (O'Brien, 1974:58) She was very fair and blond, had perfect teeth and her nickname was "Whitey". She was clearly her father's favourite and deemed responsible by her mother. When she was sent away to convent school, everybody lamented it although she excelled at school. She was "diligent, devout, the last to leave the chapel, and in no time at all tipped by the elder girls as future prefect." (O'Brien, 1974:59) She had two best friends who constantly competed for her attention and love and always left some sweet thing for her like a chocolate bar or a slice of cake. She also recruited two or three other, younger girls who did her chores for her, and whom she took 'under her wing'.

During the Christmas holidays, Tess got her first boyfriend who gifted her with a pair of fur-backed gloves during the holidays. She wore them to what she deemed "her evening fashion parade" (O'Brien, 1974:60) when she took a walk around the village to show off herself, and to become the point of admiration for other townspeople, visiting friends for tea and cake and discussing men and their plans to go on holidays abroad. Later, her romance with the athlete ended and she cared about being perceived as someone who had only kind things to say about him.

After finishing her education in the convent, Tess went straight to Dublin to start a secretarial course and eventually got a job as the secretary to an important man in an overseas company. In her new job post, she was surrounded, once more, by people who adored her and gifted her – "roses, (…) lilacs, Canterbury bells and very often a little punnet of strawberries or currants from their gardens." (O'Brien, 1974:62). It was in one of the journeys back to Dublin from the countryside that Tess met her second 'boyfriend'. He was a commentator on the train and charmed her with asking if he could record her voice because it was so lovely. He learned the things she liked like coconut creams, gins and lime and would arrange for picnics to be prepared with the things she loved most to eat. When Tess found out he was married to another woman, she ended the whole charade as swiftly as it had begun and was only seen to have spent one whole day and one whole night in bed but not asleep. After that she did not mention the train commentator anymore.

After that she met her husband, a young country excise officer, and she knew they were to be together. Her father opposed but after a while, Tess's father softened toward the young man. Within a month they were engaged. Tess and her husband had four children in total, Tess did not breastfeed, and they added a second wing to their house so they could separate the children from their own "grown-up life" (O'Brien, 1974:64). Theirs was an old Georgian house known in the town as *The Blue Shutters* and the couple used to sit around and admire it, the furniture Tess got at auctions, the fruits, flowers, and vegetables growing in the garden. The couple threw grand soirees for their guests at Christmas, serving them delicacies and gathering the entire family and friends.

Their children were raucous. She came across the habit of calling her children by the wrong names and would usually take an afternoon nap and her favourite son would be designated to wake her up at four o'clock. She preferred her sons, and her daughters were said to not be as pretty as her – her sons having inherited her colouring – none of them studious. Her eldest daughter, Nora, referred to her mother as *The Duchess*, as she always seemed regal, had set a certain par of ideals, and always had her way. "It was a joke but not a welcome one." (O'Brien, 1974:69) Soon enough, her children were due to go away to school and Tess made herself busy with buying uniforms, sewing on nametags and such minor things.

"The first little lasting cloud to appear in Tess's life was when she turned forty and began to put on weight." (O'Brien, 1974:69). Her husband was reportedly fine with her having to let out a few dresses and wearing smocks, a sort of apron that looks like a bib but overgrown, but he got home late one night smelling like cheap cologne. He could not explain, neither could he say what kept him for so long. She rang the office, asked her husband's secretary where he was only to be told he had left the office a long time before. The following Sunday, she discovered he had been cheating on her when a girl offered him a peppermint sweet in the church grounds. The pair of girls, who came from outside of town to open a boutique, called their home and when Tess picked up, one of them told her to tell her husband that he was invited to the Mass they were having their new premises offered. Tess wrote it down on the message pad and her husband attended the Mass the next evening. After the couple reconciled, her husband admitted to her he had deceived her, but he would never again, told a story about making a show of himself by leaving after the Gospel to go home and ask to be forgiven.

The big Georgian house began to grow still and quiet, quite like her and her husband's relationship and their social life.

> her husband would take his time about coming home in the evenings, and she would read a book, or try to read a book, and register the clock striking each quarter, and wish that people would call to tell her she was pretty, or to eat some of her legendary sandwiches, or to give her the little items of news. No such luck. People went to the houses of younger couples as they had once flocked to hers, and her husband, though up to no monkey business, was no

> longer quite the same, did not surprise her with little half-pound boxes of chocolates, did not whistle as she came down the stairs dressed to go out. (O'Brien, 1974:71)

One thing that stunned Tess was when she read in her daughter's journal that she thought Tess was "smarmy" (O'Brien, 1974:71) but how her father does not see through it. She remembers feeling the same thing she felt when she smelled the cologne on her husband's lapel, or how she felt when she read a "disgusting magazine article about sex;" (O'Brien, 1974:71). Tess thinks that all these events foreshadowed her feelings now, how everyone else vibrates with more passion, "more life, more urgency, even more desperation concerning the things they did." (O'Brien, 1974: 72) She felt lonely, without anything to connect her to the other people in her life, she was afraid, she was bored with her and her husband's routine, she was beginning to feel unhappy:

> 'Oh Jesus,' she uttered aloud. "Is this how it is when one begins to be unhappy?' (O'Brien, 1974:72)

She begins to fear change, begins even to realise that she did not have the passion it took to make such changes in the world. She abhorred machines, acted in crazed ways that worried her husband, gloating about how she broke a mirror and would have seven years bad luck after it. Her husband has seen this coming, predicted it. The story ends with Tess sitting in front of a windowpane, staring into its blankness.

When reading this short story, like many others authored by Edna O'Brien, we cannot ignore the rural aspect of it: the archetypal 'place' of the woman, the importance of nationalism and religion, the small-town gossiping that happens, one dimensional housewife, the rowdy children, the catholic schools said children are sent to – what Pilar Villar Argaíz defined as a "claustrophobic provinciality" (Argaíz, 2012:92). Not only that, but also the fundamental aspect of education segregation in Ireland, many forms of transgression – among them sexual transgression, extramarital transgressions, and religious transgression – materialism and shallowness.

The countryside, in this tale in particular is much different from the one approached in the previous chapter, also by O'Brien. While both have an element of rurality embedded in them – be it geographically or psychologically – this story differs from the previous one because of the sense of entrapment that the small-town mentality has on people who yearn to get out of it or who do not fit in. Here, O'Brien describes to the reader the life of a woman who is perfectly content with her place in in a provincial, small-town environment.

The pervasive imagery in the short story is of a lucky girl, who has always been cheery and beautiful, who is constantly receiving gifts from family and friends, and is blatantly the favourite of the family and of all social circles in which she happens to move. She conforms to all types of subservience expected in a woman, she "was not

overbrainy like her elder sister or fanciful like her younger sister" (O'Brien, 1974:58). Instead, she excelled at the things considered apt for girls: cookery classes. She was not one to question the established rules set out for her by society and conventional way of living. She was the favourite exactly *because* she followed those rules, was obedient to them without fault.

This piece brings forth the question of agency and defiance and, again, how rural Ireland is a space set on traditions that perceivably stifle women's growth. However, when reading this story, we get the sense that Tess does not feel stifled until much later in life. To her, a life in the Irish countryside meant an idyllic life for her, her husband and her children. It meant, and still means for many families, a continuity that is not achievable in big cities.

A sense of an idyllic, cohesive identity is a point of pride in rural communities. Tess plays the part of the favourite, prettiest girl in the village to the point of perfection: was not fussy as a baby, was pious to a point of being compared to a saint when a child, was perfectly poised as a teen and respectable as a young woman. She was the best at school – but not for the typical classes – often being in charge of the fire in the cookery classes.

This is the first instance – closely followed by the one at the convent that I'll explore later on in the chapter – when the reader questions themselves about the experiences of this young girl, whose most important achievement so far is being the best at cookery classes. Of course, this raises the question of single-sex schools and educational segregation.

As stated by Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - a Teachta Dálain since 2020 – in a 2018 article for thejournal.ie:

> Ireland has a higher proportion of gender segregation than our European peers. One third of our second level schools are single gender which is unusually high by international standards. 17% of our primary school children still attend single-sex schools, a percentage that is much higher in Dublin. (Ó Ríordáin, 2018)

He raises the point in the article, that there is no evidence that supports the separation of boys and girls favouring the educational aspect of academic life. There are several published, real-life accounts of how separating boys from girls since childhood causes a great deal of problems with relationships between the genders later in life – leading, even, to social anxiety or excessive stress. (Moloney, 2020)

For girls, segregation did not afford them a real, full education - it meant that the stereotypes about their gender got further diffused, spreading deeper roots in their subconscious. In a Sé Sí survey of gender in Irish Education dated 2007, the authors found that "…36 per cent of second-level pupils in Ireland today attend single-sex schools. In a majority of European countries, there are no single sex schools and

only a very small minority of pupils attend single sex education in the remaining countries." (O'Connor, 2007:4)

Contrary to a majority of European countries, Ireland still demonstrates a high percentage of gender segregated schools. While the opinions are divided on the good-and-bad of single-sex schools, it is widely agreed that co-ed schools better prepare girls *and* boys for social scenes and relationships.

Another point made by researchers is that gender segregated schools serve to maintain certain gender stereotypes that are hurtful to children and dictate their role in society. This is, of course, what we see represented in the short story when Tess is proclaimed the best student in the cookery class.

The same Sé Si document mentioned earlier describes how traditional gender roles are perpetuated in and extend to the classroom in the choice of subjects taken up by children. This being the pressure from home or children's natural proneness to imitate adults in their day-to-day roles, the truth remains that what is considered widely as 'homely' subjects – those considered by the wider populace as 'worthless humanities' (Rugerri, 2019) remain on little girls' report cards.

> The overview of subject take-up patterns provided in Sé Sí reveals substantial gender differences that have remained largely unchanged over time. From early second level onwards, pupils conform closely to the traditional gender stereotypes in terms of the subjects they study. Boys far outnumber girls in the take-up of "practical subjects," such as engineering, technical drawing, and construction studies and girls far outnumber boys in home economics, music, art and European languages. (O'Connor, 2007:4)

In this way, the stereotypes ingrained deeply in male and female children, the paths were set for children to take – boys to have professions, girls to take care of the home.

Since early age Tess is pushed towards the preconceptions of what was right for a woman to do and, obeying such ideals, does not question what more there is to life than being good in the kitchen, taking care of a house or birthing a child. She was taught so at school, possibly imitated her mother on doing so, too. Of course, like many other girls in Ireland until the 1970s, she was sent to a convent to be educated by nuns according to the Christian religion.

To summarise, I would refer to Maureen O'Connor's opinion that, "Girls are at once reduced to natural resources, ripe for exploitation, and instructed relentlessly in their social duties, which more often than not require they resist their 'natural' urges." (O'Connor 2017:90)

Of course, in Ireland the educational system is mainly a denominational one in primary and secondary levels. It would be fair to say, as Deirdre Raferty has, that "Education included fulfilling the duty of inculcating Church values and ensuring the

spiritual development of pupils." (Raferty, 2012:300), this way, perpetuating the high morality and purity that young girls had to burden themselves with for the remainder of their lives.

One, deeply important, text that inspired the stance of catholic convent schools on how to educate young women was the Instructions for the Educations of a Daughter (1687), authored by Archbishop François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon. While crucially ahead of its time in the incessant defence of education for girls, the text is not without its flaws – especially when it comes to the perceived position a woman is supposed to take in life. Fénelon argued that to be the ideal housewife, young girls had to be shaped to be so, to leave their vanity and idleness – traits he thought mainly inhabited the female world – behind. However, the attributes of an ideal wife and mother were not innate. Fénelon argued that young girls were prone towards idleness and vanity, traits which were even more apparent among the upper classes. Mary Hatfield cites him in one of her many publications on the topic, as the main pusher for educating girls in this deeply patriarchal way:

> 'this languor and idleness, joined to ignorance, gives rise to pernicious sensibility, and a desire for public amusements. It also excites an indiscreet and insatiable curiosity'. This curiosity was made more dangerous by girls' innate vanity and desire to please. To counter these natural urges, discipline and virtue had to be encouraged and exemplified through formal education. (Hatfield, 2020: 69)

In convent schools, the classes reserved for girls were dance, music, drawing and voice lessons which were recognised as 'accomplishments', which represented the epitome of female education and meant that girls would be perfectly poised for patriarchal society. These subjects were absolutely indispensable for the girls to make their husband happy someday:

> Needlework and fancy work, one utilitarian and one ornamental, were similarly offered and formed a material exhibit of womanly accomplishment. The accomplishments were a necessary aspect of female education, as they formed a 'ticket of admission to fashionable company', they also 'increase a young lady's chance of a prize in the matrimonial lottery', according to Maria Edgeworth In the second half of the eighteenth century, geography, sacred and profane history, arithmetic and accounting were available to pupils. (Hatfiled, 2020:65)

The tradition of setting girls up for a life of being concerned with their public appearance, their future husbands and subsequent children, continue in secondary grade, up until adulthood in a girl's life. The pedagogy of convent schools was set up to ingrain into young girls the purity, chasteness and piety held by the mother of Christ,

the Virgin Mary, and to teach girls how to best emulate her as to have a life as blessed as hers. Anthropologically, catholic schools and convent schools are positioned in the centre of the web of a patriarchal society, as it helps perpetuate female stereotypes and "usher pupils into womanhood with the social graces and virtuous habits expected in a genteel and respectable milieu." (Hatfield, 2020:76) The objective is to programme young women to be women according to a man's perspective, to teach them how to best take care of their husbands so, in turn, their husbands can go out into the world and affect some change.

The point here seems to be that Tess is the favourite because she did not find a need to have these subjects taught to her. She excelled at convent school, being deemed worthy of becoming prefect in her early years of study and was shown blatant favouritism towards her. She knew how to make the best sandwiches without doing anything special. She was capable of inciting the deepest love among other girls, so much so that they fought for her time and affection. While the sources of this love are uncertain – brotherly, platonic or even sexual love can be implicit in the text – it would not be unusual as O'Brien had previously depicted homoerotic feelings taking place inside convent doors[8]. And while the relationship between Tess and the other two girls is not as clear an exploration of homoeroticism as "Sister Imelda" is, it still conjures preconceptions and concepts about catholic convent education and the bars put on the expression of female sexuality.

Of the love felt by these two girls we hear nothing more, and soon are treated to a story about Tess's first boyfriend, how he gave her a pair of gloves so luxurious it put everyone in awe of them. And how he had to get back together with his former girlfriend so that she did not accuse him of breach of promise[9]. These gloves she wore during her "evening fashion parade" (O´Brien 1974:56) as Tess called it, which represented a would-be-genteel societal custom that sees that young girls are presentable and social as to quickly get an admirer and a future husband – debutantes. She latter goes to various friends' houses for tea parties and to socialise in a way considered respectable by the upper- and middle-classes.

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[8] In "Sister Imelda", a tale authored by O'Brien and published in the collection entitled "A Fanatic Heart" in 1984, O'Brien explores the themes of homoerotic feelings and impossible love inside convent doors. In the short tale, our female protagonist, upon being sent to a catholic convent school, becomes enchanted by a nun named Sister Imelda, to a point where she is deeply infatuated with her. Both women give gifts to each other, and dedicate poems to one another, but their love is never realized. In a religious society, ruled by patriarchy, and in which all women must be attached to a man (be him of flesh and bone or a spiritual one), there is no place for this relationship to blossom into what-could-have-been. Both women are already promised – one to a higher entity, another to a possible future husband.

[9] This has its merit in the early 20th century perception that a man's promise to marry a woman was a legally binding contract. The financial penalty for such actions were payment for damages made to the female. Since these accusations led to scrutiny of the intimate personal lives of the family, something which was strongly frowned upon, most young men were discouraged from pursuing other women and marry their accuser.

Pillar Villar Argáiz raises an interesting anthropological argument, in an essay written in 2013. To dissect some of O'Brien's short fiction, she leans on Jean-Luc Nancy's and Maurice Blanchot's theories of community and civilization, one of which argues that the community is characterized by their reaction to others and their otherness. If social life, marriage and childbearing is an established way of renewing society (as to give an illusion of an undying society, of the world turning around in its normalcy if you will), Tess partakes in it, in her perusing around town to show herself off, and by actively searching for a husband. A dramatic effect would be if she did not find herself a suitable match, and then she would be dismissed as a failure to society and, in other ways, her family.

> For the women O'Brian portray, failing to marry and bear children is a great catastrophe. Their spinsterhood would "unwork" the social circle around them, as they prove unable to renew their community through marriage and motherhood. (Argáiz, 2013:181)

Tricia Cusack points out that tea drinking in Ireland was primarily a female venture and that tea parties were "Also a means of regulating women's behaviour: the conventions of afternoon tea as practiced by upper- and middle-class women were another means of social control in a patriarchal society. Women partaking in afternoon tea were subject to rules that not only confined them to a domestic setting, but prohibited behaviours or exchange defined as unfeminine." (Cusack, 2018:186). Commonly represented in many novels published between the 19th and 20th centuries, which later were adapted to movies and inhabit the back of our pop culture, collective minds – in novels like Pride and Prejudice, Alice in Wonderland and many more – tea parties were at a point, considered too frenetic and libertine – something which is proven true in our short story. Seeing as the female culture in Ireland was one, in general, of restrain and containment, organizing tea parties where only females were allowed to attend was, for many, a kind of freedom they were not allowed in any other space – public or private – in society.

This holds a correlation to the society presented by Edna O'Brien in the short story. The Bible tells us that a good Christian teaches his or her children to be like themselves, to be a model on which they mould themselves - Deuteronomy 32:46-47. From the watchful eye of her parents, she tries to emulate their behaviours the best she can, as to get a good match and dismiss being a spinster. From the small bit we know of her parents, they seem not like the type of people who would lend themselves to rebelling against the current of society. These feelings of conflicted mother-daughter relationships will come up later in the short story, and will be explored further, but for now it will suffice to say that Tess is a product of her parents and the education they bestowed upon her.

Still, with this in mind, Tess grew to be successful. She found a suitable job and in her trips on the train and yearnings to see more of the world, she met Luke, the train commentator who was married and forgot to disclose such a fact.

To understand the public perception of extramarital affairs in Ireland, we need to know that men and women were seen differently by the British law when it came to affairs. Of course, when the crime was perpetrated by women it was seen as a direct offense against society and the virtue of Ireland itself. When the husband did it, it became a concern for neither the virtue not the society of the great nation of Ireland. Affairs are somewhat a *laissez faire* matter in most countries nowadays but at a certain time in Ireland's history affairs carried on by different genders carried different punishments.

In the case against a woman adulterer, she was always compelled to stay silent about the whole incident while her husband could try and get benefits from her lover, as if the husband lost something of monetary value to the other man – something commonly known as crim con (Howlin, 2016)[10]:

> The wife's voice was not heard in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century crim con cases. The action lay between her husband and her alleged lover; a wife could neither testify not have witnesses to testify on her behalf. She might have her reputation destroyed in court without being afforded a right of reply. (Howlin, 2016:13)

Sometimes brought out of spite, these accusations were seen as a slap on the face of the virtuous and pure persona that was created for Ireland and all its women. But in the case of the short story, the man is the adulterer. In such cases, social standards dictate that the wife is perceived as the betrayed, loving angel, and the mistress the envious devil incarnate. Although the text does not seem to hint at any physical connection between Tess and Luke, perception is all that matters in the countryside – as we have seen in the first chapter of this dissertation.

Tess's behaviour after she discovers that Luke is married, is the behaviour of a woman who has to evade, at all costs, the appearance of the aforementioned envious devil. She hides away for a day and when she is seen again, acts as if everything is completely normal. To protect her social position – and her future guarantee of a husband and children – she has to make it look like she was not his mistress although he was somewhat enamoured with her.

Another possible aim of this relationship finale was to show that Tess is not endowed with the capability of caring much about other people. Everything that happens to her that is relatively unhappy – like breaking up with Tom and Luke being married – is handled with a certain distance and coldness that she does not seem to realize she has. Another instance of this coldness is her husband's affair – which will be

[10] Abbreviated from Criminal Conversation, these were trials often held when a woman was known to be engaged in an affair with another man while being married. This maintains the perception that a woman is her husband's property, as he is able to demand reparations from the 'trespasser'. This is now abolished in many jurisdictions.

discussed later under different circumstances and explored from a different thematic angle. Tess lacks passion in her life, the same passion she yearns for at the end of the short story. This apathetic reaction to the matters of the heart can be caused by her simply knowing the place that is hers to occupy in the world or simply because she lacks love for any other being. I am inclined to the first hypothesis as O'Brien repeatedly uses the trope of the subservient woman to make her point about the position of women in society.

> By stressing the emotional paralysis and the entrapment of these women, O'Brien denounces the pervasive influence, in the Ireland of the 1940s and 1950s, of traditional passive and subservient images of femininity. (Argaíz, 2012:94)

After this entanglement with a married man, Tess finds herself a husband whom she knew immediately was the one for her. Tess speaks of her husband to be in a way that manifests the shallowness she has come to learn to live with. She speaks of his job first, of the good life he will be able to provide, and we never know the young man's name. Her father disapproved of the relationship of course, prohibited it, no doubt saying that there was no one good enough for his little girl. Eventually, he caved in.

The manner in which it is narrated entails that the story of Tess and her husband is unlikely to obtain sympathy from readers, as Tess left her job as a secretary – an ordinary action for a wife-to-be to take and related to the quote above – to be a full-time housewife. They had four children, two of which had difficult births, but they were born healthy. After their children were born, they added a wing to their house for the children, to separate grownup life from children life. As described, the house is vast and its importance in the life of the couple is big.

The house is a most important space in the life of a new couple and their social life. It becomes, in its traditional values, the soul of the small community and its disposition to welcome new members also reflects those of the parish – in its unwillingness to welcome those who are different, and its willingness to embrace the ones who are.

The description of the house strikes the reader as an unusual one – why dedicate so much time to describing a place when the medium is a short story? However, we can dissect the relevance of this portrayal when putting it into perspective with Gaston Bachelard's theory presented in his study *The Poetics of Space.* In it, Bachelard explores the spaces humans inhabit – be them indoor or outdoor – in juxtaposition with an exploration of the human psyche and the experiences we feel because of architecture and how such spaces reflect on ourselves. Very simply put, the author imagines that one's being is a physical home, and in it congregates many spaces that differently affect us in our normal life. For the author, the house is *the* pillar, a shelter without which there would be no stability to an

individual's life, a space that inhabits both the rational and irrational spaces in our minds (Bachelard, 1994).

In a study about communal openness in the short fiction of Edna O'Brien, Pilar Villar Argáiz states that "the house stands as a symbol in O'Brien's fiction of the saturated community." (Argáiz, 2013:188) In her essay the author argues that the house is maintained private as to protect the sanctity of the house from deviant outsiders. This, of course, correlates to Derrida's theory that society is not inclusive at all, and his insistence on the deconstruction and reconstruction of society – to one that includes all people, even if dissenters. We must consider these theories when discussing this short story as the house as a centre for the village people, is not at all an enclosed space when the newlyweds move there but will eventually become one.

The house, a Georgian one known in the town as *The Blue Shutters*, is the background to many parties, including on Christmas evenings, when Tess runs around making sandwiches and raffle away baskets of food. It is the place their children grow up in, that stores many memories of the family and symbolizes happiness. However, the children leave, and as the house gets emptier and more secluded, when the couple is not sought out to host parties anymore, Tess begins to realise that something is amiss.

While the preconception – to this day in some cases – is to believe that "the woman is the heart of the home" (Blessed Teresa of Kolkata, 2000) Tess begins to realise that it's not *enough* for her to have a house, children, and a husband. The emptiness of the house reflects the emptiness in herself, much like Bachelard argues in his theory.

"The first little lasting cloud to appear in Tess's life was when she turned forty and began to put on weight." (O'Brien, 1974:6) This, of course, alongside with another case of infidelity – this time committed by her husband. This indiscretion, however, will open another subject that is substantial in the tale and in O'Brien's work as a whole – the dismantling of the previously unquestioned authority of the church and clergy and the lack of belief in its morals. One my personal favourite themes of O'Brien's work, is that the author chooses to show the reader of the gradual loss of faith in the moralizing weight of the Catholic church by making the characters doubt their faith or dissent from church-mandated morals.

Christianity has often enclosed the domain of sexuality and sexual orientations under labels such as "sin" and "immoral", often confining these aspects to the silence of the family – who could not know how to deal with such topics and banning them from public discourses. Recently, however, such terms and opposition on the part of the church have been widely countered and denounced. "Concepts such as sexual diversity, orientation and preferences took over from the priestly language of adultery, fornication and concupiscence" (Inglis, 1997:6) With the growing exposure of scandal within the Catholic church and the public's backlash over the growing number of cases of child abuse, incest, rape and abortion denounced and reported by the media, the public started to move away from the concepts of celibacy, innocence, purity and piousness perpetuated by the church and came to accept the fluidity of sexuality.

Slowly, society is coming to terms with the normalcies of sexuality, moving away from feelings of shame and gradually embracing them in their day-to-day lives.

Using Foucault's theory, Inglis identified the three aspects of the restrictive and oppressive silence on sex that are the main reasons of the sexually repressed Irish folk:

> Foucault delineates three main aspects to the deployment of sexuality which have relevance for an analysis of what happened in Ireland: (a) a strict regulation under Canon Law and a surveillance of marriage by priests in relation to fecundity, forbidden times, positions, etc. (Foucault, 1980:37) (b) the separation, labelling and analysis of the whole range of sexual libertines, deviants and perverts who had been confined, supervised and studied (1980:39); and (c) the constitution of sexuality as a problem for children who had to be kept ignorant and innocent of sex and to be constituted as modest, chaste and pure by being made aware and becoming constantly vigilant of the mortal danger of sins of the flesh (1980:41). [Foucault, 1980 as cited by Inglis, 1997:12]

In the case of this short story, and relating to the mentioned theme of O'Brien's work, the author curiously chooses to have Tess find out about the affair on church grounds, and having her husband repent for the affair after he attended the Mass he was invited to by his mistress(es). The events and the locations O'Brien chose here are frankly obvious, and specifically made to let the reader question the reasoning behind these choices.

Sex outside marriage was a taboo-topic in society, although evidently the cases where such happened were many, and would continue to be so despite its ordinariness. These topics, were obviously, repressed by church officials. Tess's husband fails to deny the 'sin of the flesh', which promptly makes the reader question why should we believe in the sanctity of marriage? Why believe in any of Church-mandated moral rules? It breaks open a deeply rooted question of disparity between genders and how the act of cheating is perceived amongst individuals.

Irish society had often attempted to police bodies and regulate marriage, assigning the roles of husband and wife, of father and mother, to men and women – often burdening them with the responsibility to birth large families they did not want or were able to support. "Life, sex and the body were open, coarse, obscene, indecent, tragic and funny. (…) Sexuality was tied into a fixation of reproducing and developing kinship ties, names and possessions." (Inglis, 1997:9).

The failure of the husband to deny the propositions of young, beautiful girls, implies that O'Brien attempts to show the readers that Church morals were not universally compatible with every individual, no matter how pious and religious one was. The façade of being a devout family who attends mass every Sunday, is then smashed by the author, who problematises marriage and its social perceptions and implications.

Tess takes the affair with a naturalness that can only be blamed on the normality of knowing how common it is for a woman to have her husband cheat on her. Even when one of the mistresses calls Tess to invite her husband to mass – a clear insinuation of something else to come – Tess reacts with a cool, level-headed calm which seems disproportionate when comparing it to our modern-day reactions. She also accepts material compensation for the affair. As mentioned before, Tess received many presents, but this was the biggest one her husband gave her. A mink stole that attracted the envy of every other woman in the parties they attended together. As these events took place, the children were leaving, one by one, for boarding school until the house grew still and Tess remained in it alone, no children to animate the house.

In the end she remains alone, in a big house, unhappy and older. In her manifesto "Out of Time: The Perils and Pleasures of Ageing, Lynn Segal argues that, while we all age, "… it is women who have often reported a very specific horror of ageing." (Segal, 2012:13 as cited by Wray, 2017:183) This sense of terror is very much in line with what we feel at the end of the short story when Tess looks out of her bedroom window, feeling lonely and detached from the life she has been living. The feeling of disappointment is clear, for a woman who obviously has neglected the process of ageing, which has brought its problems to her marriage, and in doing so has started resenting the process:

> … and wish that people would call to tell her that she was pretty, or to eat some of her legendary sandwiches, or to give her the little items of news. No such luck. People went to the houses of younger couples as they had once flocked to hers, and her husband, though up to no monkey business, was no longer quote the same, did not whistle when she came down the stairs dressed to go out. (O'Brien, 1974:71)

Again, as Segal puts it, ageing is linked to "the place of the body, and fertility, in women's lives; above all, with what is seen as beauty, attractiveness, good looks, in defining the quintessentially "feminine", however fleeting, however unattainable, this will prove" (Segal, 2012:13 as cited in Wray, 2017:183) This is the sense we get at the end of the story, that by losing her youth and her beauty, Tess no longer knows who she is. She became so attached to the idea of being young and popular amongst the community, that she forgot to gather other habits that made her happy and fulfilled. She became bored with her life of repetitiveness and routine.

On the other hand, the second short story discussed in this chapter, also concerns itself with the passage of time, routines, and infidelities – in fact, some of the many things that bring together the two stories and the two main ladies is their contrasting opinions on routine.

Maeve Binchy's "Bella and the Marriage Counsellor" is a very short tale that tells the story of a wife who has been content with her marriage and finds out her

husband has been seeing another woman, whom he wants to leave her for. He explains to his wife – after the cat is let out of the bag by an overexcited shopkeeper – that the affair has been going on for six months and people at the office were covering for him. He asks her for a divorce, and Bella grovels and begs him not to go forward with it. When he leaves the house the next morning, she wonders what wives do when they no longer have a husband.

By mid-afternoon, Bella stopped placing blame on Jim and started to blame herself – her body – for his affair. How she had "let herself go" throughout all those years of marriage. There was a roll of fat around her waist, she claimed, and a "padded" chin. The magazines Bella read were counselling women without boyfriends to 'slim down' in hopes to find a husband. She decides that a diet will fix her broken marriage and visits a doctor that tells her she does not need to lose that much weight to be healthy. She wanted the "marvellous tablets from the doctors, which meant that you were never hungry again." (Binchy, 2015:299) The doctor did not prescribe her anything.

When Jim returned by midnight, Bella was starving – having eaten nothing at all throughout the day – he slept in the living room, she in the bedroom. The next morning, she dressed in the most slimming thing she owned, put on makeup and joined Jim in the kitchen in attempts to sway his mind. His mind, however, could not be tampered with. He wanted to know how much money he needed to give Bella every month if she wanted to sell the house to start afresh. Overwhelmed she left the house and when she came back, Jim and some of his things were gone. During her outing she made an appointment to the National Marriage Guidance Council for Thursday. When the day came, she stood in front of a clergyman that never suggested to her that religious intent might be the remedy to her problems. In Bella's opinion, the counsellor did not do much counselling, he just listened and nodded. When she told him about the plan to lose weight, he did not react to it, merely asked if her weight made her feel unhappy. The counsellor did not speak much after this – not about Bella's rants about her age, or her husband's mistress, or how the country should have laws to protect marriages and not destroy them. Bella departs from the clergyman, assuring him that everything will be alright again when she is two stone lighter.

The open ending of this story, just like Edna O'Brien's short story, contains the details of the life of a woman who struggles with herself. As discussed before, affairs are a common thing not only in Ireland but in the world, and the couple seem to be incompatible with each other ["Don't say you haven't noticed how dull we've got together. You must have been feeling that everything we'd ever hoped for and promised ourselves has all for in this dreary sort of routine of catching up with things, for ever" (Binchy, 2015:296)]. While Bella has been happy in her life with him, with the routine that they have as a couple, her husband Jim has been seeing one of his students and intends to marry her after he divorces Bella.

Bella, of course, believes in the sanctity of marriage, and after her husband expresses the intent to have a divorce, she resorts to making sly comments about the promise they made to each other on their marriage day. The routines, she says, are

what make her life happy and exactly what makes her husband miserable. Facing the prospect of being left alone, Bella wonders how people live without a husband:

> What did people do when their husbands walked out? Often enough she had gossiped and tut-tutted about other families where this had happened. But what did a wife actually *do*? (Binchy, 2015:297)

This, of course brings up the aspect of the dependency of women on their husbands. In their book, What do Women Want?, Eichenbaum and Orbach argue that dependency is a deep feeling that arouses conflicting feelings on the part of women in relationships.

> As she opens herself up to this new person, either emotionally or sexually, the part of her that longs for love acceptance gets stirred. Will this be the person who will love her fully? Will this be the person to whom she can bring all of herself – the strong and competent parts as well as the insecure and emotionally hungry parts? Can she relax into believing that he will be reliable and capable of responding to her? (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 2014)

This is applicable to Bella and the feeling of dejection she feels when Jim asks her for a divorce. Women often place the blame upon themselves when a relationship ends – which is exactly what Bella does in the story. She is so dependent on her husband and fulfilling his emotional needs, that she no longer recognizes her own needs. To live without a husband is inconceivable to her because she was raised – much like Tess – to emulate her own mother and care about the men, the children, and the house, putting herself in second place. The feeling of dependency is a familiar one for women, especially those who live in a deeply traditional society like Ireland.

Bella comes to stop blaming Jim for his affair, and starts placing the blame on her body, abusing it even. She seems to believe than when she loses weight, she will get her old life back. “Jim had never said anything, but he was a man and, as a man, he must have been put off by her flesh. What Bella must do now was to lose a lot of weight, dramatically, then he would come back again…” (Binchy, 2015:298).

Beauty standards have been unattainable for a very long time, and Bella is one more of the individuals who fall in the trap of body dysmorphia[11] (Vashi, 2016; Lemma, 2009;) – a condition where a person obsesses about flaws in their appearances that other people can not notice, i.e., Bella looks at herself and sees abundant fat, when

[11] A mental health condition that deeply affects the perception of an individual about themselves, keeping them focused on flaws in their appearance – flaws that are not, in most cases, recognised by others. This condition may lead to constant shame and avoidance of social interactions, eventually impacting the individual’s daily life and their ability to function in society.

she does not have that much of it to begin with – and attempts a crazy diet to lose the extra weight she does not have to begin with. This is the never-ending story of feminine bodies of the modern world: fitting into a standardized pattern, just because the media purports it to be the ideal look of a woman.

Many studies have been conducted on how ageism and age-related stereotypes affect the mental health of subjects. A longitudinal study conducted in Ireland proposed that it was a "particularly apposite setting to study this association" (Freeman et al., 2016:133) between deteriorating mental health and the ageing process as "… a recent study has shown that age stereotypes have become more negative in a linear way in Ireland" (Freeman et al., 2016:133). Mental health deterioration is considered by the authors a major public health crisis due to the outcome seen in most cases, which include depression and anxiety, which ultimately result in suicide or impairments – physical, cognitive or social.

I argue that this deterioration is what is ailing Bella. In her quest to lose the weight she is vehement she has to lose, she initiates in a path of self-isolation – by cancelling on her friends and their plans – and one that will indubitably lead her to a state of frail health. Bella constantly feels faint and week due to the lack of nourishment she provides for her body. Despite only being natural that with ageing comes the steady slowing of the digestive system – making it easier for individuals to gain weight while also making it harder to lose it – Bella only sees unattractiveness when it comes to her body.

In her book *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance*, Wendy Chapkis argues that the "…current ideal beauty remains a narrow-hipped, high-breasted woman with flawless skin." (Chapkis, 1986:8), even though this simply is not attainable for everyone. The story, of course, does a lot to perpetuate this stereotype by citing from many magazines – hardly the most trust-worthy outlet in this topic – that explained how one woman lost weight to revive her dissatisfied marriage and how single girls were encouraged to lose weight to find boyfriends, hinting at the problematic nucleus of focusing on beauty ideals.

By behaving this way, we can agree that Bella and women that act as she does, "raise the threshold of self-hate faster than the age span." (Ellen Goodman as cited in Chapkis, 1986:10). This mindset of hatred towards the natural cycle of ageing, and the continuous, incessant insistence on going to a health farm to lose weight, presents a barrier for Tess's self-love, instead of despising it, to embrace the process of getting older and being single instead of negating or repudiating it.

In their psychology and health article on self-perception and ageing, Wurm and Benyamini argue that "…age stereotypes become internalized from childhood across the life span of an individual…" (Wurm & Benyamini, 2014:835). They further argue that the stereotypes present in society about old age provokes a severe negative reaction to what is natural for when the body starts to age. Bella focuses on her weight, much like Tess, but Bella attempts to change her powerlessness.

Dieting becomes a way to deal with the problems of her life – by denying her body sustenance, she will erase the existent familial problems. Never mind that Jim

had an affair, she would still take him back and do the run-of-the-mill sacrifices that traditional wives do for their husbands. By dieting, she feels she regains a control that she lacks in her life. By punishing her body, by denigrating it, Bella feels she will have repented for the crime of becoming "too complacent" (Binchy, 2015:298). If Bella never fixes this imbalance purporting to the way she sees and carries herself in the world, then she will never truly have any sort of control.

By adapting to circumstances, the individual exhibits a laudable supply of persistence and resilience. By learning to exist in a totally different way than you did before, with none of the routines and the endless company, Bella would surpass her profound need to take care of her – soon-to-be-ex – husband and start taking care of herself, developing new parts of herself that otherwise could not have been explored.

This, of course, falls in line with the repeated sexualization, and consequential brutalisation, of female bodies. By moulding the female mind to it since its prime, the beauty standard becomes so deeply ingrained in **women** that she, without being aware of it – hates parts of herself, both physically and mentally, that do not correlate with that idealization.

Recently, one of the most common concerns on the part of feminist groups has been the eagerness for women to develop a full understanding of their full potential despite the beauty standards, denying the usual female routines a space in their lives – by not covering oneself in makeup, not wearing spandex to be shapelier, even to stop shaving, some females have claimed a space of their own to be themselves.

This attitude is exactly what Bella lacks as she is constantly trying to appeal to her husband, she does not take back the power that can be hers. Chapkis argues that there is a distinct difference between the child-woman and the over forty woman.

> The over-forty beauty shares with the child-woman the promise of eternal youth. To be beautiful, they seem to say, is to look a constant twenty whether biologically twelve of forty-five. (…) older women must literally remake their bodies in the pursuit of beauty. (Chapkis, 1986:9)

The social eviction that Tess suffered because of her advancing age is being self-imposed by Bella. Her need for solitude is indicative of her need to wallow in her sadness over losing her husband to a younger woman, and also evidences a deep-rooted shame over her upcoming divorce. The short story seems to argue that if she were to deny these instincts, Bella would be happier. Instead, during the week until her meeting with the marriage counsellor, Bella thinks of how difficult it is to keep appearances: how she always tries to think of places Jim can be instead of going forward with her life, meeting friends and going to parties – she cancels the plans she has and accepts almost no invitations to friendly gatherings. The fact that Bella feels the need to keep up the appearance that she is still with her husband underlines a deep feeling of failure and shame. In non-metropolitan areas in Ireland, divorce would still be a shameful thing, even if younger generations are more adept and supportive of

it, and to add the shame of being traded in by a younger woman is a fear that affects many women – one which Bella is currently living. Her only hope, she seems to think, is the marriage counsellor.

His approach to her dilemma, however, is not very reassuring. While he speaks very little, he tries to gently stir her from her efforts of changing herself physically and hints at simply accepting the fact that the relationship has come to an end. He asks her if her weight ever made her unhappy, and she says yes, that she is too much fat and her husband's new girlfriend is probably very skinny. She knows she can lose weight, but she turns to the counsellor to know what she can do after she's thinner. Softly, he hints at the wish to stir her away from the body dysmorphic Bella to a Bella that is much more accepting of herself in her natural beauty. The counsellor does not have any advice to give her about how to get Jim back, he just listens to her self-pity of how she's forty-five and will be turned out from her home. It seems that the author is implying that Bella must learn how to appreciate herself.

On the topic of self-love, the Bible suggests that to go through life filled with hate or insecurities about ourselves is a waste of His power. Through Christian scripture, we know God created the human race as a mirror image of himself, and so to hate ourselves is to hate Him. To stimulate our self-esteem, we must take a deep plunge within ourselves and ask, 'Who am I, truly?'. To move past the trivial things of the flesh is something priests are encouraged to preach against. Pride is, after all, one of the seven deadly sins according to the Bible. ["The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished." (Proverbs 16:5)]

The final image of Bella leaving the meeting with the counsellor is an open ending but one that does not leave her destiny too in question. She is obviously going to go forward with her plan to lose weight to get back her husband. The counsellor, again, shares no opinion of his own about her dilemma. This is precisely what gives us the expectation that Bella will not be successful in her efforts to get her husband back. Binchy ends the story by saying that Jim promised to be with her when they were married.

Like the first short story explored here, this second one shows a loss of belief in the sanctity of marriage, much like the first short story. What connects Tess and Bella is their inability to adapt to their current circumstances. By denying that they are ageing and the most interesting aspect of themselves is not their exterior, they do not allow themselves to adapt to the newer times, swiftly changing to be integrated and modern women. They could shed their pretences of normalcy and accept that they are not happy with the life they are leading and strive to be happier. Henceforth, they have the prospect of being new women, shedding their older skin for new one that will explore their potential, their better self.

The potential of these women is much bigger than housewife, and for the potential to be realised they must transcend their beliefs that housewife is as good as they are going to be able to attain. Furthermore, they are bonded together by their experiences and how society has moulded them into the housewives who care about pleasing their husbands to the fullest extent.

3. Chapter 3: Genus Aequalitatem: Women and Men in Short Stories by O’Brien and Binchy

Women and their dependent role in relationships and society has long been problematized and discussed in feminist circles. By upbringing, women tend to occupy a subservient role in the traditional heterosexual relationship and are dependant, emotionally and financially, on their male counterpart. Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach argue that a woman who is in a relationship is inclined to believe that she has the support she needs. In their joint work, they assert that so many women know feelings of frustration and unhappiness, and that is seems to be a cultural construct:

> …many women juggle with similar kinds of feelings of yearning, disappointment, anger and loss. This psychological phenomenon is so consistently a part of so many women’s lives that it cannot be attributed to each woman’s family history. We must conclude that the cultural influence on girls – something gender specific and central to a girls upbringing – dramatically affects how she approaches an intimate sexual relationship. (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1983:33)

The primal role of the woman as caregiver allows for her own need for care and affection to be ignored. By being the emotional support of the family unit, she ignores in herself the need for such support. Ironically, women are often subjected to being financially dependent on men, not by choice, but by societal ruling.

In the two short stories approached in this chapter, - Edna O’Brien’s “Lantern Slides” and “A Few of the Girls” by Maeve Binchy – we will explore the dependant role society has imposed on women, how independence is something these women are slowly gaining terrain on, and how some women are still averse or frightful of female empowerment and independence. In both, there are women who are adept of female empowerment, in both there are women averse to it, frightful, or ashamed of breaking free of the shackles of societal approval.

Lantern Slides, the collection, is itself a composite novel[12] that has sometimes been linked to James Joyce’s collection *Dubliners* as its precedent, while at the same time taking liberties in its departures from the canon. O’Brien made the genre her own when in 1990 she published *Lantern Slides* and “joined different short narrative ‘slides’ into one novel, far from Joyce’s living dead. O’Brien attempts the search for new protagonists, mainly single women, and starts a new line that has been interpreted as

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[12] Robert M. Luscher defines it as “a volume of stories, collected and organized by their author, in which the reader successively realized underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions of pattern and theme. (…) The volume as a whole becomes an open book, inviting the reader to construct a network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact.” (Luscher, 1989:148). It is then important to assert that a composite novel revolves around something, it may be a theme, a character, a space or a time.

a liberating sign by critics" (Lasa-Alvarez et al. 2008:782). The name of the collection derives from a projection device fallen in disuse, and symbolically it denotes the changes that the author is seeing in the society around her, binding these same changes in her stories to her characters. The characters' problematization of certain aspects of fictional modern life mirrors those of actual modern life, deepening our understanding of the future and how we, as humans, deal with changes. The collection can also be taken to symbolize a new era of women's writings, when prospects are finally optimistic for women of various backgrounds. With her clear departure from Joyce in this collection – the existence of ironic narrators, feminist rewritings and the redefinition of the city as an abyss of opportunities – O'Brien is working towards redefining the Joycean Irish city presented in 1914. O'Brien's Dublin is not as melancholic and bucolic as Joyce's, precisely because she is looking for a way to do a refreshing take on the city and the "representation of a new generation" (Lasa-Alvarez et al. 2008:782). Her 1990s collection focuses on themes that were not as profoundly explored in her previous collections – including sexual freedom, divorce, liberal initiatives, etc.

The last, the longest and the eponymous short story. The most extensive short story approached in this dissertation as a whole, "Lantern Slides" represents many aspects of the socio-cultural lifestyles in Ireland, the individual trajectories within the city– marriage, divorce, politics, dependence, harassment, and violence – and the conflicting opinions that arise between women and men, depending on their experiences. These retellings of different, subjective, personal narratives afford the reader a glimpse of the changing city of Dublin. The short story depicts a surprise birthday party attended by a panoply of characters and in which nothing much happens, but conversation is rich. A party obviously organized for a wealthy person, the characters tell one another about various aspects of their lives that will implement them as representative of certain archetypes[13] and if and how they will fit in the projection of society made by Edna O'Brien.

Our characters all meet while waiting for Betty, the birthday girl, arrives. Miss Lawless and Mr. Conroy arrive together, and Conroy shares the story of the woman whom he loved and who died. He tells Miss Lawless how he kissed her, a married woman, when she was blind drunk because of her mother's death. They soon join Dr Fitz and Mr. Gogarty who makes several jokes with misogynistic and sexual connotations throughout the night. Bill the Barrow Boy also joins the group. A man of humble origins, he is engaged to Denise, a woman who does not desire to have children and is very beautiful. The conversation soon turns to Bill's humble upbringing, which makes Mr. Conroy uncomfortable. The party only, truly, begins when Betty, the woman whose birthday it is, arrives at the party. From then on, the group is seated,

[13] Carl Jung though of archetypes as inherited ideas or thoughts that derive from our collective experiences and are present in the unconscious part of an individual's psyche. to these experiences, Jung added the manifestation of recurrent symbols or motifs in the arts – literature, painting, films, etc – that represent a collective that shares said traits.

and other characters are brought into the narrative. Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan, a married couple, Sinead, and Dot the Florist.

The conversation at the table changes from topic to topic, how Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan did not talk for one entire year, then to Sinead and her grieving. Bill the Butcher Boy mused about how beautiful his bride, Denise, was, prompting Mr. Conroy to liken Miss Lawless to Maire Ruadh[14]. The topic soon turns to Betty, and how she is husbandless at the moment. Sinead asks for the "missing – indeed the vagrant – husband" to not be mentioned. Sinead did not understand why Betty's husband would trade her in for another woman whom she insults. Dr Fitz, her *liaison*, tells her to not speak of something she does not know. However, Sinead tells Miss Lawless that she is close friends with Betty and knows which women her husband left Betty for. She assures Miss Lawless that this woman, Clara, is Danish and Dr Fitz "describes a woman who was not at all svelte, who wore ordinary clothes, had never gone to a hairdresser or a beauty parlour in her life, and was so overweight." (O'Brien, 1990:189). When inquired why Betty's husband had run off with Clara, Dr Fitz informs the group that Clara makes the husband feel good.

They also talk about such things as a Gucci tie that Mr. Conroy was gifted and how the women want "stimulating conversation" (O'Brien, 1990:191) Sinead starts the most remarkable exchange of the evening when she states that "though they were treated like pieces of china at a party, they were frequently 'knocked about' at home" (O'Brien, 1990:191). At this statement, Dr Fitz seems to get irritated enough to almost throw a wine bottle at his paramour. A discussion on divorce ensues, with men and Eileen Vaughan and the rest of the women standing on opposite sides of the discussion. The men and Mrs. Vaughan argue that people should stay in a miserable and failed marriage for the sake of the children, and the rest of the women argue that children suffer when their fathers are cheating on their mothers with young women. Mrs. Vaughan's reason to disagree with the rest of the women was that she believed "that young girls nowadays were tramps in the way they dressed and the way they behaved." (O'Brien, 1990:191) Sinead begins to tell the tragic story of her previously failed marriage.

To bring harmony back to the table, Mr. Conroy starts to tell the group of a stroll he and Miss Lawless had earlier that day. What Mr. Conroy did not know was that the entire morning, Miss Lawless was reminiscing about how she had "surrendered herself" to Abelard[15]. (O'Brien, 1990:193). Dot the Florist is looking for a

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[14] A quick research tells us that Maire Ruadh was a prevalent figure in Irish folklore. Married three times for convenience, she was believed to have killed all three of her husbands and later died a gruesome death herself. It is said she still haunts the Lamenagh castle; With this comparison I believe that Mr. Conroy was saying that Miss Lawless's beauty could tempt any man, and it was haunting in some ways.

[15] The name of this character is intriguing and provocative. The tragic love story of Pierre Abelard and Héloïse is best known in pop culture and history, usually allotted a space in literature in which they are vastly represented – together or separated (Pope, 1717; Rosseau 1761; Twain 1869; Adams, 1904; Waddell, 1933; Lowell, 1973; Carroll, 2017). Abelard was entrusted the education of Héloïse – at the time 17 years of age – by her uncle and when he found out the two had a relationship that culminated in

man who will pay off her debts and The Meat Baron is the perfect candidate. Next came the telling of the life of Mr. Vaughan and how horrid it was. His wife was not kind to him because she caught him cheating through a letter sent to him by his mistress. His wife, enraged by his affair, made copies of the letter and set them to all his friends and family, including a sister of his who was a nun, Eileen's family and his employers.

While listening to this story, Miss Lawless was shocked to find a "modern day Abelard". Betty ran and kissed him and Miss Lawless felt jealous. She was fixated on the man, who was a widower, having lost his wife in a drowning accident. Dr Fitz took the opportunity to tell Miss Lawless the story of how John, Betty's husband, told her he wanted to separate, how Betty went berserk on a plane, how he had to give her something so she would calm down. Sinead, jealous at the attention Dr Fitz was giving to another woman, sneered some comment at them, and started to think about how she wished to marry him and how a child would settle him. Later, while much drunk, Sinead made various comments that hinted at an affair between Fitz and Betty, and, after a warning look from him, she rushed out of the salon, followed by Bill the Barrow Boy who pitied her. Mrs. Vaughan was thinking about when someone would speak to her, how they all thought she was hard, and none of them knew how she had cried when she found out about her husband's affair.

Miss Lawless is then taken to meet this new Abelard and decided that while there were similarities, there were also differences between the two Abelards. This new Abelard was more ruthless, more sociable than the first. He retold his wife's accident to Miss Lawless and then asked if she wanted to eat or drink anything. Of course, this raised the question of Mr. Conroy, the man who invited Miss Lawless and wanted to take her home too. Miss Lawless wished that Abelard won this small dispute. The evening ends without any remarkable actions but there is an exciting anticipation in the room that hope will prevail for a better, brighter future.

To understand the perceived role of women as dependant creatures, we must first study what Megan Dawson referred to as "learned helplessness"[16]. This theory, of course, takes its foundations from the notion that social constructs are actively taught and passed through generations of women. Dawson states that women are "socialised into being dependant, passive and helpless." (Dawson, 1994:83). Women are

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the birth of a son named Astrolabe. Knowing of the uncle's ire, Abelard flees with Héloïse and marries her. He sends her to a convent in England to protect her from her abusive uncle and to raise their son. Aggrieved that the two married, Héloïse's uncle sends men to castrate Abelard as a reparation for the damages done to his niece. He retires in shame and dedicates himself to his philosophical studies. Héloïse, too, resides in the convent and eventually becomes the prelate nullius. Their love is immortalised in their letters to each other and considered a foundation for Western European literature.

[16] This theory is used to explain the helpless behaviours in Western culture and how the awareness of them is a first step in their women's quest for empowerment. After repeated aversive stimulation – like berating or physical abuse – a subject learns the behaviour the perpetrator wants them to believe (See Kiefer, 1990; Kitzinger, 1991; Harris, 2008).

themselves taught by their mothers, who were taught in turn, by theirs, to be home creatures – to take care of the things of the home, to nurture and care, to be the supportive beam in the household. Helplessness is a direct "result of oversocialization into stereotyped feminine roles. These women feel that they are not able to survive on their own and have no experience in decision-making." (Ball & Wyman, 1977). Like most things we are taught since children, this information is stuck to the female psyche indefinitely until a woman directly renounces it. This assertive positioning on the matter will break the belief that women are to be dependant on others forever – like eternal children.

Miss Lawless seems to crave some sort of traditional relationship although hiding a love affair anything but traditional. As explored before, extramarital affairs are a common matter, but still this one seemed to have an emotional depth where most just have physical undertones. Miss Lawless, while having Mr. Conroy in love with her, seems to lack interest in his advances towards her, thoughts of her first Abelard keep crossing her mind. While Miss Lawless can be likened to a modern-day Greta Conroy, she simply lacks the character development that Greta is afforded in "The Dead". By not giving her a first name, Miss Lawless remains, simply immature and atrophied. Joyce instils in Greta Conroy an intelligence that we do not know if Miss Lawless possesses, and while Greta feels a melancholy when thinking of a seventeen-year-old boy she knew once, Miss Lawless misses a person who is alive, simply lost his attractive manhood – not in the exact same way Pierre Abelard did, but he became emasculated, nonetheless. She first meets Abelard at the newspaper office and he, who is married with three children, still pursues her. By losing his physical prowess, by becoming half-blind and ripe with age, the first man likened to Abelard lost all the interest Miss Lawless might have had in him. She was "a little disappointed to hear that he was almost blind now, and that he walked with a stick." (O'Brien, 1990:204)

The manner in which O'Brien acquaints readers with Miss Lawless's consciousness, her aspirations, her feelings for the few people in her life conveys a perception that her emphasis on men is unfair – as we do not want to do unto them as they have done onto us. Underlying the narrative, with its glimpses into the characters' inner life and motivations and hence its fashioning of point of view, there seems to be a sense that equality should be the primary goal of feminism, not vengeance. To treat both genders and the people assigned to them as unique, and individual is the path put forward by feminism.

The first Abelard has fallen prey to physical deterioration. Unlike Greta, however, she does not marry out of necessity, she is resolved in marrying out of love. An innocent woman, her naiveté allows her to believe that the new Abelard at the end of the short story can be mellowed out by her and have a relationship formed between the widower and herself. She describes him as a more sociable, sterner version of the first Abelard. His character remains dubious until the end of the short story and we do not know if Miss Lawless pursues him or vice-versa.

The overtly dependant relationships come from the rest of the females of the short story. Betty is emotionally dependant on many characters around her – Dr Fitz,

Sinead, Mr. Conroy, etc – to compensate for her emotionally unavailable husband. The grand surprise party she is presented with, and the set of the short story, is another way for her friends to stroke her ego and try to maintain her sanity and mental stability. Everywhere on the walls are photos of Betty in svelte forms such as in her swimwear, and opulent pictures adorn the walls. The entire effort of the party is to keep her from entering a similar state like the one she reached when on the plane, after her husband told her he wanted to live apart.

Betty's calmness seems to be dependent on being adored and doted on by all her friends and acquaintances. The great displays of affection by the partygoers serve only to appease her. While glamorously beautiful and considerably rich, she is not truly happy. The one man she supposedly could rely on, could be dependent on, has forfeited her capability to do so, and fundamentally abandoned her. This combined with the fact John abandoned her for a less attractive woman has given a deadly blow to her self-confidence and self-worth. Eichenbaum and Orbach (1983) make the point that while women and men should be equally reliable on one another, women are constantly awaiting the time when this support is taken from them, they dread it but expect it nonetheless.

While she tries to compensate for her husband's emotional and physical absence, she also demonstrates an ability to turn an undesired situation into a satisfactory one. While she does not have him, she still benefits from his status, and wealth. She collects the trophy with her husband, despite being separated, keeping him reliant on the public stability that being married to her affords him. She is still needed in the mundane aspects of his life, and her influence over all the people at the party fashions her as a character greatly loved and cherished by every other. In these matters, she is endowed with power and she is dedicated to making it last.

Another emotionally dependant woman is Sinead. Having a difficult past with a horrid husband, she exchanges him for Dr Fitz. Sinead was emotionally and financially dependent on her ex-husband. Typically, women were considered to be material things of their husbands so they could treat or mistreat as they wanted. The fact that a woman was considered property accentuates the existence of a power dynamic that is imbalanced within the relationships – nowadays the imbalances may have diminished, but they have not been erased completely. Deborah Sinclair argues that "wife assault involves the intent by the husband to intimidate, either by thread of by use of physical force on the person's wife or property. The purpose of the assault is to control her behaviours by the inducement of fear." (Sinclair, 1985:15 as cited by Dawson, 1994:81) By abusing her physically, the male feels justified in *disciplining* his wife, perpetuating the power disparity in the relationship.

The abuses were recurrent in the relationship, and after Sinead lost the baby due to more violent abuses, she decided to leave her husband after he blamed her. The grief and psychological damage of losing a child and being blamed for it, coupled with he physical pain of being beaten again seemed to have woken Sinead up for the possibility of her being the one doing the abandoning. Because he broke the sanctity

and holiness of the home, not only does she abandon him, but she also forsaken the traditional family model, the nuclear family she intended to have.

Sinclair argues that there are three aspects that work to maintain a woman in an abusive relationship: "societal beliefs; accessibility of resources and the response of the community; and the psychological experience of the woman." (Sinclair, 1985, as cited by Dawson 1994:84). Abandoning her husband without assuredness of fair and affordable housing, access to employment, to child-care facilities or other facilities for that matter, is without doubt a courageous act partaken by Sinead even without any real prospects for herself.

While it is very common for women who've been victims of abuse to internalise their oppression and believe they were deserving of such abuse, Sinead does not seem to have grown attached to the idea. What also does not happen is any empathy for her at the table, when she retells her story. The only person who shows emotion is Bill the Barrow Boy, who tries to stop her from getting worked up. While Sinclair (1985) has stated that the correct thing to do is to regard those who have been victims of abuse as courageous and strong, the table does not have much emotion for Sinead, at all.

After leaving him, she transfers her dependence to Dr Fitz, the only doctor that could come to the rescue when her ex-husband kills himself with pills. While disagreeing with his actions and comments, she is a woman who is emotionally unstable, and so is uncapable of containing her emotions – as she displays many on the table that are not well met by her audience. She displays more than once what Adrienne Rich termed as *horizontal hostility* – women who feel threatened and jealous of other women – and also storms off after Dr Fitz shows interest in Miss Lawless. Just because they interacted with the doctor. In him, Sinead found an emotional crutch, someone to substitute her husband almost immediately and whom she saw could give her the emotional and financial support she needed. However, she is trapped with another man whose rage seems to be brimming at the top. He throws her angered glances and once even seems to ponder if he should throw a glass wine bottle at her all to try and control her behaviour, to keep her from saying something he does not want her to say. In this new relationship, the imbalance of the power dynamic still stands:

> The power imbalance serves as a rationale for a man to "discipline" his wife while domestic violence effectively perpetuates the dominance of men over women. (Hyde, 1991:351 as cited by Dawson, M. 1994:83)

He tries to oppress her behaviour and personality by having her not speak of her life experiences, by not speaking of the mistress, Clara, by not discussing divorce and because she stormed off in a flame of jealousy. The doctor Sinead thinks, has a playboyish side to him that resurfaces every time he meets a new woman. After years of abuse and wanting to finally have the life she always dreamed of, she plans to secure the doctor by getting pregnant with his child – preferably a boy, she says. (This

preference also shows a kind of favouritism towards the male sex which is troubling itself). She desperately tries to hold onto the doctor, but while he is soft on her, he still feels the need to exert his oppression on her.

> The rejection of the “little girl” inside means that a woman is unable to feel fully accepted and loved. (…) She constantly will be looking for the person, the close relationship that will give her security and fill up the emptiness. Sadly, men, to whom she turns, are not likely to have developed nurturing skills. Looking at the way heterosexual couples fit together psychologically, from a woman's perspective, it is as though women are, by upbringing, prepared for a life in which they will lack the emotional contact they desire so intensely. (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1983:39)

In her relationship with the doctor, Sinead wants what he cannot provide. Her goals, however, as characterised and suggested in O’Brien’s narrative, do not justify the means. Entrapment in a marriage/relationship with an individual due to an unwanted pregnancy is hardly new – be it in real life or a fictional narrative – and O’Brien’s narration of Sinead’s predicament does not, transparently, preclude readers’ awareness that the character’s plan works against the accepted view that a child should be desired by both parents. Sinead is, like the others sitting around that table, a highly dislikeable character.

Eileen Vaughan is another character who is dependent on her husband – after being humiliated, cheated on and having her social image defiled to the point everyone thinks of her as frigid, Eileen is trapped in an unhappy marriage of 18 years because she conforms to the traditions of marriage. She submits and accepts she will be cheated on and divorce does not cross her mind because, in her opinion, it would be an even greater dishonour.

The entire story of the cheating scenario is retold to the reader by Mr. Conroy, who spares no details. He tells miss Lawless of how the hotel manager, who was a deeply religious man, condoned the extramarital affair because everyone knew, he was married to “a harridan” (O’Brien, 1990:207) Marina Oppenheimer argues that “…cheated partners are often victims of a psychological set up by their partners. In order to justify extramarital relationships, cheating partners induce their spouses into playing a very negative role in the marriage” (Oppenheimer, 2007:181) and that they often “…create arguments to justify distancing behaviour and the need for a lover.” (Oppenheimer, 2007:182). Eileen is seen by the entire party as someone who is very cold, non-sociable, who has not spoken to her own husband in an entire year and who seems even frigid.

> Hard, hard was what they thought she was. (…) cursing not the errant husband but herself for being the sour, hard fossil of a woman that she was, for never

> throwing him a word of kindness, and for not being able to express an endearment except through gruffness. (O'Brien, 1990:217)

Suzanne Laba Cataldi defines frigidity as "a wide range of meaning – including lacking in ardour or warmth; a marked aversion or abnormal indifference to sexuality; and a physical inability to attain orgasm. The word is, or was, usually applied to women." (Cataldi, 1999:70) Miss Vaughan is disliked by everyone because they perceive her to be cold, to be frigid and that she dislikes everyone she is surrounded by. Exploring Simone de Beauvoir's work, she argues that "Symbolic expressions of frigidity often signal unjust power relations in Beauvoirian literature. They represent an active, choiceful rejection of dominance in heterosexual relationships." (Cataldi, 1999:70) After finding out about her husbands' betrayal, she shuts down her emotional and physical link and response to him as vengeance. She rejects him but refuses to take the dominant part of the relationship.

The smallest bit of dominance she could muster, she used to humiliate her husband by sending the letter the mistress wrote to Mr. Vaughan, to everyone they knew. Now she remains trapped in a loveless marriage, too entrapped to obtain a divorce or to leave him. To cite Beauvoir herself on the topic of frigidity,

> A woman may resort to it to deliberately insult (Beauvoir, 1989:466) or to punish "the male for all the wrongs she feels she had endured." (Beauvoir, 1989:393 as cited in Cataldi, 1999:71)

However, what the table does not know, and the reader does, is that the day Eileen lost her faith in her husband she cried desperately and wished that a disease would take her. She says she has no reason for being gruff, or to not be able to show her husband some kindness, she desired to be the person who could do that. She simply was not. And so, because they all perceived her as frigid, she decided to play the part of the frigid wife, still married and still dependant on her husband.

Differently, however, from all the others, Dot the Florist is *looking* for someone she can depend on financially. While she does not want to be emotionally dependant on a man, she does want to be reliant on him for financial purposes. For self-preservation and of her own volition, she will voluntarily submit to a man's desires to obtain the amount of money needed to pay off her debts. Hers is a solely financial dependence, and one she has not achieved yet.

These women, by trying to free themselves from being dependant or by trying to become dependant, have become close to the men, and while the men are not explored much in the other chapters, we will try to decode here what their attitude (and hence, the author's belief of men's attitudes in general) towards women and feminism is – as there is a great array of male characters of different backgrounds in

the short story. It is also important to consider these male characters as they, too, by acting the way they do in the short story, perpetuate the predicated gender ideology that segregates men and women.

Johnston and Morrison (2007), in their paper on the masculinities of young Irishmen, have stated that the view of masculinity as a single entity, equally present in all men, has been abandoned. Now, the leading theory is that masculinities are differently displayed in each man, very influenced by race, age, socioeconomic standards, and sexual orientation. Raewyn Connell, in his extensive work on masculinity, argues that masculine personalities are constructed due to the socialization with other men and while the predicated masculine stereotype does not necessarily reflect the everyday actions and behaviours of all men, it does resort – as seen previously – to the commanding "exemplars of masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005:846 as cited in Johnston & Morrison, 2007:662) to which all masculine behaviours are contraposed and judged by.

Of course, there are counters to this theory. J.C. Wade theorized that these hypothesis that focus on men in groups are not capable of identifying and solving different points and ideas within a group, and that most men have different identity cores present in themselves, the image of their specific masculinity may differ from all of the ones seen before. Michael Kimmel, in his very relevant work of sociology stated that

> Women often complain that their male friends or partners are...so understanding when they are alone and yet laugh at sexist jokes or even make those jokes themselves when they are out in a group (Kimmel, 1997:234 as cited by Johnson and Morrison, 2007:662).

This citation is particularly accurate in describing the men of the party. The men of this short story behave in a typically dominant sort of way when in a group. Mr. Gogarty, Dr Fitz and Mr. Conroy resort to the childish way of partaking in misogynist and sexual jokes about women which shows immense disrespect for the women present at the table.

Dr Fitz tries to impose his authority on Sinead by way of hard looks and threats of physical violence when at the table, but there are hints that he is very fond of her when in private. However, that does not excuse the way he treats her in public.

Mr. Conroy is a very emotional, passionate, and romantic man in his thoughts – "… to kiss her would be the realization of a dream…" (O'Brien, 1990:213) – but tells Miss Lawless of how he kissed Nicola when she was blind drunk – despite her being married and, worst of all, without getting consent. He brags of wealth and partakes in the abasement of Eileen Vaughan by asking her husband if there were "Any windfalls?" (O'Brien, 1990:194), the term the two came up with to ask if Eileen had "thawed" (O'Brien, 1990:194). While the phrase originates in the business world, here it is a

secret code between the two men, passed without Eileen being privy to it. also seems to have a philanderer way about him, paired with a somewhat obsessive trait. In his house he has a bust of Nicola, the woman he loved who died, and that it was his own to look at, for his enjoyment alone. Later he also mentions a wife he had, who had died some years previously making him a widower. This has made him somewhat cynical towards love.

Mr. Gogarty lacks any redeeming qualities as we are not much in his head, and all we hear him talk about is how women are dumb and Northside girls[17] fake their orgasms. Bill the Barrow Boy is the only man present that shows any type of empathy, sympathy, and kindness to the rest of the women. His exhibition of emotion and humanity is evidence that masculinity takes many forms that differentiate greatly from one another.

These men are, excluding Bill in my opinion, taking part in a performative masculinity that is not necessarily indicative of their true selves. Johnston and Morrison argue that "men's behaviour is enacted to meet the demands of a given circumstance and the perceived expectations of others, with the individual able to assume multiple identities as required." (Johnston & Morrison, 2007:662). The men are enacting what they think are the desired manly qualities, but in fact they do not realise that the actions they take make them awkward and unattractive. To the readers, they are misogynist characters that are dislikeable in the least.

It makes sense to look at these men through the lens of bachelorhood. Michael Warner defends that 'Bachelorhood is a category that only makes sense against a narrative background of life expectations." (Warner, 200 as cited by Madden, 2019:179).

Of course, this statement is also true for women. Bachelorhood is considered acceptable, as long as it is one of the stages to get to a bigger destination. The expectations of marrying, having a family, and a house to take care of or maintain is a pressure imposed on both women and men – although the inability to accept and do these things presents much bigger consequences for women. Except Dr Fitz, a proclaimed bachelor with a proclivity for beautiful women, the men are divorcés, widowers or to be married and the women are fairly represented, with two single ladies, one widow/divorcé and one married woman. The topic of divorce is a discussion taken at the table and it pits most of the women against the men at the table. The women are mostly on board with the idea, while men are not so keen on it.

This, of course, stirred conflict on the topic of divorce in Ireland. The characters have defined opinions on the topic, all the men and Eileen Vaughan are anti-divorce, and their reasons for doing so seem to be mostly economic or religious.

[17] Historically, Dublin's Northside is depicted as being rundown in literature, the poorest side of the city; Dublin's Southside was where the more affluent classes lived.

> Discussion of the anti-divorce discourse revealed that two types of concerns preoccupied opponents of divorce: economic, and moral or religious. (Dillon, 1993:69)

With the announcement of a referendum on divorce in 1986, the topic began being thoroughly discussed in public and private life. Literature, which in various ways draws on life and experience, started probing the issue through a broad range of characters. In 1986 the Irish people were confident in their belief that divorce should be legal in certain circumstances. (Dillion, 1993). However, to maintain the traditional stereotype of the home and the nuclear family according to Catholicism, anti-divorce supporters had to insist, instead, on the sanctity of marriage, of how it was a lifelong commitment the couple made to each other and how they could not dissolve it – it would be impure in the eyes of God – and how monogamy played an enormous part in the life of an individual. We know, however, that many men were unfaithful to their wives on many occasions, and so the lifelong commitment and monogamy were broken beyond repair.

The intention to set up a Family Court was announced by Garret FitzGerald in his 1986 speech declaring the divorce referendum. Economic worries might be present as the division of a couple's resources in Court could be in the centre of the aversion to divorce by a big part of the male population. Payment of fair alimony was dictated by court according to the family economic situation, as a way to ensure that the mother had protection and resources to better take care of the children.

Furthermore, research (Anderson, 2014) shows that the parents' divorce might prove to actually be better off for the children if their parents are in constant conflict. If the parents can co-parent in a peaceful way, then the child would turn out healthy and develop a strong relationship with both the parents. However, seen as women were in charge of taking care of every aspect of raising a child, it is common for children to develop a strong relationship with their mothers.

In the story the men's argument is reduced to thinking about the children, because the children are the ones who really suffer with a divorce. Eileen Vaughan's position, however, is a bit more complicated. She believes, like many women before her, that divorcing her husband will only allow him to move in with his mistress and build a life with her, possibly have more children and relegate the previous ones to history. Eileen opposes divorce so she can make her husband as miserable as she is in the marriage and to stop him from being, as Mary McAleese puts it "a man who leaves his wife and children so that he can be happier with another woman." (McAleese as cited by Dillon, 1993:76)

Eileen, too, believes in traditional marriage and the traditional female role. Not only does she believe the aforementioned commitment and monogamy statements, but she also believes that a woman's personality is "inextricably linked to marriage; thus, a woman's status was dependent on her role as wife and homemaker and was not related to engagement in the public sphere. Within this framework, they argued

that divorce would mean the loss not just of economic but of social and personal status." (Dillon, 1993:78). Getting a divorce would be a slap in the face for Eileen, to bid farewell to an eighteen-year-old marriage. For her, staying in a marriage is

> a paternalistic argument that maintains that woman's "natural" nurturing role needs to be protected from those who undermine it: economically independent women engaged in the public sphere; men who default on their responsibilities toward women; and "male" laws, which exploit women's vulnerability. (Dillon, 1993:79-80)

For the rest of the women around the table, they believe that to achieve equality with men, and for the condition of women's lives to get better, divorce needed to become legal in Ireland[18]. On the accounts of wives being "knocked about" at home – as Sinead puts it – or victims of much, much worse, most women in the short story are pro-divorce. Of course, we must consider that for a long time, women were seen as having no legal protection from the marriage on. Since they became wives, they also became their husband's possession, what Lenore Weitzman defines as a "non-person" (Weitzman, 1985 as cited in Dillon, 1993:70).

Differently to the arguments raised against the divorce referendum[19], divorces were usually sought after if a marriage was already in shambles or was deteriorating to a point where it almost did not exist anymore. However, divorce does not necessarily mean having been in a bad relationship. It can mean that the couple's ideals just do not align, as seems is the case with Bill the Barrow Boy and his fiancé, Denise. As we've seen, in Ireland the Catholic church exerted immense pressure of couples to replace the population by having large families. Furthermore, they preached the model of the Virgin Mary to women across Ireland, as the perfect woman and, in consequence, mother. If the woman was not able to have children for physiological reasons – like barrenness – and not unwillingness, the alternative route to take is the one put forward by many stories in the Bible. If you plunged into religion you could be blessed with children, or instead you would be filled with the spirit of God. (Baden & Moss, 2015)

Unwillingness to have children is treated as a deviance, a departure from the 'natural' female role of mother. As Helen Bulis stated in her essay on childless wives:

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[18] Dillion argues that "Since the early part of the nineteenth century, demands for divorce law reform were prevalent among feminists in Western Europe, who saw divorce as one way of giving legal protection to women's uncertain status relative to the de facto independence of men." (Dillion, 1993:70)

[19] In 1937 Ireland adopted a ban on divorce. The referendum of 1986 proposed to erase that ban but failed. Dillion argues that its failure was due to "how a society grapples with issues of tradition and modernity. From this perspective, it says something about cultural tensions…" (Dillion, 1993:4). In 1995 another referendum was announced and this time, divorce became legal in Ireland.

> Women who are childless are considered deviant from society's norm. this is exacerbated for those women who are married and fulfil the role of wife but not mother. (Bulis, 1994:45)

For these women who do not have the desire to become mothers, can be subjected to various societal responses like being marginalized, rejected by their peers as well as being considered failures by society at large, all because they are considered peripheral to normative society. Additionally, women who had children were considered patriotic – because they were helping to replenish the population – and those who did not were deemed unpatriotic.[20] In the worst-case scenario they are abandoned by their husbands, claiming that they cannot give them an heir. However, this is not Denise's case. She is unwilling to have children with Bill due to her figure being ruined by carrying the child.

The ability to be a mother voluntarily or not is a relatively new concept, in 1935, Ireland argued for the legalization of contraception within the home, but regulation was not passed until 1985, and even so with very strict regulations. Family planning was not considered as a viable route for new couples at the time, and "the identity for Women is clearly Mother, with other roles such as Sister or Wife, being secondary" (Bulis, 1994:51).

Chodorow in an extensive work on the social and political implications of the motherhood discourse stated that "women became mothers because they were responding to a pervasive social ideology about the correct role for women" (Chowdorow, 1984:88 as cited by Bulis, 1994:54).

Bill seems to want a child, going to the church and lighting a candle in attempts for her to change her mind, does compliment her figure and beauty multiple times. He wishes she would conform to his wish of having a child of his own and reports her saying that maybe at a later time they could have children, but not at the moment. This is a problem, of course, because "The married woman, however, is expected to automatically become a mother" (Bulis, 1994:45). For what it's worth, Bill does not force her hand on her desires, respects her wishes although it makes him unhappy. The story implies that, eventually, they will come to an agreement on their situation, but for now it comes down to Denise's right to choose. And in that, Bill the Barrow Boy does not oppose her.

The exchange between these characters expresses O'Brien's capability to provide a cast of characters that is diverse and representative of real lives and real problems that arise within the space of a relationship. Married and umarried couples might disagree and have disagreed on whether they will or will not have children. The importance that Denise attributes to her appearance is unmatched with her desire to have children.

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[20] Dillon, 1993; Bullis, 1994 *in* Feminist Excavations; Pauley, 1994 *in* Feminist Excavations; O'Hara, 1998;

I believe this is what O'Brien projects for the future, that women will have the right to choose: the right to divorce, to have children, to have abortions. All the women of this short story are their own women, in turn they choose to give up their virginity to complete strangers, abandon their abusing and violent husbands, to go after a man for their money or whether to have children or not. Women will have a chance to figure out for themselves what is best, without having to consider the possibility of being left out on the cold with children to sustain but no way to do so.

Important to point out, also, is that in 1990, the year the collection was published, was also the year the first female president of Ireland was elected, Mary Robinson. This unforeseen election shifted the perception that women were incapable of holding high offices. In 1997, her successor Mary McAleese, was also elected, making their terms something that would not be possible a few years prior.

The men it seems, have not much faith deposited in them, the only man we can look upon with kindness is Bill the Barrow Boy. His kindness, propriety and humility make him stand out from the rest of his companions, and while he is the only one, O'Brien does deposit hope on him, and men like him. To follow his example is the right way to evolve as males.

Maeve Binchy, however, gives us a story of four women, three of them trapped into unhappy relationships of which two do not even consider the possibility of dissolving, and the fourth one who is single after a divorce. Binchy asks us to consider the lives of these four women, and if their insistence in remaining married or in unhappy relationships makes them happy.

In *A Few of the Girls* – a short story published in 2015, in a posthumous collection of her stories – Binchy tells us the story of Mary, Nora, Angie and Nicola. The four friends went through school in Dublin together but got separated when the fourth friend, Nicola, moved away. The friends are going to get back together again since Nicola is coming back to Dublin after she got divorced from her American husband.

The short story starts with the three girls talking about how when Nicola came to visit, they always had a gathering, a small thing, just a few of the girls. Nicola is described by them as the most trustworthy and courageous of the group, an empowered woman who is back in Dublin to sell the family house and somehow bail out her brother.

All the girls felt excited about the group getting back together, however, the prospect of a person they have not seen in a long time seeing them again after those many years left the girls feeling unsettled. Mary, the hostess of their small diner party, proposed to go on a diet so she could impress her friend. She was scared that her husband, Gerald, would flirt with Nicola and she would accept it. Nora, whose husband was a drunk who could not keep a job, bought a pink tracksuit to make her friends think that she was independent, and Angie felt the need to buy a new purse to keep attention on it and not on her illicit affair with a married man.

All of them knew what Nicola would say if she knew of their lives, what they have become and what they are subjected to.

> Why don't you leave him? That was the question. It was so obvious that Nicola wondered why it had to be asked. Of course, Mary should leave a two-timer. Of course Nora shouldn't sit around watching a lush drink away everything they worked for. Angie must need her head examined to set on this husband-at-all-costs crusade. These were all smashing women, they didn't need the aggravation of such men. (Binchy, 2015:280)

When the party comes all the women wear what they have bought new, and Mary's simple supper became a six-course meal, all to impress Nicola and to turn her away from asking about their decaying relationships. When the four friends are together, some truths about their homelife, which they did not intend to be known, come out.

Mary's husband cheats on her constantly with other, random women and has fathered a child – a girl – by a university student to whom he pays alimony to. He dotingly and affectionately calls her "My daughter", apparently without realising or not caring about of how painful the entire situation if for the family.

Nora's husband, Barry, has gotten an ultimatum from work: he either stops with the drinking or he is fired. Of course, he is not going to stop drinking or going to bars, so Nora has been searching for a way to provide for her family when he loses his job.

Angie's boyfriend, Brien, mistreats her and sees her like his personal sexual object. His wife, Shirley, is pregnant again and Angie is forbidden to call Brien on his work phone because he's afraid his secretary will find out about the affair. Angie is then relegated to a 'dirty little secret' that Brien keeps hiding and is, possibly, ashamed of.

Despite the girls imagining that Nicola has the perfect life, it appears she does not have such a dreamlife. Her brother, whom she is trying to bail out with the money from selling the house, was caught with drugs, and she has divorced her husband, an American who she describes as "simply marvellous but utterly impossible…" (Binchy, 2015:284). Despite that, they know that she is a designer, but they do not know what she designs. Her life is still much of a mystery to her friends because they cannot bring themselves to ask about Nicola, how she is doing and her life.

By the end of the evening, Nicola says goodbye to her friends as a man, Tommy – who also went to school with them – comes to pick her up for a date. Tommy told them of how nice it was that they all kept up with each other, how women were so much nicer than men.

When Nicola and Tommy left, all the women agreed that none of the revelations of the night were to be told to anyone else. Mary said that obviously the whole ordeal was very painful, and her children were never to know. Angie understood, she said, the way Brien behaved – his wife was pregnant, and she was on one side, Shirley on the other. Nora said it would be good for her to get a job, maybe it

would even be challenging. The women end the short story wondering what they would find out about each other in seven-years' time.

In the run up to the meeting the tension described in the short story is almost palpable. The three Dublin women all want desperately to impress Nicola, partaking in certain things that are only meant to impress or to show that they run their own life.

Immediately after making plans with Nicola, Mary proposed to go on a diet, to 'tighten things up' and impress her school friend, which she says is ridiculous because you could never impress people you went to school with. Nora bought a pink tracksuit that makes her feel bad about herself, but she wears it to the gathering nonetheless because she wants to show her friends – especially Nicola – that she is in charge of her own life. Angie, on the other hand, got a new purse in hopes that the topic of the conversation remained on it and not in the affair she has been having with a married man.

All three women betray their own insecurities by acting to try and impress someone they have not seen in a long time. Mary is insecure about her body, Nora of being seen as dependant and Angie of being considered a bad person because she's a mistress.

The cultural construct that women cannot have deep, meaningful friendships with one another without those relationships becoming competitive or toxic is widespread. Exactly as mentioned, it is a social construct, one intended to keep women from coming together and pursue fulfilling friendships. Instead, this competitive, toxic narrative is built to create a myth that female friendships are fragile and fraught little concepts.

Nicola provides her friends with a safe environment in which they can lay bare all their problems and she will try to advise them the best she can, as she has done since they were children. The best policy when in trouble – especially if those problems are like the ones Mary, Nora and Angie are going through – a support group is probably one of the best ways to cope with unhappy relationships.

Binchy is known to depict several women in unhappy, dissatisfied marriages even though society depicted marriage as the happiest act to occur in a woman's life. Even in the situations these women are stuck in – being betrayed by your spouse; having a drunk husband; develop an affair with a married man – Binchy's women are strong within the constraints they set upon themselves.

The two married women, who do not even factor divorce in the escape of their unhappy situations, face embarrassment after embarrassment originating from their spouses' actions. Not once do they consider the best for their integrity and propriety. Instead, they decide to remain in dissatisfied marriages, perhaps because of the social shame, perhaps because of the children.

The debate of whether or not to remain in a marriage because of offspring, once more, can be dismantled by simply arguing that problematic relationships at home can present deterioration for the child's future life. Trouble integrating schools

or having long-lasting, loving relationships with others because of their parents' constant disagreements. Research shows that "…children of divorce do not necessarily have more long term-psychological difficulties than children from nondivorced families" (Rappaport, 2013:360). With divorce being currently normalized, the risk of the children becoming social pariahs is significantly lower than previously. Nora and Mary both face this aspect of married life, to decide whether or not their marriage is over because of the inadmissible behaviour their husbands have been taking. Both with children, both in unhappy marriages, the path of divorce may seem like a plausible route to take for them. Much more nefarious to the child is un-resolved conflict between the parents, divorced or not.

> The more intense the conflict between the parents, the more likely children are to have internalized (e.g. depression) and externalized (e.g. acting out) problems. (Rappaport, 2013:361).

Support from people – women – in similar situations is much easier to arrange nowadays. These women arrange themselves around Nicola, and in being around her, support each other. Nicola counsels the two women to leave their husbands, because they are fantastic women who can live their life independently from men, instead of being dependant on them.

Again, the topic of women dependence, especially the one deposited on men, arises. Women, these women especially, lack self-esteem to a degree where the men dictate their self-worth and their actions. Mary's husband blatantly has affairs, illegitimate children and shows them off like it's his divine right to have affairs, and he does not seem to care what his wife thinks of him, at all. Nora's husband cannot sacrifice alcohol in exchange for the stability of his family or to be able to provide for them. He too, does not care what his wife thinks of him, or if she is forced to provide for the family instead of him and his fulfilling his socially dictated role.

These men, of course, are forced themselves into an appointed role that they did not accept consciously. To them, their socially dictated role is equally as burdensome as women's. To understand this, we need to consider Catherine Nash's research on Irish masculinity.

> Masculine sexuality could be fulfilled, ordered, and moralized through marriage, home, and family. (…) Behind this reiteration of the propriety of the family home lurks the spectre of demonized homosexuality, a deviant alternative to prostitution, celibacy, and marriage, which undermined the family, the work ethic, and homosocial camaraderie. (Nash, 1996:441)

Masculinity is, too, deeply entangled with the home and the ability to provide happiness and sustain your wife and children. That these men can't hold up their end of the bargain does not seem to bother them much.

Women often feel immeasurably pressured by the role of wife and mother put upon them by society, btu these men seem to let go of their socially established role much easier. Historically, men have been given less stringent ways to deal with being incapable to rise up to the epitome of masculinity.

Alcohol and engaging in affairs are an outing that not many women see as viable for their predicaments. Irish men, however, reportedly use these methods to escape their own obligations. Another man to follow suit is Brien, Angie's boyfriend. He too has a family, and he too is failing his duty to remain faithful to his wife by continuing an affair with Angie. Shirley, his wife, is pregnant and instead of being present for them, he prefers to be in hotels and alike flocking with a younger, single woman.

Adding to this, Brien treats Angie like his personal sexual object, to constantly afford him gratification of his most hedonistic desires. He cares very little for her, her feelings for him or the fact that he puts her in an anomalous place for a young woman to be – a mistress. With a full, enjoyable life ahead of her, Brien is firmly tying Angie to him emotionally although he does not intend on corresponding her affections – an egotistical action that has no bigger purpose than him knowing that he *can*.

In the short story, Angie represents the young woman who is desperate to comply with the ideology of family and marriage. As normative terms in the Irish culture, the fact that Angie is failing to marry and start her own family represents a failure to herself. What Angie seems to not understand, however, is that single people can be happy in their individuality. Furthermore, "… single women have to negotiate between the two strong conceptions of womanhood: 1) a patriarchal conception as heterosexual, married and reproductive, and 2) a conception of single womanhood as lack, as deviant and as a threat to the patriarchal order" (Byrne, 2008:35) Not only do single women have to struggle with these conceptions, but they also have to deal with being deemed old maids, spinster, sad, sexless or bachelors.

Byrne argues, in her essay on Irish single women, that "the valuing of independence and equality as a basis for composing the self is fundamentally challenging to concepts of dependence and inequality, implicit to male/female heterosexual relations." (Byrne, 2008:35). Hence, single women feel themselves to be less fulfilled than married women because their self-worth has been inextricably linked to the ideologies of marriage and motherhood. Remaining single is, therefore, negative and unbearable.

In this short story, the men are the main perpetrators against the women. The women, gathered around the table and sharing their family issues, paint the typical Maeve Binchy landscape. The value of friendship – especially female friendship – is an integral part of this short story. Nicola, the most independent of the four friends,

supports and counsels her friends to stop feeling sorry for themselves and do something about their situation.

Nicola stands out from her friends, not only because she is independent from any one man, but because she can see the broader picture. She understands, from personal experience, that women have as much right to divorce and take the reins of their life as much as any man has. She knows that her friends can maintain their maiden names, have jobs, support their children as single mothers if they must. She knows her friends can behave that way because she has. She kept her job as a designer – although we do not know *what* she designs – and her freedom. She kept her family inheritance separate from her husband, and she is supporting herself in her divorce.

Her particular empowerment through her friend's eyes, however, is not evident when the reader sees her as a singular character. While her friends see her as a woman to envy, we know very little of Nicola – that's where her power resides. For all the reader knows, Nicola could be dealing with all the aforementioned problems in a relationship, if not more. She does not expand on her life and remains unknown as a character, her mysteriousness prolonging to the end of the short story. And because she does not confide in her friends as her friends confide in her, the reader empathises less with Nicola and are able to see her as an individualist.

McCormack argues that "Individual feminist voices persisted in Ireland throughout the middle years of the century, but they were on the whole isolated" (McCormack, 199:617 as cited by Chang, 2017). Nicola belongs in this category, constantly encouraging her friends to take fully, the control of their lives.. Through the easy and relaxed way that certain aspects of these women's lives are presented, the reader can be assured of Maeve Binchy's projections for the future and how marvellously liberating it could be. The normalcy with which women getting jobs or divorce are mentioned in the tale suggest a period of adaptation that will represent, in the future, more liberties for women – a brighter tomorrow. Through this short story paternalistic concepts of femininity and girlhood are broken – with the 'saintly' girls blowing off a class in the convent school; with the women being the support of the household; etc. The individual personalities that women have will be able to come out in the open, instead of being an amalgamation of piousness and kindness. We can hope for an equal right to express ourselves.

Rebeca Steinberger argues that Binchy's stories are so successful because she can "create realistic characters who do not fall prey to the sexual and social constraints that pervade our twenty-first-century culture." (Steinberger, 2006:22).

By staying in these failed relationships, Nora, Mary and Angie are boycotting their own potential. By subduing to selfish and betraying men they are failing to develop their own prospects. Binchy's predictions for the future are bright, a future where women can fight for their independency, have the same rights as men. Binchy is projecting a future in which Ireland accepts diverse stories – diverse voices – and provides the same opportunities for men and women. In this bright future, women will not have to choose between being home or being social.

Although the characters in these short stories do not all share the same opinions, the path forward is clear. The ability to express ourselves, to let out our emotions – or lack thereof – and to decide for ourselves and our families is what can be expected for Ireland. Modern Irish society would be the primal place for the improvement of gender equality even if not all Irish people have the same opinion.

The two stories and its characters are connected by their female characters and by their social status as dependant on their male counterparts but also in their women characters' search for power and status in a country that is just waking up to the problems of gender inequality. Both O'Brien and Binchy are connected in their opinions that conditions for women in Ireland would improve despite the steps backward taken with the belated legalization of contraception (1980), failed referendums on divorce (until 1986), and the prohibition on abortions (legalized only in 2018). Terrible and mediocre lives would still be led by women and men in such stories, but the ability to have gender equality – to be able to express one's opinion and have it matter just the same as a male counterpart – was the greatest goal to be achieved.

Conclusion:

As a final testament to the work done in this dissertation, the following short chapter will be consisting of a few notions on the similarities of the stories dissected in this document. These stories were deliberately chosen and arranged into pairs for the similarity of their topics and discussed themes. The work both of Edna O'Brien and Maeve Binchy, despite their many particularities and differences, has a striking number of elements in common, as discussed, and the chapters have hopefully provided some light on the matter.

The first two stories, "The Consultant Aunt" and "The Widow", bring out social perceptions in the more rural parts of Ireland. While in more recent years the perception of the countryside has come to change, the place in time within which the characters in both stories exist still in that closed, retrograde space in the countryside when all that was different, singular, or somehow did not conform was frowned upon, precisely because it stood aside. This, of course, had less to do with the specific location of our characters, btu reflected much more on the preconceptions and ideologies they – or the ones surrounding them – held. It is simply that traditions are more firmly planted in the countryside, and so the area has presented a more difficult experience as regards evolving with the times. In these places, the way people view one another is crucial for someone to be included.

Our protagonists have, both of them, a hard time fitting in. But they stand out because of their lack of assimilation into the social space and beliefs. Because they refuse to become like everyone else by not sharing their aversion to modernization, they stand out as marvellous protagonists and – to some – role models. They are both women who break the rules, who stand against what has been internalized in them since children because they believe it is best to decide for themselves what is best. If they did not, eventually, the monotonous aspect of traditional life would break them.

The authors chose to depict them as characters that stand apart from others – who would not like to have a woman pass through them in a red car on her way to town to do errands for you – precisely to present them as representative of modernity, of the freedom women like them could have if they stopped worrying about the opinions that prevailed in their small communities.

The second pair of short stories discussed, Edna O'Brien's "The Favourite" and Maeve Binchy's "Bella and the Marriage Counsellor", present us with a difficult aspect of life: ageing.

Many are the reports of 'midlife crises and elaborate plans to hide one's true age, but the authors choose to present it as both natural and, in its own way, beautiful. Both our protagonists, although somewhat dislikeable, go through a hard time processing the fact that they are getting older. They may gain a little bit of weight – due to the metabolic system slowing down – and have a wrinkle here or there, but their worth has not diminished because of their age.

In shame, they retrieve from their public presence – either because they feel they do not fit in or because they feel the need to hide something – instead deciding to isolate themselves in their empty houses, in some cases taking drastic measures to regain some of their ‘lost’ beauty. This firmly positions the protagonists in an endless state of unhappiness and unease about themselves. In the long term, these feelings will represent problematic symptoms that will cause prolonged discontent and dissatisfaction if they do not change their present situation. These two characters, Tess and Bella, represent women who, in denying themselves their right to claim their happiness, are condemning themselves to a mediocre life in which they will not be able to be completely fulfilled.

Finally, in the third chapter, the short stories “Lantern Slides” and “Few of the Girls” have prompted us to discuss the role of dependence that women find themselves in most of the time. It also depicts the way that some women inflict some of that dependence on themselves. Unlike the permanent state of innocence that women were kept in, in the change for modernity, women were able to learn more about their bodies and eventually started to get access to reproductive rights.

Many topics are represented in these two short stories – including abortion, divorce and affairs. The women, specifically in Edna O’Brien’s stories, are originally from different backgrounds, of different ages and give the reader a wide perception of the opinion on these topics. Through their imaginative production the authors managed to present the reader with a wide array of possibilities for the future of Ireland. In their representation of female characters, they paint a path forward for women in Ireland, a bright future full of opportunities and the prospect of equality.

These authors, as major icons of the Irish literary canon, have impacted the minds of young women in Ireland and can be credited with inspiring them to break with the oppression they were forcibly shackled with at birth. Forever marked by their efforts, our collective, feminist athenaeum is richer for their attempt to represent the experiences of the women and girls who might be sitting next to us in class, in the subway, who might be our superiors or inferiors, who hopefully, might be our friends.

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