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The ethics of single maternity in contemporary irish women's fiction
La ética de la maternidad en solitario en la novela irlandesa contemporánea de mujeres

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DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA

THE ETHICS OF SINGLE MATERNITY IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH WOMEN'S FICTION

LA ÉTICA DE LA MATERNIDAD EN SOLITARIO EN LA NOVELA IRLANDESA CONTEMPORÁNEA DE MUJERES

Auxiliadora Pérez Vides

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Tesis doctoral presentada por **Auxiliadora Pérez Vides** dentro del Programa de Doctorado "Filología Inglesa" de la Universidad de Huelva. La dirección de este trabajo ha sido a cargo de la **Dra. Dña. Pilar Cuder Domínguez.**

La autora

Vº Bº de la Directora

Huelva, febrero de 2009.

For my parents

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

PART I: MATERNITY DISCOURSES IN IRELAND: PAST AND PRESENT

1. Mothering the land: female sexuality and maternity in Irish history

1.1. Pre-historic, Celtic and medieval Ireland: procreation and its mythical components 17

1.2. The colonial land: from the outside, from the inside 70

1.3. The nationalist cause: the maternal ideals becoming (eternal) realities 120

2. Mothering the narrative: Irishness and the Irish novel

2.1. Critical theories and fictional practices 137

2.2. Irish women's narrations of female subject formation 148

2.3. Other mothers in Irish women's fiction..... 164

PART II: TOWARDS SINGLE MOTHERS' SUBJECTIVITY: MARY LELAND'S *THE KILLEEN*, MARY ROSE CALLAGHAN'S *MOTHERS* AND EDNA O'BRIEN'S *DOWN BY THE RIVER*

3. The authors and their works 177

3.1. Mary Rose Callaghan's *Mothers* 181

3.2. Mary Leland's *The Killeen* 186

3.3. Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* 190

4. Social Matters: a tradition of repression

4.1. The Politics of the State: power and powerlessness 194

4.1.1. The legal space: framing the individual's rights 203

4.1.2. Social policies: in search for provision 223

4.1.3. Politics: in the name of the nation..... 232

4.2. The power of religion: Catholic ideals and practices 245

4.2.1. Discourses of virginity: Marian images 252

4.2.2. The fallen woman: "crime," punishment and atonement 261

4.3. The ethics of the family: of women and morals

4.3.1. Women's education: learning and expectations 281

4.3.2. Marriage: the ideal institution 295

4.3.3. Family relations: stories of use and abuse 308

4.3.4. Women's sexuality: (re)producing female bodies 344

5. Individual matters: claiming alternatives

5.1. Another kind of maternity 400

5.2. The power of female and maternal self-expression 421

5.3. Women's networks and solidarity 432

CONCLUSIONS..... 447

WORKS CITED

1. Primary sources 461

2. Secondary sources 466

Resumen de la tesis en español 495

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The presence of the maternal plot has been widespread in Irish literature on account of the relevant role granted to the iconography of motherhood in the configuration of the island's identity. However, because of the prevalence of patriarchal articulations, their determination of the ideologies and practices of maternity, and also because of the male-oriented power structures that have characterised its history, literary representations of the maternal have been traditionally articulated through the voice of canonical male writers, whereas women's insights into this realm have been often relegated to a secondary space. To counteract such marginalisation, in the past few decades women writers have visibly challenged the patriarchal status quo of Ireland's literature with the publication of a great number of critically acclaimed works, award winning productions, the establishment of women's publishing houses and other advances in their recognition within the literary panorama of the island. Underlying that agenda as well as many of those schemes appears the widespread belief that maternal discourse must be brought to the fore in an attempt to achieve an effective social change, to which obliterated voices can positively contribute.

Most particularly, many of these writers have transcended that marginalisation even more visibly by creating narratives of women and mothers whose behaviour deviates from the norms of ideal femininity and maternity, thus posing a rather inescapable controversy before the reading public. Among those non-standard conducts, women's out of wedlock conception has received special attention in the contemporary literary map of Ireland insofar as these individuals epitomise the extent to which female sexual deviation can affect the grounds of Irish cultural signifiers. To be

single and pregnant contravenes the ideal of female purity and the sacralisation of the institution of marriage upon which the family –the transmitter of Catholic beliefs and values– has dwelt for a long time. Hence, a strict regulation of female corporeality has characterised the island, with a repressive politics of women's reproductive freedom that despite some important developments, still lingers well into the twenty-first century. Also, by portraying the experiences of Irish single mothers in their texts, women writers are challenging the silencing of a female imaginary that threatens the principles of the sanctified family ethos on which a greater part of the island's character rests.

In this dissertation, we bring together literary configurations of single maternity and critical accounts of that subject in an attempt to highlight from a gendered perspective the undertaking of those projects of social change that have been taking place in recent times. We intend to make visible the incorporation of an ethics of unmarried motherhood to the contemporary reality of Ireland by examining the work of three Irish women novelists. It is our view that their literary production raises interesting debates about this social issue that affects women, and it means a formidable step forward in the recognition of marginalised subjects that increasingly characterised the later part of the twentieth century, arguably making way for the many female writers who are deconstructing the traditional categories in the present times. Thematically, our study is constructed upon the literary representation of how single mothers personify the ideological anxieties of cultural degradation as prompted by their break of moral codes, so that they have figured as the most direct scapegoats of general apprehension with their various strands of social marginalisation.

The three novels selected are Mary Rose Callaghan's *Mothers* (1982), Mary Leland's *The Killeen* (1985) and Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1996). These texts correlate in their representation of the confluence of history, socio-cultural elements and gender coding in contexts of unmarried maternity, and they are similarly constructed upon a two-fold dimension rooted in feminist writing and agendas. On the one hand, Callaghan, Leland and O'Brien coincide in their purpose to unveil the psychological ordeal that Irish women encounter when getting pregnant outside marriage and to project their experiences from the perspectives of these women. Indeed, as Julia Kristeva claims in her study *New Maladies of the Soul*, it is the particularity of the individual woman what should be a matter of concern for contemporary feminist revisions of the situation of women. Thus, in order to dismantle homogenising and totalitarian principles of womanhood, for Kristeva it is important "to support instead the singularity of each woman, her complexities, her many languages" (221). On the other hand, the three novelists under study interrogate the forces that circumscribe single mothers' tribulations by creating an alternative space of expression in which they can subvert the parameters that delimit them and accommodate the maternal to their own acquisition of subjectivity, whatever its final expression it may turn out to be.

In the chapters that follow we explore the terms in which, collectively and also individually, the novels describe the multi-layered forms of homogenisation of the single mothers' experiences but also their articulation of a different ethics of single maternity, which has remained unheard and veiled but certainly in existence in the contemporary milieu of Ireland. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that to attain a full project of identity

formation, it is not necessary to create new identities but to re-articulate what already exists. To use her own words, "The task here is not to celebrate each and new possibility *qua* possibility but to redescribe those possibilities that *already* exist but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible" (189, emphasis in the original). Following Butler's argument, we claim that these texts expose various forms of victimisation for women who conceived outside marriage while at the same time they depict the identities that have lain beneath that victimisation, thus giving way to a new ethics of single maternity.

The selection of the three novels under study responds to an attempt to assemble similar literary portraits of how the cultural framing of twentieth-century Ireland affected the lives of single mothers. Simultaneously, central to this choice was the importance of considering a spectrum of texts that offer a complementary collection of insights into the possibilities for these women to challenge the prevailing signifiers of female subjectivity in those contexts. Published within close chronological proximity, with only a time interval of fourteen years between the earliest and the most recent one, and contextualised in different moments of the past century, the novels raise uneasy questions for the contemporary reader about the extent to which many of the parameters that delimit women's agency in unmarried pregnancies are still active or not in present day Ireland. The fact that the latest novel was published only thirteen years before the completion of this dissertation also adds on that preliminary purpose, and it enables us to reflect upon the substantiability of social change in that respect.

Quite interestingly too, a close reading of the novels will demonstrate the gender polarities that existed in Ireland throughout the twentieth century and by which women conceiving outside the limits of marriage have been more intensely shaped by cultural elements, whereas their male partners are left unmarked. Hence, in line with the importance of personal occurrence held by Kristeva, it is our contention that Callaghan, Leland and O'Brien construct their stories upon the psychological and emotional difficulties that individual single and pregnant women have had to face in these cases.

The study has been organized into two major parts which are, in turn, structured into a number of chapters and sections. Starting from the well sustained premise that Irish literature has always been infused with the history of the island (Foster 1989; Kiberd 1996; Villacañas 2007), Part One deals with the historical background against which Irish discourses of female deviant sexuality and maternity have been set. Indeed, the three novels are informed by the contextual, socio-historical reality in which they were conceived and published so that this contextual shaping seemed inevitable. Covering from pre-historical, Celtic and medieval times to colonial, nationalist and post-nationalist articulations of femininity and motherhood, the first chapter describes some of the cultural artefacts that have shaped the correspondence between social configurations of maternity and single mothers' experiences, as they ultimately determine literary representations of this topic. Special attention is paid to how female sexuality in its deviant forms and maternal performance have been constructed and deconstructed throughout its socio-cultural tradition.

The second chapter delineates the theoretical apparatus that provides a conceptual space to analyse Irish women writers' textualisations of female subjectivity and particularly, of the single pregnant self. Given the narrative focus of our study, we provide an examination of the peculiarities that make the Irish novel of the 1980s and 1990s, like the ones we have selected, an interesting body of literature reflecting the social idiosyncrasy of the island at that time. Particularly, the fictional treatment of women's negotiation and final attainment of subjectivity is brought to the fore in the second section, while the third one explores the subject of deviant maternity as it has been approached by Irish women novelists. Thus, figures like Maeve Binchy, Evelyn Conlon and Emma Cooke share with the three authors in our study an interest in exposing in their works the realities that lie beneath silencing process, and they have encouraged an interrogation of the way in which Irish people approach these women and their cases.

Part Two is an analytical exploration of the three selected novels in light of several issues that are similarly addressed in the texts and that we consider relevant for the articulation of Irish single mothers' experiences and for the construction of a new ethics of unmarried maternity. It is structured again into three main chapters that cover, on the one hand, the contextualisation of the narratives within the three authors' literary production, as we briefly give their biographical details and an overview of their work. Next, the second chapter comprises an analysis of textual representations of the social artefacts that have traditionally repressed women in Ireland, particularly single mothers. We focus on the oppression effected by the State, the Catholic ideology and the family, given their direct involvement in this repressive programme. Thus, issues like the authors'

depiction of the rhetorics of power represented by the legal framework approved by the State, single mothers' access to public provision or their meaning for the political construction of the nation are specially taken into consideration. Likewise, we take a closer look into the grip of the religious discourse for the ideology in which Irish women are instructed. We focus particularly on the Marian symbolism to which they have been required to comply and its subsequent penalisation when such behaviour is not demonstrated. A section on the textual construction of family matters ends the chapter, its longer dimension being shaped by the unquestionable relation of the subject of Irish single maternity to the ideology that sustains this institution in the country, and also by the opportunities of change that, as claimed by the authors, the protagonists must fight for in order to achieve a full sense of personhood.

The third section offers a reading of how the novels unfold the stories of the single mothers in such a way that they reveal that individuation for the protagonists as well as for Irish women in their situation can be achieved by redefining the prevalent delineations. We argue that through a shared description of the personal quest and the performance of self-devised patterns of single maternity, the authors demonstrate through their characters that a perceptive focus on the particularities of the individual opens up more inspiring prospects than the ones defined by external agents of social construction. Our whole project then finds its inner and outer coherence in the sense that the three texts offer different negotiations of those delimiting parameters while at the same time these final developments are instances of the plural liberations that women can achieve. Thus, the authors use single mothers' voices to transmit the marginalisation that they

have suffered because of the grip of the cultural signifiers of patriarchy prevalent in Ireland.

Because of the authors' vindication of the single mothers' position in society, the subversive elements that inform the characters and the challenge imprinted on their stories, we offer a feminist approach to the texts, but also questions about ethical order and subjectivity are underscored in our examination. In fact, this study tries to provide an analysis of a subject that, despite its recurrence in the milieu of contemporary Ireland and its representation in Irish literature, has remained rather neglected by literary criticism. Hence, in what is a pioneer enterprise, sociological approaches and literary interpretations of single maternity are brought together in one single project, in the hope that we will contribute to the interrogation of a usually hidden part and voicing of Ireland's recent history. In this vein, we agree with Rosi Braidotti's theory of "epistemic nomadism" when she contends that:

> The feminist theoretician today can only be 'in transit,' moving on, passing through, creating connections where things were previously dis-connected or seemed un-related, where there seemed to be 'nothing to see' … it also implies the effort to move on the invention of new ways of relating, of building footbridges between notions. (93)

Quite visibly, the contemporary Irish ethos appears "in transit", given the increasing cosmopolitanism and secularisation of the present day island. However, the many limitations for women's full access to reproductive control that still prevail make literary portraits of single maternity and studies like this crucial for the effective progression into a more empathetic view of women's reality.

As for the methodological strategies and critical purposes in our study, the terms "single" and "maternity" comprise a number of

connotations that need some explanation. Although many factors determine the condition in which the women on whom we are focussing are forced to live, it is their non-deliberate conception out of wedlock what made us bring the three texts together. Therefore, marriage is probably the distinctive element that marks their marginal position within the established codes of female (sexual) behaviour. Our focus is not simply on never married women bringing up their children alone, but also on those women who, being single, fall into an unexpected pregnancy, whatever their final decision will be. Similarly, the "maternity" in the title of this dissertation refers to the biological and experiential condition that the protagonists of the novels go through, even if not all the women analysed carry their pregnancies to full term by the time when the narratives end. In other words, and strictly speaking, only two characters out of the three novels selected do perform some kind of maternal care of their children but, we claim, all of them fall under the category of "mothers" for the kind of maternal subjectivity to which the authors allocate them. Not a matter of time, space or physical contact, then, the maternity described in the novels is a much more intimate and psychological state that informs the protagonists' lives throughout the action of the texts.

The phrase "contemporary Irish women's fiction" also requires further specification. The first two words refer to the idiosyncrasy that characterised the Republic of Ireland during the greater part of the twentieth century, up to the publication of the latest novel. Yet, as mentioned above, the novels can also be read through the lens of more recent times, in relation with the rapid social change that has resulted from the booming Irish economy of the mid-to-late 1990s –the so-called "Celtic Tiger"–. As for

the second part of the phrase, it may suggest that the literary representation of single maternity was of interest to us from a genuinely and exclusively valid female perspective. On the contrary, it responds to the more practical purpose of unifying criteria and giving this study a coherent significance. As will be described at the end of Part One, male novelists have engagingly examined this topic during the same time frame covered by the three novels that we have chosen, but to include them within the major contents of this dissertation or in comparison with the women authors, would require too much space, although this arguably opens up possibilities for our future research. It is our belief, as will be demonstrated through the study, that specific thematic features and narrative strategies recur in the novels, thus making them examples of "Irish women's fiction" and of how single maternity has been treated by female novelists. Indeed, as suggested by Elaine Showalter not long before the publication of the first novel in our work, through a study of women as group, the reader can discover parallelisms between their use of images and patterns (1978: 11).

In conclusion, our purpose in this study is to analyse three women novelists' contribution to the single maternity question in Ireland and ultimately, to its social reality. *Mothers*, *The Killeen* and *Down by the River* illustrate utterly the mutual influence between society and literature as well as the strategies that women can use to subvert the constraining elements of cultural artefacts. To our mind, these texts are perfect representatives of the extent to which in the 1980s and 1990s women novelists added to the building up of what is now, because of such and many other projects, a quite new and more open-minded Ireland. As we will go on to see, the commonplaces or changes within that lapse of time reveal not only the

degree of transformation of Irish culture but also the necessary steps for a real negotiation of the individuality of single mothers. Ultimately then, we will try to prove with the analysis of the novels, how Callaghan, Leland and O'Brien demonstrate that the reimagining of part of Ireland's history from a gendered perspective can provide valuable indications of the possibilities that have remained unvoiced and their highly causative character.

PART I

MATERNITY DISCOURSES IN IRELAND:

PAST AND PRESENT

1.- Mothering the land: female sexuality and maternity in Irish history

1.1. Pre-Historic, Celtic and medieval Ireland: procreation and its mythical components

Modern and contemporary theorisings of Ireland's cultural identity tend to resort to certain elements of the socio-historical roots of its pre-Historic and Celtic era, insofar as the present-day nation is still infused with part of the idiosyncrasy that delineated the early Irish world. Like many other distinctive features of the Irish cultural system, the intersection between the notions of national identity and femininity has been the focus of a great variety of critical explorations, which have coincided in looking for the grounds of such agenda in the cultural milieu of the ancient communities. Across the broad spectrum of disciplines in the humanities, historians, sociologists, literary critics and other scholars have closely observed the events as well as the social motives that were central to this original society and noticed how most of them have remained so to a large extent in the different stages of the historical evolution of the isle (Ó Corráin 1978 and 1989; Cruise O'Brien 1983; Charles-Edwards 2001).

As far as women are concerned, the impact of these early understandings upon the sexualized discourse of Irishness and its subsequent constructions of femininity has been equally considerable and perhaps even more noticeable. Over the course of Irish history, the gender coding system and the articulation of the female imaginary have rested considerably on the different writings and rewritings of early Ireland's cultural ideology. As untimely as it may seem to be, the beginnings of Irish

human history was indeed an age in which womanhood and its social components were generally viewed as key elements for the articulation of the collective unity of the country, to such an extent that despite later historical developments, the terms in which the female experience in general, and maternity in particular, were internalised by the early inhabitants of Ireland can be said, to our mind, to have determined much of the socio-political principles that still remain in operation in our present era.[1]

Although most of the information available about the status of women in ancient Ireland has reached us not from archaeological sources but through an extensive body of mythological accounts (Lanigan Wood 13), the recurrent presence of female characters in this ample heritage of legends provides trustful insight into the role that actual women played in a society that mirrored itself through the authority of myths. To separate fiction from fact has never been an easy task, but arguably, the durability of mythical images of women throughout the different phases of Irish civilization suggests how often everyday practices in the real communities were inspired by the fictional characterizations of the female experience portrayed in myths.[2] For critic Roger Sawyer, though, that difference should not be a matter of concern:

> The distinction between fact and fiction is of minor importance. What is of value is the perception of Irish womanhood that led to the creation or exaggeration of the legendary figures and, conversely, the

[1] See Brendan Kennelly's introduction in the anthology *Ireland's Women: Writings Past and Present* for an insight into how much of the spirit of women from mythological and pagan Ireland still survives in present-day women, helping them overcome the different strands of tyranny that have fallen upon them (Donovan *et al.* xxi).

[2] Irish historians have also widely studied the signification of female presence in this civilization, as evidenced by different sources, like megalithic archaeology. For a more detailed description of these findings, see the second chapter of Maureen Concannon's study *The Sacred Whore*.

> perception that real people derived from larger than life heroines whose supposed deeds generated so much inspiration. (2)

The fact that the oral tradition and the customs of storytelling that have always made Ireland so popular among other nations were strongly female-dominated indicates how women, despite suffering evident social restrictions, can be claimed to have had a relevant position in the configuration of the early Irish cultural identity. Not surprisingly, according to several well-known legends, the foundation of Ireland and its original civilization was accomplished by women. Thus, after Noah's flood, goddess Cessair —whose name is strongly linked to water symbolism— is assumed to have reached Ireland out of the seas with a group of fifty women and three men, leading these early people to inhabit the island (O'Brien 1976: 1).

Likewise, a triad of women —the triple Goddess Banba, Fotla and Ériu— is also reputed to have negotiated with the Iberian Milesians —one of the pre-Celtic invaders of Ireland— before their attempt to conquer the isle. The text known as *The Book of Invasions* is a document about Ireland's past that was written in the Middle Ages and tells how the Milesians first had to deal with each of the three goddesses about the terms of their occupation. It was Éiru's welcoming divination of their prosperous colonization on the isle and her fulfilled request to have the land named after her in exchange, what granted them permission to settle: "'Grant me the favour, sons of Mil and offspring of Bregon, that my name be on this island,' said she. 'It will be the principal name for it,' said Amairgen" (Bourke *et al.* 254). Since then, derivations of Ériu's name have given Ireland its internationally recognized titular identity, as well as, ironically, contributing to the identification of the Irish land with women and femininity, as will be analysed later in this and

other sections of our study. Such were the extraordinary powers of the women of early Ireland's oral literature, where they were represented as legendary heroines that performed wonderful deeds before the eyes of the native population.

Despite the recurrent appearance of these emblematic women, in the Irish pre-Historic era the female trope was decidedly dominated by the Great Goddess, in accordance to the widespread veneration of God in female form that pervaded all over Europe. In a society that was strongly polytheist, she was fervently venerated under a multiplicity of names, forms and functions, appealing to as varied and crucial concepts as sovereignty, fertility, fire, midwifery, destruction and many others. As for their designation, throughout ancient traditions she figured as Great Danu of the Tuatha dé Danann,[3] Brigid, the Triple Goddess Banbha, Fodla and Éiru that was mentioned above, or the other triple veneration of Morrigna, consisting of Morrigan, Badb and Macha, who were mostly known as war goddesses. The shapes in which they became apparent not only in tales but also in artistic forms were also quite varied, this multiplicity having to do with the cyclical rhetorics of time with which women have been traditionally associated on account of their biological procreative attributes. Goddess images could then be found in the guises of a young maiden, a mother or an old hag, which corresponded to the stages of birth, life and death-regeneration in the constantly renovated cycle of life for natural beings.

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[3] In Irish language, Tuatha dé Dannan literally means "the people of the Goddess Danu." This community of otherworldly, semi-divine creatures that were masters in the arts of magic are considered as one of the earliest peoples to have inhabited Ireland, which was later taken from them by the Iberian Milesians. With their arrival, the descendants of Danu had to take refuge under the island's ground, where they created a subterranean magical kingdom that assorts them as the ancestors of the leprechauns and fairies that pervade Irish folklore and traditions (Hurtley *et al.* 315).

The most prominent understanding of the goddess was the all-encompassing and omnipotent Mother Goddess, who occupied a central position in the ancient traditions of Ireland as well as throughout the European continent. For the population of the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, she was not only the symbol of God but literally the origin of all creation. So embedded was her figure in the collective consciousness of these early communities that she has also been considered as the very dominant divinity even after the Bronze-age tradition of which Ireland started to participate around 2100 B.C. (Reynolds 12).

Moreover, what is most remarkable about this prehistoric society is that, as noted by Maureen Concannon, "[t]he earth was the body of the goddess, and the female body was worshipped in an embodied religion, in which the body of the goddess, the earth and the female body were all revered and celebrated" (18). Corporeality and femininity then, seem to have had a leading role in the symbolic order of these ancient periods, as evidenced by a great number of archaeological discoveries, such as caves or rock paintings that were furnished with female imagery or shaped with female forms and devoted to the Great Goddess.

One of the most valuable inferences of this connection between religion and society through the image of the goddess lies in the idea that in the places and communities where she was venerated, women did have benefits and a reputable social status, as held by critics and archaeologists like Marija Gimbutas (1982). Through her archaeological research she has observed the mythical component that always pervades artistic manifestations of this society in Ireland, with a recurrent presence of

symbols such as spirals, vulvas, breasts and triangles, frequently associated with nature and the goddess.

With the arrival of the Celts, who came to Ireland from central Europe around 350 B.C., religion and spirituality retained the socio-political and even geographic relevance that had prevailed in previous stages. Actually, the Celtic milieu was strongly influenced by the peoples that had inhabited Ireland before them, from whom they inherited a great deal. Likewise, there is an added dimension of their uniqueness that has to do with the fact that their authority persisted for a long time without suffering evident changes, because Ireland was, as Thomas Cahill puts it, "a land outside time" or "a timeless land," located as it is in one of the outer limits of Europe (81-82). The Celts were a nomadic, warlike and illiterate people with a strong sense of social hierarchy and a solid belief in the Otherworld. They worshipped the sun and rejoiced in the natural world, as will be made clear below. Also, their respect for storytelling and poetry provided them with the artistic framework to materialize their fascination with their own past, as indicated by their recurrent divinization of their heroic ancestors, both male and female.

Like many of their European contemporaries, the pagan Irish are said to have paid faithful homage to Mother Goddess, who protected them in times of difficulty and ensured their security in a motherly manner. Most of the customs of this primitive society were organized around her figure, which held the collective experience of the communities together. These practices, which can neither be termed as patriarchal nor fully matriarchal, marked the early Irish territories as genuinely matrifocal and mother-

centred. The religious and social influence of the Goddess was generally understood in maternal terms and has surfaced over the course of Irish history, an interpretation that turned out to be extremely relevant for later ideological processes of national allegory, which eminently depended on ideas of protection and sacrifice.

Indeed, the symbolic function of the goddess was, along with commonly plural, also very complex and quite decisive for the configuration of femininity in Ireland's pre-History and afterwards. As mentioned above, these deities were an extension of Mother Earth, the very soil in which the tribal society was settled. This perspective can also be inferred from her pervasive association with natural landforms such as hills, wells, lakes and rivers and their topographical designations. Many of the geographical elements of Ireland's landscape were regarded as direct, earthly manifestations of the Goddess, exposing both the beauty and the power that she could bring into the world. Inevitably, numerous topographical forms are said to be named after goddesses, such as the Paps of Anu in Killarney or the Hill of Allen in County Kildare (Concannon 22-23).

What is of crucial importance for this study is the fact that in early Irish belief the equation woman-nature appeared as a remarkable issue. Yet, it is necessary to note here that this identification of female bodily features with the topographical elements of the Irish land has become the focus of many contemporary feminist reviews, as women's bodily imagery has been used for nationalist purposes in later periods of Irish history,

resulting from this perhaps simplistic association of the female experience purely with nature and biology.[4]

Most precisely, always by virtue of an underlying maternal imagining of the creation of life and the provision of nourishment, rivers retained an even more significant function in this natural scene metaphor, because, to paraphrase Mary Condren, "they were the womb openings of the Great Mother, the symbol of life, and often bore her name in different forms" (2002: 26). The representative character of these geographical features conformed to the topical importance of water as a life-producing element and its relation with the procreative function of women in childbirth. Not surprisingly, then, there was a widespread tradition –that by no means was restricted to Ireland but pervaded most of continental Europe–[5] by which many rivers were to take their names from the goddesses, as in the case of, for example, the rivers Liffey, Shannon and Boyne –the most important ones on the isle–, whose names are derived from the goddesses Life, Sinnann and Boan, respectively.

Together with this symbolic identification of goddesses and women with the land itself, and probably as a complement to that association, also came the widespread imagery that related them with the idea of sovereignty.

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[4] An influential work in this respect is Catherine Nash's article "Remapping the Body/ Land: New Cartographies of Identity, Gender and Landscape in Ireland," where she explores the use of female iconography to represent the Irish space land which was performed by the patriarchal ideology inherent to both colonial and later nationalist discourses of the isle. Particularly significant in this article is the analysis of the artist Kathy Pendergast's drawings *Body Map Series 1, 2, 3 and 4* (1983), in which she manifests how the cartographic representation of the landscape is designed by means of female body imagery, thus predicating a critique of the excessive control of women's bodies –especially contemporary restrictions on sexuality and reproduction– on account of this ancient binding of women to nature and landforms. For a detailed examination of this work, see also González Arias, 2000, chapter II.1.

[5] The names of important rivers of continental Europe, such as the Rhine or the Danube also have their origin in the Celtic sea Goddess Rhianan and the Great Mother Goddess Danu, respectively (Concannon 195).

In a country that was divided into small kingdoms,[6] reverence to these female divinities was intimately tied to the specific places and regions that worshipped one or another of their images (MacCanna 76).[7] For that reason, the necessity to control the boundaries and ensure the prosperity of a certain territory had to be guaranteed by any possible means so that purity could prevail within its limits as well as among its inhabitants. To that purpose, the feminisation of the territory was a valuable ingredient, as manifested by certain rites in pre-Christian mythology whereby the prospective king of a particular land had to mate with the goddess in order to validate not only his right to be the legitimate ruler, but also the approval of the community and the fertility of that specific territory (Cruise O'Brien 26-27). This inauguration ceremony, which was known as the *banfheis rígi* or marriage of sovereignty, was accompanied by performances of sacrifice and divination, and also had a restoring effect upon the female character involved in it, that in fact, was represented under a dual appearance.[8] Before the rite, she was presented to the aspirer as a *cailleach* –as she is known in the Irish Celtic tradition–, an old hag, literally as old as the mountains of Ireland and also very frequently with a witch-like appearance that did not appeal the king at first; yet, once he consented to have sexual

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[6] During the Celtic era before the spread of Christianity by St. Patrick, Ireland was divided into one hundred and fifty reigns or tribal territories, also known as *tuatha*. A bigger division grouped these kingdoms into five provinces, Ulster, Leinster, Munster, Meath and Connaught, which remain the names of the four main provinces of the present day Republic and Northern Ireland, although Meath is no longer a province.

[7] Besides their symbolic representation of sovereignty, some of these local goddesses also appeared in the role of death-foreboders, a quality that clearly links them to the banshee figures of old Ireland. Banshees were female beings that foretold an imminent death in certain Irish families with lamentations and other keening practices. Their tradition has long survived in Ireland and it is considered as a development of the Ancient goddesses associated with death and water. For a close observation on this subject, see Patricia Lynsight's chapter "Aspects of the Earth-Goddess in the Traditions of the Banshee in Ireland," 1998.

[8] This practice had similarities with other ceremonies of Mesopotamic culture of as early as the third millennium B. C.

intercourse with her and the ceremony had taken place, she was miraculously bestowed with youth and beauty again. There are also several accounts that point out that appearance as old and ugly or young and beautiful essentially depended on the future king's merit to have that charge himself, a condition that will be later transferred to medieval Irish mythology as well (Nash 1997: 112).

Considering the fact that in ancient Ireland lustful women were thought to turn into ugly creatures owing to an excessive concentration of sexual drives within their body, and also that any expression of beauty usually denoted prosperity, the regeneration of grace and abundance could only be attained if this sacred copulation was performed (Bitel 1996: 69-70). A further connotation of these rites is that they illustrate how sex had a transforming effect for women, and extensively, for the whole country. Therefore, the most relevant issue embedded in these practices, and which seems more significant for the sake of this study, is the fact that whereas womanhood was indissolubly linked to sexuality and it interacted with the concept of geographical space, female use of sexuality itself had a very transforming power for human beings, the land and the people, which suggests that women figured as the factual agents of fertility (Condren 2002: 24).

We can even go beyond that idea if we agree with Miriam Robins Dexter and Starr Goode when they contend that contrary to some interpretations of her loose sexuality, this intercourse does not imply a negative understanding of the Goddess as a manifestation of lust, but rather it hints at her extremely sacred quality: "She both energises and protects the

people who occupy her land. In the bestowal of energies through her huge sexual prowess, she manifests her complementarily huge sacrality" (70). Probably for those reasons, the dominant female icon that was to prevail "from the beginning of history and before, until the final dissolution of the Irish social order in the seventeenth century" was this dual image of the magical metamorphosis of the hag into a young woman, that Proinsias MacCanna calls "the tradition of the *puella senilis*" in his influential study of women in Irish mythology (7).

In the service of the Goddess remained a number of priestesses and Virgins who acted as physical vehicles for the performance of these sovereignty rituals. These figures were privileged members of society, standing as they did as corporeal representations of the Goddess in the communities, whose stability was built upon them on a large scale. Yet, what strikes the modern reader most forcibly about their function is the fact that the concept of virginity associated with them contained a different meaning from our contemporary understanding. In other words, a virgin was not a woman who had never had sexual intercourse with a man, but rather, a woman who was not the property of any man and had the autonomy to have sex with whom she chose (Concannon 153). Thus, the nature and role of priestesses and Virgins stress the imbrication of spirituality and sexuality in the pre-Christian society of Ireland, since it was believed that only thanks to their bodily intercession, balance could be maintained.

Another direct referent to grasp the significance of femininity in this early society and which is of crucial importance for the main content of this

work is their particular understanding and sacralisation of childbirth. Their notion and materialisation of birthing rituals were intimately tied to the idea of sovereignty and the appropriateness of the king of the territory in which the delivery took place:

> According to myth and folklore, women in Ireland gave birth in the open –in sacred places designated for that specific function. In the descriptions of the reign of a good king, childbirth was not painful, not did women die in giving birth [...] A ritual fire was built surrounding the newborn and its mother, and the child was baptized with milk from the holy woman's sacred cow. Many of these rituals are associated with St Brigid, who was invoked by all birthing mothers in Ireland. It was a custom to put a Brigid's cross under the pillow of a woman giving birth. (Concannon 30)

However, more than appealing to rightful and fair leadership, the integral components of these rituals seem to endorse again the sacred bond between women and the earth, as well as shedding some light on the eminent value of elements usually attached to the goddesses, such as fire and milk. On this account, the invocation of Brigid –the goddess of fire, divination, medicine and midwifery– was quite common during the birthing process, a tradition which with the Christianisation of Ireland and her ideological transformation into Saint Brigid, as will be explained later, would also be maintained. Actually, the appearance of supernatural elements was also frequent during the pregnancy and childbirth of mothers-to-be of saints, which manifests the ongoing attachment of the earthly metaphor to the Irish spiritual tradition in spite of the coming of the new religion.

Most of these many sided aspects of female deities and women came to be represented in tales about extraordinary heroines that in many cases are said to be direct derivations of the ancient goddesses. Storytelling, a largely practised custom in Ireland, played a decisive role in pre-Christian

society for the passing of these images and symbolic identifications from generation to generation. There was indeed a broad spectrum of mythological narratives of oral transmission in which female action was crucial for the development of the community. However, throughout these stories, references to women usually had also a specifically maternal character, which is our main focus of analysis here. Tales about concepts such as female sexuality, motherhood and even abortion were not rare but actually abundant in this orally-centred society, which according to Lisa Bitel, can be indicative of the widespread obsession that the early Irish had with the reproduction of their race:

> The profusion of Irish stories about sex and procreation, besides expressing the rules and fears of coupling, also reveal the hopes of a people obsessed with reproducing themselves. Some of these birth myths were more solemn, some more ancient, some more religious than others; some were expressed in descriptive and some in proscriptive terms. Yet, they all rehearsed a process of sexual intercourse, conception, pregnancy, and birth —although not always in that order and not always including the four steps. (1996: 66)

Despite the popularity of these oral narratives dealing with either social themes or historical events from legendary times, they only reached a written form during the Middle Ages period, mostly between the seventh and the twelfth centuries. Further, a certain collision persists between their literary format and their mythological content, which has been the subject of much critical discussion by early Ireland specialists. For Máire Herbert, both understandings are valid as these literary texts "do not provide access to a systematic view of the Irish mythic universe; rather, they allow glimpses of the manner in which the supernatural was represented in story" (141). Obviously, they are myths, not history, but since they provide such a romantic picture of the intrepid warriors and other high-spirited characters

of old Ireland, many Gaelic revivalists have always been attracted to them as direct models for Irish heroism.

What these medieval manuscripts contained was a collection of stories that are generally referred to as the narrative of the Four Cycles. Traditional Irish Celtic mythology comprises a long list of tales which are divided into, first, the Mythological Cycle, which is full of the other-worldly beings and supernatural forces that inhabited the island in its earliest pre-Christian phases, its most significant feature also being that women, for the most part, are here treated as a powerful and supernatural race, whereas men insist in their desire to gain power by means of magical mechanisms. Secondly, in the Ulster cycle, that covers the first two centuries of Christian occupation, of great consequence are the heroic deeds performed by Queen Maeve –also named Medb or Maev– of Connacht and CuChulainn, the famous Ulster warrior who came to be one of Ireland's national heroes. Also relevant to this cycle is the story of Deirdre and Noisu, two young lovers that had to resist the urges of King Conchobar of Ulster, who was inflamed by Deirdre's beauty. Then, the Fenian Cycle, comprising from the third to the eighth century, revolves around romance, as in the tales of love and elopement between Diarmaid and Grainne, and the situation on the isle after the fall of CuChulainn and Conchobar. And finally, in the Historical Cycle from heroes and lovers the action moves towards the High kings that reigned all over Ireland in the first millennium, and all the intricacies around their royal succession. It is in this last group of legends where women are more strongly related to the idea of sovereignty, probably because they focus on kingship and the power of rulers.

A noteworthy female icon in the Ulster cycle is goddess Macha, whose story can be interpreted as a foreboding premise for later events in Irish history, mostly in the North, where her presence is manifest in place names like the city of Armagh, meaning literally "Macha's Height." Although several accounts of this character have survived, her most salient description has reached us from the so-called story of "The Debility of the Ulstermen" or "The Ulstermen's Pangs," included in the early parts of the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), an Irish prose epic saga from the Ulster cycle first written down around the eighth century but referring to historical events of the times of Christ.[9] That specific story tells about young Macha becoming the wife of widowed and wealthy Crunchu, whom she treated kindly both in the domestic and the sexual arena. At the time of the annual reunion of the Ulstermen, where she had asked her husband not to go, foreseeing troubles for her if he attended and people learnt of their union, he could not resist boasting of her sexual prowess during the horse racing competition that took place in the assembly every year, and where kings and queens' horses usually won. After his declaration, Crunchu was asked to send for Macha in order to demonstrate her qualities in the flesh. To that aim, they asked her to run with the horses, but she refused at first, as she was heavily pregnant. Only when they threatened to kill Crunchu if she did not turn up, she eventually consented, pledging them anyhow to wait until she gave birth. King Conchobar did not accept the delay, so she had to run, finally winning the race and giving birth to twins at the finish

[9] There are several versions of this manuscript. For this description, I am using Thomas Kinsella's translation of a twelfth century text based on an oral version of the stories.

line. Through her childbirth pains she cursed the unmerciful crowd to suffer the same pain that she had felt:

> As soon as all the people heard the scream of the woman, it laid them low so that the strength of all of them was the same as of the woman who was in travail. 'The shame that you have inflicted upon me,' she said, 'shall be indeed a disgrace to you from now on. When things shall be most difficult for you, all those of you who guard this province shall have only the strength of a woman in childbirth; and as long as a woman in childbirth, so shall you likewise be, namely, to the end of five days and four nights, and, moreover, it shall be on you unto the ninth generation, that is to say, for the lifespan of nine persons.' (Bourke *et al.* 174)

The meanings and consequences of her dooming words have been understood in various ways, many of them drawing childbirth close to the warrior, patriarchal society that would prevail in Ireland for a long time. Macha's screams and pains would be imitated by warriors as they tried, according to widespread interpretations, to appeal to Mother Earth to assist them in battle, as she assists women giving birth. Her figure could then be perceived as link between an earlier praise for women's intervention in creativity and prosperity, and a growing male conscience of social construction.

Among the legendary female characters of Ireland's mythic past, Queen Maeve of Connacht, who has been usually interpreted as an earthly representation of Goddess Medbh, also stands as one of the most powerful women of this early culture. She appears associated with the concept of sovereignty through copulation that was described above, as she turned her many husbands into great kings by means of sexual intercourse. Her most remarkable feature though, was her ability to render men impotent by offering them to drink from her own body. The name Maeve actually means "intoxication or frenzy," this condition allowing her to bend sexuality and

reproduction to her own will. She was also a very ambitious woman, as described by Marian Broderick in her anthology *Wild Irish Women*: "The tales of her greed and acquisitiveness in the *Táin* probably stem from the frequency of Maeve's raids into neighbouring counties and her attempts to set up a matriarchy in Connacht" (240).

The *Táin* describes Maeve of Connacht as an active warrior-queen willing to surpass her husband's, King Ailill, fortunes at all costs. Actually, what strikes the reader quite forcibly is that it is *her* personality not the man's what seems to be the centre of attention of the epic, since, to quote Joseph F. Naggy, "it is clear throughout that Maeve is the driving force behind the destructive cattle raid" (cited in Moss and Walestuck 264). Most of the narrative focusses on her strong disposition to seize an extremely valuable bull –the famed Brown Bull of Cooley– from its owner, Dáire Mac Fiachna of Ulster. To that aim, she even offers to have sex with Dáire, but during the negotiation process, constant news of refusal of a peaceful passing of the bull reach Connacht, as the Ulster men insist that it can only be attained by force. Maeve's soldiers then have to face the leader of the Red Branch Knights (the mythical army of the northern province), a supernatural hero named CuChulain who is the only Ulsterman not suffering from the debilitating pangs inflicted by Macha that we outlined above. Maeve was strongly determined to intervene directly in warfare and covenants, her mightiness and astounding physical presence in battle being described by a wounded Ulster soldier in the following terms in the *Táin*:

> A tall, fair, long-faced woman with soft features came at me. She had a head of yellow hair, and two gold birds on her shoulders. She wore a purple cloak folded about her, with five hands' breath of gold on her back. She carried a light, stinging, sharp-edged lance in her hand,

> and she held an iron sword with a woman's grip over her head –a massive figure. (Cahill 87)

Throughout the saga, Maeve stands as a wilful and strong female character whose attributes very much resembled those of Goddess Medbh. It is this faithful resemblance what has lead critics and historians to consider her as something like a genuine goddess in human form (Lanigan Wood 14). To our mind, probably what seems more attractive about this heroine is her self-assurance and continuous desire to demonstrate supremacy, as "[s]he is depicted as a masterful, boastful, wilful, powerful, loving, uninhibited woman who regards herself as the equal of any man, and one who must be seen to be the equal" (Reynolds 13).

The authority of these goddesses and many other deities did not disappear abruptly when Christianity began to spread on the isle in the fifth century. Rather, throughout what was a peaceful assimilation process, pagan and holy figures smoothly converged in the psyche of the early Christian Irish people. This merging has made Ireland quite unique among other Christian nations, because despite a still evident Christian supremacy, somehow the pagan tradition has persisted on the isle. With this pacific fusion in mind, it can be fairly said that the Christianity brought by Saint Patrick –the British missionary who came to Ireland to initiate the pagan Irish into the Catholic faith and eventually became the island's patron saint– did not destroy the existing Gaelic concepts of womanhood or the grounds of women's rights in important issues such as marriage or property. On the contrary, one of the most striking features of his mission is that he managed to use the old traditions for Christian purposes (Sawyer 8). Actually, it has been often claimed that Celtic Christianity held on the Irish

social order for such a long time because of its ability to accommodate the old and the new cultural features.

Even if it is accepted among critics and historians that the first missionaries arrived in Ireland in the late fourth and early fifth century, the specific date for the commencement of the spread of Christian faith in Ireland keeps on being a mystery for scholars. The same uncertainty applies to the moment in which the whole country became eventually Christian. Despite this confusion, what we do know is that by the sixth century, Diarmait mac Cerbaill, the king of Tara, one of the most important spiritual and political sites of pre-Christian Ireland, still refused to acknowledge the new creed and was resolute to retain his pagan spirituality (Ó Corráin 1989: 11). Likewise, it is widely accepted among historians and critics that even if they were declined by the new religion, traces of the Goddess-based era were still evident in early modern Ireland, like, for example, the Kingmaking and sovereignty rituals, which are said to have remained in practice up to Elizabethan times (Cruise O'Brien 27). Beyond that paradoxical situation, in light of these two significant cases, it seems fair to assert that the process of Christianization of Celtic Ireland was a slow, complex and very particular one.

For scholars like Mary Condren though, the validation of the Christian ethos on the isle had an enormous impact on the religious and social consciousness of this early community, particularly in relation to women's status and concepts of femininity. Throughout her study of women and religion in Celtic Ireland, she contends that by killing the serpent, the symbol traditionally associated with the Goddess on account of her

femininity and her link to the natural cycle of life, death and regeneration, the patriarchal fathers of the early Christian period destroyed the main attributes of matrifocal societies and replaced them with male-centred ones or with the signs of her destruction.[10] This spiritual overthrow, she adds, had even more severe consequences for the gender coding system:

> Killing the Goddess as such was not what was important. More critical was the destruction of those symbolic, political, familial, and religious sources of power traditionally associated with women. This would be the precondition for the new society to take root, a society where men would take it upon themselves to give birth; where women would be firmly under control. (2002: 24)

In the context of this ongoing dialectics between the old and the new order, a further metaphor for this tragic transformation is also outlined by Condren when she points out later in her study that with the introduction of Christian beliefs and doctrine, religious imagery in Ireland suffered a sex change, namely, from the generic triple Goddess, the Morrigna, to the male-structured predicament of the Holy Trinity (2002: 49). Not surprisingly then, with the consolidation of the Christian faith and the gradual empowerment of religious officiaries, vestiges of the old matri-centred societies were to be abolished, as it was indeed the case with the already mentioned rituals of children's baptism in milk, which the twelfth century Synod of Cashel completely forbade.

However, the gradual Romanization of the old Gaelic culture can alternatively appear as a cultural major development and at the same time as a rather destructive force. In other words, it was thanks to Christian scribes and other religious figures in the monastic sites that the orally

[10] According to popular religious folklore, Saint Patrick banished all the serpents from Ireland in an attempt to eliminate one of the sources of evil for the newly converted Irish. Symbolically too, he was trying to destroy part of the imagery of the Goddess.

transmitted laws and traditions inherited from pre-historic and Celtic times were to be recorded and preserved, becoming precious elements for our perception of the social system of ancient Ireland.[11] But on the other hand, the evangelizing endeavour of these Christian-educated men sometimes also entailed the composition of satires that ridiculed the old female divinities or the reconstruction of the features and folktales about female figures, thus obliterating the gynocentric representations of the Goddess and fostering the patriarchal dogma of the new religion. Actually, in the early Medieval European milieu, paganism was always associated with femaleness, and therefore, it justified intervention upon it, a practice that would prevail in later historical periods.

One of the most salient reorganizations of female imagery brought about by the consolidation of the Christian faith in Ireland is embodied by the prominent and highly venerated figure of Brigid. Her character is nonetheless a very complex one, since Christianity could not eradicate completely the elements that related her to the ancient powers of the all-embracing Goddess who was worshipped by the Celtic peoples across Europe. This has resulted into simultaneous practices around both her pagan and saintly figure, which still recur in our present days, to such an

[11] The mostly oral and memory-attached Celtic civilization had only reached a written form in the so-called *Ogham* alphabet, a system of lines visibly based on the Latin alphabet and which were carved on stones used for epitaphs and other memorials, constituting the earliest form of written Irish language (O'Beirne Ranelagh 20). However, the recording of Celtic folklore had mostly been done by means of spoken words, and would remain so long after the introduction of writing. Missionaries and other figures of the early Irish Church, by contrast, infused the attributes of Latin into the barbarian psyche of the Celtic population, as part of their evangelising enterprise, thus giving rise to the writing of Irish history. The effects of this culturally revolutionary process that stemmed from the important monastic sites that were founded in the early centuries of Christian occupation are indeed manifest by the compilation of the so-called Great Books. In analysing these and other documents, scholars have long debated though, whether the tales contained in them reflect accurately or not a time before Christianity came (Bitel 2000: 38).

extent that even nowadays, in the psyche of contemporary Ireland she may be internalized alternatively as goddess, saint or even myth. What we do know for sure is that along Irish history, in her name the pagan divinity symbolizing fire, moon, sun and knowledge came to be combined with the fifth-century saint who founded a monastery in Kildare. She was also considered the basic pillar of early Christian Ireland together with Saint Patrick, and had a solid authority over Churches, nunneries and other religious settlements in Ireland. Thus, as an example of Christian missionaries' attempt to adapt the old beliefs to the new creed, goddess Brigid's attributes were assigned to the woman that would become the abbess of Kildare, and later, the most famous female saint in Irish history.

In both interpretations, fire has been the element most frequently associated with Brigid. It refers to the ancient purification rituals in which her followers had to carry the seed of fire in order to protect the community, coexisting with the belief that pillars of fire appeared at the saint's birth and at her ordination. The imbrication of the two cults or more precisely, the extent to which the pagan meaning of Brigid survived in the religious tradition of Ireland was already described by Geraldus Cambrensis in the twelfth century. Indeed, hagiographers' descriptions of her life as well as common legends about her powers and the rites around her predicate the successful assimilation of these dual aspects within Brigid's image. Following this perspective, Roger Sawyer insists that "she was spared any appreciable conflict between heathen and Christian tradition" (9), while Mary Condren, among many others, celebrates the merging qualities of Brigid's gentile and religious nature in the following terms:

> At her birth, her mother had one foot inside the door and the other outside, bridging the world of pagan and Christian. Her mother was a slave; her father, a free and rich man. She forms a perfect bridge or threshold between the worlds of pagan and Christian, rich and poor, women and men. (2001: 123)

In addition to this, however multiple has always been Brigid's representation in the context of Celtic folklore or its later Christian developments, we are obliged to mention the maternal trope that emerged around her figure in early medieval Ireland. It has been suggested that even if her religious followers included more women than men, she acted as the maternal intercessor for Irish people, healing and nurturing people of either sex, as Lisa Bitel puts it:

> Although Brigit's authority and miracles are typically feminine and although her ecclesiastical followers theoretically included more women then men, her worship was double-gendered. Writers and audiences read Brigit as a female symbol on some levels, but as nonetheless a stalwart intercessor for both men and women. (2004: 8)

In her saintly dimension, historians have widely asserted Brigid's primacy over other religious figures of her time, both female and male ones too. Part of her historical fame, mostly among feminist scholars, lies in the fact that she has never been assigned a disposition to claim authority over male ecclesiastical figures or a desire to imitate their masculine ways. On the contrary, hagiographers seem to have always emphasized the magnificence that her femininity effected upon her life and mission. This is Lisa Bitel's conclusion in her chapter when she resolves that

> Brigit was, above all, a woman, although a hyper-Christian woman. Nonetheless, it made sense to early medieval writers to signify her sometimes as a goddess-figure. By doing so, they consciously invoked for her nameless powers that belonged exclusively to women and had existed centuries before Patrick came to Ireland. Being female was the source of Brigit's, and hence of Kildare's, prestige amongst other saints and their communities. Any rumours that she

> had a past as a goddess only reaffirmed the fiercely feminine basis of her authority and her solidarity with other females. So did her identification with the Blessed Virgin. (2004: 13)[12]

Not surprisingly, then, the Irish projected the identity of Mary as the Virgin Mother of God into the image of Saint Brigid, who became known as "Mary of the Gaels" or even "the Midwife to the Blessed Mother." This is another curious element of the early centuries of Christian conversion, since chronologically Brigid could have never coincided with Jesus's mother. However, throughout the centuries, folklore has sustained the Irish spiritual imagination with stories about how Brigid assisted Mary in childbirth and also at various moments of the infant Jesus's life. In return, the legend goes, Mary granted her with a special feast day of her own. This belief took such powerful grip on the Irish spiritual consciousness that it has reached the modern era.[13]

The association of Brigid with the Virgin also reveals, to my mind, another aspect of the unique dialectics embodied by Brigid: she was the goddess of fertility and midwifery, and at the same time, her saintly and mother-like qualities helped the Irish to come to terms with the virginal maternity of Mary.[14] These two qualities may strike the contemporary reader as mutually exclusive but the influence that her figure has had in the Irish spiritual imagination proves it reasonable. Although information about her role as goddess is scarce, we are certain that the sacred, legendary

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[12] The name of the goddess and the saint can be spelt differently: Brigid, Brigit, Bridget or the more Irish one, Bríd.

[13] At first, the Irish were reluctant to acknowledge the superiority of Mary over their local saint, whose attributes were deeply rooted on their imagination. In Ireland, the cult of the Virgin Mary was not completely expanded until the eighth century. Evidence comes from the few artistic traces dating from these centuries and devoted to the Mary that have been found.

[14] The dual characteristics of Brigid as goddess and saint also served as a valuable symbol for the early nationalist women's movement at the very beginning of the twentieth century. Maud Gonne, the leader of the movement, chose Brigid as a feminist icon whose traits would appeal to both Catholic and non-Catholic audiences (McKenna 74-108).

Brigid, who could change the course of time by means of her magic skills, has been amazingly intertwined with the historical figure, whom all birthing mothers invoked by putting under their pillow a cross in the shape of a lozenge, a prehistoric symbol of fertility (Concannon 30).[15]

Moreover, despite the evident religious changes, the transformation from Mother Goddess to virgin saint entailed another source of mastery over sexuality and fertility, which may be seen as controversial given the Christian dogma she belonged to. By this token, the historical Brigid is said to have cured a frigid woman and made the foetus of a pregnant nun disappear, two actions that pose an evident conflict with the asexual codes of behaviour that were delineated for women by the Christian faith. Yet, she became one of Ireland's patron saints and is nowadays invoked as the benefactor of "babies, illegitimate children, sea and fishermen, dairy-workers, healing, learning and metalwork" (Broderick 218).

As for the social arena of Ireland in the early periods of Christian accession, the authority of female figures like Brigid is also reputed with having stood behind the creation of the so-called Brehon Laws, a complex corpus of Irish jurisprudence which had been committed to memory by generations of brehons —from the Irish word *brithern* or judges—, who were part of the men of learning in this society, together with the *fili* or poets. The

[15] Another ritual around Brigid is still quite popular nowadays in Ireland. It takes place on the eve of the 1st of February, the feast day of Brigid and also the date of the pagan festival of Imbolc, which marked the beginning of spring and was one of the main days of the Celtic calendar. Actually, babies born on that date were treated with much respect. That night, women spread a cloak on a tree outside the house and Brigid passes over blessing the cloak with her spirit. Its pieces are later used to cure sick people and to heal pregnant women. Likewise, another curious ritual associated with Brigid and Imbolc is devoted to Saint Gobnait, also a sixth-century abbess. At the beginning of February, pilgrims gather around a carving in the Church of her former abbey and "women who are unable to conceive rub the genital area of the carving, taking rubbings of the stone in their handkerchiefs and drink them in water" (Concannon 36).

laws reached written form in the seventh century, when the first Irish monks recorded them in manuscripts, as it had been ordained by Saint Patrick.[16] Over the years, this collection of legal tracts has provided early Ireland scholars with extensive data about the customs of the isle at that time; but most importantly, many historical and feminist works subscribe to the idea that they contain valuable background information to grasp the principles for the extraordinary status of women in the old Gaelic times.

Even if this society was eminently patriarchal and women suffered evident restrictions, mainly regarding the inheritance of property or the performance of legal acts, these tracts were quite detailed about a prevalent social concern with safeguarding female sexual needs and other considerations about their condition. Likewise, they enacted the protection of women's rights in relation to marriage, out of wedlock conception and divorce, as we will analyse later in this chapter, to such an extent that they shed some light on the considerable status that, in general, was granted to women in civil law.

Nevertheless, we must also bear in mind that the Irish, like the rest of ancient Europe, had a complex and ambivalent gender relations system and that the social organization of that time did not favour women completely. The patriarchal order in which the monks and other ecclesiastical figures were immersed may have probably prompted them to purify the content of these laws, by erasing some of the old remnants of the mythical and religious reverence to women in the old times; but the kind of society that

[16] It has also been assumed that their content owes as much to Brigit's intervention as to the fact that some Brehons were indeed women.

they encountered and reflected in their manuscripts already undermined many of women's most vital rights.[17]

What the monks and other Church-educated men found was that the Celtic warring society was strongly patriarchal itself and revolved about an overtly stratified and hierarchal social system. As we have seen, Ireland was divided into a multiplicity of small kingdoms and there was no central control over the whole isle. Life was structured around the *fine*, which stood as the main social unit and was articulated upon the family system, and also around a larger, political unit, called *tuatha* or petty kingdom.[18] Society was divided into three main groups, which included the aristocracy, the free people and the slaves. People's rank was measured according to their birth status or their wealth, and it was possible to reach a higher or lower condition during their lifetime (Byrne 33). To the highest class belonged not only the kings, but also warriors, judges, druids, poets, historians and counsellors. Their distinctive trait was that they had clients and vassals over whom they exerted their authority. The class of the free men consisted of a larger subdivision, and they were the main foundation of society, as merchants, traders, peasants and cattle dealers were part of this group. Finally, slaves were those individuals who had been captured as war

[17] By the time when Irish history began to be written, Church and civil authorities had a very good relationship and played an equal role in the phrasing of the legislation, which was articulated in an attempt to drag on the old Irish ways. Consequently, religious figures did not dare to change many of the customs that had prevailed for long in the Celtic period, but rather, they took much travail in preserving them (Hughes 56; Mhac an tSaoi 90). However, an alternative look to this cultural encounter has been endorsed by another line of critics and historians who maintain that Christian occupation meant an enormous transformation of Irish traditional values and that in the assimilation process many of the old customs were abolished by monks and other authorities (Cruise O'Brien 27).

[18] The *fine* did not correspond to the nuclear family as we understand it today, but rather, it was a bigger family unit which included all sorts of relations up to five generations in the male line.

prisoners or criminals, and they could only have access to gaining their freedom by means of hard work (O'Beirne Ranelagh 24-25).

With this premise in mind, it is not unreasonable to remark that the Brehon laws clearly delineated the sophisticated framework of relationships that were inherent to this society, affecting not only the clear-cut differentiation among the social classes but most notably, attending to the various kinds of relations between men and women and the many different ways in which they got together. This is precisely the guiding principle of *Cáin Lánamna*, the most complete tract on marriage in early Irish law. It dates from the eighth century and here the relationship between husband and wife is equated with other "couplings" recognized in the legal system, like "a lord and his base clients, a Church and its tenantry," in which the latter is always dependent on the former (Bourke *et al.* 23). Curiously enough, the focus of the clerics that put them down seems to be more practical than prescriptive, since they are especially concerned with describing the everyday realities of marriage and the idiosyncrasy of its different types, rather than with creating abstract theories of it.

In general, whereas men's status either remained unchanged or it was improved, dependence was the effect rendered upon women when entering marriage. However, Irish law was articulated around a complex marital rhetorics that contemplated the existence of many different kinds of unions and granted individual rights to both partners within marriage, to such an extent that women were not completely obliterated by the legal parameters that sustained it. The most remarkable principle of Irish legislation regarding the position of women in marriage was that the

husband did not inherently own his wife, since marriage was regarded as purely a contract between them (O'Beirne Ranelagh 29). The tracts reflect how a proper marriage had to be between two free-born equals, so that more than a possible alliance, it demonstrated the rank of the lineages that were linked by it.

The idea of husband and wife sharing common assets was unacceptable. Actually, property was the corollary dimension of early Irish understanding of marriage, as one of the elements that distinguished the three main kinds of relationships was each partner's contribution in terms of personal effects. *Cáin Lánamna* lists and explores ten different kinds of marriage or "couples of cohabitation and procreation" (Bourke *et al.* 23), but only three of them are treated as the major ones. Firstly, the most recurrent union was *lánamans comthinchuir* or "union of common contribution" in which the man and the woman equally contributed, but at the same time, each of them retains the ownership of what he or she had provided.[19] Next, in *lánamnas mná for ferthinchur* or "union of woman on man's contribution," the man enlarges the marriage fund with a more substantial contribution than the woman. This was probably the oldest form of marriage and the one with more patriarchal hues, as the husband could do what he pleased with the marital property. But again, wives had certain rights that protected their own interests and gave them some security. The third type of marriage is known as *lánamnas fir for bantinchur co fognam* or "union of a man on

[19] Since women could not own land or inherit real estate, this type of marriage raises troubling questions about how they could contribute to the marriage with the same amount of property as men. Bart Jaski has comments that a woman "could only acquire it by work or gift (such as marriage gift), or inherit it for her lifetime if her father died without leaving any sons" (23). For a more detailed description of the wife's dowry and the man's paying of a brideprice to the woman's family, see his article "Marriage Laws in Ireland and on the Continent in the Early Middle Ages," 22-27.

woman-contribution with service." Here, a man without land or property married an heiress who, having no brothers, had received her father's property. The husband could not make any contract without his wife's consent and all his status depended on her.

Apart from these most common types of marriage, there were other unions also recognized in tracts like *Cáin Lánamna*. The first two can be grouped as marriage by acceptance or acknowledgment. They include unions that were carried out by inducement on one of the partners or unions in which a frequenting man without work or provision marries a woman. Also validated by law appeared the union that was performed by abduction or the one made by wandering mercenaries. Further, there were other associations between men and women that were considered illegitimate, even if the relationship was of a prolonged character. Those included the unions made in secrecy, without the arrangement of any property bestowal, the one produced by violence or rape and the one in which the two partners were lunatics or mad, usually arranged by someone else with purposes of mockery.

All in all, it seems worth noting that, as we will also see below with the grounds for divorce later in this chapter, the dignity of women and the reassurance of their rights was a key subject for the rhetorics of marriage in early medieval Ireland. In general, women could not inherit land and even heiresses were not allowed to pass on their property at death, which may lead us to suggest that at this time in Ireland, women were not used as items for economic profit or for political promotion, as was indeed the case in the rest of feudal Europe. Donncha Ó Corráin distinguishes three phases

in the Irish consideration of women's rights within marriage. At first, as they had no independent capacity before the law, women did not enjoy any individual rights. Later, around the eighth century, women acquired certain rights in marriage, which in some cases reached to positions of equality. Finally, she argues that in the ninth and tenth centuries, "the privileges of 'the woman of equal lordship' were in large measure extended to wives of a lower grade, that is, to the majority of married women" (1978: 9).

Nevertheless, the social discourse on women and femininity was rather ambivalent in early medieval Ireland. Despite the protection of women in the context of marriage, in the cultural order of this period female identity was disclaimed by social ideology, a custom which operated at many different levels. The patriarchal consciousness that was inevitably reinforced by the appearance of Christianity and which has dominated on the isle for ever since, not only internalized women as socially inferior to men but literally, it was deeply rooted in male imagination that women had no identity at all. Also, because this society was essentially class-ridden and the status of the individual was eminently measured in terms of honour, women's social value depended exclusively on their husband's condition, corresponding, in general, to half of whatever honour-price he had.

Likewise, everyday practices of Irish law at this time reflect the animalization of women that was performed in order to calculate a man's social status as well as his legal capacity. In other words, one of the units that determined a higher or lower rank in society was a man's possession of *cumal* or female slaves, that reckoned as six *sets* or young heifers, which

was the basic unit (Byrne 33). The *cumal* was highly valued, not only because it was more difficult for them to escape than it was for men, but also because her owner could benefit highly from holding these women by sexually exploiting them (Charles-Edwards 68-69). There is an added dimension of this assimilation of slave girls with animal typology that we find significant and it has to do with a widespread belief that women could never fully attain their human potential. In this light, narratives and other folkloric sources show that in early medieval Ireland, to quote Lisa Bitel, "women were more like other non-humans —animals or supernatural beings- than like men." Consequently, she continues, "[w]omen were not simply Other, but often otherworldly" (1995: 138).[20]

Quite shockingly too, because women were considered less valuable than men, they had a much more restricted access to medical attention. Such disposition can be inferred from an eighth-century tract on sick-maintenance and the provision of assistance to sick people, called *Bretha Crólige*. These medico-legal documents manifest the minor value assigned to female bodies, as they proclaimed that women, along with children, had to be granted less medical attention and less food than men in times of illness. As a kind of social security system, fees were paid in proportion to the legal worth and the social value of the individual, but they were totally denied in certain cases: "There are three women in the community who have no right to sick-maintenance or fines, although injury has been done to

[20] The animal metaphor transcended the economic realm and seized quite deeply the social psyche of the most powerful, aristocratic class. This can be interpreted from *Tecosca Cormaic*, one of the so-called "wisdom texts" from the eighth century in which a king, Cormaic, exposes his views on women, who, according to him, are of one single type and "they should be feared like wild beasts" because "women are capricious beasts [...] better to whip them than humour them" (Bourke *et al.* 199-200).

them: a woman who does not care who she sleeps with, a woman who steals from everybody and a sorceress who traffics in charms" (Bourke *et al.* 32).

The impact of practices like this rests upon the essence of the gender biased ideological principles by which, as will become recurrent over the course of Irish social history, female sexual deviation was connected to robbery, witchcraft and other kinds of social offences. Again, this restriction indicates that the Irish were extremely concerned with controlling loose sexuality on the grounds that it would turn into improper conception and unacceptable reproduction, as we will explore later. Most importantly, it raises troubling questions about the difficulty for sexually deviant women to ever cure from the illnesses they were said to bring upon themselves by their indecent behaviour.

Gender inequalities acquired an added dimension in the complex fosterage system that was prevalent in this society. The Brehon laws are quite precise on legislating around the multiple incidences of this network that was employed in order to ensure the harmony between tribes and families. They promulgated that children were to leave their parents' home before reaching adolescence and be fostered by surrogate parents, who accepted them as part of a kind of contract. As Charles-Edwards observes, "[f]osterage, like so much else in Irish society, was a contractual agreement […] The foster-parents bound themselves to maintain the child at a level appropriate to its status and to give instruction" (116).[21] The alliance, though, was different depending on the sex of the foster child: unlike boys, who had to stay with their foster parents until they were seventeen and

[21] Even CuChulain, the famous hero of the *Táin* was fostered by several families, as was the appropriate custom for someone of high rank like him.

became well-trained in the arts of war, girls were expected to leave at fourteen, find a proper man and create a new family themselves. Again, this constitutes another method to endorse the gender stereotypes by which women were supposed to follow the patriarchal patterns of behaviour that were designed for them.

The development of women's ability to reproduce should also be a matter of analysis in this chapter. Irish law determined that women were born without a gender and only later in their life they would acquire their femaleness. A further irony lies in the belief that by the time when a girl was biologically able to reproduce, she became socially less valuable than men. Obviously, such gender imaginary leads us to question the validity of a social ethos and a legal framework that, as was mentioned above, placed an enormous emphasis on the reproduction of the Irish race whereas its most relevant accomplisher was subordinated and relegated to a marginal state. Therefore, it suggests that in early medieval Ireland women were exclusively conceptualized as sheer complements to men, their function being that of sexual partners, birthgivers and nurturers, or caregiving members of the family of men.

Precisely on account of that obsession with the reproduction of legitimate heirs and as a result of the use of women as currency, virginity was an important issue to be guaranteed by early Irish law. Since they were deprived of individual subjectivity, obviously women could not make a personal use of their virginity, which was not seen as a right per se. Rather, it was generally manipulated for political purposes, in order to ensure alliances between families by means of marriage. Little remained, then, of

the old pagan concept of virginity that was mentioned above. To allow women to have sexual intercourse with whom they chose was not a practice that would appeal to the early Irish Church, and that became widely recorded in Irish cannon law. On the contrary, the disposition of the religious and political authorities focussed on the close protection of women's virginity –and men's too, but not as evidently– by any possible means, as well as the propagation of the extremely positive effects of chastity and continence.

To this end, clerical authorities strove to codify a system of rules about virginity and chaste behaviour to be followed by the Irish medieval population, along with other controversial issues of that society that needed to be revised and recorded. A clear example of this scheme can be found in books 45 and 46 of *The Hibernensis*, an eighth century compilation of Irish cannon law that comprises excerpts from teachings in the Bible, the Fathers of the Church and other important sources. Book 46 centres on questions regarding women and starts with a reflection by Saint Jerome on virginity:

> Jerome: Virginity is the beauty of the Church, the flower of modesty, the path to life, the guardian of sobriety, the patroness of innocence, the darling of justice. She eradicates vices and is the conqueror of lust. Virginity is strong in abstinence, constant in humility, sincere in charity, gives substance to prayer, is careful in vigils, eager in fasts, victorious in life, is the companion of the angels [Mathew 22: 30]. (Bourke *et al*. 99-100)

The chapter deals with an apology of the virginal state insofar as it was thought to contribute to accomplishing the life of perfection delineated by the parameters of Christian teaching for both men and women. But given the general content of the book, it is definitely more intended to promote this behaviour in women than in men. Similarly, the main theme

of Book 45 is marriage, and it explores the different types and the circumstances that may occur in early medieval Ireland. At the beginning we find a reflection about how a woman should behave in marriage, establishing that a wife is "a chaste virgin, bethroded in virginity" (Bourke *et al*. 12). Women's imperatives when already engaged in marital unions are also made explicit in the *Triads*, which were part of another wisdom-text from the eighth century. This narrative prescribed "the three drops of a wedded woman," that is, blood, tears and sweat. Each of them, respectively, correspond to the expectations and requirements for future wives, which included virginity at marriage and their resignation to suffer and hard work once having taken the nuptial tie, as interpreted by Lisa Bitel (1995: 144).

An additional look to the situation can be offered if we explore the politics of female sexuality generally held in this period of Irish history. As we have just outlined, women had to go through extensive limitations about their conduct in marriage, mostly in terms of sexual behaviour. Inherent in this ideology was the conceptualization that reproduction had to be guaranteed at all costs and this could not be achieved if female sexuality was not carefully regulated. Lisa Bitel analysed the many and rich folkloric sources and stories from early Ireland, and she noticed how, among many other prejudices, it was commonly believed that a lustful woman was unable to conceive because "the uncontrollable fire of lust lit her womb and boiled the seeds" (1996: 70). Desire and promiscuity were internalized as illnesses and they could be treated in men, but in women, the early Irish maintained, it was practically impossible to cure.

This gender differentiation acquires a deeper significance with the assumption that women with this dissolute behaviour became aggressive and mad, and therefore, they could not be controlled (Bitel 1996: 69). It is also related to the idea that contained sexuality brought upon these women and their surroundings an undesirable lack of beauty, as we saw earlier in our analysis of the sovereignty myths. Here we see again the intersection between female sexuality and the balance of the territory, as promiscuous women were associated with ugliness and infertility, affecting their body as well as precluding the prosperity of their community, and this could only be solved provided that proper sex took place. Consequently, with this ideology in mind, it could be fairly said that the early Irish were afraid of promiscuous women because, as will become recurrent over the course of the island's history and analysed in this study as well, any female sexual behaviour that deviated from the norms would cause the degeneration of their body and by extension, of the whole country.

Reservations about women's behaviour also proliferated in cases of rape or sexual assault. It was generally accepted that sex between the partners was a voluntary act, to such an extent that sexual intercourse performed with violence or without the approval of one of the individuals was severely condemned by the legal system. In the event of rape, also called *sleith*, the man had to pay a fine to the woman's guardian. However, restrictions applied, as was outlined in *The Hibernensis*:

> There are seven women in Irish law who are liable in their encounters and who are not entitled to penalty-fine or honour-price for their *sleith* […]: A whore who offers her body to all, until she becomes chaste, a woman who stays silent about her *sleith*, a woman who conceals her rape, a woman who is raped in a town and who does not cry until the rapist has got away, a woman who agrees to have illicit

> intercourse in despite of her husband, a woman who trysts with a man in the bushes or in bed, a woman who invokes a hostage-surety, clerical or lay, by offering her body, a woman who offers herself for something trivial. (Bourke *et al.* 29)

In contexts like these we can understand that whether they had actually been the victims of their rapist or not remained unimportant, and all the responsibility was laid upon the women.[22] In general, as it has been endorsed by the Irish social ethos along history, mistrust was firstly allocated to women, whereas the real circumstances of the action remained meaningless.

This lack of credibility in women had to do with the reinforcement of patriarchy brought about by Christianity but it was at odds with the protection that was granted to mothers at that time. Actually, this ambivalent attitude towards women has lingered well into later periods of Irish history, as we will analyse in the second part of this study. The maternal discourse of early medieval Ireland was articulated around the expectation that all women should be mothers. Besides, on account of the complex kinship system that prevailed in this cultural order, one's relationship to the mother was of crucial importance, probably not for purposes of inheritance, as we have seen, but indeed for socio-political interests. Most particularly, maternal descent reflected status, to such an extent that claims to a high social condition or even to certain religious positions could be proved by tracing the individual's motherline (Charles-Edwards 95). Mothers' opinions were also of crucial importance in the decisions about royal succession since they usually functioned as arbiters in

[22] Brigit is said to have devised a whistle to be used by women in these situations, so that they could be clearly heard and avoid incrimination (Condren 2002: 58).

controversial claims and open disputes about territorial ruling, a practice that was common until at least the Norman period.

About this honouring of mothers and the global understanding of the family, there is also the added insight that in everyday life, the responsibility of rearing and educating children was to be shared by both parents. Even if to have a child was viewed as the main goal in a woman's life, she was not perceived as having to cope with her pregnancy and with nurturing alone. Only in some exceptional circumstances was each parent exempt from this duty. In the case of the woman, the law stated that it was when "she suffers from defective health" or "when the child is begotten either against the woman's wish, or against the command of persons who have authority over her." If any of this happened, the responsibility fell upon the baby's father.[23] Again, this proved a strong concern with women's integrity and well-being, and shows child rearing as a social and family-shared activity. As for men, they were dispensed with this obligation provided they were "either mentally or morally incapable [...] men who father children against the command of those who have authority over them," and finally, if their paternity of a prostitute's child could not be proved (Ó Corráin 1978: 8).

An evident recording of the sacredness of women as mothers can be found in the narrative of the *Cáin Adamnáin* or Law of Adamnán, dating from 697. Adamnán was a very influential cleric, the abbot on Iona, who so to speak, introduced the idea of motherhood as an abstract concept and also as a sacred practice in the collective consciousness of medieval Ireland. His law was intended to ensure the immunity of women, children and clerics

[23] Restrictions also applied for wanton women, for women who had been raped or when they had born their children without having the permission of their guardians (Bitel 1996: 87).

from suffering violence or from going to war, and it was to be applied extensively on the isle. If these precepts were infringed, a complex network of fines and penalties was brought into play, the most severe ones being compensations for offences against women (Charles-Edwards 70). Indeed, women had been actively engaged in warfare along the Celtic order, but it was not until this law was established that fines would be imposed on men who employed women in military operations (Lanigan Wood 14). His main intention when presenting this law was that women, as potential procreators and birthgivers of later generations of Christians, had to be protected by all means. Thus, Adamnán made clear that putting women in danger by any act of war or violence collided with women's biological capacity of giving life. Hence, these transgressions had to be condemned, as detailed by the following excerpt from the law:

> You shall establish a law in Ireland and Britain for the sake of the mother of each one, because a mother has borne each of you, and for the sake of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ through whom the whole human race is… And whoever kills a woman shall be condemned to a twofold punishment, that is, before death, his right hand and his left foot shall be cut off and after that he shall die and his kin shall pay seven *cumal*s and the commutation for seven years of penance…For great is the sin when anyone kills one who is mother, and sister to Christ's mother, and the mother of Christ, who labours carrying the distaff and in clothing everyone. (Bourke *et al.* 19)

Underlying the justification for these laws and clearly recognisable from the beginning of this quote, we can find echoes of goddess Macha's curse when she was made to run a race against several horses while she was about to give birth, as described above. In a similar way to what was presumed from that pagan story, the *Cáin Adamnáin* tried to sanctify motherhood in these Christian times, not only on account of the glorification of the maternal role of Mary, the Mother of God, and her assimilation to all

the mothers of Ireland, but also because of a strong anxiety for protecting Ireland's procreative forces.[24]

Despite this legal protection, a closer exploration of the everyday discourse of maternity may lead us to note that inherent in this ideology of motherhood lay a widespread belief that it was merely the logical effect of sexual intercourse, whereas women's maternal experience seemed to be understood as a temporary state. According to poet and Gaelic specialist Máire Mhac an tSaoi, in the Irish milieu of the early Middle Ages motherhood was "a result whose primary importance is dynastic, political and economic" (89). As has been the case in later periods of Irish history up to our present era, maternity, or more specifically, mothers were then forced to remain as the vehicles to guarantee the continuity of the political power and the perpetuation of family property upon the new generations. Yet, their own maternal experiences, always directed towards the common good, were completely undermined.

This reflection can be connected to feminist writer Adrienne Rich's considerations of maternity in her work *Of Woman Born*, first published in 1976. Her now classic distinction between motherhood as the possibility of women to reproduce and have a connection with their children, and a more systemic understanding of it by which because of that possibility, all women

[24] In fact, Adamnán's inspiration for the creation of this law is said to have come from his mother, a very determined woman named Rónnat. On one occasion, she saw a woman's head separated from her body and lying in the middle of a battlefield. Immediately, she asked Adamnán to use his religious influence and power and to make everything possible in order to spare women from having to fight and from suffering. When her son rejected her proposal, pledging incompetence for such a deed, she even tortured him in various ways, like denying him food and drink for a period of time or literally burying him alive up to his chest. Only when an angel of God heard his prayers for liberation, he made a resolution to save women. Adamnán then had to face many kings, who were at first unwilling to accept his proposal, but he threatened them with suffering severe consequences in their succession if they did not comply with his scheme (Condren 2002: 52-54). Finally, the law was enacted in County Offaly and was put into practice systematically in Ireland and Britain.

must remain under (patriarchal) control, clearly operates in the Irish case. Rich also observes that "any institution which expresses itself so universally ends by profoundly affecting our experience, even the language we use to describe it. The experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channelled to serve male interests" (1997: 42). Building up from Rich's perspective, we can suggest that the Irish traditional discourse of maternity, not only in the medieval era but also in later periods, as we will see, unsubstantiated mothers' experiences by virtue of a major focus simply on reproduction.

The controversial components of these early phases of the institutionalization of motherhood in Ireland certainly have to do with the prevalent ideology of family and kindred, and mostly, with the implications of the fosterage system outlined earlier. In spite of being an accorded contract, fosterage relations were seen as filled with natural emotions, and it was commonly thought that the foster-mother would develop a genuine affection towards her foster-children, to whom she would be fondly attached. This practice usually created stronger bonds than the ones between natural parents and their children, which were mostly based on rights and responsibility rather than love. The difference between the terms *máthair* (birth mother) and *muimme* (foster mother) is a clear illustration of this distinction, and it entices a dual understanding of a child's education. In this respect, Lisa Bitel has remarked that "mothers gave birth to babies, endowing them with name, family, and eventually, inheritance; but foster mothers were the mommies who supposedly instructed and loved children" (1996: 86).

Connected to this conceptualization of nurturing as an extended activity remained the idea of illegitimacy, a concept that suffered a significant transformation with the consolidation of Christianity in Ireland. Although the pre-Christian habit of placing the responsibility of child education unto the whole family of its father or mother had lingered well into the Christian era, with the new creed a woman's conception out of wedlock was viewed with much suspicion by the religious figures. Thus, that a woman would have to raise her child alone was rather unconceivable for the earlier tribe-centred society, but contrary to this practice, the Christian law was quite reluctant to accept a bastard child as having the same rights as the legitimate heirs.

Likewise, legitimacy was clearly related to property insofar as the legal framework of Ireland at this time established that only a legitimate baby was legible to inherit his family property, provided it was recognized by its parents' kin. In cases of out of wedlock conception, even if the mother was supported by her kindred, she was expected to find an appropriate source of provision for her baby, what usually made her resort to marriage or to look for a suitable foster home for the child. Also, as another evidence of the relevance given to family ties, lest she be viewed as a bad mother, she was compelled to make sure that her child was always in good terms with both his/ her paternal and maternal kin (Bitel 1996: 88). This practice reveals the central position that even in these early times, family links occupied not only in the formation of individual subjectivity but also in human beings' access to social life. In the same vein, it suggests that

ultimately, the responsibility for personal identity and social acceptance was laid upon mothers.

The most problematic issue regarding illegitimacy or inappropriate conception came up when the mother was assumed to have tried to abort her foetus or having interrupted her pregnancy. Again, the circumstances around the conception were unimportant since Irish Christian morality was mostly focussed on favouring the salvation of the woman involved in an act of illegitimacy. For obvious reasons, the attitude of the Church in these circumstances was extremely inflexible and it was to be translated into cannon law. Thus, with these redemption purposes in mind, religious authorities devised a complex system of penances for those women who had committed abortion, which varied depending on the degree of social consequences entailed by their acts. In other words, women had to go through different periods of penance so that they could redress for their awful sins. These practices were reflected in the so-called *Penitentials*, which were religious tracts from as early as the sixth century serving as manuals to assist the Irish priests when assigning appropriate penances to various kinds of sins, mostly those of a sexual nature. The *Penitential of Saint Finnian*, dating from the sixth century, declares that:

> [i]f a woman by her magic destroys the child she has conceived of somebody, she shall do penance for half a year with an allowance of bread and water, and abstain for two years from wine and meat and fast for the six forty-day periods with bread and water. But if, as we have said, she bears a child and her sin is manifest, she shall do penance for six years with bread and water. (Bourke *et al.* 95)

The establishment of these penances gives ground to think that a curious distinction was established between the killing of a foetus and the deliberate bearing of a bastard child. Interestingly, the former was less

harshly treated than the latter, as it did not imply a visible manifestation of the sin (Condren 2002: 90-91).[25] The perception that lies beneath this differentiation between abortion and infanticide also raises troubling questions about what could be socially perceived and what had to remain concealed in order to guarantee the protection of personal and ultimately, familial honour, a strict practice that has prevailed, as we shall see, until very recent times.

Subsequent penitentials dating from the following centuries show an even more significant distinction, which is quite unique and unexpected for these times of Christian ideology, that is, the assignation of different penances depending on the phases of development of the child in the uterus. These documents pronounce that in its earliest moments of life, a child grows from fertilised seed to enfleshed embryo and finally, it reaches the status of foetus when the soul enters the flesh, so that abortions performed in each stage had to be punished and redeemed in different ways: "A woman who causes miscarriage of that which she has conceived after it has become established in the womb, three years and a half of penance. If the flesh has formed, it is seven years. If the soul has entered it, fourteen years of penance" (cited in Condren 2002: 91).

Arguably, the fact that this distinction was legally recorded in these texts does not necessarily mean that everyday practices and social behaviour fully complied with the legal disposition, as it could be the case with many of the aspects that have been analysed in this chapter. Anyway,

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[25] The reduction of the penance was also applied when the woman who had caused her child to die was poor, which seems a quite sensitive consideration for these times (O'Connor 1992: 59).

what strikes the modern audience is the fact that even if the abortion of a fertilized seed had to be redeemed, at least there was certain awareness of these controversial issues. For us, this figures as a very forward thinking as well as contradictory to the modern treatment of abortion in Ireland, where it is still vilified and prohibited in most cases, as we will analyse in later sections of our study.

That abortion was considered as a serious crime with not only moral but also familial and social consequences can be inferred from the fact that Brehon laws mentioned a married woman's deliberate slaying of her foetus as one of the possible grounds for divorce. To have committed the "abortion of that which she bears" was among the seven offences that entitled a husband to divorce his wife, together with betrayal, adultery, disgracing his honour, infanticide, barrenness or even spoiling things in the house (Bourke *et al.* 28).

But divorce legislation was equally favourable for women in economic, social and moral terms, at least in customary law, which gave an enormous emphasis on safeguarding the respectability of women. When it came to wives, divorce was granted to them if their husband had concealed his impotency, if he spread slander about her or humiliated her, if he abandoned her or cheated upon her, and finally, if he engaged in a homosexual relation (Bourke *et al.* 28). The laws are quite detailed too in the procedures that had to be followed for the returning to the guiltless party of the contribution originally made to the marriage, which for the women in the seven circumstances above mentioned, meant the full recovery of their bridewealth.

From a global perspective, and with all these premises in mind, we can confirm that however paradoxical it was towards the role of women in society, Irish customary law manifested a firm concern with protecting the dignity of wives and of women in general. Actually, early Ireland scholars like Donncha Ó Corráin have noticed that, as compared with other early societies, through its law Ireland granted wives higher rights than their European contemporaries (1978: 4). Obviously, the cannon law of the Church was more restrictive in cases of divorce and would only tolerate it if really serious faults or offences were committed within the marriage bonds. But all in all, we can say that the early medieval Irish attitude towards divorce appears as another indicative of its ambivalent treatment of controversial issues and of its contradictory position about women, insofar as it relegated them to the status of wives and reproducers but, in a liberal way, granted them some fundamental rights.

The interaction of secular and religious authorities for the production of Irish legislation remained practically in the same terms in the ninth and tenth centuries. Even though by that time the Church's control and influence over customary law was clearly enhanced on the rest of the continent, the Irish social ethos kept on being regulated by the old codes, and many of the ancient traditions were still projected all over the isle (Jaski 42). Despite obviously experimenting some changes and developments, the laws were imbued in their greater part with the cultural elements of the former periods, a curious imbrication that, again, made Ireland quite a unique place along the medieval period and also well into the early modern era.

Besides the substantiation of the legal framework, the economic prosperity brought about by the consolidation of monasteries and other religious centres during the Golden Age in the seventh and eighth centuries was another referent for the milieu of this period. It was precisely this prosperity and wealth what attracted the Viking fleets coming from Northern Europe, having colonised other territories like the Shetlands, the Orkneys or Scotland. They began their raids in Ireland in 795, with a special focus on sacking monasteries. They destroyed many monastic communities, killing a great number of monks, until their definitive incursion in 837, when they decided to set up permanent bases on the isle.

In the early years of the Viking invasion, the clash between the two cultures was quite noticeable at first because, among many other incidences, Scandinavian society was still attached to the pre-literate, warrior Iron Age. They were actually trying to re-establish paganism on the isle, whereas the Irish had by then a much more advanced and religious social order (William J. Smyth 37). On the other hand, the power of the Scandinavians –also commonly called the Ostmen, the Eastmen or the Norse– was to be centred on urban settlements, and that collided with Ireland's rural organization. Indeed, they are responsible for the foundation of important cities, mostly along the island's coast, such as Dublin, Wexford or Waterford, but always, we must add, at the cost of the natives' lives and of some of their most common traditions.

Despite these attempts at destruction, and although the Vikings are mostly known as marauders, it has also been accepted among historians that the Irish learnt a lot from their invaders, who were masters in woodcraft

and the construction of ships, very skilled in weaponry and diligent in business and commerce (De Paor 69). The extent to which the two cultures intermingled can be inferred from the fact that their initial raiding purposes progressively disappeared mostly on account of their successful acculturation and their acceptance of Christianity by the end of the tenth century.

As for women, their position is also said to have gradually improved in the centuries of Viking presence in Ireland. For instance, it has been noted by Donncha Ó Corráin that around the second half of the tenth century, royal women experimented a positive transformation in their designation, whereby they were no longer referred to as "the queen of the king" of a certain territory, but rather "queen" of that place. In fact, despite the presence of strong and influential women like Queen Maeve, women had never inherited political power and could not govern independently, but by this time, they stopped being treated as mere consorts and started to be considered as rightful individuals (1978: 10).[26]

Another example of the notable role of women in socio-political matters can be found in the figure of Gormlaith, who stands as a strongly determined, politically committed and sexually liberated woman of the eleventh century, the time when the Viking presence was widespread and even starting to lose ground, because of the Irish natives' victories over the Norse leaders. Alliances between dynasties of both origins were one of the most common strategies developed by the Scandinavians in order to avoid

[26] To illustrate these higher privileges, we can also mention the case of Queen Ota, the wife a Dane monarch who usually gave pagan audience from the sacred altar in Clonmacnoise, one of the most important religious centres of monasticism in early medieval Ireland (Sawyer 11).

losing power. The instrument to achieve one of those alliances was Gormlaith, the daughter of the overlord of Leinster. She was married off to Olaf Cuarán, the elderly king of the Viking town of Dublin and later high-king of Ireland.[27] Despite turning into the high-queen after this marriage, when Mael Sechnaill –the young king of Meath– attempted to overthrow Olaf and made him flee to Scotland, Gormlaith decided to help the challenger in his project, thus betraying her own husband. Shortly after he took the high-kingship from Olaf, she married Mael Sechnaill, becoming the high-queen for the second time.

Not satisfied with that, she followed the same plot with Brian Boru, the king of Munster, who was becoming more and more powerful and claimed the high-kingship for himself towards the end of the tenth century. Again, Gormlaith saw his position as a great opportunity to gain power for herself, and persuaded her brother Mael Mordha and her son Sitric to become allied to Brian Boru, to whom she constantly offered her sexual favours, until she finally got to marry him. When he gained supremacy over Mael Sechnaill, she became, again, the high-queen.

However, she would later try to manipulate Brian Boru, who refused her constant demands of political expansion for their family and eventually repudiated her. After facing Gormlaith's brother and son, Brian Boru became allied with Mael Sechnaill, and together they conquered the city of Dublin. The fight reached its peak when Mael Mordha gathered a mighty army from Leinster, with allies of Viking and British origin and made war on Brian Boru and Mael Sechnaill at the famous Battle of Clontarf –also called

[27] For the description of Gormlaith's story I am mostly following Marion Broderick's study in her *Wild Irish Women: Extraordinary Lives from History* (2002).

Brian's Battle– in 1014. Although Brian died on the battlefield, this revolt meant the final defeat of the Vikings and the end of their domination in Ireland. After that, Gormlaith, who had outlived all her husbands, led a quiet life, rather different from the "treacherous" and sexually active tendency that had characterised her personality and her existence in these late Viking times.

For modern readers, she may figure then as an amazon-like icon, whose spirited and ambitious behaviour measures up with the goddesses and heroines of Ireland's past.[28] Gormlaith's multiple marriages denote not only an unusual female negotiation of political power through marriage but also, and most notably, the possibility offered to influential Irish noblewomen, like princesses or queens, to blur the limits of the established rules for the legitimate production of heirs by marriage. The acceptance of female sexual promiscuity in cases like this implies that women's virginity was not as much valued as their reproductive capacities. In Lisa Bitel's words, "rather than coming to the marriage beds as virgins, such political players brought their experience, their royal names, and the influence of their kinsfolk as dowries. They then set about their jobs of producing children who would help cement the marriage alliance" (2002: 181).

Moving from the political framework of colonisation and territorial power onto the religious sphere, it is also worthy of note for the purpose of this study that most of the elements of the female gender coding in these medieval times were constructed around the parameters of the figure of the

[28] Gormlaith was a well-known and much feared figure for the Scandinavian colonisers, as evidenced by a description of her character in a Norse saga, where she appears as "fairest and best-gifted in everything that was not in her own power, but it was the talk of men that she did all things ill over which she may have any power" (Curtis 27).

Virgin Mary, whose cult increased enormously during the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, not only in Ireland but all over Europe (Lanigan Wood 21). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Irish had to face an arduous conflict between their spiritual loyalty to Brigid and the prominent role of Mary in Christian faith. However, by this period their devotion to the Mother of God had increased, as it became palpable in the new Churches and religious sites being built in her honour from then on, mostly through the intercession of the new religious orders on the isle.

Like Brigid and the other goddesses had done in earlier times, the Virgin would then act as the protector of the Irish population and intercede in their favour, acting in the same maternal way as the one characteristic of the Mother Goddess. Appealing to this protecting and mother-like attitude, Mary Condren highlights this analogy between Mary and the goddesses when, using a fine comparison, she comments that

> [j]ust as the ancient goddesses calmed the wrath of warriors by showing their bare breasts, so too Mary could be counted upon to remind God that she had once nursed him and the milk of her breast could now dissolve his wrath [...] God may well be pure spirit, but Mary would soon remind him of his human origins, showing him her breasts, reminding him of how he had sucked. (2002: 162)

Marian imagery and ideology transcended the limits of spirituality and coalesced into the social collective consciousness, directly affecting women and their position in everyday life. The female ideal embodied by Mary would end up converging with social parameters of women's conduct, which by then were turning the female sex more exclusively to the domestic realm. In her book *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, Marina Warner maintains that the physical projection of Mary into everyday women was not fully effected until the Franciscan order

revolutionised the Christian faith in the thirteenth century by posing questions about Christ's birth and Mary's Immaculate Conception. Together with the Cistercians, the Franciscans emphasised Mary's most salient and unparalleled virtue, that is, humility, which was to be extensively marked as the most compelling quality for the good Christians, especially for women. Gradually this virtue was interpreted in social rather than spiritual terms so that it became a basic component of the ideals of female behaviour (240-246).

To recapitulate, throughout the stories of invasions and religious and political conquests recorded in legal documents and other sources, women appeared as sacred entities whose rights had to be protected. But in everyday life, transgressions of the social parameters of female behaviour did occur, with women behaving deviantly and being punished for that. One way or another, we must bear in mind that the materials that have survived not only do not reflect the social politics articulated around women from all the social classes and ideologies, but also their content may well be the idealizations of the jurists and quite different from what took place in daily life. What is for sure is that many of the practices that conformed the rhetorics of femininity in Irish Gaelic times, as well as its contradictions, were still much in use by the time of the Anglo-Norman conquest of the isle, which is the focus of analysis in the following section of this study.

1.2. The colonial land: from the outside, from the inside

From the early days of Anglo-Norman invasion, Ireland became immersed in a process of change inevitably effected by the presence of a people that has been probably the most innovative group of settlers ever to colonise the island. Their incursion had a profound impact on the colonised land and its population, who had been used to political, religious and legal practices quite different from the organization advocated by the new incomers, landing from the eastern island with evangelising and political purposes. The remodelling of the old Irish customs and state of affairs in favour of the new Anglo-Norman order that took place since the outset of their offensive gave rise to the subordination of the native population, whom the invaders considered to be extremely backward. Their firm desire for transformation included the reorganization of the economy, the general use of the new coinage system, the establishment of English as the official language and the introduction of unfamiliar artistic forms and architectural styles. All in all, it brought about a rather different scene from the one that the Irish people had witnessed until that moment.

Yet, the picture was not as negative as it may seem. Acculturation was also an immediate outcome for the native population and for the new wave of invaders as well. As had been the case with the Vikings, the local surroundings and the many idiosyncrasies of the Irish spirit –much devastated by internal political conflicts but always standing up for culture– also influenced the new colonists, who ended up accepting and assimilating many of the traditions that had been deep-rooted in the Irish psyche. To quote William J. Smyth: "The Anglo-Normans –certainly agents of change–

were also to borrow much from the rooted and culturally unified, if politically fragmented and decentralised, Gaelic and Norse-Irish population" (26).

The cultural ethos that the Anglo-Normans found at their arrival in Ireland in 1169 was influenced by the two major occurrences that had characterised the period of a hundred and fifty years between the Battle of Clontarf and their own invasion, between the end of the Viking domination and the end of Gaelic independence, namely, the reformation of the Church and the continuous rivalries and struggles between the island's dynasties. It can be fairly said that the elements and incidences around these two crucial events had such a grip upon the Irish society of the time that they would determine to a large extent the categories that have sustained the island's cultural order, even up to the present.

With the new wave of colonists, legislation about marriage and divorce, up to then constructed mainly in relation to the Brehon laws, experimented a clearly apparent process of Europeanization that was justified by the pseudo-demonstrated belief that the Irish were a barbaric and ignorant race whose social order and morality evolved around suspicious customs. Their usage of the marital and divorce systems was the main focus of Church reformation, as decreed by national and international religious authorities like Pope Gregory VII himself, who was much concerned with the rumours about the wicked habits of the Irish people. Common practices such as marriages between partners of close kindred or a lax attitude towards marriage nullity were to be under constant attack as they were considered absolutely outrageous by the reformists. Divorce, which

had been tolerated in certain cases by the Christian dogma, as we mentioned in the previous section, was now strictly prohibited, condemned and punished.

As for the regulation of female sexuality, reformist legislation was mostly centred on the prevention of incestuous relations and marriages between close relatives and also on the protection of women's virginity before entering these family-arranged marriages. Such unions –frequent in former, Gaelic times– were regarded as degenerate practices that jeopardized the new religious order advocated by the reformists and which was based on decency and integrity.[29] But more than having sexual implications and moral consequences, incest posed a rather controversial political problem. Both Church and secular authorities were by then quite concerned with attaining unity and purity, so that a lot of effort was made to avoid the extensive power that large families could get to attain and the threat that such achievement could pose for their own attempts of centralised authority. In a society where alliances were extremely precious and necessary for political expansion, women were the valuable mechanisms used by men in order to achieve this much sought-for influence. In doing so, women's rights in marriage were clearly diminished and they lost much of the freedom they had been granted earlier.

This spirit of purification of the Irish traditional manners touched the English throne too. Actually, reformation reached a climactic moment when King Henry II, also attracted by the "primitive" customs of the supposedly

[29] To illustrate this preoccupation we can turn to the Synod of Cashel, summoned in 1101. It decreed that "in Ireland none should have to wife either his father's wife or his grandfather's, her sister or her daughter, or his brother's wife or any women at all so near related" (Bourke *et al.* 43).

uncivilised Irish, was granted permission by Pope Adrian IV to invade Ireland. The Pope gave him the *Laudibiliter* bull in order to eliminate all sources of abomination and vice on the isle by spreading the "real" faith of the Church to the ignorant natives. Sixteen years would pass, though, until the King realised that apart from these religious interests, the Irish lands could also be a source of prosperity and stood quite worthy of acquisition. Eventually, he arrived at Waterford in 1171, soon appointing his son John as "Lord of Ireland."

Before and after these events, negative stereotypes of the Irish people were spread all over the Anglo-Norman order with the intention of justifying the invasion. For the invaders, the intrusion in Ireland was legitimated not only on grounds of accomplishing a proper christianisation of the island but also of civilising a nation with barbaric and savage traditions. In this light, the insights of influential people like Gerald of Wales —also called Giraldus Cambrensis— were extremely valuable and convincing. He was a Norman-Welsh clerk at the service of King Henry and Prince John's chaplain. One of his most peculiar accounts is focussed on the kingmaking and sovereignty rites that were explored in the earlier section of the present study, and which he rejects for the zoophilic connotations that they entail. His views can be said to have marked the beginning of a long-lasting conceptualisation of the Irish race as the Other of the English culture, an idea that was reinforced by the animalisation metaphor and also, as we shall see later in this work, by the feminisation of Ireland as a wanton woman who needed to be tamed.

Another illustrative example of the projection and restraint of the dissolute character that the English colonisers assigned to the Irish natives can be found in the *sheela-na-gigs* tradition that became popular since the Anglo-Norman invasion and after the papal authority was consolidated in the twelfth century. They were exhibitionist female figures originally carved on the walls of Churches in order to warn the Irish population of the dangers of lust and desire, which were traditionally identified as female, and all in a period when sin was strongly associated with bodily offences. Although they were quite varied in shape and symbolism, most of the *sheelas* that have survived represent women with exaggerated sexual organs and quite ugly according to the medieval standards of female beauty. Their vulva is frequently in display, along with their huge mouth and tongue, and that contrasts with the recurrent erasure of breasts. In her analysis of the representations of these female icons in stones and their recovery by contemporary Irish women poets, Luz Mar González points out that:

> In medieval times, representations of lust and death in the shape of a woman are not infrequent, probably associated with Eve's supposed original sin. For the patriarchal ideologies of the Christian west, female corporeality was perceived as volatile, its processes and orifices turning it into a penetrable entity, as opposed to the normative body of makes and virgins: compact, complete, self-contained and under control. (2007: 104)

Literally, *sheela-na-gig* means "old hag of the castle" (Kelly 1996: 5), a name that seems to derive from the many wrinkles and grooves that are commonly found in the face of these carvings, probably symbolising the idea of the regenerative power of women. It is precisely that image as well as the exposure of their genitals what has led some critics to link the *sheelas* with the old pagan fertility goddesses. Thus, for Maureen Concannon, for

example, these figures are the medieval development of the ancient aspects of the Mother Goddess that were by then used to symbolise the power of the Mother Church by the religious orders, who decided to keep these icons in the new sites they built because of their widespread popular devotion (34). Concannon's emphasis on the fertility and regenerative side of the *sheelas* is manifest in her exploration of the figure found in Abbeylare, County Longford and the one in Fethard, County Tipperary. The former depicts a *sheela* with a baby in her womb and may date from before the twelfth century, whereas the latter appears pregnant and also with her umbilicus cord showing. Both represent the perpetuation of the goddess in the different stages of Christianity in Ireland and the continuity of the power of the Great Mother, who is life in death and death in life.[30]

A different perspective of the *sheela* tradition is followed by critics who set their origin exclusively in the medieval context (Andersen 1977; Freitag 2006). Indeed, as the Anglo-Norman colonisation consolidated, they were gradually transferred to the entrances or windows of castles, a tendency that manifests their use as instruments of protection against wicked attacks or bad spirits (Andersen 97). Actually, it was commonly believed by that time that naked women could ward off death and the devil, as both could be generally repelled by the sight of a woman's sex. Further, the same understanding of the *sheela*'s protective quality can be inferred from the habit of giving fertility carvings or *sheela* stones to women in

[30] At the end of her study, Concannon adds a very illustrative chart in which she indicates the different functions of the *sheelas* over time, specifying their locations, symbolism and role in Ireland's prehistory and up to the present.

labour, so that they could be spared from suffering and bad luck during childbirth (Freitag 74).

Whatever their origin and meaning and although their pagan precedence is quite possible, we can assert the Christian medieval grounds of the *sheelas*, not only because most of the surviving carvings date from the period after the Norman invasion, but also because they proliferate more in the areas of Norman influence than in the purely Gaelic zones.[31] We can agree with Luz Mar González in her analysis of their different forms and functions when she concludes that "*Sheela-na-gigs* belong to that long line of spatial metaphors of women in which they are goddesses, mythological heroines or icons in castles and Churches. *Sheelas* were another source of the Irish tradition of allegorising the nation" (2000: 74, my translation).

Beyond the religious and spiritual realm, before the arrival of the Anglo-Normans Ireland had been engaged in another course of events which together with this reform crusade were to determine the island's condition forever. Constant desires for supremacy over all the kingdoms had been recurrent, but these attempts to attain the high-kingship had probably increased after the Viking era. This warring atmosphere did nothing but promote fragmentation rather than unity, and ultimately, it exposed the country to a higher degree of vulnerability before the invaders. Actually, as has been suggested by Brian Ó Cuív in his study of the Irish panorama in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, "[h]ad the political evolution of Ireland towards a strong national monarchy proceeded as satisfactorily as the

[31] A great number of *sheelas* have been found in England and also in other European countries, although Ireland has the biggest number of surviving carvings with these female exhibitionist figures.

ecclesiastical reform, the *Laudabiliter* grant might never have been used by Henry II" (93).

The prospect of a supreme ruler had already been shattered when the king of Leinster, Diarmait Mac Murchada, refused to pay homage to the central authority embraced by Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair of Connacht. Mac Murchada defied him by kidnapping his wife, Devorgilla. Old enmities between the kingdoms intensified, until Mac Murchada was finally banished from Ireland, having to set off to England. There he sought the aid of King Henry II and his subjects, only finding support in Richard de Clare, a Welsh leader, also commonly known as Strongbow. Mac Murchada promised Strongbow his daughter Aoife's hand and the succession of his Leinster territories provided he assisted him against Ua Conchobair. Curiously enough, the story goes that his incursion on the isle and consequently, the establishment of the Anglo-Norman order was occasioned by a woman, who, nonetheless, as had been the case with Devorgilla, acted as a mere spectator of her own and her country's future. The dispute finally favoured the Leinstermen, and Strongbow married Aoife, gradually acquiring more and more power in the area. But his supremacy only lasted until Henry II became interested in the island and declared himself high king (McMahon 45).

All this climate of religious, political and economic transformation unquestionably affected the gender coding system in Ireland and most predominately, women's social condition. Aoife was only one of the many young daughters whose marriage was arranged by paternal authority, a practice that became increasingly popular at the time insofar as the law

proclaimed that along with becoming his wife's guardian, the husband was rendered the total control of her property after they got married. Hence, rather than forging or consolidating ties between families, as had been the main purpose of marital unions in former Gaelic periods, now interests were mostly economic and directed towards territorial expansion, both within the island and also over other European countries. For those purposes, women were globally used as the economic and political currency that would enable their suitors to enlarge their own lordship by joining heiresses, whatever their fortune was. It can be fairly asserted then, that women's feelings and needs were obviously undermined in this feudalising process of female commodification.

An alternative look at the situation can be offered if we indicate that since the Anglo-Normans' promotion of mixed marriages inside and outside the island eventually led to their successful assimilation to the Irish culture, women could be actually viewed as the very agents of that process of acculturation. In any case, we must also make clear that this merging role through marriage was played by women of either origin because not only Gaelic Irish women married the invaders but it was also common among the daughters of the Anglo-Normans to become Irish chieftains' wives. This is Lisa Bitel's position when she remarks: "Women on both sides of the ethnic divide facilitated the assimilation of invaders and invaded, as had women in Gaul in the fifth century, British women in the sixth century, and Irish women a century or two before among the Danes of Dublin and other Viking ports" (2002: 258).

Whatever the viewpoint about women's role in the assimilation process, for the materialization of inter-cultural marriages female virginity stood as a virtue —and usually a primary condition— that had to be guaranteed by the woman's guardians. Not less than in the old Gaelic era, virginity was not considered a female right per se but rather an instrument at the service of male control for the attainment of economic and political power. With this objective in mind then, it was not unusual that deviant women who made a personal use of their virginity with romantic purposes by joining the men they loved instead of the men they should marry were severely condemned, and also that fathers urged their daughters to protect their chastity, and by extension the paternal properties, by entering a convent.

But what stands as an even more significant female move is that not all of them complied willingly with this expectation, since some women deliberately took up permanent virginity vows. This decision has been described by Mary Condren as

> a logical option and welcome alternative to a forced political marriage, possibly with someone beneath the social class in which the woman had been reared. Virginity for these women was in their own self-interest. By remaining virginal, women could protect their status mobility, if not in the present life, at least in the future. (2002: 158)

The option can be seen as a rather paradoxical one though, as claimed by Marina Warner in her analysis of the Marian figure and worship in *Alone of All Her Sex*. According to Warner, to take up the veil can be viewed as a liberating and at the same time oppressing move since it provides for women's education and for some kind of freedom, but it is constructed upon mistrust in women's bodily power:

> At a general level, the solution is completely inadequate. For the foundations of the ethic of sexual chastity are laid in fear and loathing of female body's functions, in identification of evil with the flesh and flesh with woman [...] Accepting virginity as an ideal entails contempt for sex and motherhood, with the result that far from remaining a priviledged state undertaken by few women of vocation, virginity and sexual chastity become a general condition of sinlessness applicable to both the married and the unmarried. (77)

In general, the treatment of women in this period of Irish history followed the standard principles that were applied in the rest of the western parts of the continent, probably on account of Ireland's accommodation to the European ways by means of Norman influence (MacCurtain 1985: 40). By virtue of their customary law, that set the basis for what was going to be the English Common Law, and also due to the conservative designations of the Church, the Anglo-Normans initiated in Ireland a social system by which women lost many of the rights and privileges that they had enjoyed in earlier times. Morality was somehow less "liberal" than in previous stages and women were the most direct targets of the conservative schemes. Patriarchy, which at any rate had also characterised the old Irish order, with its delusion of women's identity and of their role in society, was therefore consolidated when Ireland joined the milieu of later medieval Europe.

Nevertheless, we must also highlight the fact that unlike many other European countries, Ireland lived a unique state, insofar as, legally and culturally speaking, a dual situation emerged in those transfigurative times. Anglo-Norman assimilation was a slow process to be completed and as a matter of fact, it has been widely assumed among historians that the foreign settlers did not conquer the island's entire territory. Consequently, the Gaelic parts that remained directly untouched by the Norman system still held onto the old ways and the country was simultaneously functioning

under two different orders. Each community had its own legal system which coexisted with the other for a long time, although eventually, interaction resulted into mutual influence.

The differentiation between the two systems acquires an evident significance as far as women and their social consideration are concerned. One of the most evident Anglo-Norman restrictions was brought into play by the legal proclamation that the husband was his wife's only guardian. In other words, it was generally maintained among the new settlers that by taking the marriage vows, a woman passed from being her father's property to the lordship of her husband. On the contrary, as Katherine Simms observes, in the Gaelic side, "even after she married, an Irishwoman did not pass completely under her husband's authority" and her own family retained some responsibility over her (14).

Likewise, within the Anglo-Norman system, economic independence was only granted to widows, who inherited a life interest in half of their husband's property after his death. For wives in the Gaelic order, though, in some cases a certain degree of autonomous control over their husband's property was conceded during their married life. For example, it was the custom that the wife of an Irish chief would exert financial handling of her husband's property and even receive some rents and taxes from his subjects, apart from retaining control over her own dowry (MacCurtain 1985: 41). These taxes were literally called "the lady's rent."

Practices and perspectives on divorce also recurred in both cultural orders and they actually meant a point of convergence between them because similar patterns were followed in both systems. Despite the

restrictions and penalisations of the Church, which became more intense after the reformation, the native population as well as the Anglo-Norman community sought the termination of marriage usually by husband and wife's mutual consent, and requested annulment by pledging consanguinity or bigamy. Yet historical records show a variation in each system that had to do with the gender of the party that normally pleaded for divorce as well as the reasons for that petition.

Gaelic Irish wives appealed to the religious authorities in an attempt to recuperate their husband, who in many cases had left and dismissed them without any reasonable cause. However, according to Katherine Simms, among the Anglo-Normans, proceedings for separation were usually set in motion by women themselves (16). The reason for that inclination is certainly substantiated by the habit of arranged marriages that we explored above, denoting that regularly women got weary of being the artefacts and victims of matchmaking and decided to break the unions into which they had been forced. Curiously enough too, quite significant was the Church's attitude towards this kind of circumstances since, Simms continues, it "provided a court of appeal for both Irish matrons, and for Anglo-Irish daughters forced unwillingly into marriage" (20).

That high degree of acculturation, initially favourable for the establishment of the newcomers' order, would gradually result into the degradation of the Anglo-Norman hegemony in Ireland. By the fourteenth century, intermarriages and other forms of assimilation had lead to a complete adaptation to the Irish ways, inevitably giving rise to what has been called a "Gaelic resurgence." The foreigners had reached such a

complete point of familiarization with the Irish habits that the island witnessed a transition from Anglo-Norman to Anglo-Irish. The situation had also been fostered by the emigration of a great part of the population after the catastrophe of the Black Death and also by the fact that although the culmination of the Anglo-Norman power over Ireland had taken place in the thirteenth century, a century later their power became restricted to a reduced area around Dublin known as "The Pale," which comprised the descendants of the first Anglo-Norman settlers, also called "Old English."

A lot of emphasis was by then laid on keeping the Normans away from the Irish customs that were "absorbing" them, as was indeed predicated on, for example, the Statutes of Kilkenny in 1366. In general, these parliamentary enactments were devised in order to keep the two communities separated as much as possible, both culturally and socially. Essentially, they were not anti-Irish in tone or content, or hostile to the Irish order but rather, they were addressed to the settlers who had alarmingly adopted the Irish ways (Lydon 93). As a result, Normans were not allowed to keep on with their interracial marriages or with adopting purely Gaelic practices like fosterage, which was considered extremely unnatural.

During this period, England's attitude towards Ireland was simply characterised by a policy of non-intervention, with lords generally absent from their Irish possessions as the metropolis was long engaged in war with France. Gaelic earls and chieftains were in local charge of the territories, showing different degrees of loyalty to the crown and usually in conflict among themselves. This situation of indifference would change, though, with King Henry VIII, who was the first Tudor monarch to decide that

England had to be more directly involved in Irish affairs. He started a campaign to reconquer the island by using military intervention and reinforcing the authority of the English representatives in Ireland, as well as precluding the independence of the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish leaders. His plans for innovation also included the Protestant Anglican Reformation that he tried to impose on the island, and which the Irish, commanded by the religious orders, strongly resisted.

With the change of the dominant religious doctrine, women's position in society was strongly affected as the two faiths proposed different views of the female sex. Indeed, opposition and separation were common occurrences in this period and they were materialised not only in the division between the two countries and their contrary religious creed, but also in the clear-cut social class distinctions and in the categorical process of gender differentiation. The standards of femininity were different depending on women's social class, with domesticity being mostly assigned to women of the lower strata.

Likewise, the humanising process of the Virgin Mary was a key ideological element of the idealisation of the housewife, a strategy that became quite accepted at the time and remained another source of native-colonial antagonism. For the Reformers, the salvation of humankind depended only on the power of God, and Mary had no active role in it. Protestants accused the Catholic Irish of immoderately worshipping women by way of Mary, covering the unrivalled authority of Jesus and his patriarchal ideology. Protestant reform then, contributed to the dissipation of the age of Mary that had lasted for several centuries and which clung

quite strongly to the Catholic imagination in Ireland. As Roger Sawyer puts it,

> [a]s the years passed, the major sin of Roman Catholics in the eyes of the Protestants of various degrees of reasonableness or unreasonableness was that at best they used Christ's mother as mediator, at worst, they worshipped a usurper of the Godhead who, as it happened, was a woman. (14)

But despite the harness and durability of its methods, ultimately Reformation was rather unsuccessful in Ireland. All the Tudor monarchs, except Mary, who was a Catholic herself, tried to establish Protestantism in different ways. However, far from disappearing, the Catholic faith professed by Gaelic Irish and Anglo-Irish ended up being consolidated. The Counter-Reformation, which had been commanded by the Jesuits and other religious figures from the Continent, triumphed among the native population to such an extent that the Catholic faith rendered the country united against English oppression, whereas the colonial milieu and the ideological order remained rather fragmented. Actually, religious difference stood as a key factor for the strengthening of the enduring political and cultural conflicts and it marked the continuity between medieval and early modern Ireland (Hadfield 70)

Under the reign of Elizabeth I, relations between the colony and the metropolis acquired an extremely significant hue that would be decisive for later considerations of Ireland during the long colonial domination of Britain and which have been fundamental for the understanding of the female condition on the isle. Elizabeth intensified the Plantations policies that had been introduced in earlier decades, whereby lands were utterly seized from the old rebellious landowners and passed down to the recently arrived

colonists, also called "New English." Social hierarchy was then reinforced, with the appearance of a new wealthy aristocracy, whereas the labouring poor moved even further down in the lower levels of Ireland's pastoral economy.

In general terms, the Elizabethan method, which was prolonged with the severe land-confiscation and bloody massacres during the Cromwell era, was ideologically based upon the colonial debasement of the Irish race. It had quite unfortunate effects on women insofar as traditional patriarchal marks of femininity, like weakness, vulnerability and also wickedness and lust, were used in order to justify the new wave of English intervention over a land that was associated with everything female, and therefore was viewed as essentially inferior. As part of the core notion of Renaissance anthropology, it was a common practice during the Elizabethan and also in the post-Elizabethan periods to treat the Irish natives as "a barbarous and savage people –dirty, nomadic, treacherous, lecherous, and wanting all stabilizing social customs– who lacked the ability to pass above their pastoral mode of living to a 'higher' form of civilization" (Hadfield 78). To demonstrate these inferior traits was a necessary task though, but the authority of those who tried to account for it, with more or less seriousness and accuracy, like Edmund Spenser himself, was firmly credited.

It was in this context that the English linguistic colonisation of Ireland was also reinforced. In other words, those colonial ideologies about the uncivilised nature of the Irish obviously had implications for language. In the period of duality that prevailed before the renewed interest in Irish affairs during the reign of Henry VIII, Irish culture had had a powerful grip

on the old English lords and the Irish language was very much revered, as well as Gaelic cultural forms. However, when Renaissance anthropological discourses characterised the Irish as barbarians, in a kind of reworking of the justification of the original conquest in the twelfth century, a more radical process of anglicisation of the Irish was urgently needed, and language became indeed one of the main targets of the policies designed for native alienation, resulting into the imposition of English as the official language on the isle. As Patricia Palmer holds,

> [a]nglicisation was neither incidental to the conduct of conquest nor a mere spin-off from it. Language was intimately bound up with the ideologies that legitimised colonisation and shaped its unfolding. The colonists' estimation of their own language and their attitudes towards that of the enemy are as much constitutive of such ideologies as they are consequences of them. (14)

In this process of degradation of the Irish race, colonisers not only inaugurated a feminised discourse of Ireland that would be recurrent in later historical periods up to the present, as we will see in the next section, but also they focussed their attention towards the particularly repellent features of Irish women. In this light, special emphasis was given to the perception of Ireland as a wanton woman who could only be tamed by male mediation. This trope was clearly elaborated by Luke Gernon, a seventeenth-century English administrator who saw Ireland in the following terms:

> This Nymph of Ireland, is at all points like a young wench that hath the green sickness for want of occupying. She is very fayre of visage, and hath a smooth skinn of tender grasse. Indeed, she is somewhat freckled (as the Irish are) some parts darker than other… Her breasts are round hillocks of milk yeelding grasse, and that so fertile, that they contend with the vallyes. And betwixt her legs (for Ireland is full of havens), she hath an open harbour, but not much frequented… It is nowe since she was drawn out of the womb of rebellion about sixteen years, by'r lady nineteen, and yet she wants a husband, she is

> not embraced, she is not hedged and ditched, there is noo quickset putt into her. (Cited in Hadfied and McVeagh 66)

According to the colonial mind, as a feminised country Ireland could only beget barbarous women who behaved in barbarous ways. Thus, this period also witnessed a widespread projection of Irish women as beastlike beings with a strong tendency towards promiscuity and drinking, and an overt authority in family affairs. Quite disturbing for the foreign psyche was the permanence of the old female right by which pregnant women could claim and assign the paternity of their child to any man. Thus, paternal responsibility was usually allocated to powerful and influential men, who in many cases had not even met the baby's mother. As Roger Sawyer observes, "[t]his right could be exercised at any time during the child's minority, and could effectively bind him or her to a father previously unknown to either child or mother" (16-17). Obviously, this remnant of the old maternal power of women posed a logical aversion for the patriarchal non-native ideology, which tried to curtail any source of female primacy as well as the propagation of women's unfitting native rights.

Most significantly, a recurrent colonial understanding of women during this period and quite connected to the main topic of this study, was their conceptualisation as having the ability to debilitate the purity, and therefore the power, of the English settlers by continuing with the practices of fostering and interracial marriages, that had survived from former periods. In Catherine Nash's words, "[t]hrough the traditions of fostering children between families, intermarriage and wet nursing, Irish women could undermine the cultural purity of the English colonists, thereby destabilising the distinctions between barbarity and civility upon which

political control was legitimated" (1997: 113). The possibility of women's miscegenated reproduction and of cross-ethnic education through fosterage can be said to have posed a serious source of fear for the colonists, who tried at all costs to keep on validating settlement and intervention on grounds of a distinctively ferocious and feminine native nature.

Indeed, Irish customs were rather abnormal in the eyes of the English settlers and that was clearly manifested in their understanding of the female condition. Measures like the ideological feminisation of the land were intertwined with the political territorial Plantation policies and with the attempt to restrain female sexuality. Hence, the general domination over the natives also entailed a specific subjugation of everyday women. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries women's role in society was firmly restricted, according to the precepts of the new legal system that had been established on the isle, namely, the English Common Law. For Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, Irish women at this time suffered three major limitations: they were totally denied any political authority, their property and inheritance rights were regulated by the new laws and their social role was subordinated to that of their husband (26). We can also add that underlying all three measures lay the belief that women's social functions were those of wives and mothers and that they had to be exclusively relegated to the domestic sphere. Further, Ó Tuathaigh defends the idea that women's status in this period in Ireland depended more on their social class and their religious faith rather than on their belonging to one or the other side of the cultural line, as it has also been suggested by Roger Sawyer when he comments that

"a woman's status would be determined more by her faith and her social class than her supposed ethnic origin, significant though this might be" (18).

As for the maternal discourse, evidence about the specific treatment or entitlement to Irish mothers in the early modern period is rather scarce. Folklore has provided, however, a good number of sources to become aware of the idiosyncrasies of deviant maternity, with several surviving legends and traditions about the practices of abortion and infanticide and telling how they were internalised by the early modern Irish population. Their recurrence in the oral traditions as well as the strength with which they have held the Irish mind from that moment on indicate that to comply with the principles of "normal" or socially acceptable motherhood was a common preoccupation for women at that time.

The content of these legends reveals how the effects of Reformation and Counter-Reformation reached quite distinctly the women involved in unwanted pregnancies, which had become a pointed focus of legislation not only in Ireland but all over Europe. According to folklorist Anne O'Connor, "[a] developing consciousness of reproduction, midwifery and infant mortality, and their demographic consequences is apparent in later seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century thinking" (1991b: 308). By then, Ireland, as well as other European countries in which the witch craze for women's child killing was more than common, had become aware of female dealings with the darker side of sexuality and conception, and that violated the religious codes of female behaviour.[32] Needless to say, religious

[32] In her contribution to *The Abortion Papers*, a series of articles published in 1992 and covering many subjects and perspectives about this extremely controversial issue in Ireland and elsewhere, Anne O'Connor observes that the victims of the witch hunts in medieval and

concern for the innocent soul of the aborted or murdered baby as well as for the demonic character of women who committed such actions was clearly behind this increasing consciousness of everything abject about women's role in reproduction.

On a wider canvas, we can also state that the effects of deviant sexuality proved to be a recurrent matter of concern for European legislation as evidenced by the details of the court cases that have been passed down to us. Sexual offences mostly involved cases of out of wedlock conception and premarital sexual intercourse, which was called "fornication." Most particularly, to quote Merry Wiesner-Hanks in her study *Christian Sexuality in Early Modern World*,

> many of the cases of fornication were actually between individuals who intended to marry or who were in fact married by the time the case came to court. Historians of England have found that between one-fifth and one-half of brides were pregnant upon marriage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and up to one-half in the eighteenth. (79)

From this information we can infer that marriage stood as one of the most common strategies used in order to avoid the illegitimate birth of bastard children, whether it was for social, economic or religious reasons. Whatever they were, we can also establish that the early Modern period saw a growing anxiety with the criminalisation of illegitimacy, a process in which women were usually treated with much disbelief.

An interesting point made also by Wiesner-Hanks refers to the curious conception of rape in this period and of women's involvement in these circumstances. In other words, it was regularly assumed that apart

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renaissance Europe were mostly women, and more specifically, midwives. She also explores how they were equated with Satanism in popular ideology (61-62).

from the male seed, conception also took place after the woman's orgasm, so if she had conceived, that implied that she had enjoyed. For this reason, in the cases of rape in which women got pregnant, they were usually either charged with deliberately accepting intercourse or were suspiciously and carefully investigated until they could prove that they had tried by any possible means to resist their attacker; shockingly, "men were instead charged with lesser crimes and punished with fines or brief imprisonments" (79-80).

When unwanted conception had taken place, abortion or infanticide was commonly sought for. Anne O'Connor also observes that the reasons for women performing abortion or infanticide were quite varied at this time, and depended on a multiplicity of factors, such as social, religious, economic and psychological ones. But what her study of the folklore material from this time distinguishes most clearly is that

> infanticide rather than abortion was the most general means of disposing of the life of an unwanted child. Methods of causing abortion have indeed been recorded in Irish and international folk tradition, but there is much evidence to indicate that while trying to cause an abortion endangered both the life of the mother and the infant, the practice of killing the newborn infant, by whatever means available, would only result in the death of one person. (1991b: 309)

Both measures, taken by women in order to avoid or conceal illegitimacy, were the recurrent topics of a great deal of literary and legal texts in this period. Such was the social and religious anxiety about the profusion of women's killing their own bastard children that an Infanticide Act —already operative in England since 1623— was passed by the Irish parliament in 1707. A singular contemplation characterised it, though: women charged with infanticide were generally condemned to death, but

significantly, they could escape this fatal punishment provided sustainable evidence could be found to prove that the baby had been stillborn (O'Connor 1991b: 307). The picaresque that these dispositions may have provoked certainly needs no further explanation.

What we do have to add is that religion kept on having a powerful grip on Irish society and stood as a key social differentiation factor as the eighteenth century approached. With the introduction of the Penal Laws against the Catholic population of Ireland in 1695, women from this religious community suffered quite strongly the effects of those restrictions that placed the natives in an even more vulnerable state in political, religious, economic and social terms. The consequences of the increasingly evident stratified class system, in which local population were dispossessed of the right to landownership whereas English landlords enjoyed a prosperous existence by way of exploitation, did not favour the female condition: women, relegated as they were to domesticity and childbearing, could not easily escape from this unfortunate situation of oppression and privatisation imposed by the prevalent order.

Likewise, women directly suffered the consequences of the political conflict by which the Catholic Irish, who had supported the claim to the English throne by James II, were defeated by William of Orange's protestant followers after the famous Battle of the Boyne in 1690, that confirmed the latter as William III. These events, along with the restrictions introduced by the Penal Laws, gave rise to a strong attachment to the traditional native religious faith, and they formed the basis for the growing Irish nationalist consciousness claiming for resistance against English tyranny and

independence from the empire, that would result into the revolutionary uprisings and changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This discourse would find a literary expression in the tradition of the *aisling* or vision poems that became quite popular in eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry. These compositions were articulated around the recurrent motif of the *speirbhean* or dream woman, who was the embodiment of the land, beautiful but sad and passive, and expecting to be rescued by a male who would liberate her from oppression. The content of this poetic tradition stood as a key element for the ideological interpretation of women and for the imbrication of gender, sexuality and nationhood while it also became a landmark for considerations of masculinity, femininity and heroism in the following centuries. [33]

Moving from the symbolic order, in which Irish women would be broadly placed after the appearance of this poetic manifestation, to the everyday lives of women, we must bring to the fore the salient economic role that they played in eighteenth-century Irish society, which by then had already adopted the patriarchal nuclear family as its most distinctive and long-lasting social unit, comprising father, mother and children, whereas

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[33] Part of the content and ideological effects on women resulting from this tradition is analysed by Luz Mar González in *Otra Irlanda*. She explores the characterisation of women in the *aisling* poetry, focussing on an eighteenth-century composition written by the Irish Gaelic poet Aogan O Rathaille, in which he meets a beautiful young maiden who seems to have a supernatural origin and tells him of the need for the deposed king to return and save her from suffering. Meanwhile, a strange man, representing England, offends her and tries to make her his bride. González suggests that poems like this also include sexual motifs that link these women with the old sovereignty rites and goddesses insofar as they describe how having sex with the beautiful and passive maiden grants the male figure the right to reign, but that can only be attained provided she consents to intercourse. The difference with the ancient myths, however, lies in the characterisation of the woman, who is no longer as determined as the old goddesses were (2000: 77). For a further description of this and other *aisling* poems, see also C.L. Innes' study *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935* (1993).

the concept of kin group characteristic of the old order was much displaced by that period.[34] Women were expected to participate and contribute to the economic maintenance of the family, mostly in the lowest levels of society. They performed agricultural and farm work, did street trading in fish as well as some managerial functions, among other jobs. However, even if these occupations meant another source of income to the family funding, they obviously posed an additional burden apart from their assumed role as housekeepers and child breeders and educators. It is particularly this multiplicity of tasks, which varied depending on context, religion or class, what may make us conclude that by this time, women's role in Irish society was probably not homogenous, but it appeared instead as quite multifold and varying from one class to another and ultimately, from one family to another.

In the case of mothers, we must say that information about maternity issues in this period is rather limited and there is not much historical evidence on the social privileges or restrictions that they may have had. To mention just a few inferences, Ó Tuathaigh focusses on the average births to a married woman in pre-industrial Ireland and concludes that even if evidence suggests that English women gave birth to three or four children, the number seems quite low for the same period in Ireland. Finally, his conclusion about the maternal details of the island is that "[firstly, due to dietary and other factors, fecundity came to an end sooner than it does nowadays. Secondly, the weaning period for infants was longer than it is now" (32).

[34] Nevertheless, fostering was still operative among the native families and it continued to be practiced well into the nineteenth century (Ó Tuathaigh 31).

As the eighteenth century approached, the stratification of Irish society in terms of class, religion and cultural origin became increasingly evident. The gradual primacy of the colonial system would be manifested with the emergence of the so-called Protestant Ascendancy, the privileged class that finally subjugated the Catholic community and dominated Ireland's political and economic power from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. With a special focus on religious difference and land ownership, the Ascendancy exerted its abusive power over the impoverished tenants, who lived in constant tribulation and found extraordinary difficulties in paying their rents, whereas the land lords revered in luxury and opulence. This confrontation between the two classes operated at many levels and would clearly and differently impact on the status of women, who would either benefit or suffer from the prevalent ethos in the side of the cultural line in which they happened to be born and bred.

In the case of the gentry ladies, by this time they got commonly engaged in social work, with the foundation of institutions and committees of relief for the poor population, the establishment of schools or their role as benefactors of charities. This social influence embodied by women from the Ascendancy was depicted by the Anglo-Irish writer Maria Edgeworth in her novel *Castle Rackrent* (1800), which is considered as the pioneer of the Big House novel tradition and also the first narrative piece written in the novel form by an Irish woman of letters.[35] Her realist portrait of the decadence of

[35] The Big House novel tradition derives its name from the building in which they were usually set. Not a proper castle in many cases, it was considered "big" as opposed to the cottages and shacks in which the tenants of the area used to live, whereas the land lords had a luxurious lifestyle. In general, the narratives tell the idiosyncrasies of the Anglo-Irish management of the land and their labourers. After Edgeworth, a great number of Irish writers, male and female, have followed the Big House tradition in their literary works,

the Anglo-Irish class and system at the end of the eighteenth century is quite valuable to understand the life, manners and aspirations of women from this social background as well as to see the many faults of the already vanishing social and economic order. Through her narrator, Edgeworth describes the domestic atmosphere in which at that time the distinction between Anglo-Irish and Gaelic Irish, lords and tenants, masters and servants and men and women was made clear. Given the privileged background they were educated in, her Anglo-Irish women figure as enjoying an advantaged position, and even though their role depended very much on their husband's social status, they did have the benefit of some economic liberties.[36]

In the Roman Catholic side, despite the evident repression caused by Anglo-Irish primacy, female intervention was prominent and indeed crucial as well in the sense that many women contributed to the creation of religious orders devoted to the education and provision for the middle and lower classes. Thus, between 1755 and the mid nineteenth century, sisterhoods like the Presentation Sisters, the Sisters of Mercy and the Loreto Sisters opened their first convents in Dublin and other Irish towns. However, the profusion of women entering these institutions at this time also sheds some light on the limited options left to them apart from the prescriptive role of wives and mothers. Along with emigration, celibate life was seen as the only escape from the difficult economic situation that the

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ranging from Charles Lever, Somerville and Ross, Elizabeth Bowen or more recently, Jennifer Johnston and John Banville.

[36] Through the narrator of *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth describes how some of the gentry women, like the wife of one of the lords of the estate in which the novel is set, had their own income, which came from the money they received from sealing the tenants' contracts and also from selling ashes of the weeds around the main house, used for the production of bleach and soap (1988:17)

country was living. As Amor Barros explains in her study *Metáforas de su tierra: breve historia de las mujeres irlandesas* that was one of the most common options among the female Catholic population. By taking the veil, they became part of independent social structures which ultimately provided them with a job and possibilities of personal promotion, while they also engaged in projects extremely acclaimed by Irish society (36). At the same time, this female move may also denote a certain awareness on the part of these women of the necessity to work for the collective interests of the Irish population, an attitude that, whether from religious or secular schemes, and whether proposed by and for males or females, would be the leading spirit for later streams of nationalism and claims for independence from England.

The cultural differentiation of women in Ireland also became evident in their access to education which, nonetheless, was rather limited and incomplete as compared to men. Although a National System of Primary Education was established in 1831, only girls from the gentry or the middle classes could aspire to literacy, and that was merely transferred into the learning of social conduct patterns, letter writing, music, needlework and art, all of them executed within the framework of the indispensable instruction in Christian values. At any rate, the newly founded colleges that catered mostly for Protestant but also for Catholic girls had revolutionary effects on women in educational and economic terms. This liberalising step forward had important results in the role of women during the crucial historical events that took place in the following period. In Margaret McCurtain's words, "higher education for middle-class Irish women brought them not only economic freedom and university honours, but in the early

twentieth century brought them, by various routes, unto the revolutionary experience that led to the founding of the Free State in the south in 1922" (1985: 47).

Likewise, the predominantly domestic existence that they led facilitated these exceptional privileges, resulting ultimately in the emergence of a number of women authors, who tried to reflect in their writings the experiences they encountered in their immediate surroundings or their correspondence with relatives and acquaintances. Many of them wrote under male pseudonyms and had to abide how their work was hardly considered as "proper" literature, mostly because, as argued by Inés Praga in *Una belleza terrible*, they were constantly reminded that their primary duty was to comply with the roles of wife and mother. In fact, Praga observes that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were a great number of potential female writers who openly apologised for consecrating their life to writing and for neglecting their family (244).

This regular omission of women writers and their works was indeed denounced by Elizabeth Sharp in her collection *Women's Voices* (1887). A writer herself, she gathered two centuries of writings by Irish women poets, as well as some English and Scottish authors. Throughout her preface, Sharp claims justice for those unknown female writers along with the elevation of their status to that of *real* poets. In her introduction, special emphasis is given to the fact that this neglect stems from the restrictions suffered by women in terms of education and other fundamental rights:

> Women have had many serious hindrances to contend against —defective education, lack of broad experience of life, absence of freedom in which to make full use of natural abilities and the force of

> public and private opinion, both of which have always been prone to prejudge her work and unfavourably, or at best apologetically. (Cited in Kellegher 7)

Despite the imposition of domesticity, or probably because of that and of their lack of a substantial role in the political and intellectual life of Ireland in this period, there had been an important claim for women's active function in the handling of public affairs in "*Párliament na nBan*" or "Parliament of Women," an Irish text from the early eighteenth century consisting of several speeches made by an assembly of noblewomen. The author was inspired by Desiderius Erasmus's work "The Council of Women" for his rejection of gender inequality and the defence of women's agency in socio-political affairs by way of learning and education, among other proposals. Thus, in one of the speeches a woman complains to her companions how they are "withdrawing from all public affairs, remaining always at home, attending to our distaffs and spindles, even though many of us are no good about the house" (cited in O'Tuathaigh 32). Inherent in this reproach there is an outcry against women's relegation to compulsory domesticity and in favour of female undertaking of public and artistic actions. However, there is probably no need to expand on the idea that fair and rightful as they were, schemes like this had little or no repercussion in the patriarchy-based ideology of eighteenth-century Ireland, although it stood as a public claim for Irish women's visibility.

Indeed, the crucial events that took place at many levels in the following century would be a catalyst for change in Irish collective consciousness and ultimately in the configuration of femininity and maternity ideologies. It has been accepted among historians and

nineteenth-century specialists that the demographic explosion that took place in the early decades of that century on the island acted as a determining factor for many of the particulars that characterised it (Lee 1978; Connolly 1985). Particularly, that the majority of the Irish population at that time, especially from the lower classes, married at a very young age as compared to other European countries and to modern and contemporary standards is a much observed tendency.[37] Thus, traditionally early marriage has been considered as the principal regulator of population insofar as it resulted into a high fertility rate in Ireland during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Furthermore, the majority of the socioeconomic problems that afflicted the country and that resulted into the Great Famine of 1845-1849, have been attributed to this increase. The Irish, mostly those of modest descent, had benefited from the system of subdivision of family property that would favour all the owner's sons equally by granting them the right to inherit small pieces of land, in which potatoes, the basic product of Irish agriculture and diet, were mostly and easily produced. This had favoured early and unrestricted marriage among the offspring of the low classes, and had placed them in a profitable situation which, nonetheless, would be gradually maimed by the effects of the demographic upturn. In other words, this demographic excess occasioned not only strong competition for owning and working the lands but also, and subsequently, the underemployment of the by then massive Irish population.

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[37] Recorded documents like the Irish Poor Enquiry of the 1830s show that among the rural lower classes, the usual age for contracting marriage was around twenty in men and sixteen to twenty in women.

A dissension against this line of argument is posed by Sean. J. Connolly in his article "Marriage in Pre-Famine Ireland," where he explores how instead of early marriage or land subdivision, it was the system of arranged marriages –that were still quite popular at the time–, what had influenced the demographic and economic situation, and how marital consciousness depended on the amount of property of the individual. Unlike the positions about spouses' age and its effects in population figures described above, Connolly maintains that because marital unions depended quite overtly on considerations of the woman's dowry and the man's inheritance of land, farmers' daughters and sons had to postpone their marriage until a later age, when the husband-to-be could receive the land from his deceased father. With the gradual shift in the economy brought about by the population growth, among other factors, farmers refused to subdivide their farms and insisted that their descendants either postpone their marriage, not to marry at all or emigrate to other countries.

Connolly distinguishes two groups within the farming family system, namely:

> a minority of larger occupiers, among whom marriage was postponed almost or entirely as long as it was to be in post-Famine Ireland, and a larger group of small farmers, deeply concerned with the implications of marriage for the orderly transfer of property from one generation to the next but nevertheless willing to subdivide the family holding in order to allow their sons to marry while still in their twenties. (83)

All this implies on the one hand, that generally marriage took place between partners of the same social class, and on the other hand, that there was a very marked degree of paternal control. This tendency, he continues, was rather different outside the farming classes where not only was parents'

decision in the match less strict and rather informal, but also access to marriage was more easily granted, since those who had no land had nothing to expect to (83-84).

In fact, during the Famine, namely, the four years of economic disaster occasioned by a blight in the potato crops and intensified by a stream of Siberian winds, more than half a million people died from hunger and disease and about two hundred thousand had to emigrate, mostly to Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia. This catastrophe meant an immediate drop in population and had a profound impact on the Irish socio-economic and ultimately cultural framework. The always extremely important issues of land ownership and inheritance suffered a variation from former periods that can be encapsulated into what Arensberg and Kimball in the 1960s defined as "Familism." The term refers to the tendency in the post-Famine years by which in order to perpetuate family property and prevent land fragmentation, fathers usually selected their heir among their sons. This strategy brought about a series of typical procedures for the assignation of the holdings to the appropriate heir and also severe restrictions in sexual behaviour, like the ones described by David Cairns and Shaun Richards in their study *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture*: "the spread of matchmaking as a preliminary to marriage; pressure on 'surplus' sons and daughters to emigrate; pressure on them to observe strict chastity and not, through following their own desires, to risk the transmission of the farm under unfavourable circumstances through a *misalliance*" (43). What it did bring to the fore was the establishment of the tenant farmers as the most numerous social group in the later part of the

nineteenth century, whereas the labourers kept on being second-class citizens in economic terms.

Another recurrent focus of critical analysis quite relevant for the content of our study is the rationale of the codes of sexual behaviour and its connection to illegitimacy. In the past few decades there has been some discussion about the attitude towards bastardy and unmarried motherhood during the pre-Famine years. Approaches to the situation conclude that because of the consolidation of the family as the standard social and economic unit, there was a low incidence of illegitimacy in mid nineteenth-century Ireland. Particularly, Sean J. Connolly admits that there was little reticence towards sexual expression in the early part of the nineteenth century, in clear contrast to the Victorian regulations, but that did not mean that extramarital intercourse and conception were widely tolerated. He insists that illegitimate births were more frequent in the east and the south of Ireland than in the west, where properties were smaller, and that in general

> the proportion of illegitimate births was relatively small, rarely amounting to more than 5 per cent of the total and often to considerably less […] Among Catholics at least, less than 10 per cent of all brides in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries appear to have been pregnant when they came to the altar. (91)

However, Anne O'Connor contends that "perhaps these matters were not recorded in the Irish official documentation or were discussed under different titles, such as 'adoption', for instance" (1991a: 32). What she is certain about, as evidenced by the information from the mid nineteenth-century Census and legislation, is that bastardy and foundlings were common at this time, and hospitals and orphanages, usually run by

religious orders, as we will see later in this section, had a prominent role in raising the large number of unwanted children (1991a: 31). Likewise, she suggests that at the end of the nineteenth century, abortion began to be legislated against as harshly as had infanticide so that the legal framework can give evidence of the social anxiety about these issues. We can agree with O'Connor that whether the number of out of wedlock pregnancies and illegitimate births was high or not, it must be accepted that these cases were treated with suspicion and contempt and that there probably was a customary inclination among the affected individuals and their families to conceal the details of such unacceptable deeds, which were subsequently left out of the recorded documents in many cases.

In the same line, in her exploration of women and sexuality in nineteenth-century Ireland, Dympna McLoughlin challenges the typically sceptic position about the low illegitimacy rate and extra-marital sexuality by detailing several revealing aspects and statistical data from that society. Her description of the different factors that may shatter this myth of asexuality and celibacy at that time manifests the presence of deviant sexuality and the lack of an orthodox practice of sexual alliances. She mentions, for example, the widespread presence and awareness of prostitution, the recurrence of folk stories about women administering love potions with sex inducing effects in men, or the thriving role of workhouses and foundling hospitals. But probably her most meaningful description against that asexual misconception refers to the fact that evidence proves how many of the women who had emigrated to the United States or Australia for economic and also respectability reasons, would recurrently

send for the children that they had left behind in those institutions once they had settled in the new land (266-267). This procedure reveals not only the extent to which illegitimacy was indeed widespread in that period, but also that concealment from officialdom, including a physical separation between unmarried mothers and their illegitimate babies, was an urgently taken measure, the same position that was maintained by Anne O'Connor.

Another conclusion drawn by McLoughlin from the mid nineteenth-century documentary evidence has to do with the purely economic reasons inherent in the calamity always posed in Ireland by an out of wedlock conception. An unvirtuous woman could ruin her family because "[i]f a woman was impregnated through pre-marital sexual relation, and the man refused to marry her, she was in a most wretched predicament. Her only chance of redemption was if her father provided an extra large dowry "in order to cover the disgrace" (274). On account of this preoccupation with dowry provision, poor women with illegitimate babies made everything possible to remain invisible to official respectability, but in the cases where their situation was unfolded into the public scene, they were merely pitied and held in contempt. The circumstances varied from the industrial to the agricultural contexts, being the former less preoccupied with the inheritance of fortune and status, which could be attained by hard work instead. With all these considerations in mind, McLoughlin concludes that "sexual prudery in nineteenth-century Ireland had little to do with the Church and all to do with the economics of the emerging middle class… Economics, not sentiment, were the main issues here" (274).

A rather different perspective on single maternity ideology in nineteenth-century Ireland is endorsed by Tom Inglis in his comprehensive study *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church*. He attributes the abhorrent content assigned to deviant sexuality and out of wedlock conception to the gained control of women taken by the Catholic Church. The puritan strategy devised by priests and nuns was sanctioned by the National Education system and its emphasis on instructing girls in the ideal qualities of a good mother. Their task was to supervise the young girls in their maternal role and that was attained by closely controlling their sexual life. For Inglis, the common attitude was that "women especially were made to feel ashamed of their bodies. They were interrogated about their sexual feelings, desires and activities in the confessional. Outside the confessional there was a deafening silence. Sex became the most abhorrent sin" (1998: 188).

In fact, Inglis also relates the rhetorics of maternity to the economic milieu when he maintains that it was only in the earlier part of the nineteenth century when the institution of motherhood as such began to prosper, running side by side with the separation of the private and public spheres. Women, and most particularly wives, severely suffered the transition from home employment to industrialisation, in which female labour was at first unnecessary. He draws on the work done by critics like Joseph Lee, who had concluded that when Irish agriculture began to shift from tillage to livestock, women's economic contribution to the family was not as essential as it had been in the pre-Famine period (Lee 37).

To continue with Inglis's analysis of the status of mothers and motherhood in those decades around the Famine, we can bring to the fore his association of the emerging dominant class of tenant farmers with the increase in the power of the Catholic Church, and the role played by mothers in such religious upturn. In other words, the relation between this emerging rural bourgeoisie and the Catholic authorities was of a reciprocal necessity, in the sense that the former provided economic capital whereas the latter granted the achievement of the same social prestige as the Protestant gentry. The only problem, Inglis observes, was that "they became a rather conservative force" and they visibly had to resort to the mother in order to guarantee this reciprocal benefit. To quote again from his work, "[i]t was the mother who became the organisational link between the newly institutionalised power of the Roman Catholic Church and the individual farming family. It was she who instilled and maintained in her husband and children all that was disciplined, moral and civil" (1998: 184).

Standing as a consequence of these ideological premises, the recurrent vilification suffered by women involved in deviant motherhood must be explored in further detail. This attitude was part of the widespread social awareness of deviant sexuality and undesirable births, and was highly influenced by moral teachings that condemned all sorts of abnormal femininity and unacceptable motherhood. A clear illustration of this woman-centred anxiety can be found in the child murderess and dead child traditions that had become embedded in the nineteenth-century Irish folklore and psyche. Besides the higher incidence of the former, there is a clear distinction between them in terms of content: child murderess stories

and ballads told of women who had killed their unbaptised child or children and did not repent of their sin, so that their lack of atonement rendered them unhappy for the rest of their existence. By contrast, in the dead child legends the souls of children who had died without receiving baptism –after abortion, miscarriage or murder had taken place–, manifested in supernatural ways throughout the community (O'Connor 1991b: 310-311). The two traditions were closely linked, and both were constructed upon a popular belief that these women were evil and ultimately responsible for their children's dwelling in limbo for ever after. Another intersection between them was that they projected the diabolical side of illegitimate babies' mothers, as well as their subsequent rejection and even fear on grounds of religion, an attitude which somehow still occurs because many of these stories and part of the negative views on these women have survived well into contemporary times. Again, we must explain at this point that folklore may not be fact, but the recurrent presence of these stories shows that there was social awareness and much uneasiness about these acts.

More specific information about the situation of illegitimate babies' mothers and indeed quite illustrative of the everyday consciousness about these issues can be traced in the Irish Poor Inquiry of the 1830s, which was based on remarks provided by local witnesses about everyday situations throughout the island and who generally used a rather moral tone in their descriptions. To mention but one of the various reports, which have been collected by Maria Luddy in her book *Women in Ireland: 1800-1918*, one informer comments on the situation during that decade in County Westmeath by indicating that:

> Girls who have had illegitimate children are looked on with great contempt both by men and women, and are seldom married, nor would a farmer give his daughter to a bastard except he was much richer… Women who have had bastards are sometimes driven to begging, and in some instances to prostitution, and with regard to the children the females are, in general, brought up very badly. The males sometimes get service. (37)

What most of these reports set forth is that begging and prostitution stood as the immediate outcome of bearing illegitimate babies. Likewise, an additional obstacle emerged for these women since they were not only socially disdained but also they found great difficulty in procuring a husband. In fact, some of them resorted to marriage and some others did not. We must explain that those who desperately wanted to marry in order to avoid social rejection and economic privation rarely found a husband above their social class, and for those who did not marry, ostracisation by family and community usually brought them to poverty. Thus, these practices and perspectives appear in clear contrast to what was described in the previous section of our study, when we mentioned how during the Celtic era, illegitimacy was not a severe problem for the family or the community of the women, and it was solved by the kin group, that shared the responsibility of the bastard child's raising. Unfortunately, the picture in nineteenth-century Ireland was rather difficult, and remained so hereafter, until very recent times.

Luddy's collection stands as a valuable insight into the many aspects concerning the status of women in the time span on which she focusses her volume. The book includes a chapter devoted entirely to motherhood and its reflection in literary, legal and personal documents of the period. Among these texts stands out a pamphlet by the suffragist Thomas J. Haslam

published in 1868, in which together with his wife, who was a well-known suffragist and pro-women campaigner, he advocates for women's use of the "safe period" in order to prevent an excessive number of pregnancies. Even though he is incorrect about the specific days within the woman's menstrual cycle in which it occurs, and even though he proposes abstinence during those days –unlike other methods used such as the "introduction of a small piece of soft and elastic sponge into the vagina immediately before the act of copulation, and its withdrawal immediately afterwards" (Luddy 32)–, his campaign is not moralist but quite altruist towards women and towards the Irish people in general. He justifies his position on grounds of family welfare, which according to him, should precede ethical principles so that he manages to present birth control as a reasonable attitude in human beings:

> When Providence endowed mankind with the noble gift of reason, it was in order that we might regulate our conduct in accordance with the dictates of prudence, and not allow ourselves to be carried away by the violence of our propensities to the injury, and not infrequent destruction, of our unfortunate children. The generation of offspring by parents who are not in position to maintain them in health and happiness is one of the most brutal and selfish enormities which man and woman can commit. (Luddy 32-34)

Many other proposals, of a social, economic or sexual nature, succeeded this unusual proposition. The nineteenth century indeed saw the explosion of social policies, with the introduction in Ireland of a number of acts that gave shape to the welfare state, mostly inherited from the dictates of British administration but covering much of the local necessities. The first and foremost legal action in the early decades of the century was the Poor Relief Act of 1838, which set up the basis of the workhouse system, so essential for single mothers and other Irish social outcasts. Other lines of action included the Amendment Act of 1847, that provided outdoor relief,

the Medical Children Act of 1851 or the Public Health Act of 1878, that set into motion the Irish public health system (Kennedy 2002: 36).

Particularly significant for single mothers was the workhouse system that came into action with the Irish Poor Relief Act. These were institutions for the poor not legible to receive relief at home, which also counted among its interns the sick, the elderly and the mentally handicapped. About the specific situation of single mothers in these centres, Eithne McLaughlin and Paula Rodgers point out that:

> Unmarried mothers, having no husbands, had a more 'automatic' right to Poor Law relief in the workhouse, but on the other hand, had no legal rights to their child -from whom they were often separated. Under common law a child born outside marriage was said to be *fillius nullus*, a 'child of no one'- neither parent was the guardian nor had any rights to custody over the child. (17)

But probably the most striking aspect of the workhouse system is that among the "fallen women" a distinction was frequently made between those women on their first pregnancy –also called "first fall"– and those who had repeated the offence by a second out of wedlock conception, being the latter doubly ostracised and often literally segregated from the former in order to prevent "contamination." Following Eileen O'Hare *et al.* in their account of the situation of the unmarried mother in nineteenth century Ireland in *Mothers Alone: A Study of Women Who Gave Birth outside Marriage*, we can add that the illegitimate babies that were born or brought into these centres would remain with their mother usually until the age of two, when they were boarded out and taken to orphanages or industrial schools. As for the women, those from a Catholic background at that point were accommodated in convents run by nuns, whereas a similar procedure was taken for women of other religious denominations (5).

A so-called "Magdalen Ayslum" had already been set up in Dublin in the mid eighteenth century in order to provide economic and social shelter for the women in such miserable state, and morally assisting them in their way to redemption from their sins. But it was during the second half of the nineteenth century that many of these convents were opened in several counties, like Cork, Wexford and Limerick, mostly under the supervision of the Good Shepherd Nuns.[38] Set up with the intention of rescuing prostitutes and other fallen women, Refuges, Asylums and Magdalen Homes were becoming increasingly popular as the century progressed and in many cases were so overcrowded that rigorous selection processes had to be followed. In any case, and curiously enough, their original purpose and their supposedly religious piety atmosphere was more a myth than a reality.

Underlying this provision for the unmarried mother made either by the state or through the voluntary work of religious orders lay the fear that illegitimate babies would be exposed, starved to death or actually murdered by the fallen mother right after childbirth. However, more contemporary approaches to this social provision schemes endorse the view that inherent in the establishment of those institutions was mostly the awe-inspiring character of female sexuality. This is actually Frances Finnegan's approach in her extensive study *Do Penance or Perish: A Study of Magdalen Asylums in Ireland*. She starts from the premise of fear in the sense that according to her, nineteenth-century concerns with prostitution in Britain had given rise to the so-called "Rescue or Penitentiary System," by which together with the

[38] At the beginning of the twentieth century, this kind of institutions developed into what were called Mother and Baby Homes. They acted exclusively in favour of unwed mothers, who were no longer admitted in the poor law centres and workhouses, their situation being considered of a different nature other than economic and requiring more specific provision.

Contagious Disease Legislation, the dangers of sexuality were intended to be controlled, being this ideology and policies later transferred to Ireland. To quote from her introductory chapter:

> The Female Penitentiary Movement –based on morbid fears of women's sexuality, and fed, approved of, and financially supported by the society from which it emerged– has been ranked, along with the Contagious Disease Acts, as the most blatant form of class and sexual discrimination of that most hypocritical of eras –the Victorian Age. (1)

Further, Finnegan criticises the role played by female agents in this hideous chapter of Irish history insofar as it was mostly women who became actively involved in the provision of interns for these institutions. In other words, not only did mostly women act as Rescue Workers recommending fallen women to enter the Asylums but also in many cases they entered the institutions under the counselling of female relatives. Besides, she criticises the fact that:

> Few questioned the morality of consigning 'fallen' women but not men to penitentiaries; and there was no public outcry or Parliamentary debate about prostitutes, unmarried mothers and victims of incest, seduction or rape, spending years, or sometimes even lifetimes, in unregulated and supposedly 'short-terms' Homes. (1)

The situation in which single mothers were suddenly immersed is perfectly described by O'Hare *et al.* in the following terms: "once given refuge in Catholic convents these women seldom left, working in the laundry or engaged in lace making, their whereabouts sometimes unknown to relatives and friends" (7). Among all the "types" of interns, ranging as we have mentioned from prostitutes, unmarried mothers, sexually abused and mentally deficient girls, and even young girls in need of restraint, probably those who lived in a more wretched condition were those women unexpectedly involved in out of wedlock conception. Pregnant women were

not admitted in the convents, at least not on a preliminary basis, so that by the time when they entered their newly assigned places of residence, they had already parted with their babies and were forced to leave their past behind. This even more miserable situation is described by Finnegan when she remarks that:

> Unmarried mothers [were] forced to give up their babies as well as their lives. Regardless of whether passion, seduction or abuse had been the cause of pregnancy; and irrespective of whether the infant had survived, grieving, post-natal mothers were compelled to suffer in silence, and to submit, without murmur, to the anguish of their loss… [They] would return to work red-eyed or crying, unusually quiet or "difficult," an object of pity, curiosity and scorn. (28)

Another focus of contemporary criticism of the Magdalen Penitentiaries is the discourse used by the religious figures that managed them when they addressed the interned women. Irrespective of age or time spent within the walls of the convent —a lifetime in many cases—, they were referred to as "girls" or "children" and also as "Magdalens," on account of their sexual sins and their need to atone and redeem themselves, like the biblical character is said to have done. By contrast, in the public eye the nuns were considered to be assisting them in a motherly way, thus playing an extremely important role not only in making deviant women invisible and trying to reform them, but also by ultimately performing a patriotic function in favour of the nation. However, accounts by women who survived or escaped this regime give evidence of the harsh treatment and continuous demoralisation suffered by these women, shattering that idealised myth of Catholic and typically maternal intervention, which was considered as one of

the means to articulate the growing nationalist consciousness about Ireland's identity.[39]

A remarkable feature of nineteenth-century Ireland was that whereas the colonial psyche was engaged in economic and social provision issues, the colonialist ideology revolved around pseudo-scientific judgments of the Irish subjects, focussed on aspects of racial distinction. They were articulated on the grounds of anthropological and physical studies of the Irish race which had dubiously but authoritatively accounted for the animalisation and inferiority of the Celtic people, usually compared with blacks and savages, and standing as clear developments of the Medieval and Renaissance clichés that justified colonial intervention. This perspective was socially sanctioned and became quite popular among the British and Anglo-Irish circles in the 1860s, mostly after the emergence of the Fenians.[40]

Particularly effectual for the notion of England's cultural and "racial" pre-eminence over Ireland were Matthew Arnold's views on the Irish as an inferior race that spoke an inferior language and behaved in uncivilised

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[39] Ireland has recently seen a profusion of works devoted to this controversial and long concealed part of its history. Mostly based on these accounts by former Magdalen interns, an extensive number of documentaries, biographies, critical articles, literary productions (including novels, plays and collections of poetry) as well as artistic pieces have been released in the past decade. Among these productions, particularly significant was the documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998) the first piece of visual material covering this issue with the testimony of surviving interns, *Sinners* (2002) and *The Magdalen Sisters* (2002), the film that brought this subject to international audiences. Also constituting pioneer studies of these events and women's experiences of them, a chapter in Cinta Ramblado Minero and Auxiliadora Pérez Vides's *Single Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (2006) is devoted to the portrayal of these institutions in literature and film, whereas a comprehensive study of the origins and history of these institutions can be found in James Smith's *Ireland's Magdalene Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (2007).

[40] The Fenian Brotherhood was a secret society founded in 1856 in New York by John O'Mahony. It was soon brought to Ireland, where it changed its name into the Irish Republican Brotherhood. They defended the creation of an Irish Republic, but thought it could only be attained by force, to such an extent that "[i]n the eyes of unionism, Fenianism seemed to be a kind of disease that infected the rabble of Ireland." The emigrant community in Britain, the United States and Canada was a considerable support to the organization for the provision of arms and officers (Moody 230-232).

ways. His position was actually based on his contemporary Ernest Renan's philological analysis of European languages –as determining features of identity–, and his conclusion of the complementary quality of the Celtic language, in opposition to other mainstream languages. Renan had outlined the complementarity of the Celts on account of their emotional and melancholic character as a race, and he reinforced this idea by means of a metaphor that identified them as "an essentially feminine race" (cited in Cairns and Richards 46). In other words, his gendered comparison pointed out that like women "complement" men, so this race and its linguistic identity added to the masculinist values of other cultures and languages, like the English. For Arnold, though, the feminisation of the Irish acquired an even more negative content in the sense that, according to him, being by nature sensible and prone to exaltation, the Celts were completely incapable of self-government. Therefore, he presumes that they have "something feminine in them, and the Celt is peculiarly disposed to feel the spell of feminine idiosyncrasy; he has an affinity to it; he is not far from its secret" (cited in Cairns and Richards 48).

Throughout the century, England's reaction towards Ireland's political insurrection and economic disaster had been a rather patronising one. Since the proclamation of the Irish Parliament in 1782, that gave rise to a strong concern with national identity, a great part of the Irish political circles had been engaged in granting its independence from England, but such hopes were shattered when the United Irishmen, who had organised a rebellion against British oppression in 1798, were put down and Britain passed the Act of Union in 1800. The century was inaugurated with a

reaffirmation of Ireland's subjugation under the empire, which was translated into this condescending perception of the colonised race during the later, Victorian times. Most significantly, throughout the Famine, England's attitude towards Ireland's suffering had been that of indifference, and that led to an increasingly evident anti-English feeling on the part of the locals.

This political and ideological confrontation between the two nations was manifested not only in the everyday political discourse but also, and most graphically, in the depiction of the two countries that pervaded newspapers and journals. Very illustrative of such contraposition and also of the abstract feminisation of the country in rather decadent terms, were the pictures that appeared in the British journal *Punch* along the nineteenth century. In these cartoons, Ireland is represented as Hibernia, a virginal maiden always threatened by the radical and ape-like Fenians. Both characterisations perfectly exemplify the denigration of the Irish race, but according to C. L. Innes in her study *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935*, what is most striking about them is the disparity between the abstract description of the nation and the portrayal of the Irish individuals. To quote from her work,

> if Hibernia embodies the extreme of angelic femininity dreamed by Victorian Englishmen -beautiful, graceful, spiritualized and passive- Hibernians are her opposite -bestial, dirty, loutishly masculine, aggressive and ugly: the extreme of masculine bestiality feared by Victorian Englishmen, and in this aspect like the representations of African and Indian men. (14)

What these considerations of the Irish as a second-class race entails for the island's women applies first to the strict code of gender inequality that stemmed from this differentiation: as Ireland was different from

England, so men were different from women. On the other hand, because this gender biased discourse appeared by the time when cultural and political claims for independence were becoming stronger, the colonial feminisation of Ireland was curiously adopted by the colonised as well. They reversed the inferiority stereotype by asserting their masculinity but retained the gender component in an attempt to justify nationalism and political action on grounds of male rescue of a female-like Ireland. Under the resultant ideological perception of female identity, women were reduced to chattel and body, and more precisely, womb and sexual incompleteness. The maternal trope, as we shall see in the following section, added an extremely meaningful ingredient to the nationalist cause, and symbolism rather than practicality was the common interpretation of Irish mothers and their social role.

1.3. The nationalist cause: the maternal ideals becoming (eternal) realities

As a consequence of all the anti-colonial feelings that had grown over the different stages of Irish history and which became intensified in the nineteenth century, the first two decades of the twentieth century were characterised by a fervent campaign against British presence in Ireland, as evidenced in politics, culture and media productions. This section offers an overview of the events that took place from those years to the most contemporary socio-political background of Ireland that has been largely infused with the signifiers that have pervaded the island's history.

With the Home Rule crisis of 1913 and 1914, the Irish renewed the claims for the independence for which important leaders like Daniel O'Connell and Charles Stewart Parnell had fought in the previous century. By the time of the First World War, when the Home Rule was neglected by British administration, some of the private armies of Ireland, like the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Irish Volunteers, organised a revolt, the Easter Rebellion of 1916. Its aftermath, with the execution of most of its leaders –like Patrick Pearse and Thomas Clarke– was a real catalyst for a change of attitude in Irish people. Curiously enough, the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, signed before the rising, claimed for Ireland's necessity to have her men and women fighting for her and declared the equal rights and equal opportunities for Irish people.

That women participated actively in political events in that period and that nationalism also helped women to fight for suffragism is now

widely assumed.[41] For example, famous female names of that era were Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, who founded in 1908 the Irish Women Franchise League, and Constance Markievicz and Rosamond Jacobs, active members of the *Cumann na mBan*,[42] the female branch of the Irish Volunteers. Some were primarily feminists and others were primarily nationalists, although it is difficult to know where they stood and to generalise their position. Dana Hearne points out that suffragists "were not necessarily involved in a sexual revolution, i.e., the overthrow of patriarchal institutions, ideology, and socialization processes" (31). However, she also assumes that within this movement there were debates

> around a wide range of issues from the role of mothers in the formation of citizens, to the nature of the work that women do, to questions of sexuality, to critiques of war and the problems inherent in a male-run state, to analyses of the concept of equality, to questions about male-female differences and the implications of those differences for the nation as a whole. (31)

Hearne goes on to note that feminists were quite aware of the differences between the nation and the state, as they thought that they participated of the nation, understood as "people", but they were not part of the state, considered as "the government apparatus" (31).

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[41] There are different positions as to whether nationalism fostered feminism in Ireland or not, though, ranging from Carol Coulter's positive view of their interaction in her study *The Hidden Tradition* where she argues that nationalist struggle "offered [women] scope for a wider range of activities in public life than that experienced by their sisters in imperialist countries" (3) and Gerardine Meaney's assertion that "a feminism which refuses to engage with the hard realities of Ireland can be no more than that. A feminism based on exclusion will continue to be itself excluded" (1993: 236). On the opposite side stands Edna Longley, whose article "From Cathleen to Anorexia: The Breakdown of Irelands", represented an argument against the fact that an excessive nationalism did not benefit the fight for equality. For Longley, there is "a collusion between all Nationalist images of women, between Queen Maeve and Mother Ireland, between the feminine-pathetic and the feminine-heroic" (190).

[42] The phrase can be translated into English as "Women's Association" or "League of Women." See Margaret Ward 2001: 58-63 for a close examination of this organisation, founded in Dublin in 1913 and lead by Constance Marcievicz. Another important organization at that time was *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* or "Daughters of Erin", a nationalist group founded by Maud Gonne in 1900 and with its own newspaper, *Bean na nÉireann* or "The Irish Women".

The Irish suffragists attempted to broaden the definition of politics in society by calling into question the public/private dichotomy associated with gender. They found that with the Representation of the People Act of 1918, the British parliament recognised the right to vote for women over thirty, but only to those who were married, homemakers or university graduates. The suffrage paper *The Irish Citizen* (1912-1920) was a very useful vehicle in calling attention to the importance of gender and feminist activities for the practice of citizenship, in challenging the privacy of the domestic sphere and in demanding a wider public role for women (Cullen Owens 86). In the meantime, the Irish Republic was not recognised internationally, this giving rise to the war of Independence or Anglo-Irish War of 1919. As a result, with the partition of the country and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, by which the Irish had to plead loyalty to the British crown, the country saw the difference of opinions between the Republican leaders and subsequently, the outbreak of Civil War between 1922 and 1923. Those who opposed the treaty –ratified by the Irish Parliament or *Dáil*– were defeated and many of its supporters were killed. Nonetheless, Ireland was given a degree of independence that few of them would have ever imagined.

In the post-independence period, a profound metaphorical and mental process took place around the need to assert Irishness and the (masculine) desire for the domination of the land. As in other modern societies suffering from colonial subjugation, the consolidation of nationalism necessitated a symbology that could guarantee the Irish cultural homogeneity. Responding to the whole process of colonial oppression, the nationalist configuration of Irish identity in this period was

based on the establishment of rigid gender constructs. The role of women in this kind of nationalist ethics has been explored by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davies, who point out the ever-present gender component in processes of cultural formation. They note the complexity of the two-dimensional relevance of women as ideal "producers" and material "reproducers" of nationalist ideologies, by which they serve to perpetuate the ideology that characterises the nation, while certain codes of behaviour are imposed upon them. Thus, it is their belief that "[b]y dressing and behaving 'properly', and by giving birth to children within legitimate marriages, [women] both signify and reproduce the symbolic and legal boundaries of the collectivity. More than that, a female is often used as the actual symbolic figuration of the nation" (28).

In the Irish case, strict female gender iconographies had already been present in the eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry tradition, where as mentioned in the previous section, Ireland was constructed as a woman suffering the victimisation of British rule. Names like The Shan Van Vocht,[43] Kathleen Ní Houlihan or Dark Rosaleen appeared in the *aisling* or vision poetry, symbolising Ireland as a poor old woman grieving for the loss of her sons, and beautiful young women that made sacrifices for their beloved country, respectively. [44] With the reworkings of those ballads in the

[43] The term literally means "the poor old woman" and it is usually written in Gaelic but with English spelling (Hurtley *et al.* 286). This personification was used by Patrick Pearse in the famous poem "*Mise Eire*" or "I am Ireland", written on the eve of his execution in 1916. Ireland is identified as the mother for whom the soldiers-sons should fight and sacrifice in order to satisfy her.

[44] Indeed, literature stood as a significant expression of the recovery of Celtic revival traditions, mythology and folklore. This spirit was central to the Irish Literary Revival associated with authors like Lady Gregory and W.B.Yeats, who in turn, founded the Irish National Theatre. Yeats's play *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* (1902) and his 1930s collection of stories about the *aisling* poet Red Hanrahan include descriptions of young women in distress,

nineteenth century by poets like James Clarence Mangan and his famous "Dark Rosaleen" or the above-mentioned O Rathaille, and the increasing devotion to the Virgin Mary that had taken place since the later part of the nineteenth century, the female trope was widely used in the Gaelic revival of the first part of the twentieth century in order to assert Ireland's sovereignty and its detachment from British imposition.

Amor Barros has delved into the identification women-land as inherited from Celtic traditions but which in the period of newly-independent Ireland was used to empower men, implying a masculine relation to the land. She has interpreted this iconography in the following terms:

> There is a return to the historical origins in search of a self identity, different from the English one, and turning to the Gaelic and Celtic cultures that represent bravery, strength and the will for authenticity. Therefore, it is precisely the feminisation of the land what entails a masculine relation between the people and her. (2004: 56, my translation)

This female categorisation of the Irish landscape has also been described by critics like Sighle Breathnacth-Lynch and Angela K. Martin. The former insists on the rural and beautiful countryside imagery that was projected in that period, along with a specific codification of the Irish woman set against that idealised peasant landscape. However, she also denounces that this iconography "helped to anchor women to a rural identity while at the same time reinforce the supposed links between the female, nature and nurturing" (26). A similar conclusion is drawn by Martin when she suggests that this Irish sense of place "depended largely on a construction of masculinity that

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resembling the female presence in the sovereignty myths. See González 2000: 80-84 for a further description of these stories and what they represent.

symbolically and practically 'placed' women in the ideal realm of male ownership and control of property (the farmstead)" (1997: 96).

In the same line, Catherine Nash explains that in order to detach themselves from the colonialist stereotypes of the Celtic feminine, nationalists emphasized the virility of Irish men, simultaneously asserting the strict differentiation between men and women on the island (1997: 114). Gerry Smyth views this moment of Irish decolonisation as an attempt to challenge the idea of the "feminine race" that we commented above, emphasising, on the contrary, the distinction by which "the Irish male was constructed as active, a fighter and earner; the Irish woman was passive, a nurturer mainstay of the family, bastion of the domestic realm of home and earth" (55-56). Similarly, Breathnacth-Lynch draws on Jean Baudilliard's theory of hyper-reality as the simulated real that becomes widely accepted as truth when she describes how this process of cultural transformation in newly-independent Ireland rested on an assumed masculinity of the autonomous Gaelic order, which required the hyperfeminine construction of its women in order to have an authentic cultural identity. To use her own words:

> While Irish men were encouraged to be strong, virile, and active in the affairs of the country, Irish women were encouraged, first and foremost, to be mothers whose duty is to inculcate their children (especially their sons) with love of country, of Gaelic traditions, and of freedom. The central meaning of a woman's existence was through her family; her space confined solely to the domestic sphere. (27-28)

It is in this process of hyperfeminisation where, we could add, desexualised motherhood was ascribed to women, as representatives of the purity and reproductivity of the newly established nation. Indeed, because

of the sanctification of maternity, in this period debates were also common about the notion of the "citizen mother" or "civic motherhood". This made reference to the relevant function of mothers for the state, in the sense that they were expected to educate their sons as useful citizens. Dane Hearne explains in her analysis of this concept that mothers' relationship to the state was seen as pivotal by virtue of their "natural function" as reproducers: "This view was based on the belief that men were ultimately controlled by women and thus, it was essential to instill in women a proper sense of values to ensure that their influence and control would be beneficial to the welfare of the state" (31). However, she also notes that this ideology entailed women's subordination to the state so that "[t]his cannot be an emancipatory role for women in a society where men are accorded all the public power and are apparently not expected to learn any of the nurturing, caring qualities of the domestic sphere" (32).

Among feminists' reactions to this ideology stood a widespread claim that it was necessary first to grant them a higher access to education as their moral and educational influence had been automatically ascribed to the family. Indeed, Nira Yuval-Davies has commented on this nationalist expectation for women to become mothers in her study *Gender and Nation*, where she insists that "often the pressures on women to have or not to have children relate them not as individuals, workers and/or wives, but as members of specific national collectivities" (22). Her remark has particular relevance in the Irish case for the intersection of the postcolonial, nationalist and Catholic codes of femininity on the island, and it raises troubling

questions about the ethical principles upon which such female-maternal understanding is based.

It is also worth noting that these ideological formulations of womanhood transcended the symbolical order as they were predicated on the lives of everyday women. This idea was also exposed by Ailbhe Smyth when she mentioned that Cathleen Ní Houlihan and Dark Rosaleen told very little of the experiences of real women (1991: 21-22). Most particularly, this operated at the level of female bodily discourse and intervention in the name of the nation. Such is Angela K. Martin's conclusion when she explains that:

> [T]he space of the nation is also constituted through, and is simultaneous with, the emergence of particular corporealities. Place and sense of place, therefore, are literally embodied and not only abstract or metaphorical in nature. They are part of, and simultaneously constituted by, those 'polymorphous techniques of power' that also constitute particular forms of sexual difference and embodied sexualities. (1997: 90)

Concomitant with the assertion of power through this proto-typical femininity obviously was the condemnation of irregular practices of such codification. As Heather Ingman puts it: "The sexually loose woman was not only shocking, she was seen as anti-Irish or 'foreign'. Very often she had to be expelled, if not from her country, at least from her family or her community" (7). As will be emphasised at various points of our study, from this critical moment of national and cultural identity consolidation, deviant femininity, mostly understood in sexual terms, provoked social anxieties of cultural disintegration.

Breda Gray and Louise Ryan also address the issue of the deviations of idealised female purity, which were considered as threats to the integrity

of Irish national identity. For them, the symbolic understanding of womanhood simplified women's experiences and given the reinforcement of religious discourse and Marian imagery at the time, it was common to find dichotomous notions of purity/immorality and victimisation/threat applied to women, as they were expected to project the stability of the nation not its vulnerability or corruption. Consequently, "[t]he tragic realities of Irish women who were sexually abused, became pregnant outside or marriage and were consigned to an institution for life, are reduced to a mere symbol of evil and immorality" (Gray and Ryan 523).

Because of the social alliance between Church and state, illegitimacy was a major concern in that period. Revealing some of the dichotomous rhetorics mentioned above, Luddy remarks that these women were seen as either "innocent victims or corrupting agents [...] poor girls or potential blackmailers [who] brought shame to their nation and their families" (2001: 798). In the same vein, exploring the social preoccupation with out of wedlock conception, Rosemary Cullen Owens also points out the further concern prompted by the migration of unmarried mothers, which was rather frequent from the early years of the formation of the Irish state until the 1960s. Particularly, she highlights the attempts made by the Catholic clergy to "prevent the children of such mothers being adopted by non-Catholic families in England" (175).

As Mary E. Daly comments, "that political independence meant a decline in the status of women has become a truism" (104). Indeed, on account of Ireland's becoming a newly independent state, the mid-to-end 1920s was a period in which legal fervour proliferated. For Breathnacht-

Lynch, women were excluded from the body politic, mostly because of the homosocial bonding of nationalism and its needs to articulate a legal backing for that scheme (28). After the Civil War, the *Cumann na nGael* or "The Association of Gaelic People"[45] government issued the Free State Constitution in 1922. Throughout the decade, a number of acts and protectionist policies were proclaimed and introduced in a country extremely concerned with autonomy and self-sufficiency. These rulings evidenced the long-lasting conservative rhetorics of the family defended by Church and State and it posed a number of obstacles for the full development of citizenship for Irish women. With the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act, all printed information about contraception or birth control was banned, in an attempt to safeguard the population from sexual immorality and again, to promote reproduction within the sanctified realm of marriage. Also, the Matrimonial Act of 1925 outlawed divorce and the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1935 prohibited the importation, advertising and sale of contraceptives. The first ban, which remained operative for over forty years, contributed to enshrine the family as the basic unit of society, a preoccupation that would be asserted in later legal documents and actions.

After the general election of 1932, the Fianna Fáil Party[46] came to power with Eamon de Valera as the President of the executive council. Notably, the radical conservative fervour that had characterised his position in the previous political events culminated in the new 1937 Constitution, which all in all, tried to compensate the moral crisis Ireland was going

[45] The party had been created, in support of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, by William Cosgrave, who became the head of the provisional government in the *Dáil* in 1922.
[46] The party, which became excised from the *Sinn Féin*, had been founded by Eamon de Valera in 1926.

through by delineating the principles in which its nationalistic, Catholic and family-centred identity would be sustained from then on. However, the document was criticised for its establishment of the differentiation of roles assigned for men and women and their citizenship rights, of women's lower status and their confinement to domesticity. Article 41 of the constitution, whose significance and implications for Irish women will be described extensively in Part Two, was focussed on women and the family. The Catholic rhetorics was also clearly imprinted on it, with an emphasis on marriage and the family as the sacred institutions upon which the state would be founded.[47] Actually, in 1932 the so-called "marriage bar" had been introduced, thwarting married women's access to a paid employment in the public sector (O'Connor 1998: 37-38).[48] An important illustration of such legal formulations and social understandings can be found in Conrad M. Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball's famous 1930s study *Family and Community in Ireland*. Among many other considerations, they found that pregnancy was the woman's "major duty", so much so that childlessness was blamed exclusively on her and it constituted ground for the man's claim for divorce (131-132).

The whole system of beliefs that surface over the constitutional document has prompted critics to think that the Free State terms of equal citizenship rights for women and men were contravened. Thus, among the many incongruities of the constitutional construction of mothers was the

[47] An interesting and comprehensive analysis of the constitutional projection of the role of women and their subsequent legal condition in contemporary Ireland can be found in Scannell, 1988.
[48] The ban was lifted in 1957 for primary school teachers and finally removed in 1973 for all sectors.

fact that, as Caitríona Beaumont suggests, despite this tribute, mothers were not straightforwardly granted a direct access to health care or economic support: "It is significant that the endorsement of Irish motherhood in Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution did not translate into social welfare reforms such as family allowances or free health care for wives" (102). Beaumont also aligns this delimitation with the fact that many women emigrated as they did not want to have this situation at home. The same conclusion is drawn by Weekes when she notes that:

> [W]hile analysts were quick to note the veneration of the mother in Irish family life, mothers themselves were relatively silent on both the rewards and restrictions of such veneration. Until recent years, few Irish women spoke *as* mothers in popular culture or had a voice within the institutional structures of Church and state. Traditionally, therefore, the value of motherhood in Irish culture has been viewed in essentially private terms, based largely on familial affection and social respect. (2000: 100)

Although the 1940s and 1950s were a period of political recession and economic stagnation, and although much of the strength and inspiration of the suffragist movement had been lost, the women's movement had gone into decline, fascism was growing in Europe and the Catholic church was becoming more powerful, this social order fostered the idea of getting women out to fight for their inalienable rights.[49] Appealing to the government's insistence on protectionist policies, a number of campaigns concentrated on the struggle for state provision for the family and for women's maternal role. Thus, under the Children's Allowance Act of 1944, payments to the head of the household were introduced for the third and fourth child under sixteen. Three years later, a Mother and Child

[49] Important developments in women's cause in Ireland at that time was the foundation of the Irish Country Women Association in 1935 and the Irish Housewives Association in 1942. These two groups had challenged the state to revise the condition of women. See Linda Connolly, 71-82 for more information.

Scheme was proposed with the intention of providing free maternity care and service both before and after childbirth as well as free health care for children under sixteen, regardless of family income. The Church manifested its strict opposition to this social measure as they claimed that it meant an interference with the privacy of the family. Finally, after long social and political debates, the scheme was introduced in the Health Act of 1953 (Kennedy 2002: 56-59). Nonetheless, this period was also characterised by the strict differentiation of conceptions within and outside marriage. Thus, Magdalene Homes and workhouses proliferated as the rate of illegitimate births had risen.

Although the 1960s have been identified with sexual revolution and liberation on an international scale, this had little impact in Ireland, where the nuclear family ethics and the Catholic discourse were still much deeply-rooted in the collective psyche (Hill 145). In this decade, probably the most important event concerning women and their social condition was the decision by several women's groups and organizations to gather information about the discrimination of women in the Republic in the areas of education and employment. Thus, in 1968 they requested a National Commission on the Status of Women, which took the form of the *Report of the Commission on the Status of Women* four years later (Kilfeather 108).

The passing of the Abortion Act in Britain in 1967 also opened new possibilities for Irish women facing an unwanted pregnancy, as will be later commented. Tony Fahey locates in the late 1960s the beginning of a more critical attitude of the Church towards the social treatment of female sexuality and unmarried maternity in particular. He suggests that "[t]he

availability of abortion in England led to a view in Catholic circles that, compared to abortion, unmarried motherhood was very much the lesser of the two evils and should be treated much more supportively on that account" (65). Similarly, Fahey goes on to suggest that hasty marriages in those circumstances were seen with much suspicion for the high risk of instability that they entailed, so that from the 1970s onwards, pastoral dealing in those cases promoted a less purity-oriented view of morality, even if premarital sex was not approved. Thus, ironically, the mainstream Church and its hierarchy contributed to the destigmatisation of unmarried maternity, only opposed by its more radical conservatives (65).

Influenced by the American Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement, the early 1970s saw the emergence and rapid activity of the Irish Women Liberation Movement, which was founded in 1970. Ailbhe Smyth —herself quite energetically involved in feminist and political activism— provides a description of the different phases of the movement, ranging from consciousness-raising and mobilisation from 1970 to 1974, energy and radical action from 1974 to 1977, consolidation and diversification from 1977 to 1983 and finally, repression/expression or denying the backlash from 1983 to 1990 (1993: 245-269). Their active protests against the oppression of women at many levels of Irish social life and their demands for the full recognition of women's rights focussed largely on unmarried mothers and their marginal position in society and they inspired many of the measures that were taken in favour of this group of women, as will be analysed below.

As in the case of the concept of civic motherhood that we mentioned above, for Grainne Healy the situation of women in the 1980s in the Republic was also an issue of ethical principles of citizenship. In her own words:

> The absence of recognition that women are, or should be treated as, full individuals and citizens of this Republic, lies at the root of many of these injustices. Woman's poverty arises from the fact that many of her entitlements are 'derived' from her status, not in her own right, but in relation to a man. (78)

However, in spite of the economic difficulties of this period, important events took place and legal measures were introduced, mostly favouring unmarried mothers and their offspring. As Myrtle Hill puts it, "the consequences of pregnancy outside marriage were, generally speaking, less catastrophic in the last twenty years of the twentieth century than they had been in earlier decades" (194). The materialisation of such implementation came indeed with the passing in 1987 of the Status of Children Act, which removed the legal and social distinction of children born within or outside marriage and rejected the concept of illegitimacy (O'Connor 90). The other two key 1980s campaigns in Ireland concerning the repressive effects on women in the name of the family ideology were the 1983 Abortion Referendum and the 1986 Divorce Referendum. Both were defeated, as the former meant the introduction of an amendment on "the right to life of the unborn" and the latter showed Irish people's rejection to accept marital dissolution.[50]

We conclude this section with the same observation with which it was inaugurated. Inevitably, the events that took place along the twentieth century were informed by the inherited rhetorics of former historical periods

[50] For a complete description of both campaigns and their results see Hug 147-160 and 37-48, respectively.

and they contributed in turn, to shape the most contemporary idiosyncrasy of Ireland. For reasons of space, these have only been overviewed here as they will be referred to and more closely explored in Part Two. We will see that the situation of Irish women at the end of the twentieth century was more favourable than it was for the suffragists, but that they also had to fight for the social and state revision of many issues that concern them, such as the de-vilification of female sexuality, full access to reproductive control, the handling of maternal discourse and practices, education, divorce, rape and domestic violence. Many of them will be analysed in detail by virtue of the socio-historical background against which the stories of the chosen novels are set, and we will examine much of this ethos that has made Ireland such a unique country.

2. Mothering the narrative: Irishness and the Irish novel

2.1. Critical theories and fictional practices

Literature, as many other cultural manifestations, has contributed to the configuration of Irishness and it can be fairly said that literary textualisations figure as ethical artefacts by which Irish society has been transformed. In her study of the relation of literature and philosophy *Love's Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum considers that to study literary texts may have an ethical value. For her, literature can be read *as* moral philosophy as it offers particularity, that is, the details that are usually described in books, and which are dismissed by philosophy, with its stronger insistence on general ideas, can help to understand how society should live. To use her own words, "the particular is in some way prior to general rules and principles [...] an approach to general judgement that omits awareness of and response to these particular contextual features is deficient" (165).

In line with Nussbaum's arguments about the particularity of literary stories, Liam Harte and Michael Parker point out that a great part of contemporary Irish novels "bear the imprint of unresolved political and cultural narratives and debates." Thus, for them it is quite common "to find traces of allegory embedded in the fabric of recent Irish fiction. The private individual experience becomes an illuminative metaphor of the public and national destiny; texts frame the history which itself has framed them" (2). A similar point is made by Inés Praga in her contribution to the wide-ranging study *La novela irlandesa del siglo XX*, when she comments that "the novel can not be only considered as a product of certain social

conditions, but it certainly contributes to produce, question and modify them" (10, my translation).

Nowadays, it goes without saying that the Irish novel is a consolidated genre and a social phenomenon, given the number of acclaimed authors that permeate the literary panorama of Ireland, the high quality of their production and their international recognition, among other facts. It has been claimed, for example by critic Gerry Smyth, that a renaissance of the novelistic form has taken place in Ireland since the period coinciding with the election of Mary Robinson as President of the Republic in 1990. Smyth called these forms "new Irish fiction" and even referred to them as "Robinsonian", while also suggesting that it is not surprising that "the novel is becoming perhaps *the* pre-eminent Irish cultural form" (6-7).

Nevertheless, a highly effervescent reality has characterised the island's milieu since the early part of the twentieth century and it has permeated the narrative productions published up to the present. Given the significant readings that novelists have made of that historical momentum, it is our view that fictional texts figure as an excellent reflection of the shifting cultural discourses that, questioning the judgements established during colonial, post-colonial and nationalist times, have attempted to subvert the long-sustained principles and looked for the recognition of hidden voices. In his examination of the modernisation of Irish fiction since the 1960s, Patrick Walsh remarks that although in postmodernist times this genre has become a more "eclectic, polyphonic form", it has also been adjusted to the social and economic background that "it both reflects, and to which, in the era of postmodernism, it continues to adapt" (28). Further,

particularly relevant in that process of revision and subversion has been the incorporation of gender discourse in the numerous theorisations and practical textualisations of the notions of Irishness and national identity, to which we will refer in the pages that follow.

As in many other former colonies, liberation from the British imperialist forces meant a step forward in the development of an independent Irish cultural identity, as described above. This gave rise to a postcolonial idiosyncrasy that has been imprinted on the island and all its cultural products. In his analysis of the development of postcolonial theories, Graham points out that the postcolonial diagnosis of Ireland's history is rooted upon an ethical critique of the moral wrongs performed on Irish people by British imperialism. However, very critical of these perspectives, he interrogates the grounds upon which nationalism was defended as a reaction against the coloniser. For him,

> the national has been the predominant formation of the present and future critical word and [it] has become the grammar through which all forms of colonial contact and lack of contact have found their explanation. But to allow the nation to monopolise the postcolonial field is to withhold the Irish case from a more radical interrogation by the difficult ethics of the colonial encounter. (82)

Also focussing on the intersections of ethical discourse with other critical approaches to Irish studies, Graham notes that postcolonialism has turned into a source of ethical evaluation. As he puts it, it evaluates the relation of inequality between the coloniser and the colonised, "in which a wrong is done to the colonised, whose integrity, space and identity is taken over and controlled against his/her will" (82).

However, Graham has also delved into the problems that with that ethical purpose in mind have arisen when too much focus on the nation and national readjustment has taken place (82-83). A reaction against this excessive attention to postcolonial studies of nationalism was also outlined by the postcolonial theorist David Lloyd, who criticised the disproportionate attention given by nationalism to identity distinction as a solution to colonial violence, whereas, he notes, such insistence leads to further problems:

> While nationalism is a progressive and even a necessary political movement at one stage of its history, it tends at a later stage to become entirely reactionary, both by virtue of its obsession with a deliberately exclusive concept of racial identity and, more importantly, by virtue of its formal identity with imperial ideology. (1987: x)

These ideas were further developed in his collection of essays *Anomalous States* (1993), where Lloyd claims for a new direction in Irish Studies and deplores nationalism's "mimicry of imperial forms" (23).

The idiosyncrasy of Ireland, with all the historical processes of cultural adaptation that it experienced in the past century, makes contemporary literary productions interesting elements for critical analysis. Indeed, a variety of approaches have been used to examine the textual representation of the many social, political, cultural and personal subjects that have appealed its authors along that period and up to the present. This variety has been interpreted by Jennifer Jeffers in her study *The Irish Novel at the End of the Twentieth Century* in the following terms:

> Irish Studies has been in a state of critical ferment because of the centeredness of the 'post': postcolonialism, postmodernism, post-revisionism, post-nationalism, to mention only the most prevalent 'post' discourses. These discourses have greatly increased the critical sophistication of Irish Studies by initiating new approaches. (6)

However, the debate about the classification of Irish Studies and the different topics that it usually covers is still a very dynamic one. As much as history and social change determined the topics brought to the narrative pages, so did the theoretical trends upon which many of them were constructed. Eve Patten suggests that "the fiction of the contemporary period is better categorised as post-national than as post-colonial" (259).[51] Her argument actually draws on Gerry Smyth's comment that contemporary Irish novelists are more concerned with depicting the nation as it is rather than as it should be, so that "[l]ess of an intellectual and more of an artisan, the new Irish novelist is concerned to narrate the nation as it is, rather than how it should be or might have been" (177). Similar is also Colm Toibín's reasoning in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction*, when he remarks that literature is infused with reality in Ireland:

> Because Irish fiction has been permeated by a national mood, those writers who have sought to evade the opportunities to interpret this, who have sought to deal with the individual mood, however trivial, perverse and fleeting, seem now oddly heroic and hard to place. The purpose of much Irish fiction, it seems, is to become involved in the Irish argument and the purpose of much Irish criticism has been to relate the fiction to the argument. (ix)

Their position in fact mirrors the situation of Irish studies and Irish novelists in the 1990s as they were dealing with a discourse and they were immersed in a status quo trying to get away from colonial subjugation but at the same time, to break the yoke of nationalist demands. In light of these definitions, then, it is our belief that most of the novels from the 1980s and 1990s, like the ones we have chosen for our study, respond to this

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[51] The term "postnationalism" has been defined by Claire Connolly as the agenda that "seeks to relativize the significance of the nation state while replacing emotional ties to the nation with other allegiances. What it offers is at once a move beyond the frontiers of the nation state (usually in the direction of the European Union) and a retrenchment to local allegiances, in the shape of the region" (204).

postnationalist discourse of national description through literary representation.

In his overview of the major critical trend in Irish criticism in the twentieth century, Colin Graham points out that the link to all the positions is "the tenacious grip of the 'national' has on critical discourse in Irish literary studies (whether that be expressed through identity politics, future aspiration, celebration of the past and liberation, or by dissent against these" (54). As he also suggests further in his study, it is giving "Ireland" its significance what preoccupies most critical approaches as they all seem preoccupied with finding a full meaning to the term (66). Similarly, Claire Connolly problematises the traditionally monolithic perspective of Irish studies and its narrowing nature:

> The desire to seek out new perspectives on Ireland too often retains —or rather is itself retained and restricted by— a narrowing understanding of the subject, the terms set by political and economic rather than social or cultural history. For one thing, not all Irish culture arranges itself neatly under the heading 'Irish'. A great many things have happened and are happening on the island that are not primarily concerned with nationalist and its discontents. (2)

Accordingly, these critical positions from which Irish studies have been viewed have raised troubling questions about their means and implications for the complex set of beliefs and constructions on which they rest. In other words, because of the relevance granted to the notion of Irish identity in most of these approaches, universal, rather than pluralized or integrating notions have been taken into consideration so that the traditional national identity has often ignored, for example, gender differences. This critique is precisely outlined by Graham when, drawing on Ailbhe Smyth's reflection on the condition of Irish women and the

interrogation of the correspondence between gender and Irish identity (1991: 7), he proposes to analyse gender issues in Ireland in terms of subaltern studies:

> [I]deas of subalternity can be applied to gender issues in the Irish context. The aim here is to move towards an understanding of the subaltern which can be specific to the constitutive fabric of Irish cultures, which can retain a theoretical rigour and radicalism, and which can place 'gender' within a framework capable of accounting for alterations in the prioritisation and submergence of gender issues within Irish societies. (103)

Initially, the notion of subalternity was developed by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, in reference to social groups under the rule of the dominant classes and the state. With a preliminary tendency to fragmentation, eventually they become united in an attempt to overturn hegemony and take over the power of the dominant forces. Then, the term was appropriated by post-colonial criticism in order to describe groups oppressed by colonial rule, and it has also been expanded to encompass feminist and ethnic critiques of dominance. In the case of Graham, he underscores the fact that nationalism created symbolisms and cultural discourses that silenced women, thus making gender a "subaltern" to its domination: "Nationalism (or the nation-state) in this configuration, is complicit in assuming and enforcing the subaltern status of women and other marginalised groups" (107).

In line with this fervent debate about the inclusion of gender and gender identity in the category of "Irish identity", we can find Moynagh Sullivan's critique of how Irish studies have absorbed Irish feminist studies. In other words, she claims that it is the postmodernist otherness of Irish studies what makes it worthy of note and in need of finding its own

generative power. However, she also denounces that women's studies have been negatively affected by that quest for self-assertion because it has been traditionally considered as a subcategorisation (243). The acceptance of its otherness should not necessarily involve the projection of a further objectification, which is why women, women writers and women's studies have been usually ostracised:

> In order for its own feminized Otherness not to be experienced as a lack, this lack needs to be displaced elsewhere. To this end the figure of woman is retained. If the construct of woman continues as the carrier of absence or selflessness, then being feminized does not necessarily cancel out a bid for subjecthood. (249)

On the contrary, Sullivan argues that it is only when the intersubjective quality of women's studies is recognised and the separate categorisation dismantled that the effective role of women and women's studies can come into play. Similarly, for Claire Connolly feminism has highly contributed to the dilemmas posed by the Irish studies category. To use her own words, "[f]rom the vantage point of feminism, it is possible to see how it is not only questions of national identity and definition that have motivated an Irish turn to theory. Sexual politics have played a key role in determining the shapes critical and cultural theory has taken on the island" (3).

The main topic on which this study is focussed is a clear representative of how national preoccupations with Ireland can affect the individual. In this light, it also lends itself to the analysis of the notions of self defended by different angles of feminist theory and how the attainment of individuality is related to Ireland, mostly considering the search for a full female and maternal consciousness emphasized in the novels, as we shall see below in Part Two. Western interpretations of personal identity have

been grounded on the individual's reach of autonomy, but this has been largely suspected by feminists on account of the gender bias inherent to such values. In her analysis of feminist contestations of the idea of autonomy, Maeve Cooke outlines two positions in this respect: the ones following moral and political theory and the ones inspired by post-structuralism and postmodernism. The first group is represented by Sheila Benhabib, who is against the concept of the self as an ideal and disembedded object, as its location within contexts of meaning –like history, external political forces, relations with others, etc.– appear undermined. Benhabib advocated for the dismantling of the abstract principles and general rules of moral theory introduced by Carol Gilligan and her "ethics of care" (1982), and she proposed in *Situating the Self* to substitute the traditional generalised other inherent to moral reasoning by the "concrete other", that is, that individuals, with their own contextuality and identity, should be considered instead. On the other hand, feminists like Judith Butler draw on the post-structuralist and post-modernist formulations that any ideal identity is repressive and leaves no space for heterogeneity. Because for Butler the body allows the invention and reinvention of gendered identity, this can only be fluid and in constant transformation, which is contrary to the imposed definition of coherence and unity.

In this section we are also obliged to say that in our project of analysing how single mothers are elevated to the space of Irish fictional and critical analysis, it is our argument that they are represented in recent fiction by Irish women writers as the scapegoats for the island's anxieties over cultural disintegration. For that reason, we consider appropriate to

describe the notions of fear that we are taking into account and the implications it may have in the everyday life of the women like the protagonists of the novels that we will describe below. Joanne Bourke underlines the distinction between fear and anxiety that is usually made by commentators and she points out that "the word 'fear' is used to refer to an immediate, objective threat, while anxiety refers to an anticipated, subjective threat. Anxiety is described as a general state, while fear is more specific and immediate" (189). When applied to historical development, this distinction has required control, mostly by the power agents mediating between the threatening and the threatened objects. Bourke contends that "[i]n fear states, individuals are consciously able to take measures to neutralise or flee from the dangerous object, while purposeful activity fails individuals whose subjective experience is anxiety" (190).

But because of political orientations and aims, Bourke also remarks that anxiety can be converted into fear. In other words, as the sources of anxiety are usually uncertain, it is transformed into fear by means of naming the threatening object, that is, usually by scapegoating. At the same time, Bourke suggests that fear can be turned into anxiety, by emphasizing the uncertainty of the threat, which is mostly done by a process of detachment and distinction. Thus, she concludes, "Anxiety states tend to make people withdraw from one another, unlike fear states, which are more liable to draw people together, either for comfort or to defend themselves more effectively against the danger" (191).

It is in this process of transformation pointed out by Bourke where the collectivity of women on which we are focussing can be said to stand. In

other words, it is our belief that single mothers in Ireland constitute the direct exponents of the objectifying ethics of fear that has remained in operation as a result of the nationalist claims for cultural identity because of all the threats that they imply. They have been identified as the very sources of disruption and fear, and later, they have been transformed for political and cultural reasons, into anxiety producers. The cultural formulation of Irishness that we have analysed so far in Part One provides good ground to think that during the nationalist struggle and postnationalist idiosyncrasy, single pregnant women constituted one of the reasons for the nation to stand together in favour of cultural unity, whereas in later times, it developed into an anxiety struggle that Ireland, by detaching itself from the European Union, had to achieve by itself, with its peculiar dealing of female sexuality. Whatever we call it, though, it is also our premise in this study that fear and anxieties entailed by single maternity have not been surmounted yet, given the lack of an ethics that fully considers women's rights to corporal self-control.

2.2. Irish women's narrations of female subject formation

Both in Ireland and internationally, there has been an outstanding flowering of women's writing since the later part of the twentieth century. The transformation of the typically androcentric literary cannon has brought to the fore a great amount of literary works written by female authors, who have increasingly gained ground in the artistic scene of the island. However, this process was not a swift or uncomplicated one. As Ailbhe Smyth has pointed out, twentieth-century Ireland had been presided by "the cultural trinity of Yeats, Joyce and Beckett" (1996: 144), leaving female names on the margins of the canonical literature, despite the veneration of female imagery in the nationalist discourse that had characterised most of the century.

Suffice it to mention on this respect the controversy around the major exclusion of women authors from the first three volumes of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, which was published in 1991. Not only was the volume mostly conducted by male editors but also the array of women writers included was very limited, although it covered a thousand years of Irish writing. Public outcry was immediate, and the project revealed not only how male scholars had traditionally envisioned the construction of the canon but also the secondary position ascribed to women's production (Patten 268). As a response to this under-representation of women literary authors, there was a commission to compile writings by and about women since writing came to Ireland, which finally became volumes IV and V of the anthology, published in 2002. Fortunately, though, this last project showed that dialogue was eventually growing between the two positions.

In his part of the introduction to another anthology that appeared in 1994 under the title *Ireland's Women: Writings Past and Present*, Brendan Kennelly described the changing situation of Irish women in the following terms:

> The history, or herstory, of Irish women is rather like that of the Irish language —much talked about but little heard. Of recent years, however, Irish women have been discovering, or re-discovering, their own voices, with beneficial consequences for the life and literature of the island. […] [T]hey are now creating their own language, a proper vehicle for their feelings and ideas, spoken with passion and conviction from their own perspective, jolting many Irish men into the recognition that the world and everything in it, including its languages, do not belong solely to them. (Donovan *et al.* xx-xxi)

Accordingly, and after many efforts, Irish women authors figure as a significant group among their sisters. Among these we can emphasize, with Kennelly, a full recognition of their voices, but also the recovery, in turn, of the voices of their literary foremothers and the creation of different possibilities far from the nationalist impositions for the women in the country. It is on these aspects and their masterful achievement of such enterprises in Ireland's cultural milieu that we are going to focus in the pages that follow.

The postcolonial condition of the island posed for Irish women writers a double difficulty, which includes the general predication for a nationalist order and their own struggle for literary recognition. In her claim for the acknowledgement of the extraordinary role played by women's writings in Irish historical revisionism, Rebeca Pelan suggests that they have successfully achieved "another conquest." She is actually borrowing this phrase from Roy Foster's analysis of Ireland, when he insisted that in the post-independence era, Church and state had to "undo the conquest", as

detailed in his book *Modern Ireland 1600-1972.* Particularly, for Pelan the attempt to incorporate female imagery to the social order of contemporary Ireland did not come "from the disciplines of history (revisionist or otherwise), or sociology, or even literary criticism, but from the creative arts, in particular the fiction and drama produced by contemporary Irish women since 1970" (126). We also agree with Pelan's contention that narrative texts have enabled women not only to transcend their relegation to abstract iconography and their identification with the land, but also to challenge in their works the different forms of the Irish patriarchy-oriented dominant ideology. The techniques, Pelan continues, have been varied, but all of them share a rejection of that traditionally constraining imagery: "Whether through irony, parody, comedy or tragedy, these literary iconoclasts shatter existing illusions by exposing the absurdity, stupidity, naïveté and danger associated with such images" (128).

A great part of these textualisations of the female experience in Ireland is informed by the grip of nationalism in the process of Irish identity formation and the role played by gender identity in such process, as discussed above. Because of the prevalence of a cultural imaginary based on male participation and female submission, women's voices could not be heard, to such an extent that the appearance of texts focussing on the private stories of women meant a huge step forward for them. In fact, echoing what we discussed in our introduction about Judith Butler's idea of the latent identities that remain hidden behind official versions but certainly in existence, we can bring to the fore what Claire Connolly points out about the contribution of those veiled women's voices. As she symbolically puts it:

> Such stereotyped images of idealized silent women and heroic active men are of course in many ways a *travesty* of the rich and complex roles played by women both now and in the past. They exert a powerful influence that has, at every point, come under the scrutiny and attack of the very writers and artists seemingly silenced by these dominant metaphors. (3, emphasis added)

Many of those women have used the novel as a mediator between cultural formation and individual happening, with also a shared engagement with the attainment of social change through their pages. Actually, as Katie Donovan puts it, "[i]t is to fiction that Irish women writers have made their largest contribution" (7). Particularly, feminist novels have contributed to change Irish women's reality, because to use the words of journalist and writer Nuala O'Faolain, the novel is "the necessary form of communication between sister and sister." "Everywoman's condition," O'Faolain continues, "is profoundly a shared one. The ideal feminist novel would be known by other women to tell the truth, the truth about the individual and about the condition" (1985: 131). In a similar vein, Eve Patten points out that the novel enables writers to question whether social transformation has been taking place in Ireland in favour of women or not. In her own words,

> much of the fiction of the last two decades has been dedicated to the highlighting of Irish women's continued subjugation, dovetailing in the 1980s and 1990s with a vociferous feminist project and a series of legislative campaigns in the key areas of divorce and abortion law [...] Despite the liberalising of sexual attitudes and the relaxing of restrictions on contraception, the position of women in Irish society and culture was still recognised as one of entrenched subordination. (268)

With this questioning project in mind, female authors used their works of fiction as the public voicing of what had happened to Irish women in general. A number of factors favoured those projects, nonetheless, ranging from a higher access to education, more opportunities to conjugate private and working life, and quite importantly, the establishment of several

feminist publishing houses in Ireland, like Arlen House in the 1970s and Attic Press in the 1980s. These publishers played a significant role in the introduction of feminist agendas in Ireland and "made feminist ideas accessible to new generations of Irish feminists, and for the first time, culturally specific feminist material was available to Irish women in a wider scale than heretofore" (Connolly and O'Toole 138).

As a result of this catalysing process, the works of Irish women novelists claiming for the social recognition of the female body and in general, women's experiences have been analysed from a critical perspective by a great number of Irish and international academics. Besides the ones mentioned above, we can name scholars like Heather Ingman, Anne Fogarty, James Cahalan, Gerry Smyth, Linden Peach, Anne Owens Weekes, Tasmin Hargreaves, Amor Barros, Silvia Díez or Marisol Morales, among many others. They have all published worldwide on the way in which those authors have used the novel as a resistance and also as a mechanism to reflect the intricacies of female subjectivity. Also, several major works devoted to women's writing have appeared in the past decades: in 1990, Anne Owens Weekes published her *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition*, where, as inferred from the subtitle, she claimed that the literary history of Irish women novelists had not been traced so far. She focussed on the work of six of these authors and used feminist theory as a background for the examination of a tradition of Irish literary women. Three years later, Weekes also published with Attic Press an encyclopedia of women writers from Ireland with the title *Unveiling Treasures*, this time including women dramatists and poets as well.

More recently, notable projects on this issue are Christine St. Peter's *Changing Ireland: Strategies in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2000) and Heather Ingman's *Contemporary Irish Women Fiction* (2007). St Peter's comprehensive study is intended to highlight the importance of establishing an Irish women's tradition so that "one woman's creativity can inspire or enable another's, and the cumulative effect of ever widening circles of creation, even where the individual choices of artists are very different" (9). In the other title, Ingman grounds her examination of women's writing as an individual category on the fact that even if gender roles are positively deconstructed in the present era, a politicised analysis of women's fiction had rarely occurred and "it seems premature to talk of Irish post-feminism" (2).

Debates about the position of Irish women writers in the literary scene of the island have also revolved around the appropriateness of analysing them in parallel to male writers. This controversy was closely addressed by Katie Donovan in her famous pamphlet "Irish Women: Marginalised by Whom?", where she considered that:

> isolating women writes into a single category has the self-defeating effect of further marginalising them from the literary mainstream. If their claims to be given an equal place alongside their male peers are to be taken seriously, women writers must be pushed into the flood, there to sink or swim on their own merits. (5)

Her argument is based on the need to consider closely women writers inside the literary tradition of Ireland and only then, Donovan concludes, "can we begin to see where the differences and similarities between our major writers are determined by sexual identity or other factors" (7). This line of analysis was continued by James Cahalan in his 1999 study *Double Visions*. Like

Donovan, he proposed that a gender-balanced and comparative examination of male and female writers of fiction results into a more complete and conclusive understanding, so that "[m]ale writers —and female writers— are not necessarily either villains or victors" (3). On a different canvas, Christine St. Peter also analyses this dialectics in the introduction of her study. To questions like "why only women's writing?", she responds that "the answer is both simple and complicated. It requires an appreciation of the ways in which some voices can have a blocking effect on others" (2000a: 8-9).

Whether analysed as a separate category or in conjunction with male writers' production, to our mind, recent fiction by Irish women can be arguably said to constitute an excellent source of information about what concerns Irish women and what their claims are. This is one of the main factors that, according to St. Peter, makes literature fall under the category of feminist. For her, a narrative can be called feminist "if it treats gender as a social construction that specifically disadvantages women; that recognises, however implicitly, that what has been constructed may at least be questioned, could be transgressed, and might be reconstructed; and that uses narrative as a tool in this project" (2000a: 151). In St Peter's view, individual stories and characters both inform and are informed by the context in which the author decides to set their works. Thus, she suggests that:

> While the narrative may attend to the individual consciousness of a central character, the work will explore the personal and collective forces that shape consciousness. […] [F]eminist fiction, which inscribes such political analysis in narrative, is part of the cultural life of the women's liberation movement and has helped to create that

> social revolution both in our century and in the last. (2000a: 151-152)

Similarly, in her contribution to the fourth volume of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* Margaret MacCurtain comments on the role of the Catholic discourse in this historical submerging ethos of Irish women's voices. In this light, she praises the work of feminist literary authors for their contribution to social reflection:

> Irish feminist writing has brought to the surface an awareness of the silencing, the dispossession, the invisibility of Irish women in the life of the Catholic church for the greater part of the twentieth century. That is one of the benefits of hindsight. Telling the story, searching for the muted voice, finding and understanding the idiom that describes the loss of trust, the betrayal of faith, or the experience of spiritual anguish are complementary to the feminist analysis. They supply the texts. (2002: 571)

A prominent work for the objective of finding the necessary line of women's writing in Ireland can also be found in Eavan Boland's *Object Lessons*. As probably the most famous contemporary Irish woman poet, Boland found very discouraging –as many others of her fellow novelists and playwrights did– the fact that she lacked "the precedent and example of previous Irish women poets." However, she continues,

> if these circumstances displaced my sense of relation to the Irish past in Irish poetry, they also forced me into a perception of the advantages of being able to move, with almost a surreal inevitability, from being within the poem to being its maker. A hundred years ago I might have been a motif in a poem. Now I could have a complex self within my own poem. Part of that process entailed being a priviledged witness to forces of reaction in Irish poetry. (151)

These "forces of reaction" have been arguably evidenced by the solid position of Irish women poets in the past decades, but also by the whole spectrum of

important names from other literary genres in the contemporary Irish scene.[52]

Although in this study we are interested in three novels published by Irish women between the early 1980s and the mid 1990s, it seems fair to immerse, as many women authors tried to do, in what was done before them. It is not our intention to provide a gynocritical account of contemporary writing in Ireland, but we found it interesting to trace briefly the historical development of Irish women's fiction writing with a general focus on the topics covered and the changes they introduced. As mentioned above, for Irish women novelists obstacles have been doubly marked by their femininity and the island's subjection to English colonial rule. According to Margaret Kelleher, this double marginalisation kept many female authors in oblivion for a long time, until timely collections began to rescue them in the nineteenth century, with titles such as Elizabeth Owens Blackburne's *Illustrious Women* (1877) or Catherine Hamilton's *Women Writers: Their Works and Ways* (1882) (7).

Whatever the degree of their popularity, often measured in terms of critical reception and selling numbers, a wide range of Irish women novelists had already been active before 1800, typically described as the date of the birth of the Irish novel, with the publication of Maria Edgeworth's already mentioned *Castle Rackrent*. After that, other women novelists followed, with

[52] Many volumes of poetry by Irish women poets as well as several full-length studies have been published recently, also raising much critical interest from academics around the world. See for example, Patricia Boyle Haberstroh's *Women Creating Women* (1996) and *My Self, My Muse* (2001), and Alexander Gonzalez' *Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (1999), all dealing with the works of women poets like Medbh McGuckian, Rita Ann Higgins, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan or Paula Meehan. For a similar specialised study focussed on women dramatists, see Cathy Leeny's *Seen and Heard* (2001), with titles by Dolores Walshe and Michelle Read, among others, and the many productions by Marina Carr, probably Ireland's most famous woman playwright nowadays.

names like Sydney Owenson –known as Lady Morgan–, Edith Somerville and Violet Ross and Elizabeth Bowen being associated with the novel of that period, as well as Jane Barlow and Katherine Tynan, among others. To analyse their literary production falls out of the scope of this study for reasons of space, but it can be fairly asserted that although not all of them cultivated the increasingly popular genre of the big house novel, it was indeed a quite common concern for women novelists and their literary expressions.

After this first group of foremothers writing in the years between the two centuries, much of the fiction of the early part of the twentieth century was informed by the nationalist movement that inspired women fiction writers to analyse the discourses of land, nationalism and religion. Particularly relevant in that respect is the work of the women writing around the revolutionary period and which was infused with topics that deviated from national campaigning and focussed instead on more intimate and domestic issues related to women. In her exploration of Irish women's fiction between the 1930s and 1960s, Anne Owens Weekes establishes the political detachment that characterises the early decades of the postnationalist era as the point of inflection for the emergence of a high profile production of Irish women writers. Conceptually, they began to lose the symbolic and passive role that they had in the cultural and national revivalism, and socially they had an increasingly wider range of educational and economic opportunities. Accordingly, it was when the grip of politics was dismissed that women began

> to attend to the very distinctions and restrictions which buttressed these debates and continued to affect most women negatively. This

> close link between subject and writer, between the real and the fictional life, might have produced emotional or pedantic work, but the important novels of the period reflect the wisdom, detachment and humour of disciplined artists. (2006: 189)

For Weekes, their interests did not rest on Gaelic fantasies or modernist formal expression but rather, on subject matter and realism (2006: 189). Among the authors covered by Weekes's study are the well-known names of Elizabeth Bowen, Molly Keane, Kate O'Brien and Mary Lavin, and the less popular Kathleen Coyle, Maura Laverty, Anne Crone and Janet McNeill. Taken together, their work reaches an outstanding position insofar as their liberal ideology "bring women to the centre stage, spotlighting them and opening a wide vista for future writers to mine" (203).

Cahalan locates these authors in the first of the two main groups of women writers in which he divides the twentieth century, and which is characterised by a tendency towards realism. He associates them with domestic topics and remarks that their work is full of representations of the ordinary world of women, with their inner feelings and issues of sexual identity being masterfully brought to the fore (1988: 205). Similarly, of most of these novelists John Wilson Foster says that they incorporated more themes than their male counterparts, that is, they continued the line of their predecessors in style and topics and unlike other male authors, like Sean O'Faolain or James Joyce, who by then were more concerned with the inner cultural conflicts of the new Free State, they touched upon the intricacies of women's issues at that time. Therefore, as Foster puts it, "if this reflects the marginal role in constitutional politics women have historically played in Ireland, it also permits a social objectivity missing in so much male Irish fiction" (460).

Donovan aligns the changing social landscape of Ireland during the sixties and seventies with the representation by Irish women writers of the shifting attitudes towards the changing individuals. For her, the declining role of religion over sexual repression as well as a growing urbanization and cosmopolitanism marked this era, and this was reflected in male authors as well (24). In that scenario, names like Edna O'Brien, Mary Leland, Julia O'Faolain, Jennifer Johnston or Mary Cruise O'Brien come to mind as clear representatives of the new rhetorics of femininity that was emerging by that time and the tendency towards more private and personal topics, as compared to earlier periods. St. Peter considers this generation as a "radical" one, "both in terms of experimental forms and in political perspectives" (2000a: 8). Further, Tamsin Hargreaves points out the recurrence of women's quest for subjective identity in their work (1988: 290), while we can also add that they defiantly insisted on issues related to female sexuality.

Ailbhe Smyth describes the late seventies and the early eighties as years of consolidation and diversification of the women's movement in Ireland (1988: 339-340), but she also remarks that the economic recession and the defeats of the referenda on abortion in 1983 and divorce in 1986 have led to women's disillusionment with the cause. However, in her own contribution to *The Irish Women's Studies Reader* she also adds that this was fortunately translated into a flowering cultural, educational and creative activity focussing on women at that time (1993: 265). In literature, women inevitably delved into these defeats in their production and there was an ongoing debate about the position of Irish women in terms of social rights.

Authors like Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Evelyn Conlon or Clare Boylan, who continue writing successfully nowadays, can be cited as illustrative of this period.

The election of Mary Robinson as Ireland's first female President in 1990 and the large number of novels focussing on the shifting roles of women in society that were published in that period led Gerry Smyth, as mentioned above, to label the fiction as "Robinsonian". Indeed, the legalisation of divorce and the repeal of the homophobic legislation of the mid 1990s gave rise to a kind of fiction more committed to the interrogation of traditional discourses of family formation and female corporeality, as in the works of Mary Dorcey, Emma Donoghue, Catherine Dunne or Mary Morrisy. For Jennifer Jeffers, many of the novels of this period were concerned with the body as the new "demarcating line of identity", so that sexual or gender subjectivity can be said to have replaced the old preoccupations with the political, religious or cultural parameters (1). Similarly, Amor Barros notes that:

> [by] the end of the twentieth century, a literature at last emerged in which women, and not only teenagers, began to have their own voice. From homosexuality and heterosexuality appeared topics that were banned and which now start to be named without any subterfuge, from the nature of the body and the female experiences. The realities of these protagonists are diverse but they all complete the picture, increasingly plural, that women conform as they approach the twenty-first century. (2005: 103, my translation)

As happened with the previous group of authors, these are quite active in the literary scene of present-day Ireland where the increasingly multicultural reality has also favoured the appearance of narratives engaged with current debates about the intersections of immigrant and female identities.

By describing the extent to which external conditions determine the fulfilment of identity for Irish women, female fiction writers claim for a closer introspective into the female psyche. By and large, texts project women's experience of gender, so that in doing so, it can be argued then that they fall within the narrative tradition of the female *bildungsroman*, which also intersects with the revisions of women's social condition when achieving subjectivity as proposed by feminist ethics. Generally associated with narratives written by and about men and focussed on the hero's quest for wholeness, this literary subgenre had marginalised female writings and experiences. However, women writers like the ones in our study, show a common concern with transgressing the traditional visions and female revisions of the *bildungsroman* as they endorse the need for female characters' development of self-individuality outside the canonical behaviour.[53] In her detailed examination of the development of female fiction writing in Ireland, Amor Barros marks the 1960s as the beginning of this genre on the island, and, starting with Edna O'Brien, it concentrates on

> exposing women's life experiences from childhood and/or adolescence to adulthood. Familial relationships, specially the mother-daughter relation, are essential and they constitute a point of reference when measuring the maturity of female identity, in a country whose tradition has opted for ignoring it. (2005: 92, my translation)

Throughout the narratives, the protagonists encounter a number of difficulties that, contrary to patriarchy-based understandings of single maternity, culminate into a complete self-awareness and openness to a new, more promising future. Thus, novelists seek to offer alternative viewpoints to the traditionally constrained Irish female agency and they focus on the

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[53] Other titles that fall into this category of narrative writing are Éiliís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* and Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*. A detailed description of this type of writing can be found in Barros, 2005 and 2006.

protagonists' constant attempt to carry out their individuality beyond the roles assigned to them, namely, those of dutiful daughters, resigned wives and sacrificed mothers. Indeed, as Eve Patten points out, "[s]everal authors use autobiography or *bildungsroman* to depict the individual as the victim of serial political, religious and cultural restrictions in Ireland" (268).

Viewed collectively, then, Irish women authors' telling of the traditionally obscured stories of individual occurrence from the early twentieth century to the present figures as a process of liberating trauma through literature, and also of giving female personal experiences the signification they deserve for the interrogation that the self can make to the collectivity. For Culberston,

> [t]he task then is to render body memories tellable, which means to order and arrange them in the form of a story, linking emotion to event, event with event, and so on. In so doing, it becomes possible to return the self to its legitimate social status as something separate, something that tells, that recounts its own biography… Telling, in short, is a process of disembodying memory, demystifying it, a process which can only begin after memories have been re-membered and the mystical touched by a buried self seeking its own healing. (1995: 179)

As a conclusion of this section, we can point out that it is our belief that Irish women's writings dealing with female subjectivity by women authors from the past and the present generations provide a valuable insight into how Irish culture is adjusting to the times and facing the future of its people, and extensively, its own. Quite significant for this suggestion is also Colm Toibín's conclusion in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction*, when he relies on the work of four women writers –Katherine Arnold Price, Deirdre Madden, Emma Donoghue and Anne Enright– for the

contemplation of a contemporary new tone in the post-Freudian, post-feminist and post-nationalist reality of Ireland (xxxii-xxxiii).

2.3. Other mothers in Irish women's fiction

In Ireland, the debates about the dichotomy of the presence/absence of the maternal in literature have revolved around the double silencing process undergone by maternal voices, that is, the fact that they have been described by male voices exclusively and also that the very few instances in which mothers' voices were heard were performed in private, following the allocation of this subject to family life. Weekes points out that "while analysts were quick to note the veneration of the mother in Irish family life, mothers themselves were relatively silent on both the rewards and restrictions of such veneration" (2000: 100). For her, it is because of that allocation that we might justly expect that "the value of motherhood in Irish culture has been viewed in essentially private terms, based largely on familial affection and social respect" (2000: 100).

In her exploration of contemporary literary representations of motherhood, Maroula Joannou contends that "[t]he marginal position of the unmarried mother provides a good perspective form which to consider changing gender roles, and the values and institutions in society" (42). Joannou's perception has relevance to the situation of the single motherhood plot in contemporary Irish literature, not only because the 'changing gender roles' have resulted into the inclusion of women authors in the Irish literary cannon, but also on account of the growing presence of stories about unmarried motherhood that can be observed in fictional texts published in the past few decades.[54] This incorporation can also be

[54] Earlier, illegitimacy and unmarried maternity had been the focus of popular novels like Somerville and Ross's *The Big House of Inver* (1925) and *Two Days in Aragon* (1941), published by Molly Keane under the pseudonym M.J.Farrell, both of them representatives of

interpreted as an effect of the legitimisation of new forms of womanhood and motherhood, as well as the creation of non-traditional families that have been achieved thanks to a strong politics of resistance, which many authors have undertaken through their works. An influential social agent, then, Irish fiction has highly contributed to the renegotiation of long entrenched patterns of gender behaviour, so that a turn towards alternative perspectives of hidden voices and subversive strategies has mirrored and further helped to formulate the alteration of monolithic social structures on the isle.

The widespread interest in dismantling the principles of the family and the ideal role traditionally associated with Irish women, together with the gradual social development of Ireland's contemporary milieu obviously contributed to a growing presence of literary insights into this fascinating topic. Fictional representations of unmarried motherhood are part of the enormous pull that deviant family structures, and most particularly, non-standard female behaviour have exercised on contemporary authors. Gerry Smyth highlights the break from traditional gender patterns that is prevalent in modern Irish narratives, where by contrast, the inclusion of sexual plots reveals an interesting development:

> As passive reflection or active deconstruction, much of the fiction produced in and about modern Ireland can be analysed in terms of its engagement with the social and individual fall-out from the gender division imposed by the post-colonial state, and the gradual (re)introduction of sexual desire as one of the fundamental aspects of a modern Irish identity. (56-57)

This section insists on how, in line with the rhetorics of questioning and subversion of the mainstream values exhibited by a great number of

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the big house tradition. In fact, in her study of the presence of illegitimacy in these novels, Ruth Frehner cites writer George Moore's suggestion in 1887 that every big house had its illegitimate offspring (151).

contemporary authors, many of them –male and female, as we shall see– have manifested a growing consciousness with regard to rescuing single mothers and their stories from the grip of idealised archetypes of femininity. For that reason, since the 1980s an interesting body of texts about single maternity has been published in Ireland, coinciding with the various historical events –by no means always happy– and ground-breaking projects and legislation that have brought to the fore the position of these women in the island's social reality. Using denouncing, reclaiming, illustrative or celebratory tones, these pieces have provided the frame to think about the necessary steps to raise a widespread awareness of the silencing agendas of Ireland's recent past as well as its present day consequences in respect to female "abnormal" behaviour. Likewise, they have coexisted with other projects and productions from many different disciplines, thus breaking the silence and the immediate rejection that have characterised social attitudes towards deviant sexuality and maternity, while on the contrary attempting to offer a realist picture of their experiences.

In the last decades, historical facts and personal stories concerning unmarried conception and single motherhood have been brought to public knowledge through surveys like Vivienne Darling's *And Baby Makes Two* (1984), Anthony McCashin's *Lone Mothers in Ireland* (1996) and Evelyn Mahon, Catherine Conlon and Lucy Dillon's *Women and Crisis Pregnancy* (1998), to name but a few. Sociological analyses like Abbey Hyde's "Marriage and Motherhood: The Contradictory Position of Single Mothers" (1997) and Eithne McLaughlin and Paula Rodgers's "Single Mothers in the Republic of Ireland: Mothers not Workers" (1997) have also engaged in the

various forms of social ostracisation suffered by this group of women in Ireland. Moreover, Patricia Kennedy's *Motherhood in Ireland* (2004) and the volume *Single Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (2003) edited by Cinta Ramblado Minero and Auxiliadora Pérez Vides contain historical, cultural, and social perspectives of this issue. Finally, we can mention autobiographical accounts like *Single Issue* (1998) by Maura Richards, where she tells her own experiences as a single mother in the 1970s and her struggle in favour of the recognition of their rights in those difficult times, and June Goulding's *The Light in the Window* (1998), which is a description of the everyday life of the interns of the Magdalene Asylum in which she worked as a midwife. Also worthy of note is Melissa Thompson's documentary *Like a Ship in the Night* (2002), where she reflects and includes detailed information about Irish women travelling to England for abortions, an issue that has been also uncovered by Ann Rossiter in her recently published *Ireland's Hidden Diaspora: The 'Abortion Trail' and the Making of a London-Irish Underground* (2009).

Similarly, a number of productions in the visual arts have problematised the underlying cultural and religious parameters behind the historical condemnation of any form of deviant female sexuality and maternity in Ireland, as in the films *Hush-a-bye Baby* (1989) by Margo Harkin and Peter Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters* (2003), in documentaries like Anne Crilly's *Mother Ireland* (1998) and Aisling Walsh's *Sinners* (2002), or in Gerard Mannix Flynn's installation "Call me by Name" (2004).

A close look at the novels published in the 1980s, the 1990s and so far in the twenty-first century demonstrates that unmarried mothers' stories

permeated the literary panorama of Ireland, with a considerable number of narratives focussing fully on this topic or briefly touching on it. A chronological overview could start with Emma Cooke's *A Single Sensation* (1981) and Maura Richards's *Two to Tango* (1981), two works that described in similar terms the everyday difficulties and psychological strain experienced by single pregnant women in Ireland and the huge efforts they had to make to have their option for lone motherhood to be accepted by their family and their community. Together with Mary Rose Callaghan's *Mothers* (1982) and Mary Leland's *The Killeen* (1985), they constitute the earliest full narrative portraits of this subject. However, their excessively detailed description of the everyday obstacles and chores that had to be overcome by Irish single women at that time during the process between unexpected pregnancy and childbirth, as well as the obliteration of the different solutions that are sought by women in these circumstances, made them less worthy of inclusion in this study than the novels that we have chosen.

Also from the 1980s is Evelyn Conlon's *Stars in the Daytime*, which was published in 1989. Its protagonist is a woman trying to fight against the restrictions of rural Ireland by means of persevering on her education and opting for travelling and sexual experimentation, but when an encounter with a stranger results into her pregnancy, she decides to shut herself into a room in her family home. This becomes the space to think about the situation of her family and her country, with whom she finally reconciles as she decides to live independently as a single mother.

During the 1990s, many novels published by Irish women writers dealt with personal, family and cultural anxieties about unwanted

motherhood, which by then had seen a higher social recognition thanks to the various rights and legislative claims achieved. Clairr O'Connor's *Belonging* (1991) bears witness to such a step forward, as it tells the story of a self-exiled Irish woman in New York coming to terms with the psychic effects of matrophobia, and her own inability to mother when, shortly before her parents' death, she becomes pregnant by her lover and decides to have an abortion against his wish. Similarly, family reactions towards single maternity are analysed by the daughter of the protagonist of Kate Cruise O'Brien's *The Homesick Garden* (1991), whose aunt gets pregnant out of wedlock. Alongside these particular interpretations of unmarried motherhood prejudices, recent Irish historical events related to them were reconstructed from literary pages, as in Marita Conlon-McKenna's *The Magdalen* (1999) and Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1996). Respectively, these works put on the fictional map the experiences of women behind the official (his)stories of the Magdalen Asylums —which began to be reconstructed by the mid-1990s, as mentioned above— and the X-Case of 1992 —to which we will largely refer later. Most recently, Kate O'Riordan's *The Memory Stones* (2003) delves into Irish women's relation with motherhood and motherland. It tells the story of a young unmarried and pregnant girl who moves to England in order to have her baby there, because she is convinced that her mother does not love her enough. She returns thirty years later, after her mother's death, and this helps her and her own daughter come to terms with their past.

Also remarkable is the contribution of the short story genre to this topic, as exemplified by Mary Lavin. As early as 1944, she had written

about a woman being raped and impregnated by a priest in "Sunday Brings Sunday" and later portrayed similar stories of victimisation and unwanted pregnancies in "Happiness" (1969) and "Villa Violeta" (1972). Of similar quality and also intended to break the hegemony of male, patriarchal and religious discourses over women is Clare Boylan's "The Little Madonna" (1989), where an old woman reflects about the reasons and the absurdity of a story she read in the paper: a teenage girl had fallen asleep causing the death of her baby after having left it alone in the freezing cold. Finding a religious ground in the Virgin Mary's youth at her "unexpected" pregnancy, the author criticises the fact that Irish women lack the right to choose in sex, contraception and reproduction. Finally, Maeve Binchy's "Decision in Belfield" (1982) explores the way in which a self-declared "liberal" family deals with the unexpected pregnancy of their recently graduated daughter and her refusal to get married. The girl's move to London leaves them, –mostly the narrator, her younger sister– wondering about the real outcome of the trip, as she decided to stay in Britain and break contact with the family because of their reaction. Abortion, adoption and miscarriage are discussed, with all their pros and cons being raised but also the woman's right to choose being undermined. Eventually, family expectations are restored when she returns home but they are broken again when the younger, puzzled sister becomes pregnant herself.

Popular fiction writers have also delved into single maternity, which remains among the greatest social preoccupations for Irish women's quest of personal subjecthood in a country still lagging well behind other European counterparts as far as women's reproductive rights and social attitudes

towards female sexuality are concerned. Thus, Deirdre Purcell in *Falling for a Dancer* (1993) tells the story of a woman who gets pregnant and must decide between marriage and entering a workhouse, but when she finally decides to marry a widower, she ends up being trapped in the rural life of the west of Ireland. Similarly, Maeve Binchy in *The Glass Lake* (1994), Cathy Kelly in *Past Secrets* (2006), Cecilia Ahern in *Rossie Dunne* (2007) and Colette Caddle in *It's All about Him* (2007) have presented the intricacies of Irish single maternity to Irish readers and to audiences abroad.

As for texts by women authors from Northern Ireland, in general, anxieties about single pregnancies are intertwined with sectarian politics and the effects of patriarchal constructions over women in the North. Linda Anderson's *To Stay Alive* (1984) is set in the pre-hunger strikes and "dirty protest" times and it underscores the way in which the female body is victimised by the purity-oriented education that Catholic women like the protagonist received. When the protagonist thinks that she has found liberation as she is admitted in Queens University, she gets pregnant by a classmate and rushes into marriage, wifehood and motherhood, but later feels trapped and must manage "to stay alive". Deirdre Madden's *One by One in the Darkness* (1996) is the story of three Catholic sisters from Belfast who gather together on the occasion of their father's funeral. One of them works in a woman's magazine in London and back at home she becomes increasingly aware of the stigma that being a single mother still was at the end of the twentieth century in the North. Thus, she finds herself tormented by her family's reaction to her decision of having the child without the father's support.

It is also worth noting here that the social reality and emotional subjectivity of single mothers have also attracted male authors' attention, though probably not quite as much as it has for female ones. We may find it remarkable that what may well be considered a woman-only issue –for literary portrait and also for critical analysis– is of course well represented and discussed by male writers. As Maroula Joannou explains:

> The experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, on which the fictional representations depend, are, or course, the *only* major areas in which women have exclusive first-hand knowledge which is not available to men. This does not mean that men cannot write sensitively about these things. (45)

For reasons of space and methodology, to analyse male authors' insights into the inner psyche of single mothers falls out of the scope of this study but it seems fair to say that among the greatest Irish accounts of women's dealing with an unmarried pregnancy, we can list works like Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper* (1990), William Trevor's *Felicia's Journey* (1994), Bernard McLaverty's *Grace Notes* (1997) and Benjamin Black (or John Banville)'s *Christine Falls* (2006).[55] All of them have delved into the grip that this form of the increasingly present dysfunctional family still has in the articulation of Ireland's identity and consequently, in the assertion of female subjectivity. They have reflected in a very perceptive way on how unmarried mothers inhabit a kind of subculture in society while also taking a stand against the smothering of single mother's voices and experiences.

To conclude this section, it can be pointed out that the works of fiction dealing with unmarried maternity and published by Irish women writers since the 1980s are marked by a common defence of women's right

[55] Other well-known examples of earlier narratives written by Irish male novelists and containing commentaries on the "fallen" and pregnant woman are George Moore's *Esther Watters* (1894) and James Stephens' *The Charwoman's Daughter* (1912).

to choose, by the certainty that options far beyond the constraining parameters are possible and that single motherhood is a reality that can be achieved. Further, it seems to us that much of these contemporary textualisations are grounded upon a two-dimensional project that includes, on the one hand, the humanisation and heterogeneisation of single mothers, and on the other hand, the incorporation of silenced maternal voices to the public sphere. Literature becomes then an extremely valuable mediator for the creation of a new ethics of motherhood that revolves around more open-minded factors. To this purpose, the authors are highly critical of the narrow-minded attitudes towards deviant maternity and defend the diversity of experiences that characterise these women.

Nonetheless, as inherent in the premise from which we started our study, despite the highly valuable insights provided by all these literary authors about the many misunderstandings that characterise these stories and their (many unknown) protagonists, no comprehensive analysis of unmarried maternity and its representation in fiction has been made so far, which is what we intend to counterweigh with the present study. Fictional textualisations of unmarried maternity as carried out by contemporary Irish women writers must be brought together for the quite illustrative spectrum of cultural signifiers that they dismantle and the innovative forms of self-fulfillment that they masterly describe. However, for reasons of methodology and despite this interesting panorama in representing the single mother in fiction, we have chosen three novels that, as we will see, convey this topic in representative ways.

PART II

TOWARDS SINGLE MOTHERS' SUBJECTIVITY:

MARY ROSE CALLAGHAN'S *MOTHERS*,

MARY LELAND'S *THE KILLEEN*

AND EDNA O'BRIEN'S *DOWN BY THE RIVER*

3. The authors and their works

As delineated at the end of Part One, during the past few decades the narrative representation of single maternity in Irish women's fiction has been quite varied. Our study is particularly focussed on Mary Rose Callaghan's *Mothers* (1982), Mary Leland's *The Killeen* (1985) and Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1996).[56] The three authors belong to the same generation of middle class women writers who received a conservative, Catholic education and became seduced by the increasingly consolidating Irish women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout their literary production, they claim that the reconfiguration of the prevailing categories of female sexual conduct and maternal possibilities not only interrogates the traditional foundations of Irish women's identity but also it demonstrates that hidden voices have much to adduce to its everyday life. In line with the feminist positions and discourses prevalent in the later part of the twentieth century, they suggest that historical and sociological revisionism of the Irish past is necessary in order to reach a more comprehensive view in which the marginal objects are no longer excluded but incorporated into the social reality of the island. Particularly, they are concerned with the victimisation that women have suffered in cases of non-standard sexual behaviour, conception and procurable maternity.

Although the three novels were published within an interval of only fourteen years and Mary Rose Callaghan is the youngest of the three authors, we will start our analysis with *Mothers*, because its narrative

[56] Hereafter, the title *Down by the River* will be abbreviated to *DBR*.

time at some stage moves back to an earlier period –the 1920s– as compared to *The Killeen* and *DBR,* which are located in the 1930s and the mid 1990s, respectively. The novels are set in Dublin city, County Cork and County Sligo, respectively again, three different latitudes that taken together, will constitute a rich analysis of the different considerations of their core topics. This range fosters not only the evaluation of urban and rural contexts, but also the correlation and the common practices that substantiate Ireland's peculiar idiosyncrasy.

Moreover, the actions cover a time frame of approximately seventy years and comprise a great deal of that part of Ireland's contemporary history that has been crucial for the evolution of the Irish women's cause. The three novels explore the intersection between the traditional signifiers of Ireland's cultural identity and women's status in the rhetorics of motherhood. The resulting effects of that intersection are usually unbecoming to female objects, especially to those who do not conform to the established parameters. Most particularly, the authors insist on how these figures are epitomised by single mothers and the undesirable social consequences that they pose.

Callaghan, Leland and O'Brien provide up-front accounts of the restrictive and often abusive handling of unplanned pregnancies in the Republic, with specific descriptions of the various strands of female oppression in cases of what were considered "dysfunctional" maternities. Regularly determined by their social and economic background, the protagonists are involuntarily precipitated into a state of psychological and emotional crisis that constrains their actions for a certain period of

time. Nonetheless, each of them gradually gains the agency they were denied for their female and stigmatised condition, and embraces a conduct diametrically opposed to the roles they are supposed to comply with. After years of patriarchal subjugation, these women find self-delineated ways that lead to a reconciliation with themselves as women and as mothers.

These reasons led to their inclusion in this critical study, and also because in the case of *Mothers* and *The Killeen* they have been much ignored by literary criticism within and outside Ireland. It is our view that the three novels comprise a valuable spectrum of the general topic under study, and that a great number of socio-cultural themes are recurrent in the three texts, demonstrating thus the grip of the ideology on which the different stories are grounded. Yet, each narrative constitutes not only a new perspective to the same points at issue, but also a new reaction and handling of that oppression that opens up multiple possibilities for the future into which Ireland and Irish women are inevitably and constantly projected.

Characterisation is also a shared concern for the three authors. In our study we will mainly focus on six women characters that undergo a complex process of identity formation. Ronnie, Harriet and Agnes in *Mothers*, Margaret and Julia in *The Killeen* and Mary in *Down by the River* constitute, as we will try to prove, an excellent corpus for the study of the representation of single mothers in twentieth-century Ireland. References to other minor characters, both male and female, will be made at various

points of our study, and it will mostly import to complement the main plot of single maternity which interests us.

3.1. Mary Rose Callaghan's *Mothers*

Mary Rose Callaghan was born in 1944 in north County Dublin, where her father had a farm. She began to study Medicine at University College Dublin but soon enrolled in Arts, obtaining her B.A. in English, History and Philosophy in 1968 and a Teaching Diploma the following year. She taught for several years both in Ireland and England before joining *Arts in Ireland* as assistant editor, publishing her first journalistic pieces there. In 1975 Callaghan moved to the United States, where she worked as editorial assistant in the Delaware-based Proscenium Press and occasionally, as a university teacher. There she began to write her first novel, *Mothers*, which was published some years later. In 1979 she married professor and writer Robert Hogan, who was the editor of the *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, to which Mary Rose contributed with twenty entries.

Back in Ireland, she became a lecturer in literature in the Dublin Institute of Adult Education and also the director of several workshops and seminars. Since then, she has taught many courses on Irish fiction and is an active member of the Irish Writers' Centre in Dublin. She has also been a regular contributor to periodicals such as *The Journal of Irish Literature*, *The Irish Times* or *Image Magazine* as well as the editor of *W.E.B.* She now lives in Bray, facing the bay and near the Wicklow mountains.

Apart from *Mothers*, Callaghan is the author of novels such as *Confessions of a Prodigal Daughter* (1985), *The Awkward Girl* (1990), *Emigrant Dreams* (1996) –republished in the United States as *I Met a Man*

Who Wasn't There (1997)–, *The Visitors' Book* (2001) and most recently, *Billy Come Home* (2007), a compelling story about the social treatment of people suffering from schizophrenia and *A Bit of a Scandal* (2009), which deals with the consequences of youthful and forbidden love. In 1990 she also published *Has Anyone Seen Heather?*, a thriller for young adults and whose sequel, *The Last Summer*, was published in 1997. Her short stories have been included in several collections like *Modern Irish Stories* (1985), *A Woman's Christmas* (1994) or *If Only: Short Stories of Marriage and Divorce* (1997), among others. As Maryanne Wessel-Felter puts is, "a striking element of Callaghan's fiction is allusiveness" (1994: 141). Indeed, her fiction is full of quotes and intertextual literary passages to the works of her favourite authors, like Dante, James Joyce, William Shakespeare or Jane Austen, which make her narratives conscious literary transportations. She must also be praised for her precise characterisation and her dexterous handling of point of view.

Callaghan was runner-up of the OZ Whitehead competition for her two-act play *A House for Fools* (1983) and also of the Maxwell House competition for women writers. Later, she was commissioned to write the biography of Katherine Parnell, which she entitled *Kitty O'Shea: A Life of Katherine Parnell* (1989). With this work, that proves her interest in history as well as her feminist perspective, she tried to emphasize the significant role played by this Irish woman not simply on account of having been the wife of the famous nationalist hero but paying special attention to her immense courage as a woman in nineteenth-century Ireland. Again, a lot of intertextual commentaries, references and quotes from *Ulysses*, *Mansfield Park* or *Macbeth* pervade this biographical

account. Most recently, she has also co-edited the collection *Jumping the Bus Queue* (2000), published by the Older Women's Network and consisting of a number of poems about how the experience of ageing affects women, and exploring other issues related to women in old age.

In *Mothers* (1982), Mary Rose Callaghan describes women's experiences of out of wedlock conception and adoption as well as the grip that female sisterhood may have for the development of women's subjectivity. Focussing on the lives of three generations of unwed mothers, the author explores the marginalisation that this undesirable social status provokes in those women who unexpectedly find themselves immersed in an unwanted pregnancy, and the identity conflicts that it generates in them because of the strict rules of female sexuality and the codes of the nuclear family that have prevailed in twentieth-century Ireland.

The novel is divided into six chapters, their title corresponding to a first and a second sequence of the three protagonists' names –Ronnie, Harriet and Agnes–, whose lives are intertwined by common family or friendship ties. The chapters are narrated in dramatic monologues, a strategy that manifests not only the author's interest in displaying the internal feelings of her women characters but also her desire to make the readers sympathise with their experiences, which were particularly poignant for the place and times in which they happened to live.

Mothers is set in three time periods, covering from the 1980s to the 1920s and thus reversing the chronological order that it details. This technique is perfectly managed by Callaghan through recurrent

flashbacks to the women's family past and by interweaving the lives of the three protagonists, who share the same emotional reactions despite the different contexts in which they move. The book is organised in terms of the typical response that, mostly unintentionally, these women were forced to take in order to solve their situation and which corresponds to the typical social and moral milieu of Ireland during the period in which their unwanted pregnancies take place, namely, adoption, marriage, and either lone maternity or abortion.

The action starts with the youngest protagonist –Ronnie– who becomes pregnant at the age of twenty-two in the Ireland of the 1980s, after an informal relationship with her uncompromising boyfriend. She is rather terrified of the possibility of losing her job and of disappointing her family, and hesitates about travelling to England to procure an abortion or not. It continues with Harriet, a middle-aged woman whose son died in a motorbike accident. He was conceived out of wedlock in the 1960s after an adulterous relationship with her best friend's husband, who also happens to be Ronnie's father. After he ignores the existence of the baby, Harriet hits on the option of marrying an old friend, but the union ends up in disaster as she tells him about her pregnant reality. And finally, the first sequence ends with Agnes, Ronnie's aunt and now a tormented old lady not having been able to overcome the tragedy of losing her illegitimate son, who had been given up for adoption in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The second part of the sequence unveils how the protagonists reencounter each other. Again, the narration moves from Ronnie to Agnes but closes with the three women sharing their pains and traumas

just before the latter's death. The interconnection between the three characters enables Callaghan not only to offer different outlooks to the situation in which their lives have unfolded but also to display different perspectives of the same character and her situation, seen and described from within and without. Likewise, the female convergence in the final pages of the novel unveils the author's defence of solidarity among women as one of the key points for female liberation from the patriarchal yoke, but also her open claim for the much sought-for right to choose that in cases of unwanted conception, has been denied to Irish women.

3.2. Mary Leland's *The Killeen*

Mary Leland was born in 1941 in Cork, where she grew up in a family of six children and was educated at the South Presentation Convent. Her talent for writing was already evident since she attended school, and her English teacher encouraged her to become a journalist. She began her training in *The Cork Examiner*, which she joined in 1959 as junior reporter. After spending several years in Dublin doing production assistance in Radio Television Éireann, she stayed in the capital but working as a correspondent for *The Cork Examiner*.

Leland's literary career began when, after having separated from her husband and already a mother of three children, she received a grant from the Arts Council and decided to concentrate on creative writing. Her first short story was published in the New Irish Writing page in *The Irish Press*, under the supervision of David Marcus, who was in charge of this section that put into the spotlight the work of emerging authors like Leland. In 1980 she won the Listowell Writers Short Story Award for "Displaced Persons." Since then, her short stories have appeared in a great number of journals and volumes, such as *Irish Stories from the Irish Times*, *Literary Review* (1997), *In Sunshine or in Shadow* (1998) and *The Fish Anthology* (2005). Her non-fiction pieces include *The Lie of the Land: A Literary History of County Cork* (2000) and *That Endless Adventure: A History of the Port of Cork* (2001).

Also, some of Leland's journalist pieces originally published in the 1970s were included in the recently released collection *Changing the Times: Irish Women Journalists 1969-1981* (2003). Many of them dwell on

female experiences, as the author has always been extremely committed to the women's cause in Ireland and has vindicated women's rights from both her journalistic and literary writings. She now lives in Blackrock, in Cork city and is a regular commentator and reviewer for *The Irish Times*.

The Killeen (1985) was Leland's first novel and it was highly acclaimed by critics and public for its successful representation of the victimisation of women in the always politically engaged Irish society (Mills 1986; Legget 1986; Steinberg 1986). *The Little Galloway Girls*, a collection of short stories, appeared in 1997 and consecrated her as one of Ireland's most gifted contemporary authors. Her denounce of the country's on-going fixation with politics and religious morality was also followed up in her second novel, *Approaching Priests* (1991), a title in which she criticises the grip that conservative religious ideology still had in the milieu of late twentieth-century Ireland.

Critics of her production have commonly considered *The Killeen* as Leland's best literary piece. Part of the book was included in the anthology *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* edited by Dermot Bolger and published in 1996. Her depiction of rural Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century, with its nationalist spirit affecting all parts of the country and its people, is splendidly performed. But it is her shaping of the two main female characters –Margaret and Julia– as well as the interlacing of their stories what stand as the most salient features of her major fictional work. The two women are lone mothers trying to find a way to raise their child away from the constraints of their social surroundings and they have to leave the country to do so.

Julia is the widow of a republican martyr and develops a close bond with Margaret, an innocent country girl that is sent to work as a maid in Julia's house after her illegitimate son is taken to an orphanage.

The novel is narrated in third person and consists of three parts divided into twenty chapters, and an epilogue. Part One is devoted to Margaret and her family background, although some of the other characters are also introduced. It explores her life in the convent school where she was educated, as well as her "fall" when she gets pregnant after being seduced by the convent gardener's boy, who abandons her to fight for the republican cause. The second part narrates Julia's life in the Cork of the 1940s, when as a widow and the mother of a small child who was also conceived out of wedlock, she suffers the social and also political pressures on the part of her dead husband's family to comply with the norms for a woman in her circumstances. Her psychological suffocation is only alleviated with the arrival of Margaret, whom she treats in a mother-like manner. The two women share their fears about the future of their babies, and the young girl's emotional reflections about her son —whom she never saw— are intertwined with introspections into Julia's thoughts of her marriage and the education of her baby in the republican background of her husband's family. And finally, part three describes the turmoil that Margaret goes through when she feels compelled to remove her son from the orphanage and bring him to her family farm before getting married and moving to England. The boy is left under the supervision of Margaret's brother —Michael— who strives for the baby to be accepted by his family and the neighbouring community but, because of

their puritan morality, he fails to do so, thus having to bury him in the killeen –the graveyard for unbaptised children– when he dies in irregular circumstances.

3.3. Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River*

Edna O'Brien, who was born in 1930 in Tuamgraney, County Clare, stands as one of the most celebrated icons in contemporary Irish women's writing. She spent her childhood on the family farm and showed an interest in writing since those early years. Like some of the characters in her novels, she moved to the city, where she studied at the Pharmaceutical College of Ireland in Dublin. By the late 1940s she had already begun to send some small contributions to *The Irish Press* and like many other young Irish authors of her time, she was encouraged by Peadar O'Connell, the editor of *The Bell*, to continue with her writing. In 1959 O'Brien left Dublin for London with her husband and her sons, and after her divorce in 1964, she has continued to live there.

Of the three authors selected for the present study, she is the most prolific one in terms of literary production. Between 1960 and 1964 she wrote and published her famous trilogy, *The Country Girls*, *Girls with Green Eyes* and *Girls in their Married Bliss*. More than any other classification, O'Brien has been commonly labelled as controversial and her writing associated with scandal. She was one of the first Irish women authors to write overtly about sexual issues and most particularly, about women's sexual desire and needs. Actually, all the three books in the trilogy were banned in Ireland under the Censorship of Publication Law because of the explicit sex scenes in which Kate and Baba, the country girls in the title, start their way towards personal liberation, which had led them to move to the city, as O'Brien had herself done. Indeed, much of her work is autobiographical, with a recurrent presence of women

characters and their efforts in reaching maturity, as well as the complexity of their lives and emotions.

O'Brien has been accused by feminist circles of offering rather pessimistic and forever victimised pictures of Irish women that are usually portrayed as full of grief and despair. Such is the case of the protagonists of *August is a Wicked Month* (1965), *Casualties of Peace* (1966) and *Johnny I Hardly Knew you* (1977), whose lives are immersed in tragic circumstances, like an abusive marriage, the death of a child or even murder, respectively. However, she tends to describe the reality of Irish women as harsh as it was and still is, while also leaving a door opened to change and self-expression. Other important novels are *The High Road* (1989), and *Time and Tide* (1992), in which motherhood is explored from the point of view of a woman trying to deal with the growing up of her children. O'Brien is also an excellent short story writer, with collections such as *The Love Object* (1968), *A Scandalous Woman and Other Stories* (1974), *Mrs Reinhardt and Other Stories* (1978), *Returning* (1982), *Lantern Slides* (1990), among others.

Her non-fiction pieces include her interpretation of James Joyce and Nora Barnacle's relationship in *James and Nora: Portrait of Joyce's Marriage* (1981) and the highly acclaimed *Mother Ireland* (1976). The latter is a journalistic description of the countryside from which she fled in her youth, complemented with personal reflections about the maternal trope of Ireland and its binding of people to the land ever since childhood. As a self-exiled Irish woman author she has always been a very attractive mediatic figure, with a lot of interviews and newspaper articles about her

being published in England and elsewhere. Journal issues and several collections about her work have also been published in Ireland, and a great number of conferences and panels have revolved around her life and literary production. Her most recent novels are *In the Forest* (2002), also a retelling of real events around a serial killer, and *The Light of Evening* (2006), a novel which proves again her interest in how motherhood is reinscribed in contemporary Ireland.

DBR is part of what has been considered her trilogy of Ireland in the 1990s, together with *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) and *Wild Decembers* (1999). The book is an open critique of how the nationalist imagining of Ireland in female and maternal terms remains endorsed by the social and legal control of women's bodies, focussing as it does on the ordeal that a young girl has to go through when her "deviant" pregnancy is widely seen as an instrument to reassert the traditionally Irish values, such as female purity and sacrifice, always performed for the sake of national good. The narrative is organised in seventy-four short chapters with very evocative titles and following an episodic structure. The third person narrator provides constant insights into the events that, despite being personal and rather private, become the whole country's concern. Besides, letters and passages with stream of consciousness paragraphs contribute to a multiple perspective of the same story, as they are mostly about the protagonist's feelings, which in many cases contrast quite strongly with the other characters' thoughts.

O'Brien had already explored young girls' experiences of abuse and unwanted pregnancies in *A Pagan Place*, published in 1970. Nearly thirty

years later, *DBR* narrates how a country girl, Mary, suffers verbal and sexual abuses by her father before and above all, after her mother's death to cancer. The main action in the book is inspired by the so-called "X-case," in which in 1992 a fourteen-year-old girl, pregnant after having been raped by a family friend, was prevented from travelling to England to obtain an abortion. The story and its outrageous details had struck the Irish consciousness, which was seen as puritan and sometimes pseudo-naïve, being trapped, as it still was in the 1990s, in the preservation of the sacredness of ideal motherhood. However, as criticised in the book, it did not perceive the many cracks that shatter its supposed stability and denied its victims the opportunity to express and save themselves.

In *DBR*, Mary gets pregnant by her own father and after escaping the family home and trying to procure an abortion in England, the judicial apparatus of Ireland forces her to return, thus sending her back to more family and community torture in the farm house. Her life is then cast between the pro-life campaigners who try to prevent her from committing abortion and the very few people that get really interested in her and who finally unveil the true circumstances around her pregnancy. As with many others of her female characters, O'Brien tries to liberate her from her silenced social position and give her the voice that she deserves to have. Actually, as the author mentioned in an interview, she built up the whole narrative story in this voice-providing process: "I was trying to imagine what the judges, the girl herself, and the pro-life people would feel like. It's the novelist's prerogative. Seven cords of music instead of one" (Moloney and Thompson 200).

4. Social matters: a tradition of repression

4.1. The politics of the State: power and powerlessness

Mothers, *The Killeen* and *DBR* critique the state structures of power that have repressed single mothers' experiences, and they problematise how questions of social justice have been constantly undermined in circumstances where out of wedlock maternity is concerned. The evaluation of the terms upon which that repression has been constructed is recurrent in the three novels, in an attempt to bring to the fore the necessity to revise the principles of power in which the ethos of contemporary Ireland is based. When describing the protagonists' struggle for survival in social, economic and mostly, psychological terms, the authors emphasize the enormous pull that the rhetorics of the state exercises on women involved in cases of so-called "dysfunctional maternity."

The control that the state and all its institutions wield on Irish women, as reflected in the novels, must be analysed within the scope of wider theoretical considerations of official supremacy. Questions around the notion of power –ranging from what means to be powerful to who may have it and how it is exerted over the powerless– have been widely contested in western philosophy. Quite essential for the continuity of national values, its assertion depends on the containment of undesirable objects, which very frequently leads to a process of victimisation. In general, in patriarchy-based societies, power is effected by endorsing androcentric stereotypes of womanhood, among other strategies.

The idea of the alignment of power structures and the determination of knowledge provided by French theorist Michel Foucault becomes, then, an effective model for the analysis of feminists' dispute of traditionally oppressive forces in general, and more specifically, of Irish women's struggle against the repression of state artefacts. His work clearly reflects the post-structuralist questioning of the established social meanings as well as the claims for their plurality, but it is probably his analysis of the discursive control over the individual that best fits this section of our study.

In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault provided a historical examination of how the various strands of power have manipulated human beings, quite often annihilating their bodily and mental rights to a comprehensive development of subjectivity. As the vehicles for the constitution of knowledge, discourses govern the body, thoughts and feelings of individuals, who are traditionally internalised as deprived of any meaning outside the discursive forms imposed upon them. According to him, power is

> [t]he multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (92)

In the arena of feminism, Adrienne Rich moved a step forward in the exploration of the acquisition of power and its artefacts when she claimed that the practice of power originates in male control over

motherhood. For her, men's preoccupation with the ownership of motherhood figures as the ultimate means by which patriarchal predications can be effective:

> Through control of the mother, the man assures himself of possession of his children; through control of his children he ensures the disposition of his patrimony and the safe passage of his soul after death. It would seem therefore that from very ancient times the identity, the very personality, of the man depends on power, and on the power in a certain, specific sense: that of *power over others*, beginning with a woman and her children. (1997: 64, emphasis in the original)

According to that line of argument, which echoes the progressive male involvement in the maternal as patriarchy was consolidating in Europe and in Ireland –as we saw in the first chapter–, Rich seems to place motherhood at the core of this dispute in male power oriented systems. What stems from that manipulation, she continues, is that:

> power seems to engender a kind of willed ignorance, a moral stupidity, about the inwardness of others, hence of oneself. This quality has variously been described as 'detachment', 'objectivity', 'sanity' -as if the recognition of another's being would open the floodgates to panic and hysteria. (1997: 65)

However, as many other feminists would do in the following decades, for Rich, women's redefinition of the maternal as well as the re-inscription of the mother is one of the most important projects for the transformation of the prevailing parameters. This notwithstanding, such an essential manipulation of the politics of maternity has recurrently brought forth negative implications for the social approach towards mothers.

Following Foucault and Rich's views, the case of Ireland clearly comes to mind. A number of power artefacts, always at the service of the state, have tried to shape the individual and collective bodies by means of the maternal, as we will emphasise below. However, it is necessary to

make clear that the association of power with national differentiation was essentially a product of colonial rule. Most precisely, it has been commonly sustained that such empowerment was constructed upon the assignation of gender roles in the process of decolonisation. According to Gerardine Meaney,

> a history of colonisation is a history of feminisation [...] The subject people, in rebelling and claiming independence and sovereignty, aspire to a traditionally masculine role of power. The result is that colonised peoples, often long after colonisation itself has ended, tend to observe or impose strictly differentiated gender roles in order to assert the masculinity and right to power of the (male) subject. (1993: 233)

Consequently, she concludes that the traditional assumptions and materialisation of male sexual dominance over women are derived from a residual unease about the ability to execute self-governing supremacy (1993: 233).

Likewise, because of its colonial past and its postcolonial search for national identity, the assertion of power was largely concentrated on the family as the key unit for the idealised vision of an independent, Roman Catholic isle. To that purpose, patriarchy, which has been described by Sylvia Walby as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (20), was reinscribed as strictly necessary for the new social order after the liberation from the British rule. In his study *Inventing Ireland,* Declan Kiberd notes about the postcolonial origin of the intersection of Catholicism, the family and patriarchy that

> a fiercely patriarchal system, such as colonialism, could hardly have left men feeling useless in their domestic spaces; and there is ample evidence to show that the head of the Irish household was often just as autocratic as his British counterpart. It can, indeed,

> be argued that the patriarchal society of which he was part would lead the Irish male to strive all the more for control within his own family, if only because of his political and social impotence outside it. But the evidence of Irish texts and case-histories would confirm the suspicion that the autocratic father is often the weakest male of all, concealing that weakness under the protective coverage of the prevailing system. (390)

Within this family model also lies the paradox that the male figure granted himself an amount of power that only resulted from a preceding fragility – as delineated by Meaney– from which he needs to be protected. Thus, Kiberd continues, "[p]atriarchal values exist in societies where men, lacking true authority, settle for mere power… Patriarchy is, rather, the tyranny wrought by weak men, the protective shell which guards and nurtures their weakness" (391).

To endorse its prevalence, patriarchal power found in the alliance between Church and state its most productive mechanism, constituting what Ursula Barry has termed "a marriage of convenience" (318). A similar but more direct position is followed by Alice Carey when she comments that after independence, "the Irish government and the Catholic church were entwined in an unholy alliance designed to keep the Irish people subservient, brainwashed, pure and frightened. There was no separation of church and state. They were in each other's pockets. What's worse, the populace saw it as normal" (44). These two forces have meticulously defended their respective positions in cases of disagreement on the advancement of the nation, but at the same time, hostilities between them have been obliterated when the cultural solidity of Irishness appears in jeopardy. We may elicit then from this distinctively (but not exclusively) Irish phenomenon that morality has embraced a

great amount of power, and probably, it could be added that religious morals have remained more deeply-rooted in the island's collective psyche than the contents of the more modifiable laws and state policies.

Among the various techniques, iconographies and official artefacts used for the predication of power in Ireland, the figurative and also literal manipulation of the concept of Mother Ireland has been a rather common and successful one. The process of male control over the maternal annotated by Rich was indeed brought into play long before the Free State but it became more apparent in the post-independence era. What stands out of that ideological formula, though, is that throughout time, the Irish mother has had a significant role in the development of Ireland in social and economic terms. Actually, Adrienne Rich referred to the paradox that circumscribes mothers when she pointed out the contradiction in patriarchy between "the laws and sanctions designed to keep women essentially powerless and the attribution to mothers of almost superhuman power (of control, of influence, of life-support)" (1979: 263). About this inconsistency in the case of Ireland Tom Inglis noted that

> far from being a non-entity [...] it was the mother who, from the middle of the nineteenth century, became the organisational link between the Catholic Church and the individual. It was she who, through a variety of social and cultural practices which were handed down through generations from mother to daughter with the support of the priest and Church, produced the Catholics of modern Ireland (1998: 179).

Nevertheless, Inglis is sensible enough to conclude that "whatever power an Irish mother had was mainly a moral power which was derived and maintained through the Church" (1998: 179). Inherent in this also

remains the purely private realm of maternal power that allocates mothers to positions far from institutional influence.

All these considerations serve indeed as the critical framework for the thematic content and analysis of the present study. As we will try to demonstrate in this section, the Irish state has recurrently held the view that a strict supervision of women's access to motherhood grants the necessary influence to endorse its power. As long as the maternal ideal was ensured, and consequently, all deviations from its parameters penalised, the sovereignty of the body politics would be guaranteed. It is therefore in this context where the state manipulation of single mothers should be analysed, since they have commonly figured within its apparatuses and in the collective mind as one of the most immediate personifications of anti-Irishness.

Most precisely, as is our argument throughout this dissertation, the powerful artefacts of the Irish state have traditionally ignored single mothers' inner conflicts and material problems, insofar as they are considered as the very instigators of national anxieties of cultural debasement. Thus, instead of a positive, sympathetic dealing of their problems, they contemplate direct control over the single mother as the best instrument to avoid general hysteria. As we will see, embedded in those penalising programmes there is a complex sense of fear of national contamination and disruption that to a large extent has not been surmounted yet.

It has been extensively argued that what lies beneath such political intervention over the gendered bodies is the discursive correspondence

between the nation and the state. For example, Angela K. Martin maintains that the ideological equation of the two terms is the premise from which sexual and reproductive control starts:

> Many of the gendered and sexualized meanings embodied in the idea of the Irish nation have been institutionalized in state juridical and economic structures. The Irish nation and the state are therefore paradigmatically linked, similarly experienced, and often conflated by Irish people, especially in political contexts where Irish Catholic morals are particularly threatened. Accordingly, women's bodies have been used to determine the moral, political and physical boundaries of the Republic itself, as well as the nation. (66)

Predicated to a large extent on the juridical action over women's corporeality, the materiality of the nation can only be effectuated provided its undesirable objects remain contained. Through legal, political and social policy mechanisms, that containment has been performed in an attempt to refrain the spread of the national disruption that inhabits the nationalist psyche. The ideology that underlies this agenda brings to mind the formulations of Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. In *Powers of Horror*, the French philosopher points out that the abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Arguably, this notion operates in the ideological consideration and social treatment of Irish single mothers in Ireland who, as we are trying to demonstrate in this study, have historically experienced various forms of abjection on account of the "disturbing" condition with which they have been associated.

In this vein, this section revolves around how the legal framework of contemporary Ireland has affected single mothers in terms not only of their maternal condition but also as single individuals with a rightful self-

controlled space within the social system. We will explore the ways in which the external, stately forces have limited women's attainment of subjectivity with a closer insight into the development of sexual identity and the different forms of resistance exerted over single maternity. Considered as direct referents to articulate the female experience in such circumstances, aspects of the legal framework and the political ideologies of contemporary Ireland will be brought to the fore when analysing the novels.

4.1.1. The legal space: framing the individual's rights

In the Irish scene, the influence of power structures over the articulation of individual identity is clearly exemplified by the ever-present constitutional hegemony. In other words, legal discourse has recurrently functioned as the agent by which the power of the state is activated and therefore, it remains as one of the main focuses of attention for the questioning of the Irish politics of gender coding and the practices of gender relations towards male-biased objectives. Within critical commentaries about Irish legal narratives, it has been under scrutiny how women figure as the objects that must be governed in order to substantiate the consistency that the state seeks to guarantee.

Having been approved in 1937, and although a number of amendments have been adopted over the years, the Irish Constitution obviously bears witness to the milieu of the time in which it was introduced. However, it is widely sustained among feminist critics and jurists that the post-nationalist, conservative and patriarchy-rooted ideology of the period in which it was enacted is still very much evident in many of the articles that make reference to women's function in society. According to Alpha Connelly in her study *Gender and the Law in Ireland*, "one of the ways in which this manifests itself is in its reference to women in certain roles, and its correlative lack of reference to men in these roles" (5).

Sexual difference figures as a key component of the legal context in which Irish women's lives have been framed on account of the postcolonial emphasis on national idiosyncrasy that we have extensively

commented this far in our study. Most particularly, a close look at the Constitution highlights that the attributes that conform this ethos permeate a number of articles, in which women are bound to the private sphere of the home and the performance of motherhood. Thus, Article 41.2 reads:

> 1. In particular the State recognises that by her life within the home, the woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
>
> 2. The State shall therefore, endeavour to ensure that *mothers* shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home (emphasis added). (Kelly 250)

Feminist protests about this article have been more than recurrent since not only does it relegate women to the private sphere, but also it clearly traces the equation of womanhood and motherhood. In this sense, using Yvonne Scannell's words, "it is the grossest form of sexual stereotyping" (124). Women are legally persuaded to become the mothers that would raise and educate the children of Ireland's future, under the promise of an unconditional support from the state and the recognition of their extraordinary contribution to the nation through motherhood. Yet, the disparity between the terms of that ideological phrasing and the events of everyday praxis has been a rather evident one.

The social consideration and the legal status of Irish women hardly changed in the thirty-year period after the enactment of the Constitution. In fact, an atmosphere of stagnation into De Valera's conservatism and national delimitation characterised much of the mid-twentieth century, in which the concern with reaching a purely "Irish Ireland" was visible in the different realms of the island's cultural universe. In this light, it has been recurrently discussed how the constitutional text contributed in many

ways to constrain not only the configuration of Irishness but also of individual identity, which far from being uniform has been more than often proved to be plural. To quote Patrick Hanafin,

> [t]here is no such thing as a monolithic Irish identity. Rather, Irish selfhood is fragmented into many diverse pieces, all of which have a role to play in constituting the whole. The Constitution should act as an enabling mechanism for the development of Irish identities rather than as a means, as it has done in the past, of constricting a more inclusive idea of citizenship. (147-148)

Out of all the amendments that have been made to the original text up to the present, pregnancy is the focus of five of them, succeeding on every occasion heated social debates about women's reproductive rights all over the isle. Several sections have been introduced or modified about the right to life of the unborn and the rights of the pregnant woman, namely, the inclusion of a section in Article 40.3 in 1983 (the 8th Amendment), and the right to travel abroad and get information about abortion services in 1992 (the 13th and 14th Amendments). The centre of a fierce opposition, the former guaranteed the constitutional protection of foetuses and therefore, raised troubling questions about women's entitlement to the termination of pregnancy. After a further debate about its wording, the 8th Amendment was put to public consideration under the following terms: "The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right" (Kennedy 2004: 301). Two-thirds of the voters supported the amendment, which became Article 40.3, section 3.

Another poignant reflection of the hegemony of the legal discourse over women as well as its intersection with Catholic morality and social

conservatism came to public notice a year later, with the so-called "Kerry Babies Case." The woman involved, Joanne Hayes, had given birth to a baby, which later died and was buried near her farm. But when another baby was found dead with stab wounds in the near area, Hayes was charged with having murdered the two babies, which were claimed to be her twins, despite the evidence that it could not be biologically possible as their blood types were different. Because she already had a daughter by a married man, her own sexuality, her private life and her ethical principles were under close surveillance, and the whole process of investigation trials she had to go through demonstrated how vulnerable Irish women were to a legal system that was clearly gender-biased. On the contrary, as Nell McCafferty comments, the assumptions and speculations by the men who were following the case remained unchallenged (1985a: 3).[57]

But these unfavourable events and the legal vindications of foetal rights did not stop Irish women from travelling abroad to procure an abortion and from continuing with the struggle for their reproductive rights. As Jo Murphy-Lawless puts it: "The way women have contested state control highlights issues about the relationship between bodies, demography and the politics of fertility" (1993a: 53). Throughout the 1980s, clinics and centres that on a regular basis provided services and arranged appointments for abortions in England were suspected of breaking Article 40.3, as it was claimed that the right to life of babies was not being guaranteed by the provision of those services (Smyth 1992: 15).

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[57] Eventually, the charges against Hayes were dropped, but a year later, she was put on trial for the second time and a public tribunal examined her sexual personal and sexual conduct. A comprehensive commentary of the case can be found in McCafferty's *A Woman to Blame*.

Thus, the reconciliation of the baby's rights and those of the mother proved a difficult legislative task because of their seemingly mutually exclusive nature. The ethical contradictions that result from this predicament certainly call upon the implications of a disproportionate legal status conceded to the foetus. In relation to this viewpoint, which promotes an excessive subjectification of the unborn by campaigns and associations within the so-called Pro-Life movement, Susan Bordo has pointed out

> the ontological construction that is entailed (but never openly acknowledged) by this fetal-rights position, a position that is increasingly becoming conventional wisdom in many quarters of our culture. Very simply put, that construction is one in which pregnant women are not subjects at all (neither under the law nor in the zeitgeist) while fetuses are super-subjects. It is as though the subjectivity of the pregnant body were siphoned from it and emptied into fetal life. (88)

The contradictions underlying this position and the effects that it had in everyday practice were gradually viewed with suspicion both at home and abroad. Thus, the ongoing discussion about the irrationality of the atmosphere following constitutional revision in 1983 as well as about the legitimacy of such restrictions, resulted in the European Court of Human Rights' ruling in 1992 that with the prohibition on information about abortion, the Irish state was in breach of the Convention of Human Rights. The main reason was that, as Chrystel Hug puts it, "the health of Irish women was being put at risk by the ban on information as it was the cause of later abortions and deprived women of post-abortion check-ups" (159).

Moreover, earlier that year what was known as the X case renewed the turmoil over women's reproductive right. The Attorney General and

the High Court had forbidden a fourteen-year-old girl –pregnant as a result of rape by a family friend– from leaving the country. Although she had travelled to England with her parents for the termination, she was made to return and restrained from leaving Irish jurisdiction. The girl's parents later appealed to the Supreme Court, pleading that she had suicidal tendencies and therefore, that her life was at a substantial risk if the possibility of abortion was denied. Eventually, in a landmark decision the Supreme Court ruled that because the termination of her pregnancy was the only means to protect her life, abortion was constitutionally permissible in her case, on account of the content of Article 40.3.3. Eventually, the whole case and the judicial order indicated that legislation was necessary in order to define the terms of that limited permission as well as the real extents of the 1983 Amendment.[58]

Prompted by the formulations of those judicial decisions, and by the social confusion about constitutional interpretation, in 1992 three amendments about abortion were placed in the hands of the Irish population, coinciding with the general election in November. As foreseen by several opinion polls, the 12th Amendment was finally rejected by 70% of the electorate, thus overturning the X case ruling. By contrast, the 13th and 14th amendments, which made reference to the right to travel and the right to information, were generally approved by 60%, so that it all meant a decisive step forward in women's achievement of their reproduction rights. Yet, three years later, an Act was introduced by the Department of Health for the regulation of information about the termination of

[58] For a complete analysis of the X case and its implications see Angela K. Martin's article "Death of a Nation: Transnationalism, Bodies and Abortion in Late Twentieth-Century Ireland."

pregnancies, establishing that counsel on that topic could only be provided when solicited and after other options had been discussed, so that abortion would not be inherently promoted or encouraged (Mahon *et al.* 29).

What made the 12th amendment the most poignant one among the three on which Irish people were asked to decide in 1992 was that it excluded the threat to suicide as lawful grounds for abortion. Likewise, the pregnant woman's rights were undervalued as it clearly posed a distinction between the protection of her life and her health, as can be clearly grasped from the text of the amendment:

> It shall be unlawful to terminate the life of an unborn unless such termination is necessary *to save the life, as distinct from the health*, of the mother where there is an illness or disorder of the mother giving rise to a real and substantial risk to her life, *not being a risk of self-destruction*. (Hug 180, emphasis added)

By less than 1% difference between the votes in favour and against its introduction, the amendment was finally rejected, so that the mother's threatened suicide was incorporated as lawful grounds for the termination of a pregnancy. On this new constitutional premise, a great part of the Irish population wondered whether X's ordeal had been in vain, but it seems now beyond question that what the case did bring to the fore was not only the national interrogation about legal premises for abortion but most significantly, an evident scepticism about the imbrication of the legal and moral discourses. Using again Hug's words, "[t]hanks to the X-case, abortion was no longer condemned out of hand, and the question of the appropriateness of a pro-life article in the Constitution had been posed, which by extension led to that of the feasibility that the law should

impose a particular morality" (199). Indeed, this view was also echoed by Ailbhe Smyth when she pointed out that the debate had been "positively healthy in obliging this society to talk itself across differences and division about the meanings and values it (variously) considers to be important" (cited in Lisa Smyth 78). Irish society thus learnt an extremely important lesson about the excessive magnitude that it granted to moralising principles and its lack of consideration of social circumstances before making judicial decisions and ethical judgements. From then on, I would argue, it opened its way to a less traditional and more contemporary turn to redefine the meanings of upright integrity as applied to its sexually transgressive female citizens.

Yet, the situation throughout the 1990s and up to the present has been a very restrictive one as compared to other European countries. Through the 13th Amendment, Irish women seeking an abortion are legally allowed to travel to England and other countries to obtain one. The Abortion Act was approved in Britain in 1967 but did not include Northern Ireland. Therefore, Belfast or other northern cities were excluded as possible destinations for abortion trips by women in the republic, who usually travel to London. A lobby for the extension of the Act to Northern Ireland was formed in the 1980s but by the end of the century, the goal had not been reached yet (Hill 199). It has also been recurrently claimed that the whole process is rather expensive and arduous, requiring a lot of planning and travel arrangements, so that a lot of women have been unable to undertake the trip. The costs include a

consultation fee, accommodation, travel and the abortion itself, whose charges vary depending on the numbers of weeks gone (Mahon 29).

All in all, though, the pursuit of Irish women's access to abortion has not been an unfruitful one. In 1997, the C case reopened the debate after another rape victim was allowed to travel to the United Kingdom, this time against her parents' will. As a result of this ruling, in 2002 a new Referendum promoted by the Catholic Church and the conservative government tried to introduce the 25th Amendment, which posed the revision of the terms in which abortion can be legal. Defeated by only a 2% difference, the Irish government was then obliged to grant the legislation allowing abortion for pregnant women threatening suicide. All these changes, along with the introduction of the legalisation of divorce in 1997 –whose analysis falls out of the scope of this study– have constituted what Murphy-Lawless and McCarthy term "women's achievement of full personal agency in the law" (71). Also, the process towards that achievement, however incomplete yet,[59] has been the focus of social debate over the past few decades, when Irish women's literature has also borrowed from that turmoil.[60]

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[59] According to the information provided by the Irish Family Planning Association website, the status quo continues after the 25th Amendment.

[60] For a detailed exploration of the 1995 Divorce Referendum and its subsequent transformation in the Divorce Act of 1997, see Wood and O'Shea, eds. *Divorce in Ireland* (1997) and Coulter's "Hello Divorce, Goodbye Daddy" (1997). A feminist analysis of divorce and its representation in literature can be found in my book *Sólo ellas: familia y feminismo en la novela irlandesa contemporánea*, which also analyses Catherine Dunne's novel *In the Beginning* (1997) on those issues (pages 99-128). Other fictional works on Irish women's experiences of marital breakdown or divorce are Edna O'Brien's *Time and Tide* (1992), Emma Cooke's *Wedlocked* (1994), Marian Keyes *Watermelon* (1996), Claire Ní Aonghusa's *Four Houses and a Marriage* (1997) and Catherine Dunne's *Something like Love* (2006). Moreover, the collection *If Only* (1997), which consists of twenty nine short stories by Irish women writers, is focussed entirely on those issues. It includes Mary Leland's "Commencements" and Mary Rose Callaghan's "Windfalls," both dealing with women's

In light of this intricate legal framework of the struggle over women's reproductive rights, which was certainly under close social consideration by the time in which the three novels were published, it can be easily argued that the controversies around legal prejudices about women, constitutional amendments and judicial actions were as much present within the Irish psyche as they were in the authors' mind when they conceived their works. For this reason, the situational context in which the novels were launched provides further significance to the main content and subjects that are described in them, so much so that they somehow correlate with our interpretation of the stories. At the same time, although the authors make a deliberate narrative move back in time for the background of their protagonists, rather than creating distance about the matters under analysis, they demonstrated that a greater part of past-time convictions abode the novels' present-day ideological scene and that a lot of work still had to be done in order to reach a real social development. In this vein, it can be said that the narratives deploy the postmodernist mode of time modulation, along with social critique of some of the most controversial issues of Irish legislation concerning women.

The authors' use of time framing then enables them to interrogate the substantiability of the actions that are portrayed. Adele Dalsimer points out that "Leland writes with the awareness that the forms of political animosity and parochialism she explores are resonant with current relevance. Her version of history carries with it a keen sense of

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handling of lone maternity after marital breakdown and the construction of new family patterns.

Ireland's present tragedy" (17). In *Mothers*, the main action takes place over less than a week but these days reminisce several decades (Duff 13). The publication of this novel, in which one of the protagonists plans to have an abortion, and other minor female characters claim to have had one, certainly contributed to heat up the debate about reproductive rights. Although as Mike Duff makes clear in the title of his review of the novel, it "[got] caught in abortion controversy" and Callaghan claims for the pro-choice content of her text, the story obviously offered a literary portrayal of many of the cultural, religious and economic reasons that prompt Irish women to infringe the legislation.

Ronnie in *Mothers* and Mary in *DBR* are confronted with the constitutional maxims of female behaviour in the sense that they are required to comply with what their family and society expect from them after having been born women. Their case has resonance with what Silvia Caporale comments about women's adscription to the role of mothers:

> To give birth is biological, the necessity to turn it into a primordial role for women is cultural. The political, social and economic order necessarily manipulates the positioning of individuals in the social milieu, but, at the same time needs a series of artefacts that intervene in the construction of a cultural hegemony that turns individuals into consentful subjects (*hegemony by consent*) and their bodies into docile bodies (*bio-power*). (201, my translation)

An example of the bias towards a conservative coding of women's social role as delineated in the Constitution is patent in *The Killeen* through the narrator's description of the clash between Julia's education and her desire for a self-directed life. Embedded in that coding remains the deeply-rooted and constitutionally sanctioned female adscription to the roles of wife and mother that we outlined above:

> Julia Mulcahy, neé Watson, had been brought up to the kind of life in which a married lady would be expected to go through nothing except frequent childbirth. Educated in the convent school, the darling of the nuns first because of her beauty, and, so far as Sr. Thomas Aquinas and a few discerning others, her brains, she had then been sent to a carefully chosen school in France for a year. (45)[61]

Born and bred in a well-off family, as a woman in the 1930s she was expected to marry and have several children, and therefore, not to engage in external work outside the home and beyond maternal care. Through the literary voice of her narrator, then, Leland succeeds in comprising in one single paragraph all the main points of the controversial principles ratified with the Constitution and its article 41.

Despite the insistence on the prevalence of constitutional discourse about the allocation of women to marriage, motherhood and domesticity, the novels also partake in the general claim for the exclusion of those principles from the socio-political order of Ireland. Published in the 1980s, *Mothers* and *The Killeen* represent the increasingly evident engagement with the social struggle for women's reproductive rights that Irish women's groups and individuals were engaged in at the time. Literature, then, can be considered one of the most influential disciplines from which those rights were defended, even though writers usually claim their desire to merely present a vision of reality coming from their own imagination rather than moralising through their works. Indeed, in an interview Mary Rose Callaghan commented: "A novelist can only write a story. You can't preach to people or you're not writing fiction" (Duff 13). She also made clear that with *Mothers* her interest was not to take a

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[61] Leland, Mary. *The Killeen*. London: Hamilton, 1985. All subsequent quotations from the novel refer to this edition and the page numbers will be indicated parenthetically.

stand, and that the story had already been drafted five years earlier. However, the content and tone of the book were probably the reasons why it was actually banned by RTE, the national broadcasting station, together with the fact that its publication coincided with the abortion referendum. In other words, no matter what the author had said, the novel was understood and widely read as political and became politicised in the social milieu of the time, which was something she never intended. By contrast, at another interview Callaghan remarked that "banning is the best thing that can happen to a book. It was a bit of minor hit -people were reading it on the bus" (Wessel-Felter 2003: 164).

The legal entrapment that Irish single mothers had suffered up to the 1980s is illustrated through the three characters in different but complementary ways, which correspond to the specific ethos of the various periods in which they conceived their babies. Adopting the circular time movement followed by Callaghan throughout the three stories, a closer analysis of the novel unveils that such entrapment remained intact in many ways generation after generation. Thus, the constitutional impediment that brought Agnes, her mother and a trusted servant to an English clinic to await the birth of her illegitimate child still lingers by the time of Ronnie's out of wedlock conception in Dublin during the 1980s. In fact, to quote Mike Duff: "Although the city and its people have changed gradually over their lifetimes, the book presents a narrowness of context, so that often bright and energetic, characters seem trapped" (13).

Ronnie's dilemma about having the baby or going to England for an abortion demonstrates then that she was considering a possibility that was –and still is in many ways– illegal. Indeed, as Myrtle Hill puts it: "Criminalisation is thus added to the emotion and distress of their situation" (200). The author is then fictionalising the secret break of Irish legislation that many Irish women, the victims of an excessively oppressive system, were doing every week.[62] For those reasons, further comment on the novel's censure in Irish public media is probably not necessary, displaying as it did –and as many other artistic works continue to do– the hidden reality of Ireland.

In the case of Harriet's illegitimate baby, complications of all kinds are added by the fact that her conception was also adulterous. She is not only constrained by the limits of her lover's marriage but also by her own unmarried status. For that reason, Harriet turns to the legal –but not emotional, in her case– shelter of an emergency marriage to James, an old friend of hers, not long after she discovers that she is pregnant. However, with this character Callaghan's most clear reflection of legal delimitation for women like her revolves around questions of legitimacy and inheritance. Becoming Harriet's extramarital lover and then fathering her child, Oliver epitomises the patriarchal preoccupation with the production of heirs for male property whose prevalence was pointed out in

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[62] Citing from the *Abortion Statistics* of England and Wales, Jo Murphy-Lawless remarks that by 1984, nearly four thousand women per year had an abortion in Britain and gave Ireland as their normal place of residence. This figure may have been actually higher considering the possible recrimination if the women gave their real address, as sustained by pregnancy advisory services. However, it remained at that level for the rest of the decade (1993: 54). Also judging from the abortion statistics provided by the Irish Family Planning Association, from 1980 to 1990 the average number of women was over three thousand, of which around 70% were aged between twenty and thirty four years old. For updated statistics, see their website www.ifpa.ie.

Part One of our study. Before their first sexual encounter after years of friendship, he confesses to her: "I must have a son, or I can't inherit my property. If I don't have a son the lot goes to my brother. I'd more or less made up my mind to marry Laura, and it was … difficult to … oh, get out of it. I thought my feelings for you would pass" (73).[63] His purpose when getting married and also by acknowledging this to Harriet is then made clear: he wanted to keep his economic stability by means of the legal protection that could only be granted by marital reproduction. At the same time, although he tries to persuade her about the loveless nature of such an action, what most clearly stems from this short but completely meaningful comment is not the legal dimension of that common requisite but the subtlety by which women are trapped by male, self-reliant usage of the law whereas their body is employed as the effective biological apparatus of such manipulation.

The reasons and implications of this patriarchal practice through marriage have been examined by Luce Irigaray, who, in line with structuralist positions about the exchange of women, criticises how

> women are marked phallicly by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce. Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men, including the competition for the possession of mother earth. (1991: 210)

Therefore, it follows that apart from a religious ideal, as we will see in the next section, marriage was considered as a social construction based on purely economic and legal factors, in which women are merely used as commodities.

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[63] Callaghan, Mary Rose. *Mothers.* Dublin: Arlen House, 1982. All subsequent quotations from the novel refer to this edition and the page numbers will be indicated parenthetically.

In *The Killeen*, the reflection of the legal constraints for Irish single mothers is unveiled through the intersection between the clearly Republican, religious and socially conservative context in which Margaret and Julia's stories are set. Both women become involuntarily entangled in an out of wedlock pregnancy, but because of their disparate educational and economic background, as well as personal spirit, the effects of their legal entrapment in those socially undesirable circumstances are wielded in different ways. On the one hand, a Paris-based Julia, pregnant after casual sexual intercourse with her boyfriend's best friend –the German refugee Sebastien– determines not to reveal the fling and its consequences. However, her determination aside, what seemed of real substance for her as transmitted by the narrator was the ironic concern with legitimacy through marriage that Maurice, the non-biological father, had felt at the time:

> 'Can you promise me that it will be a son?' was his cheerful protest when he set about making arrangements; like Julia, he had relatives in Cork who would welcome his child, but who would need positive assurance of its legitimacy. It had all been very legitimate. It occurred to Julia though that Patrick [the later born baby] had only amused and gratified Maurice, not held him or given him any feeling of extension, not even of commitment. (86)

As usual, a great number of meaningful connotations permeate this quote from Leland's work, ranging from men's obsession with the perpetuation of the family through the male line, the achievement of that perpetuation only by means of legitimate birth through marriage, and finally, the common relocation of paternity to a secondary position in favour of the Republican cause.

On the other hand, legal complications also appear for Margaret, whose baby is taken from her some time after birth to be educated at an orphanage. When she becomes increasingly aware and remorseful about having given up her baby for adoption, she resolves to rescue him from there and send him to her family in the country. The constrains of the rural setting as well as the legal quandaries of illegitimacy for Irish women like her can be observed when Julia tries to persuade her about the difficulties she would have to face if she made that decision:

> [I]t was ridiculous for Margaret to think she could live easily in a village with an illegitimate child. Her voice was sharp. 'You know yourself that it would make terrible trouble in your family if you went back there with Thomas. How would you deal with it? What would it be like for Thomas? At school? Would you take him to Mass? What would your mother say -and your brother, and Mary?' (93)

Held together, these two cases of what was considered as dysfunctional maternity offer similar commentaries about the consequences that the constitutional rhetorics of motherhood may have for relentless women, but at the same time, they appeal to the added standpoint from which they were also viewed, that is, class. Since the early pages of the novel, the idiosyncrasy that characterises each protagonist's situation is minutely described, along with the different mechanisms that are activated for or by each of them after their misdeed. In Adele Dalsimer's words,

> Julia's wealth and status permit her eventual liberation, but Margaret's poverty and compromised position prove insurmountable. Able to extricate her child from the inhuman demands of republican ideology, Margaret cannot protect him from the parochial ignorance and lethal bigotry of her impoverished background. (17)

Whereas everything is planned for Margaret by women who intend to "protect" her and her child, that is, the maiden aunts and a lady doctor, Julia possessed enough autonomy not to hesitate about the sensible choice to get married to Maurice (43, 86). At this point, Leland sheds some light on the various degrees of impact that legal foundations had for Irish single mothers in the early twentieth century, quite often subject to economic opportunities and perceptual awareness.

During the lapse of time between the 1940s and the early 1990s, when the events of *DBR* took place,[64] Ireland witnessed a very heated struggle for women's liberation, which gradually became consolidated as important rights were gained. Nevertheless, Edna O'Brien calls the readers' attention to the ongoing conservative ethics and legal interpretation of the Constitution that still affected Irish women in the last years of the twentieth century. In the novel, she demonstrates through Mary, as was indeed evidenced by the real X, the Irish repossession of identity that was being performed through the imaginary order but also by means of the materiality of women's bodies. Particularly, she condemns the role of constitutional discourse, which, unlike the symbolism where it is ideologically based, certainly affects the common order that these women inhabit. Not surprisingly, the extent to which patriarchal, Catholic and nationalist ethos is entrenched in social and legal dealings with unmarried maternity is strongly criticised by her.

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[64] As we have mentioned, *DBR* was published in 1996, only four years after the X-Case and the Right to life Referendum took place, but the story was more than probably conceived around that time. Thus, the appearance of the novel could have been meant not merely as a fictionalisation of the story but most certainly, as a denounce of the social handling of the case and the results of the election. In fact, one reviewer of the novel describes it as "the latest missile launched in O'Brien's quarrel with Ireland" (Jackson 36).

The involvement of Betty –a neighbour who also used to be a friend of Mary's mother– in the abortion trip to Britain figures as one of the fictional adaptations of the X case that O'Brien does in her novel. In the real episode, the police and later the Attorney general, became alerted when her parents had inquired about the possibility of getting DNA test of foetal tissue in order to start their prosecution of the rapist. By contrast, in the narrative the outset for state control over Mary's body is presented when Noni, a neighbour, finds some papers that give evidence of their appointment in a London clinic. From then on, a private problem becomes a public concern, as Noni categorically admits to James when she tells him the news: "This is not your business… It's the whole country's business" (134).[65] After this intrusion, Betty is threatened with prosecution for abducting a minor and the whole system of legal entrapment is set in motion. It is Doctor Tom the one who informs them and tells them to return home because they have committed a criminal offence. By then, and on their way back on the plane, Betty wishes for a space where there are no such legal impediments: "[W]ishing only one thing, one thing, that they could stay up there in the heavens forever, drifting through the forests of harmless cloud and being set down in some lost unmapped region" (144). In a further extension of the realities behind the legal situation of Ireland and the role of the Church in those issues, O'Brien also has Doctor Tom saying that the medical fraternity is "under the thumbs of the bishops" (142).

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[65] O'Brien, Edna. *Down by the River.* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996. All subsequent quotations from the novel refer to this edition and the page numbers will be indicated parenthetically.

That external forces other than mothers' wishes to terminate their pregnancy are also responsible for the future of the foetus-child is denounced by O'Brien throughout her account of Mary's story once she is back from London. The victim of paternal sexual abuse, she exemplifies the physical as well as psychological dullness that the Irish legal regulation generates in those women who, however undeliberately, overstep the imposed limits of ideal womanhood and motherhood. Her particular family circumstances, with a dead mother and an indifferent father, Betty's forced disappearance from the case as well as the involvement of the whole community in Mary's life turn her into a mere legal case rather than an individual. This eventually leaves her at the mercy of lawyers and judges, as widely emphasised in the second part of the book. Instantly, her story is interpreted as a national disaster, as uttered by one of the lawyers: "Some little slut about to pour piss on the nation's breast" (167). Shortly after the case is known a kind of emergency court is convened, and it is decided that "she must be stopped because the unborn shall not be removed from the jurisdiction of the court," which is understood by the High Judge that "[t]he right to travel *simpliciter* cannot take precedence over the right to life" (167). Mary's entrapment is made clear, and even though a lawyer named Cathal helps her and brings her case to the Supreme Court, it can only be done after they secure the permission of her father, who is, ironically as it remains unknown to Cathal at that stage, also the baby's father (217). Thus, O'Brien criticises the entrapment suffered by women not only by the legal particularity of this case but also by the patriarchal law that decides parental control of children.

4.1.2. Social policies: in search for provision

The analysis of how single mothers are affected by the legal space in which their condition is framed and its representation in the novels also requires a deeper exploration of the social treatment of their cases, which usually results from the legal vulnerability under which they live, and quite often creates a never ending vicious circle. When exploring the ways in which maternity is socially constructed in Ireland, Anne Coakley refers to the so-called "social citizenship model" used for the analysis of the social provision for women on an international scale. Though she directs her study towards married mothers' qualification in income maintenance schemes developed in Ireland, her introspection into how the gendering of citizenship affects the articulation of social welfare benefits is a useful framework for the examination of single mothers' status in the country. As delineated by Coakley, the term "social citizenship" alludes to "access to the average standard of living in a society, and to a sense of inclusiveness in the life of the community" (181). Intertwined in practices of such terminology remain wider questions about whether married women in Ireland are granted their individual rights or if they are simply undermined.

For the single mother, those questions acquire a deeper significance in the sense that very frequently social vulnerability is the most imminent condition to which their state precipitates them, probably as inherited from the restrictions of the Constitution in terms of the restrain on mothers from working outside the home, as commented above. Also, their rights are undermined in favour of less problematical

and more nationalistic stances of social integrity. Thus, beyond the political and moral problem that they have traditionally posed, the state's social handling of their situation has remained a widespread concern. In her study of the contradictory position of single mothers in the terms of the Irish rhetorics of marriage and motherhood, Abbey Hyde remarks that "until well into the twentieth century, the only refuge for many single mothers was the workhouse" (23). In her analysis of the situation in the 1960s and 1970s, Myrtle Hill aligns women's denied access to contraception and the tendency to deal with unwanted pregnancies by going "across the water" with the general indifference about this issue and its perception for long as a non-Irish problem (146).

Probably one of the turning points for the socio-economic consideration of unmarried mothers was introduced with the growing debates coming from feminist groups and which culminated in the 1971 manifesto *Chains or Change: The Civil Wrongs of Irish Women*. The text detailed six demands to break female oppression in the country: "One Family, One House; Equal Rights in Law, Equal Pay Now and the Removal of the Marriage Bar; Justice for Widows, Deserted Wives, Unmarried Mothers; Equal Educational Opportunities; and finally access to contraception, which they considered a fundamental human right" (Hill 153). Critics and feminist activists have agreed that its most direct result was the introduction of the Single Mothers' Allowance in 1973 by which unmarried mothers were granted the provision of a weekly allowance to help them keep their child. Similarly, the creation of several support groups around those years, like ADAPT (Association for Deserted and

Alone Parents) and CHERISH (Children Have Every Right In Society Here) meant that those women had other alternatives to the institutionalised care of the workhouse (Hyde 23).

Considering this course of action for Irish single mothers' access to state benefits, it can be argued that the three novels under study interrogate the complete application of those achievements and problematise the prevalence of the socio-economically biased notions of single maternity. Thus, the fact that single mothers visualise themselves as extremely liable to economic risks and poverty is equally criticised, though tangentially, in the texts. The authors bring to the fore that well granted prospect when, while trying to deal with their new state, the protagonists become aware of their suddenly unprotected situation. In the case of Ronnie in *Mothers*, not long after she discovers that she is pregnant her self-image in the near future is that of going to her aunt Aggie's house in order to beg for money:

> Maybe years hence, in beggarly disguise, and with a tattered child in two, I will knock on Cousin Aggie's door. 'Spare a few pence, ma'am?' Cousin Aggie, peering out, will drop a few coins into my box. 'Poor dismal creature,' she will say, 'I sense some mysterious tragedy hidden deep within you, as I gaze at the careworn lines across your strangely aristocratic features.' (23)

Callaghan emphasises here not only that being driven to begging is what most single pregnant women would ultimately expect in the 1980s, but also that shame and class deterioration remain inherent to out of wedlock conception by the time when Ronnie gets pregnant. Also, earlier in the novel, the protagonist compares her unmarried maternal state with that of a tinker she comes across while crossing Carlisle Bridge, one of the most common locations for beggars in Dublin city (22). This parallelism

enables the author to articulate her critique of how social marginalisation and economic necessity are usually the most direct results for single mothers, entering thus into the group of social outcasts.

Ronnie's fears and visions of her time ahead are simply a prospect here but they become more apparent as she gradually muses over the many inconveniences she will find on the way of her out of wedlock conception. Thus, while she thinks about the threat to her professional stability that having the baby would pose, sarcastically she comments that she could "take up shoplifting" (32). Her ironic interpretation comprises equally her own economic desperation and at the same time, the author's denounce that according to legal and social policy discourses, state benefits were automatically available for these women, but everyday realities revealed that they were not assumed so directly by them.

These ruminations contrast though, with the embarrassment that Mary is forced to go through in *DBR*. O'Brien's protagonist is younger than Ronnie, who, however precarious her life could get to be, still has a job and is economically independent. On the contrary, Mary lives on her father's farm and depends on his dispositions. Mary's vulnerability is manifest when she tries to ask him for money to do the shopping, whereas it is actually the bus fare she needs to escape to Dublin. Her purpose is to find refuge "where distraught women could shelter and even the name of it is like a beacon to her" (120). Again, her ignorance and isolation intersects here with her misery, as we are told that she had only read about this place in one of Tara's magazines. However, as her father

had refused to give her any money and forbade her to ask for his unpaid debts, she bargains for change instead of a chocolate box that a shopkeeper offers to her: "'Here,' the woman says, picking up a chocolate box with a wide red ribbon round it. 'I never sent flowers when your poor mother died.' 'I'd rather the money,' Mary says and the woman opens the till and takes out a note but somehow there is a chilliness in it" (121). What stands out in this episode is that Mary is completely dependent on her father in economic terms, and that will be one of the starting points for her story of sexual, familial, religious and even political oppression, as we will comment below. Both she and Ronnie demonstrate their shame when complying with such economic degradation, but Ronnie seems to rather experience it in comic terms and as a possible source of disappointment to her family, whereas Mary is more inclined towards self-pity: "She cannot look up at the woman for shame, no more than she could look at herself, because she has turned beggar now" (121). All in all, what the authors criticise is not simply the psychological bitterness with which women lived through the early moments of a dysfunctional pregnancy but also the socio-economic implications that it tragically entails for them.

Later on, O'Brien provides a more critical and thought-provoking insight into the social consideration of single mothers as voiced by Jacko —James's friend and neighbour—. In a conversation, the two men discuss their animal breeding business and Jacko indicates his own economic scheme:

> 'I'll tell you where the money is now … Being a woman, lying on your back and having kids, kids galore … Unmarried mothers

> fleecing this country … The more they have they more dole they're given … Up near me there's a Dutch woman in a mobile home … Six kids … Two live-in men … Both of them hammering her.' (71)

Embedded in Jacko's views of single mothers remain the patriarchal understandings of women's out of wedlock conception as indicative of their looseness, while men's responsibilities in 'hammering' them are overlooked. Further, this character bears out the not uncommon perception that these women may deliberately profit from their pregnancies. Indeed, Abbey Hyde points out that after the Single Mothers' Allowance was introduced, the condemnation of their moral values was combined with a notion of the social inconvenience that they posed: "Rather than concerns about sexual morality which dominated in the previous era, the re-emergence of negative attitudes was seen to be rooted in economic concerns about the drain of resources on the welfare state" (23). In the novel, O'Brien echoes such bias and sharply assigns them to the two male characters epitomising a strongly patriarchal mentality.

In *Mothers*, Ronnie further utters her economic concerns when becoming a single mother in another flight of fancy in which Harriet appears, thus bringing the two characters, as well as the decades in which they conceived, together for comparative consideration. To her question "what was it like having a baby?", Harriet answers: "Expensive. You'll need money. You must do something about that.[…] What about an evening job?" (156-157). This suggestion gives way to Ronnie's telephone call about an advertisement for a sandwich making job, which once again, has tragicomic undertones and reflects the absurdity and

desperation of the economic situation of single mothers. However, although the prospect of this precariousness figures as one of the reasons for Ronnie's decision to undergo an abortion in London, she is eventually persuaded by Harriet about the favourable circumstances and opportunities for single mothers in the 1980s: "We'd work something out. There's no need to panic. Not nowadays. When the baby is born, you could continue working. It'll be difficult —but there's help. Remember that" (240). Therefore, their story then ends with the conflation of the two attitudes towards the socio-economic plight of single mothers, in which a more optimistic outlook gains ground.

As for the context of *The Killeen*, Anne Owens Weekes argues that "[l]ife in impoverished Ireland is grim and harsh, and sensitive characters are especially vulnerable in such environment" (1993: 187). In the case of Margaret, her economic helplessness is evident since the early chapters of the book but becomes increasingly apparent as the story progresses. After leaving the country, where her father's death had placed her family in an extremely vulnerable economic situation, she wants to go away not only to receive the education she was willing to get since she was a child, but mostly to escape from her mother's constant reproofs and to start a new, self-sufficient life. Her job hunting escape would become then, the best excuse to leave her mother and the family problems behind:

> Margaret was afraid, but desperate. She understood nothing but that she was old enough to leave home, to work, and that she had to go. Cork, yes, that was far away, a big city, but Miss Monaghan had told her of friends who would give her work, who would look after her. What that meant she had no idea, but didn't dare to wonder. (10)

Margaret ends up accepting the offer to work in the convent, but when she gets pregnant, the economic protection granted by the scullery and wiping job she does there is immediately replaced by the imposed move to work as a servant in Julia Mulchahy's house. The economic implications of such relocation refer to the fact that earlier she had worked in the religious institution in order to cater for her instruction but when her pregnancy in irregular circumstances is known, it is social respectability what remains at stake. This is made quite clear when Father Costello tells her: "You will remain within the house at all times. Do what you are told, and you will be cared for" (24). Thus, the scheme to avoid immoral "contamination" to the other girls in the convent school intersects with the economic and spatial device created by the religious figures in order to keep her away from social reproof and economic marginalisation.

However, although this decision takes the initial form of charity on the part of the nuns and Father Costello, it bears the added irony that for them she does not qualify completely for such help, because of her unrestrained behaviour: "Sr. Brigid will bring you to this lady's house tomorrow. Sister will help you tell your family that you have moved from the convent. You will be given some money, enough, generous in fact, considering…" (24). Leland's message is clear, but by leaving this comment unfinished, she suggests that they are making allowances for which, they think, she should be more than grateful, probably for ever. Further, the fact that Margaret remains silent throughout the scene figures as a clear evidence of the powerlessness that girls like her

experienced in such circumstances, when everyone around them makes the decisions that determine their lives. Thus, as compared to the other two novels, in *The Killeen* religious factors play a more significant role in the single mothers' lack of socio-economic protection.

4.1.3. Politics: in the name of the nation

In general terms, the authors of *Mothers*, *The Killeen* and *DBR* undertake similar projects to depict how the political idiosyncrasy of twentieth-century Ireland, as well as the specific situation of the period in which the novels are set, act upon the gender ideologies that determine the social attitudes to single maternity. Though varying in its representativity and particular function in the development of each story, the state-based Irish identity politics is presented as shaping the background of the social imagining and handling of their predicament. As discussed in Part One of our study, because of its colonial past and the decolonising agendas, the political differentiation of Ireland very much depended on strategies of gender polarities that would contribute to the realignment of masculine and national power. In their attempt to achieve national integrity, state artefacts asserted their nationalist ideals through female symbolism and the sexual oppression of women. Consequently, as Gerardine Meaney remarks:

> Feminism must interrogate nationalism, must maintain its own interests and women's interests against any monolithic national identity which perpetuates patriarchy. In engaging with nationalist women, it must point out how little nationalism and republicanism have promoted or protected women's interests, how much they have done to denigrate and oppress women. (1993: 237)

In this light, it can be argued that feminist claims of dismantling the Irish political ethos of nationalism are at work in these novels, where it is remarked that the circumstances of single maternity are somehow determined by the forces of the political, patriarchal order. Despite covering a wider historical framework than the other two works, *Mothers* is the one in which the intersection of Ireland's political identity and the

configuration of single mothers' subjectivity is less thoroughly explored. Yet, much of the specific preoccupations of each historical period are inevitably filtered in the narrative. Coming from a wealthy family, with her brother a senator and with their time-honoured reputation in the national articulation of the state (104), Agnes bears witness to the disruption that an out of wedlock maternity generated in those familial circumstances of political commitment in the early decades of the century. Further, the reader can grasp that when Harriet becomes a single mother in the 1960s, the situation has not changed substantially, and even if part of the nationalist struggle for Irish cultural identity had succeeded at that time, the plight she falls into after that demonstrates the remaining effects of the construction of the nation through the female ideals, which she has not met.

The most notable interrogation of those politically oriented principles is made by Callaghan through Ronnie, whose single pregnancy story echoes much of the feminist campaigns and political questioning that characterised the 1970s and 1980s in Ireland. As maintained by Gray and Ryan, "feminists have been successful in shifting political debate in the Republic away from the ongoing concern with economic success and traditional versions of national identity to wider social issues" (133). The political content in the chapters that cover her experiences of single maternity mostly refers to the rhetorics of female sexuality and how it was contested at that time. Thus, the debates about sexual liberation, access to legal contraception and abortion are discussed at various points of those sections. However, Callaghan does not engage

in questions of the configuration of national identity through these issues, and very wisely weaves into this part of her narrative the broader political consequences of Ireland's position about abortion principles as compared to the international panorama. This is voiced through Breda in her discussion with Ronnie about the reasons and implications of Irish women's option for abortion. A declared communist, Breda de-dramatises the personal ethical conflicts occasioned by the performance of an abortion and relocates them to more extensive socio-political motives. She suggests to a puzzled Ronnie that: "A capitalist is only immersed in his own muck heap, while a socialist considers the greatest good for the greatest number… I'd say it's your public duty to have an abortion" (137). Then, she concludes her political reasoning with what can be interpreted as the need for Irish people to avoid self-absorption and adopt more internationally oriented positions in these matters: "What we do in Ireland affects the world. The world is overpopulated, so it's your duty to have an abortion. Q.E.D." (137).

The Killeen stands out among the three novels for its complex insight into the negative consequences brought about by an excessive concentration on the political signifiers of the nation without considering their fatal effects upon both female and male individuals. Obviously, the historical setting of the novel in the 1930s, a period of fervent nationalism and crucial for the configuration of the ideological patterns of Irishness and femininity during most of the century, accounts for Leland's interest in describing how single maternity episodes and social attitudes to them have been ultimately modelled on those political elements, while also

raising questions about the prevalence of such articulations in present-day Ireland. Her inscription of politics in the novel has a triple dimension, although all the different outlooks to the political milieu are imbricated in the negative consequences they usually have for the female characters. On one hand, she portrays the male objectification of women on account of their unconditional political commitment, highlighting the stagnation imposed on these female figures, even if they do not share those views and remain unconcerned with the men's cause.[66] On the other hand, quite the opposite case is described in light of women's commitment to the political cause, which nonetheless, also throws them into states of uneasiness. And finally, as the utmost effect of both positions or probably underlying them, Leland looks into the political romanticisation of the land, which appears at the end of the novel and accounts for her attempt to demythologise the trope woman-land-nation through the events in which Thomas's and Margaret's stories are unfold.

The intersection of politics and single maternity in *The Killeen* starts from the premise that women are attracted to the heroism of the men who father their child. As Christine St. Peter suggests, the protagonists are so captivated by the men's engagement in revolutionary nationalism that they end up falling "prey to the powerful aphrodisiac of militarist masculinity" (2000a: 76). Indeed, special emphasis is given to this seduction when Margaret remembers her encounters with Earnán in

[66] Earnán and Maurice are representatives of the most radical sectors of Irish republicanism which opposed the terms of the Treaty, did not support De Valera's government after the Civil War and were finally outlawed by him. Thus, they embody "what was hidden in more triumphalist versions of official republican history" (Peach 60). In the novel, their ostracisation, either within the walls of a convent or expatriated in Paris, indicates how they were persecuted for being "irregulars," and eventually it leads them to America or to prison, respectively.

the convent. The fascination that she had developed for everything around him becomes apparent when she recalls: "Her yearning mind succumbed to his references, to the sensual pull of his knowledge, and she began to look with the eyes of love not at him, but at her place, the countryside, the source of literature and song, of language" (32). Julia is similarly tantalised by Maurice in her first conversations with him in Paris, while they discuss her views on Michael Collins's ideals and the consequences of his death. Quite symbolically, the narrator marks this moment as the merging point of her sexual and political interest in him:

> This was the second excitement, the beginning of sexual consciousness flaring alight as political identity grew. […] This sense of warm lightness, of speed and purpose and gay authority, this was the beginning of her fascination; someone had broken into her determined abstraction and taken her over. (52-53)

However, Margaret and Julia also personify the reordering of that attraction and disillusionment because of their unmatched concessions between politics and their love relationship, as compared to those of the men. In other words, male political agency in this novel is presented as correlating with the delusion of women's wishes and needs, both before and after their sexual encounter leads to conception. Quite significantly, the author constructs the concurrence among the concealed political realities of the radical republican struggle in which men are immersed, their emotional detachment from the women and the ultimate secrecy that the illegitimate pregnancies resulting from such deception generate. To use Linden Peach's words, "[t]he impact of knowing that these men concealed much of themselves and were never fully present to the women with whom they made love is analogous of the way in which in the 1920s and 1930s elements of republicanism revealed themselves as strangers to

each other" (60). In this light, Leland's use of the political plot in the novel is constructed in such a way that it constitutes one of the most oppressive elements for women in the early phases of their single maternity, which then becomes a matter of social concern for those around them. The apparently liberating aims of the political enterprises at that time are then dismantled, so that as Rigg and Vance observe in their analysis of the novel, it is demonstrated that "individual life and hope were stifled and restricted even among those close to the 'freedom fighters'" (264).

But Leland's purposes to trace women's experiences of political manipulation are not restricted to those examples of suffocation. Interestingly, she also incorporates in her women characters the deconstruction or at least the questioning, of that victimised reality at some point of their relation with their nationalist partners. Thus, Margaret and Julia challenge their own oppression with ideas of national transformation and the future of the island which are completely distinct from those delineated by the men. As Julia Kristeva argues in *Nations without Nationalism*, even within political movements fighting for freedom, people run the risk of becoming totalitarian, and women, long treated as strangers and exiles in those movements, are in a good position to use their voice from the margins in order to contest that. Thus, for her "women have the luck and the responsibility of being boundary-subjects" (1993: 35).

This possibility of women's action operates in *The Killeen* through Margaret and her opposition to the violent agenda followed by Earnán in

his nationalist struggle. Margaret exposes her own vision of political deeds in a quite significant scene where Leland blends the assumed innocence of the protagonist with her sharp judgement of the strategies usually taken by the freedom fighters. Contrary to the violent actions of war and bloodshed, she believes in dialogue and negotiation as the most powerful weapons:

> 'It is the only way, don't you see?' he had asked once when she had questioned him. 'How can it be? If a person is killed that's all they are dead. They never can accept what you think is true, they never can come to agree with you. If you want to kill everyone who opposes you even on the matter of what is going to happen in this country –then you've given up on your own argument, haven't you?' (33)

In the same vein, Julia also confronts the strictly radical perception of Irish political fight sustained by Maurice, which gradually increases after their return to Cork from Paris. When he is arrested as a subversive, he starts a hunger strike in protest for his imprisonment, which is interpreted by Julia in similarly disapproving terms: "This is not how it should end for you. This is failure. Suicide is failure. You are taking your conviction with you, leaving nothing behind" (89). Through these two counterarguments uttered by the women then, the author not only offers the voice behind the official version of Irish male heroism but also the stories of discontent, disappointment and female courage that underlie them. In that sense, her protagonists somehow challenge the gender polarities inherent in political agency, as criticised by Ailbhe Smyth in her famous article "The Floozie in the Jacuzzi":

> Consider again the ethic and rhetoric of sacrifice and martyrdom for the Irish male. Inflationary. Heroic self-enhancement, self-fulfilment. To die for. Transitive. For Irish women, sacrifice signifies nothing. Annihilation. To die. Intransitive. Fuel on the

> fire of machoheroism. Metaphor in their discourse. Symbol. Icon. Even still. (21)

On the opposite side of how Margaret and Julia challenge the delimitations of nationalism in Ireland are Maurice's aunts, Miss Bina and Miss Lou. They represent the extreme devotion to the republican cause that Irish women showed at the beginning of the twentieth century through their attachment to *Cumann na mBan*, the women's branch of the IRA which played a crucial role in the war of Independence and against the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Actually, as characters the aunts are created after the historical figure of Mary MacSwiney, a Cork revolutionary whose brother —Terence Brown— was the city Mayor and died while on hunger strike in 1920. MacSwiney was a Deputy for Cork in the 1921 Dáil and she publicised her brother's death and campaigned for his ideals (Broderick 203-207). Similarly, in the novel the aunts turn their brother into a martyr and a hero, and constantly try to justify his death. Even to Julia, for whom it is indeed inexplicable, they argue: "Who can interfere with a man's right to fight for his country?" (87).

But what really aligns Maurice's aunts with the historical rebel is their common refusal to accept the Free State to which De Valera consented in the late 1920s. Estranged from the political course taken by him and from the weakness of his republican ideals, part of the position that they share about the political situation of Ireland in those decades is founded on the same principles. Thus, when discussing the validity of the Treaty, Mary MacSwiney had declared in one of her speeches in the Dáil:

> If [England] exterminates the men, the women will take their places, and if she exterminates the women, the children are rising

> fast; and if she exterminates the men, women and children of this generation, the blades of grass, dyed with their blood, will rise, like the dragon's teeth of old, into armed men and the fight will begin in the next generation. (Ward 1993: 168)

Similarly, for the Mulcahy sisters the family is the perpetuator of their political views of the nation, as inferred from Father Costello's comment that "their political lineage was impeccable for eternity" (40). For that reason, they insist on the need to continue with the articulation of a completely republican, independent country. Their presence in the novel – partaking as they do in both cases of single maternity with their insistence on the "proper" education of the two boys– reproduces the everyday manoeuvres of political interests, as they have plans to guide Julia's child "in the right direction at every possible occasion" and ask her to allow them to have political gatherings in her house (102-103). James Smith argues that "it is their perverse strategy to school the next generation of Irish martyrs that underscores Leland's counterstrategic portrait of political sacrifice in the name of Mother Ireland" (47). To our mind, they are also the embodiments of the prosaic forces that, in the name of the nation, try to manipulate the most vulnerable victims of the country's political panorama.

Beyond political beliefs and praxis, but certainly drawing on that insistence on Irish national identity that permeated the island's politics until very recent times, *The Killeen* also deconstructs a very meaningful symbol alluding to archetypical womanhood and based on the iconography of Mother Ireland, namely, the old peasant woman. As with other emblems that we have commented in other chapters of our study, this idealised vision of Irish women sustaining their offspring and the

nation's eminently rural economy, culture and education, was by and large projected onto the island's everyday ethos. Indeed, this idealised image of motherhood took place within the sacred boundaries of the cottage, which in the period around the new Free State, symbolised "the idealization of the rural family, as well as the chosen lifestyle of the new Ireland [...] It was in this environment that the Gael would be born and flourish, generation after generation. The role of women as begetters and preservers of the race was central to this vision" (Breathnacth-Lynch 29).

However, in the novel this iconographic figure is dismantled through Margaret's mother –Mrs. Coakley–, who batters her grandson and tortures him for the shame he has brought to the family:

> [She] muttered in the kitchen outside, shoving the kettle back from the fire so that Michael would not have warm water when he wanted it; 'forgetting' to keep the stirabout hot, forgetting to bring the mills in when she'd been to the cow. She was wishing death on the boy. She spat on the floor when Michael put a soiled nightshirt into the wash bucket, but she said nothing to him, and never went near Thomas at all, her hate was enough for her. She sat and watched, and waited. It came, Thomas died quietly. (127)

The cottage in which the Coakley family live in Adrigole appears then, not as the happy place for the education of new generations of Irish children, but rather, as a wretched torture chamber in which an innocent creature suffers penance after a sin he has not committed and is devoured by the maternal figure.[67] Actually, Margaret's family home never was a site of happiness (9), both before and after the death of her father. With

[67] Notice also the symbolism of the Irish land swallowing her undesired children, as Thomas is literally consumed by "the Killeen." For a further analysis of the meanings and reformulations of landscape in the novel, see my "Beyond the Limits of Illegitimacy: Mary Leland's *The Killeen*", in Altuna and Andreu, eds. 121-126. Further, in the epilogue of the novel, Margaret's younger sister Mary marries a farmer who is much older than her and must move to Cork together when he is left without a worthy land state after the death of his father. All this leaves her trapped in the city, "where the cravings of her own body had been driven underground by the urgent hungers of the land" (137).

Thomas's arrival and his unconscious bearing of the stigma of illegitimacy, the place becomes a horrible trap for him and his uncle Michael, so that (grand)Mother Ireland is then transformed into a devouring and repressive force that annihilates all hints of a more promising future for her children. Thus, to quote James Smith again: "Leland's re-inscribed 'old peasant woman' is reduced to a cowering emaciated figure" (46).

This idea of the political foundations of the nation as an annihilating force takes an equally outrageous expression in *DBR*, where a girl's pregnancy becomes a general concern. Angela K. Martin argues that what she calls "discourses of Seduction, Disease, Violence and Alterity" make reference to the fear of national destruction and change that has contributed to the internalisation of those issues as metaphors for the multi-fold threat posed to the Irish nation. Particularly relevant for such agenda is the transposition of individual choice or conscience to the level of national concern:

> Issues of individual choice, which could be seen as matters of personal conscience, become matters of national concern. Rather than being threats to individual Catholic moral integrity, abortion and divorce become matters which threaten the moral integrity of the Irish nation. (77)

This ideological movement finds its most clear materialization in women's bodies. Epitomised in the X-Case, Martin concludes, "nationalist violence, when applied to Miss X's body through state juridical structures, resulted in the mimetic embodiment of the Irish nation in the form of Miss X" (82).

O'Brien's insistence on the politicisation of Mary's case and the national manipulation of her body is most apparent after she and Betty are made to return from England in the second part of the novel. This notification sets in motion the political mechanisms and judicial competences. The fact that national actions are performed through a private case –as indeed happened to X– is then brought to the fore and harshly criticised by the author, as exposed when Mrs Fitz tells Mary that "no one's life is their own any more" (208). This constitutes an interesting move in O'Brien's fiction, because according to Christine St. Peter, "[u]nlike much of her earlier fiction, however, this novel does not remain in a private, unpoliticized realm" (2000b: 131). Mary is turned into an object of political intervention, and although various ideological approaches and policies are followed, it is the national identity what is constantly at stake in her case.

The common population consider her "a slut", "a poor child" and most interestingly, the bearer of Irishness in international contexts. A woman mentions about the case in a radio programme: "Let the girl go to England if she wants… We'll be judged in the history books as a nation of Neanderthals… Let the girl go" (187). The idea of the single mothers embodying widespread anxieties of national disintegration in Ireland can be found here. This common attitude also resonates with the theory of the nation as an "imagined community," formulated by Benedict Anderson: "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their

communion" (6). In light of these considerations, the attitudes towards Mary's pregnancy can be read as a communal reaction to a case lived by an individual but imagined by the whole population, who feel united through common national threats. The idea is indeed imprinted on the article that Mrs and Mr Fitz read to Mary when the girl is under their protection in Dublin:

> Neighbours are rallying at all hours, women arriving with flasks of tea, evident anxiety in their expressions and understandable fear for their own daughters, shock is palpable as this dark and terrible story unfolds and has put the hurt into the land itself. (211)

In a similar vein, the judges manifest in their private conversations their respective visions of the case, and although it is made clear that they are not politicians, they coincide in recognising the national dimension of the decisions they will make on the girl's use of her body: "Today being a day of general judgement upon us all" (247). Judge Hanna appeals to the distinctively religious identity of Ireland, whereas Judge Mahoney refers back to the heathen nature of the country:

> 'We're a Christian country … We're a model for the whole world.' 'We're pagans, Ambrose… Pagan urges run in our blood… Pagan love… Pagan lust… Pagan hate… It's why we need God so badly.' 'The unborn shall not be moved from the jurisdiction of the court… It's written… Sacrosant.' 'Don't give me catechism, Ambrose… I have it coming out of my ears.' (253)

Such dialogue leads us to consider the extent to which women's bodies can, and did, shake the pillars of the state and cast doubt on the position of Ireland on an international scale. As Ailbhe Smyth puts it, "women's bodies are national property, common currency, boundary between 'us' and them" (1994: 16). In *DBR* this is endorsed by the appropriation of Mary as an instrument to assert Irish national differentiation.

4.2. The power of religion: Catholic ideals and practices

By and large, the prevalence of religious discourse in cultural traditions has been endorsed by a number of stereotypes that usually stem from male interpretations of the scriptures and the established dogmas. It is well known that, as Carol Rose has noted, "all religions select stories, parables, poetry, psalms and laws in order to preserve a particular world view" (107). Judeo-Christian tradition is a clear example of that strategy insofar as it has traditionally chosen the elements that comprise its own notion of reality, which is later projected unto its followers. The problem with that codification is that frequently it has been manipulated to serve the interests of men, who have acted as their leading interpreters, whereas women remain outside the referential frame, and they appear purely objectified.

In the Catholic milieu of contemporary Ireland,[68] religious discourse has actively contributed to the systematization of gender biased principles of ideal reality, which not only misinterpret femininity but, most significantly, have used it as a symbolic instrument to achieve the goals of power apparatuses. Up to the very recent times of "post-Celtic Tiger" economy and growing multiculturalism, Catholic Ireland has internationally figured as synonymous with the nation and the Republic of Ireland. A large number of factors have led to that perception, but probably one of the most evident explanations has to do with the

[68] None of the three novels selected for our study focuses on the religious polarities between Catholicism and Protestantism in their treatment of single maternity in Ireland. Hence, and given the three authors' shared concern with portraying the imbrication of Catholic ideology and social practices of unmarried motherhood, the terms "religion" and "religious" will hereafter refer particularly to Catholicism.

dialectics between national and individual conscience that pervaded the twentieth century on the island and overtly gave more relevance to the former (Carey 44).

Among the broad spectrum of critical studies about the configuration of Irishness, there has been a recurrent insistence on the disproportionate paradigm represented by Catholic morality in the articulation of national identity and personal subjectivity. From the first decades after independence, and probably imbued by the religious empowerment in the previous century, the correspondence of the Irish nation and the Irish church was established as a vehicle of national liberation and differentiation from the colonisers. To validate that correlation, it soon became enshrined in the legal foundations of the nation, as commented above.

It has also been argued that during the 1920s, the Church adopted sexual morality as its major concern and declared itself the protector of this domain of Irish social identity. For that reason, Catholic authorities were very hostile to state intervention in relation to moral issues, even though they eventually admitted the necessity to legislate about it (Hug 78). The same position was held at the end of the century, during the abortion debate and Referenda of the 1990s, when Catholic authorities did not take part directly in political discussion, but rather stated that they could not instruct people on how to vote and that Catholics had to make decisions according to their own conscience, although they found abortion abhorrent and the Amendment quite flawed (Murphy-Lawless 53).

The Catholic imagination of Ireland was forged around the same icons in which the new nation was to be articulated, so that, as we have outlined above, Mother Ireland would also be promoted by the categories articulated by Mother Church. Particularly relevant for that categorisation was arguably the figure of the Virgin Mary. Her singularity as the virginal mother of Christ elevated her to the most admirable model for the kind of nation that the Irish nationalists were trying to achieve. The paragon of purity, integrity and sacrifice, she would function as the stereotype on which national identification was to be modelled. Further, her female condition provided the conceptual space to accommodate the kind of femininity that would favour the Irish cultural idiosyncrasy.

One of the comments made by President De Valera in his most quoted speech in the 1940s bears witness to the national signification of those features, as he famously said that the Ireland he had dreamt of was a land with "comely maidens, dancing at the crossroads" (Moynihan 466). The use of female imagery figured then as the necessary move to assert male power. Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford refers to that idea when she comments that: "The man who is trying to prove his hyper-masculinity naturally demands that his woman be hyper-feminine: which in the Irish Catholic context meant an intensification of the already heavy emphasis on virginity and motherhood, and a denial of autonomous female desire" (6).

Stemming from those normalising codes of female behaviour obviously appeared the delineation of counter discourses of amoral conduct, which would jeopardise them and shatter the national identity

into pieces. Those principles were negotiated around new iconographies of female vice that illustrated the unbecoming antithesis of the predicated ideals. The effects of this confrontation have been evident throughout the century and, as usual, they have transcended the limits of the imaginary. Breda Gray and Louise Ryan articulate this idea in the following terms:

> The virgin/whore dichotomy was certainly not unique to Ireland. But what is especially significant here is the way in which such symbols of womanhood are linked to the future of the nation. The bad woman was not merely responsible for her own moral downfall and for the ruin of men but threatened the moral degeneration of the entire nation. (522)

Further, the mirroring between Marian qualities and the established codes of femininity in the Irish Catholic order is analysed by Angela K. Martin in terms of "mimesis." The presence and authority of this parallelism has been evident over time and space, and Martin brings to the fore how social praxis demonstrates that for religious authorities the emulation of an ideal is not an abstract issue, but rather the codification of women as the real embodiments of Mary: "individual women are mimetic of Mary. It is through mimetic performance that Irish women come to embody femininity and, by extension, the Irish nation" (2000: 69).

This long entrenched, spiritual and material correspondence in the Irish scene became the core topic of social discussion at the end of the twentieth century. In 1985, it was reported that in various towns, statues of the Virgin Mary were moving or speaking, and that several people had seen her apparition. Margaret McCurtain studied those episodes and suggested that they were actually a communal, spiritual reaction to the situation Ireland was going through, as the statues of Mary were those of

"a woman, in a year that had not been kind to Irish women" (1993: 207). For Angela K. Martin, these performances are "'ideal mimetic moments' in that they provide a symbolically loaded and dramatic performative context in which female sexuality, ideal motherhood and female bodily boundaries, particularly the boundary between womb and outside world, are foregrounded" (2000: 69). [69]

It is in this context of Marian imagery that, to our mind, the case of Anne Lovett should also be brought to the fore in our study. Only a couple of months after the 1983 Referendum, the application of the constitutional compromise to defend the equal rights of mother and foetus as well as the grip of Catholic ideology were questioned when a fifteen-year-old girl was found bleeding to death beside a statue of the Virgin in a grotto near Granard, in County Longford. She had given birth there, alone and unaided, in the hope that Mary would assist her, but the baby died and shortly she died too in a hospital nearby. Curiously, although the girl had carried her pregnancy to full term, nobody in the little town admitted to having noticed her or having offered her any advice.

The episode has been read in many ways, and the reasons that made her conceal her pregnancy were harshly criticised within public audiences. In her contribution to Ailbhe Smyth's *The Abortion Papers*, journalist Nell McCafferty maintained that Anne's state was common knowledge for the institutions, the community and her own family, and that "more effort has been expended in defending the social superstructure than in defending the basic unit" (1992: 100). What

[69] For an extensive study of the incidents, also see Tóibín, Colm, ed. *Seeing is Believing: Moving Statues in Ireland*, 1985.

seems evident, though, is that these events illustrate the traditional Irish tendency to pay attention to spiritual rather than social issues. Likewise, it constitutes a clear testimony of the extent of the overbearing influence of Marian iconography and devotion on young Irish women in the twentieth century.[70] To our view, the context of Anne Lovett's death offers a tragic outlook to the material influence of an abstract and unreasonable identification that leaves the substantial problems of those women unattended.

The common role played by the Church until very recently can be considered then as that of a moral regulator, since there has always been some collusion in Ireland between public intervention and the private space of its citizens. In other words, religion has commonly acted as the moral bolster for social articulation, used by the state for their mutual benefits, while at the same time direct interference into certain issues has been viewed with much uneasiness. Under those circumstances, undesirable objects and conducts have been usually transferred to the moral competence of the Church, which has dealt with them in its own way, but always favouring the state. As Tom Inglis puts it: "Transgressions and resistances occurred, but such was the moral monopoly of the Church that they were treated as private, isolated,

[70] A striking literary revision of the circumstances of Ann Lovett's story is the poem "The Statue of the Virgin Mary at Granard Speaks," written by Paula Meehan and included in her collection *Pillow Talk* (1994). The poet gives the statue that witnessed the tragic childbirth the voice that Irish women have traditionally lacked, while her overtly sexual desires for incarnation are expressed throughout the poem. Echoes of those real life events can also be found Leland Barwell's story "The Dove of Peace", from *Different Kinds of Love* (1987), where an incest victim dies when giving birth to her father's child alone in a field.

individual events and, in most cases, they were wrapped in silence" (1994: 10).

In this section, we will examine the terms in which the Catholic ideals of femininity have been projected upon Irish women and the social interpretations of the deviations from those norms. The analysis of how the normalisation of the single mother experience is represented in the novels will be done by looking at what we consider the major religious influences on Irish women's identity, that is, the application of the rhetorics of virginity, and its other extreme in the postulates of the evil woman, resulting into the typical process of sublimation that many Irish single mothers have been made to undergo.

4.2.1. Discourses of virginity: Marian images

"Stabat Mater," Julia Kristeva's most famous study of motherhood, places it at the core of feminist revisions of patriarchal discourses. By way of Mary and the various attributes in which her iconography has been encapsulated throughout the historical development of western Christianity, Kristeva defends how the maternal must be reinscribed as the source of female power. Among those signifiers –which range from Mother of God, Queen, Immaculate Virgin, Mother of the Church, to Our Lady or Mater Dolorosa– Mary's virginity stands as one of the most controversy raising components, not only in the Catholic dogma but also in its use for the articulation of female identity. Probably what strikes us most clearly at the beginning of Kristeva's argument is her critique of the manipulation of Marian imagery for the projection of Christian fantasies, which curiously enough, was based on a translation error. The translator, she comments, "substituted for the Semitic term that indicates the sociolegal status of a young unmarried woman the Greek word *parthenos*, which on the other hand specifies a physiological condition: virginity" (1987: 236-237). Thus, she concludes that any remnant of matriarchy or the social power of the mother goddess was eradicated in favour of a cult of asexuality.

Notably, the veneration of the virginal condition of Mary and by extension, of women in general has permeated western epistemologies, and many of its products remain intact in contemporary society. Indeed, in her introductory study to feminist theology *El sexo olvidado*, Sonia Villegas analyses the origin of the imagery and functions of the Virgin

Mary as one of the female prototypes that are applied to women. To use her own words:

> [T]he model of the Virgin became the only acceptable symbol of the feminine, precisely because at the same time it represented the sexual roles that the patriarchal system assigned to women. Besides, unlike former female deities, the Virgin acted as the educator of other women in the codes of gender, teaching them to accept the superior authority of a male deity, which was reflected in the subjugation of daughters and wives in patriarchy. (65, my translation)

If we focus particularly on the Irish case, we find that the Virgin was certainly promulgated "Queen of Ireland," as another strand of the promotion of the pure, essential Irishness that was prevalent in the twentieth century. As John Turpin puts it, "Marianism was a badge of national identity" (70) and it was defended by the Church as much as the State.

Of the three novels under study, *The Killeen* is the one with a larger number of references and reflections about the grip of Marian devotion in Ireland, which was still vibrant in the 1980s.[71] This tradition is substantiated at the very moment of Margaret's first verbal contact with Earnán at the greenhouse in the convent. His salute "'s Mhuire dhuit" and her answer "Dia 's Mhuire dhuit 's Phádraig" (20) constitute the most common form of greeting in Irish language, which can be translated into literal English as "God and Mary be with you" to which she responds "God

[71] Mary Kenny cites the 1950s –with the proclamation of the doctrine of the Assumption into Heaven of the Virgin and the Marian Year of 1954– as a turning point for the Marian devotion on the island. She details that many of the grottoes and statues that are still quite popular nowadays date from those years (194). The imbrication of this common devotion by Irish women and the plight of single pregnant women is portrayed by Margo Harkin in her 1989 film *Hush-A-Bye Baby*, where the protagonist has recurrent nightmares and daydreams about the Virgin Mary during her illegitimate pregnancy. For an analysis of the power of this sacred icon of femininity and the representation of motherhood in this film, see Farley 219-237.

and Mary and St Patrick be with you." As suggested by Mary Kenny in her study *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*, "it is considered linguistically significant that the Irish language had a special proper name for the Blessed Virgin Mary, distinct from the everyday name of Mary itself" and the greeting "underlines how deep the roots of Marian devotion were in Irish" (53).[72] Therefore, the content and purpose of this linguistic choice made by Leland for the introduction of the love relationship between the two protagonists seems to be a quite significant one. In other words, not only is she emphasizing the presence of the Virgin Mary in everyday discourse but also, this constitutes the metaphoric projection of the Virgin's uniqueness that Margaret, like all Irish women, will undergo —but which she will overshadow, we must add, with her unruly behaviour later.

The ubiquity of the Virgin Mary as a source of protection to the Irish people is more directly evidenced by the several occasions in which invocations to her intercession are described in the book. In doing so, Leland particularly emphasises the way in which it is internalised as a remedy in cases of moral threat, such as the critical moment when women are about to overstep the codes of modesty, purity and chastity that she represents. This can be clearly grasped when Julia's mother —Madge— becomes strongly concerned about her daughter's decision to go

[72] Further evidence of Marian devotion in *The Killeen* can be found in the various references to the May processions in honour of the Virgin that Margaret mentions at different points, and to the congregation of "The Children of Mary" and "The Legion of Mary." Introduced in the nineteenth century, these fraternities were strategies used by religious orders to promote ritual and ceremony around Mary. Particularly, as noted by Rosemary Cullens Owens, The Children of Mary sodality was designed with the intention of "moulding Irish girls into pious and devout Catholics," also functioning as "an important recruiting ground for Irish convents" (65). This cult, endorsing silence and domesticity for Irish women, persisted at least up to the 1960s (Pat O'Connor 87). It was common that Irish girls joined those groups at some stage in their teenage years, as in the case of Ronnie, who had written in her diary her pledge to become a "Child of Mary" to stop being "a queer, strange, moody person" (*Mothers* 155).

back to Paris in order to continue her education and live an independent life there. Taking place in a little grotto inside the convent, where the old woman had gone to ask for Sister Thomas's advice, the two women, like many other Irish ones, resort to the Virgin for spiritual comfort and support about Julia's decision:

> The litany began, the nun invoking 'Holy Mary', the mother answering 'Pray for us', the two voices twining into spires of supplication, to the Mother most pure, Mother of Good Counsel, Virgin most Merciful, Mirror of Justice, Seat of Wisdom, Gate of Heaven, Morning Star, Refuge of Sinners, Comforter of the Afflicted, Queen of Angels, Queen of Prophets, Queen of Peace. (48-49)

However, the narrator also makes clear that what seemed for them the most compelling route to prevent her escape proves to be of no use, since in the line immediately following the litany we hear that "Julia went to Paris again" (49). The author demonstrates then, that Julia's longings for further education and her dreams of self-development win the battle over the prescriptions and abstract emblems of the Church which do not consider Irish women's real feelings and often thwart any kind of deviation from the pre-established codes.

A similar description of the heterodox interpretation of that ritual of Marian devotion that Irish women usually do is performed by O'Brien's narrator when Mary is brought to her aunt Veronica's house. There, several women have gathered in order to watch her at all times and prevent her from bringing on a miscarriage or committing suicide, while at the same time they instruct her on her natural caring drives by means of a trick with a goldfish that, like her own baby, the girl is induced not to kill when it jumps out of its bowl: "Good girl, good girl… You saved its

life… You see… that is your true nature, you would not kill, you would not kill" (183). In this episode, assumptions about maternal instinct as a way of appealing to the protection of the foetus through the metaphor of the goldfish intersect with the Marian appellatives that the women use as they "kneel around her" to say the Litany:

> Oh most fruitful flower of Mount Carmel
> Fruitful vine. […]
> Immaculate Virgin
> Star of the sea help me and show me you are my mother.
> Oh Mary conceived without sin. (184)

However, the gathering –performed in a rather sect-like manner as the women "prayed and waved their beads and their scapulars over her" (184)– proves to be unfruitful. Actually, Sophia Hillan reads this scene as suggesting that "[th]e women form a kind of chorus, and the action upon which they comment is as terrifying as in any Greek tragedy" (152). Although the women try to persuade Mary of their vision about her wedding and her future life as a normal girl after she has given birth to the baby, for whom they even try to find a name, we also know that Mary is simultaneously thinking: "Despite everything, she did not believe that she was having it" (*DBR* 184). All in all, then, sexual abuse and incest mean obviously the controversial framework against which O'Brien inserts the safeguarding of virginity of a young Irish girl named Mary.

In *Mothers*, it is through the character of Agnes that we are acquainted not only with the kind of restrictions that an upper class girl had to go through on account of her sex, but also with the segregation of the sexes for the widespread fear of temptations in early twentieth-century society. Used by Callaghan as a situational framework for

Agnes's later illegitimate conception, the introduction of the relation between the protagonist and Edward reflects much of the moral ethos that prevailed in that period in Ireland. Wisely set in the mid 1920s, this love affair enables the author to articulate her critique of the restrictions that were operative by then. That was indeed a decade fraught with the passing of legislation around the rhetorics of sex, which proved both the moral monopoly of the Catholic Church and the current climate of social anxiety about sexual issues. Thus, the Censorship of Films Act of 1923, The Censorship of Publications Act of 1929 and later, the Public Dance Hall Act of 1933 would clearly demonstrate not only the intensification of the Church-State alliance that we have commented at several times in our analysis, but also the constant preoccupation with sexual morality in Ireland.

Through frequent ruminations about her past, we learn how in her early twenties Agnes was a quiet, unnoticeable girl who regularly attended parties for young people, but these were "chaperoned functions" (90). Suddenly urged by Edward's notice of her, she changes her appearance, and even shares with him some afternoons at the cinema, which seems not to bother her family. Problems arise though, when the fatherly figure represented by her uncle Christopher intervenes in those meetings and their time together, by themselves. Thus, she comments to Edward: "He says we mustn't go out alone, that it's not right, th-th-th-" She stopped and took a deep breath. 'That you must get instruction'" (91). Despite Edward's protest that "[t]his is 1925. Doesn't he realize that? Everything's changed!" (91), the events into which their relation

eventually unfolds evidence the grip that such mentality had in everyday families. This has been indeed commented by Tom Inglis in his study *Moral Monopoly* when he remarks that:

> There was a strain of thought within Catholic theology which held that any contact whatsoever between girls and boys was problematical [...] The only justification for girls and boys 'keeping company' or courting was when there was a specific intention to marry. If there was no intention of marrying, then keeping company with a member of the opposite sex was a mortal sin. (28)

That indeed was the case of Agnes and Edward, as that very conversation ends when the young man utters in desperation: "You know I can't afford to get married. You know I've got mother and the girls" (91). Very few possibilities of public meetings were granted to them afterwards, and probably the author conveys that so much control was one of the causes of their illegitimate conception.

With Ronnie, Callaghan introduces a bit of sarcasm in clear contrast to that unfortunate situation resulting from an excessive manipulation of the terms in which adolescent relationships were to be founded. Probably on account of the social change that, however little, had taken place since Agnes's youth, and being Ronnie more critical and dashing than her aunt ever was at her age, the veiled sexual instruction that Irish girls received is constantly reproved by the young woman at different stages of the novel. Her monologues echo the relevance of virginity and chastity for the attainment of the type of womanhood delineated and sanctioned by Church and State: "The nuns said a man had no respect for a woman who gave in to him; it wasn't fair to palm him off with used goods" (12). Notably, this discourse is characterised by the

insistence on women's duty to preserve their virtue and protect their reputation, the most valuable gift that they were required to offer to men, who supposedly deserved purity and would judge them only on that aspect. However, this moralising discourse is clearly questioned by Ronnie when she wonders: "But what if he had been the one who had used them?" (12). Ronnie proves here very critical with the Irish gender coding system, whose parameters not only gave men a wider scope for sexual action and experience but also overlooked their reputation in a clearly distinct and more indulging way.

For Margaret in *The Killeen*, contemplation about the importance of virginity, or rather, about the implications of losing it, arises significantly a few days after her first sexual intercourse with Earnán. Although remembering the scene she "shivered with delight and slept on that sensation," the fatal consequences of her acts only dawn upon her when she encounters the image of the Virgin Mary at mass as she looks at all the images of purity and female perfection allocated to Her in the convent chapel:

> The force of her sin came floating on incense at Benediction the very next Sunday. The tall candles on the high altar held up a roof of incantations, the litany of the Virgin Mary, Mystical Rose, Tower of Ivory, House of Gold, Gate of Heaven, Morning Star, Virgin most Faithful, Virgin. (36)

This dichotomy of perspective as felt by a young girl can be seen as the result of Leland's critique of the excessive power of Catholic discourse upon young girls. It is also juxtaposed against the more significant appreciation of the extent to which Mary's virginity literally functions as the point of reference where Irish women learnt to mirror themselves, not

only in the 1940s when the action of the novel is set, but also, and most importantly, still at the end of the twentieth century.

4.2.2. The fallen woman: "crime," punishment and atonement

Starting with the biblical representations of Eve and the Fall, the ideological framework in which women have been commonly internalised by religious discourse poses them as the earthly representations of wickedness. Most precisely, because of their identification as purely corporeal beings, female offence has been usually associated with sexual transgression. This controversial imagery has been analysed by Mary Condren in the following terms:

> Women have been identified with Eve, the symbol of evil, and can only attain sanctity by identifying with the Virgin Mary, the opposite of Eve. But this is an impossible task since we are told that Mary herself 'was conceived without sin' and when she gave birth to Jesus remained a virgin. To reach full sanctity then, women have to renounce their sexuality, symbol of their role as temptress and the means by which they drag men from their lofty heights. (2002: 5)

In a similarly vein, Adrienne Rich denounces that men have eluded that association when she notes that women "have always been outside the (manmade) law, although we have been much more stringently punished than men for breaking the law, as in the case of prostitution and adultery" (1997: 269). Arguably, out of wedlock conception can be added to these two offences provided by Rich, and although she was referring to the ideological background of the 1970s, it can be easily stated that many of its mindsets still linger well into the twenty-first century. Throughout *Of Woman Born*, she criticised the gender polarities and the blurring of the limits of social justice in cases of sexual transgression, whose most direct recipients have been manifestly women. In this light, her commentary about the many strands of the lack

of gender balance in the history of humankind applies to the marginalisation, demonisation and condemnation of the single mother during every stage of her "ruined" condition.

The rhetorics of the mandatory condemnation after trespassing divine law is an ever-present reality in Ireland. For this reason, the theme of evil and its personification in female figures have constituted a common topic in Irish literature, usually as a recurrent motif for the analysis of women's breach of the traditional codes of femininity. But probably because of the ideological development that was taking place at the time, the subject saw an emergence with the women's movement in the mid twentieth century. Since then, Irish women authors have tried by and large to dismantle the excessive importance granted to morals on the isle and its material consequences on the configuration of female subjectivity.

The novels under analysis portray from various angles the immediate identification with evil that getting pregnant out of wedlock entailed for Irish women at different points in contemporary history. All the women in the narratives are immediately dispossessed of their own individuality when their state is discovered, and a new woeful disposition is assigned to them. The most straightforward instance of that transition appears in *DBR*, which out of the three texts is the one with a clearer questioning of state and community intervention upon the individual on both psychological and physical levels. Shortly after Tara's mother and the other women find evidences of Mary's abortion trip to England, the innocent orphan starts to be associated with wantonness and evil. The friendship between the two girls turns Tara into a trustful source of

information about it, but what really worries Mrs. Minogue is "the thought of that harlot sleeping in Tara's room, sharing Tara's bed, infecting her with sin and vileness" (146). In the case of Callaghan's novel, external address to Ronnie's debasement is less direct as compared to Mary, but her prediction of her family's reaction at the news of her pregnancy also sustains their interpretation of her new state in terms of foulness: "'Ah, Ronnie,' the brother would sigh, 'how could you let yourself get into a mess like this. But I expected it, oh yes. Expected it, expected it (sigh, sigh, moan) ever since you stole that Portuguese stamp out of my collection when you were twelve'" (*Mothers* 32). And finally, for Margaret condemnation comes straightforwardly from the nuns as they discover her state, but it is most harshly carried out by Father Costello, who tries to uphold his brother's innocence in the illegitimate impregnation as he tells Sister Thomas: "I suppose, Sister, Earnán *is* responsible? I mean, could it have been anyone else?" (*The Killeen* 5, emphasis in the original). Notably, what Leland traces here is the direct blame that is put on the woman in this kind of situations, while also highlighting it even more evidently by placing this comment at the very beginning of the novel.

As the stories progress, the mental images of the protagonists' downfall develop into a more direct verbal notification of their unexpected state. As delineated in the previous section, the use of discursive strategies responds to a power-gaining process by which those women's agency is wholly abated. Indeed, throughout the development of cultural systems, discourse has functioned as a key artefact for the establishment of power. Following Foucault's commentaries we noted that the thoughts,

feelings and bodily categories that constitute individuality are usually considered to lack any meaning outside the discursive articulation imposed upon them. This controversy acquires a deeper significance when it moves from the public ideological framing of human existence to the more personal construction of individual subjectivity, and most clearly, female subjectivity.

Moira Gatens even goes further when she talks about the animalisation that women suffer in cases of abnormal sexual behaviour. She remarks that:

> Women who step outside their allotted place in the body politic are frequently abused with terms like: harpy, virago, vixen, bitch, shrew; terms that make it clear that if she attempts to speak from the political body, about the political body, her speech is not recognised as human. (1997: 84)

In other words, women's life and experiences have been traditionally shaped by discourse in such a way that their individuality has very much depended on the ways in which they are addressed by the delineators of discursive categories of the body politics, in which religion also takes an extremely active part.

That the articulation of discourse is largely constructed upon the intersection between the moral principles of sexuality and the breaking of boundaries is noticeably problematised in the three novels, which share an insistence on the discursive treatment of women facing out of wedlock pregnancies and the religious grounding of such terminology. For Margaret in *The Killeen*, getting pregnant by a refugee within the walls of a convent means not only that "he has brought down" her name and she is "ruined for life" (1985: 4) but also that from then on, like most of the

protagonists of the other two novels, she would be treated as different. All kinds of external arrangements start to be made in her life, which from then on will be at the mercy of the decisions taken by everyone except herself.

Once her condition is disclosed to the convent authorities, Sister Thomas tells her about the plan they have devised for her, but it is the discourse used by the nun what strikes the reader, and Margaret herself, most clearly. Uttered before Father Costello, the nun's words must be made clear for the girl but at the same time, the message can only be delivered in a figurative way because of the presence of a male religious figure and the content of the news:

> 'He has found a place for you. A lady in the city has agreed to let you work in her home, and Fr. Costello, when the time comes, will help her make arrangements as necessary. Do you understand?' Margaret understood. A child of the country, she knew what was happening to her, that 'when the time comes' meant when the baby would be born, that 'arrangements' meant her lying-in, and what was to be done about the child. (23-24)

Embedded in the nun's speech appears then, the common practice of patronising girls in that kind of circumstances, but at the same time, her words are infused with the moral obligation to mask the details of what certainly was an undesirable event by means of a veiled explanation of the future life outlined for her. However, although Mary is indeed "a child of the country," against all expectations she is aware of her vulnerable position and keen enough to notice the farce around these religious practices. Thus, the tone used by the narrator gets a more ironic hue right afterwards, when we read the girl's interpretation of the scene:

"These things were too delicate to be mentioned aloud before a priest, although a priest had been her confessor at the convent" (24).

Leland's critique of the manipulation of discourse is reinforced by the fact that even if they were fully recognised in private, only certain things could be uttered in public, while women had to remain silent about them. Moreover, the passage speaks directly to the idea of truth and the role that the confessional has played in its construction. Indeed, Foucault made an interesting exploration of the elements that surround this sacrament, paying attention to how it is the site where power and the body merge: "Discourse therefore had to trace the meeting line of the body and the soul, following its meandering: beneath the surface of the sins, it would lay bare the unbroken nervure of the flesh" (20). Also, for him:

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; … a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it. (60-61).

In *Mothers*, the implications of the kind of discourse and ideology underlying the social consideration of pregnancy and maternity, and how they usually do not befit cases of unmarried conception, can be grasped from the early pages of the novel. When Ronnie calls the clinic in order to enquire about the results of her pregnancy test, the receptionist tells her that "the results were *very positive*" (10, emphasis added). Immediately, she starts a process of decoding the meaning of those words, that, however comically she takes them with "[v]ery positive? God, is it twins?

... Did that mean twins or seven months" (10), obviously pose an open objection to the diverse angles from which issues like this should be considered and referred to in words. In the same vein, as she is considering the ways to tell her boyfriend about his paternity, she mentions: "After all, he had something to do with it. He's a party to the crime. But how could something so natural be a crime" (38). Again, the demonisation of sexual transgression and, most particularly, premarital conception collides here with its essential reference as simply an ordinary action, no matter whether it takes place inside or outside the limits of marriage.

As for Mary, youth, helplessness and assumed naivety are the backdrop against which the community sets its discursive address towards the protagonist of *DBR*. The imposition of external religious discourse appears for example, when the letter from a priest is inserted in a newspaper article about Mary's case. The piece is read out loud by the husband of the only benefactor that the girl gets to have during her stay in Dublin –Mrs Fiz– and it starts in the following terms: "Dear little Magdalene, I call you that because I think it is a name that you would not shy away from. Of her Jesus had said 'He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to cast a stone'" (212).[73] In an oversimplifying way

[73] Many commentaries have been made about the wrong assumptions of the figure of Mary Magdalen in the Bible, since the harlot that wiped Jesus with her hair at the Pharisean's house has been recurrently mistaken for the female apostle that accompanied Jesus in his ministry and was the first person to see him raised from the dead (Luke 7:36-50, 8:1-3 and 24:9-10, respectively). For feminist critics and writers, the meanings of this confusion as well as the polarisations established between the virginal maternity of Mary and the figure of Mary Magdalene have attracted an enormous attention. Worthy of note is Angela Carter's story "Impressions: The Wrightsman Magdalene," included in her posthumous collection *Burning Your Boats* (1997), and opened with a powerful sentence such as "[f]or a woman to be a virgin and a mother, you need a miracle; when a woman is not a virgin, nor a mother, either, nobody talks about miracles" (409).

that homogenises all kinds of female offence and associate deviant girls with Mary Magdalen, the protagonist becomes the biblical sinner of the Irish 1990s, which contrasts though, with the insistence on naming her X in the actual case. [74]

However, to this kind of discursive treatment of her situation, Mary had earlier responded with much discredit, and her commentary about how these people make use of words to prove assertiveness sheds some valuable light on the transience of that practice. After the goldfish scene, the women insist that she will have a wedding like any other girl her age, but we hear of her reflections through the narrator: "She thought that words were the thing people used to suit their purpose, to stuff up the holes in themselves, to live lies, and that one day those words would be sucked out of them and they would have to be their empty speechless selves at last" (184).

But probably the most poignant allusion to the control of the Church over Irish women's sexuality in *DBR* takes place when Mary is brought by Betty to Dr Tom's surgery for an examination after the girl had confessed to her that she could be pregnant.[75] His remark "[r]osaries and ovaries. I don't know which one does the most damage to this country. And to me" (116) reveals, on the one hand, the extent to which the

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[74] The epitome of the pejorative use of discourse over these women can be found indeed in the term "penitents," which was used to refer to the interns of the Magdalene laundries. Reproductions of this discursive custom appear in Patricia Burke Brogan's play *Eclipsed* (1994), Marita Conlon-McKenna's novel *The Magdalen* (1999) and Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002).

[75] It is at this point where we can confirm that the action of *DBR* takes place in County Sligo, since once the examination has finished, the girl and Betty await the results visiting a museum very near the hospital (117). References in the text to a poet and the mythological figure of Caoilte indicate that the museum is dedicated to W. B. Yeats, who revised Caoilte's story in his poem "The Hosting of the Sidhe." The Yeats Memorial Museum is located in Sligo town, in the same area as the county hospital.

inevitable merging of Catholic and sexual morality was indeed the ideological background upon which illegitimate pregnancies were still projected in the 1990s, as his utterance simply follows Betty's "[t]here'll be hell at [Mary's] home" (116). On the other hand, it is wisely constructed by O'Brien so as to raise troubling questions about the effect that circumstances like the one Mary is going through may have when they have to be confronted with. Thus, Dr. Tom complains about the excessive manipulation of the Catholic Church but at the same time, about the social preoccupation with sexuality in the public ethos.

It is worthy of note for the critical framework of this study that in this passage the author is echoing the slogan used by pro-choice activists in the several abortion campaigns that have taken place in Ireland during the past few decades. Everywhere across the country, leaflets and banners read "Keep your rosaries off my ovaries." They were used by women's groups in their rallies against the prevailing ethos that tried to block the legalisation of contraception and the defence of women's sexual rights, as evidenced by the religious authorities' close pursuit of what were considered Catholic moral threatening cases.[76] Indeed, the symbol upon which this saying is constructed proceeds from the rosary having been one of the primary devotions in Ireland since the sixteenth century, with whole families gathered together in order to pray and read from the Bible, and culminating in the litany, as we have commented above. It

[76] Several versions of this expression have been recurrently used in feminist protests and meetings in Ireland's recent past. The latest occasion was a rally organised by CHOICE Ireland outside the GPO in Dublin in 2007, in solidarity with the woman involved in the so-called "D-Case." Like X, and Mary in *DBR*, she was prevented from travelling to England in order to obtain an abortion. For more details on this case and its consequences, visit www.choiceireland.org.

seems ironic, though, that, as described by Mary Kenny, the rosary "was the family prayer whereby the mother, and the grandmother, exercised moral authority in the home" (47). Ultimately, although Kenny defends the positive contribution of the Catholic Church for the configuration of what Ireland is today, and the Irish nationalist women's reconciliation of their religious beliefs with their violent activism (49), we can surely agree that there is much naivety embedded in such a commentary. Women's matriarchal power was only exerted within the family home whereas the real rosaries that contemporary Irish feminists were trying to depose had a much wider and powerful impact on family issues.

The rhetorics of punishment is also an integral part of the Catholic mentality and its judgement of single mothers in Ireland. The further entrenched morale of acceptance and resignation also become visible in everyday conduct, as reflected in the novels. In *Mothers*, the prevalence of this ideology is illustrated by Oliver and Laura's reaction to the out of wedlock pregnancy of their maid, Nora. Unable to accept the possibility of her becoming a single mother, Ronnie's parents admit that giving up her baby for adoption is the most appropriate solution to her condition. They also make clear to Harriet that they would probably fire Nora because she had not behaved as "society expected" her to do. Particularly, Oliver sentences that "those who don't toe the line ought to get the boot. That's merely the way of the world, and a very good way it is, I'm inclined to think" (83). The fact that Callaghan ironically makes Oliver voice this common idea indicates that embedded in it usually remains the paradox of a double morality, as he had had an extramarital

relation with Harriet himself, and although unaware of it at that time, he had fathered her son.

A similar dehumanizing move for getting involved in an illegitimate pregnancy is performed upon Margaret by Sister Thomas Aquinas. In what seemed for the nun a consciousness-raising instruction, she appeals to the disappointment in the convent about the girl's inappropriate conduct, trying to create in her a sense of guilt. Having been exclusively blamed for it, Margaret interprets her command to leave the convent as a humiliation: "She was corrupt, evil in that atmosphere which she prized the most, the school. Although it had never been her environment it had been her vision" (*The Killeen* 24). The punitive content of the project is then, two-fold. First, after the sexual offence is known, she is debased from being a commandable student and maid to an unfitting position; and then, as indicated in the quote, the ignominy is intensified as she is forced to leave the place where she had dreamt to learn and grow as a person. Thus, in contrast to Sister Thomas Aquinas's advice to continue with her education, at this point public opinion is placed before the girl's right to have the future she had devised for herself.[77]

In the case of Mary in *DBR*, the idea of punishment acquires a deeper significance due to the violent and incestuous circumstances of her conception. Out of all the protagonists in our study, she is the one

[77] In the glossary of feminist theology terms included at the end of her study, Villegas describes guilt as one of the bases of Christian religion because of its focus on sin and punishment. However, she also makes clear that "[f]eminist theology discusses the gender-oriented experiences of guilt and advocates that women should abandon the role of victims and their responsibility for this guilt system" (96, my translation).

who undergoes a stronger victimisation in the sense that her castigation starts with her female, daughterly condition inside a house headed by an abusive paternal figure. Yet, what is really remarkable in this early phase of the violations before the conception of Mary's baby is her own sense of punishment resulting from the sexual defilement she thinks she has fallen into, despite being the very victim. She certainly associates the molestation with the transgression of religious purity: "She is a leper. What to do about Holy Communion next day. She has decided that she will go to the altar and when the moment comes to take the host she will lower her head. She knows that after a few Sundays the priest will notice and will come to her house or her school" (12).

Similarly, and ultimately resulting from the fall committed by their mothers, the rhetorics of punishment also applies to the condemnation that the illegitimate babies must undergo. Along with the legal marginalisation that considered them as *nullus filius*, illegitimate babies were ostracised not only by the social community, but most shockingly, by religious figures. As mentioned above, far from providing moral support and relief to single pregnant women, it was common, but by no means uniform, that children born to unmarried women were refused baptism by the parish priest. Usually, the women travelled from town to town until a priest agreed to christen their baby, but according to Betty Hilliard, the censure inherent in that refusal demonstrates "the contrast between 'the innocent victim' and the implicitly non-innocent party" (149).

For obvious reasons, *The Killeen* is the novel which provides a closer insight into that received judgement, clearly underpinned by its title. The two dictionary entries inserted on the first page of Part One certainly shed some light on the events that unfold as the book progresses, if only these are described with more detail in Part Two. As the novel opens, readers find a definition of the Irish terms *cillín* and *cillineach*, both referring to the burial place reserved for infants and unbaptised children.[78] With the intention of contextualising and introducing the story, Leland cites Dinneen's dictionary of Irish language as the source of her reference, but this practice, deeply rooted in Ireland's tradition, requires further commentary because of the crucial role it plays in the novel.

That baptism is the necessary rite for the incorporation of a child into the Christian family is commonly assumed, along with the function of this sacrament as the imperative condition for the salvation of the human soul. When, for various reasons, the ceremony had not taken place, not only was the unbaptised person condemned to lie in limbo after death, but also there was no possibility of enjoying God's grace.[79] Because according to that reprobating ethics referred above, the children of unmarried mothers were usually denied their right to become Christians, those who died were automatically proscribed to eternal condemnation.

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[78] *Cillín* or *cillinigh* are the singular versions, whereas *cillineach* is the plural one. "Killeen" would then be the anglicised term.

[79] The Second Vatican Council, started by Pope John XXIII in 1962, removed this principle from the Catholic dogma. Mary Kenny explains though, that unbaptised babies were thought to make use of their "natural powers" to know and love God. However, she continues, the idea of limbo was "a source of anxiety to mothers whose babies had died before being baptised, and in the 1990s there were some poignant reburials of unbaptised babies, long deceased, in church graveyards" (272).

The outcome of this marginalisation implied that, to our mind, a hierarchical order was established about their status in the otherworld, and that a distinction had to be made in this world as well. Actually, Kristeva's analysis of the corpse as a form of abjection also has relevance to this religious practice:

> The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (1982: 4)

A number of archaeological discoveries and historical documents account for the long-practised tradition of burying unbaptised children outside consecrated grounds. According to Clodagh Tait, the custom of the *cillinigh* was used in Ireland up to the 1960s and it was designed to "hold the remains of strangers and children, and mass graves, particularly those dating from the Great Famine of the 1840s" (160). Tait also mentions neonate or full term foetuses in this group of outcasts (69), but what seems more remarkable for our study is that, because many illegitimate babies were unbaptised, the religious community allocated them automatically to that burial site, as they were thought to be God-forsaken.[80]

The ultimate and purely tragic consequences of these customs about illegitimate babies are actually exposed in part three of *The Killeen*, which according to Linden Peach "is better integrated with the rest of the

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[80] Apart from Leland's novel, other interesting literary portraits of these practices are Mary Lavin's story "The Lost Child," from her collection *Happiness and Other Stories* (1969), Máirtín O'Cadhain's *An tSraith ar Lár* (1970) and most recently, Patricia Burke Brogan's beautiful poem "Stone Babies," included in her collection *Above the Waves' Calligraphy* (1994: 37-38).

text than some critics have allowed" (61). For her, it is here where we can most clearly understand Leland's reflection about the "crypt." Peach interprets this image not simply as the very place where those babies were buried, but the secret issues that have been concealed for a long time and that seem to have attracted Leland. Indeed, the preoccupation with visibility and public ritual are criticised through the narrator's insight into the postulates about the killeen that Michael had credited all his life:

> He could never think very hard about the little bodies lying there, about the distinction of sacramentals. At school he accepted what he was told; the souls of those who die unbaptised lose forever the sight of Jesus Christ in Heaven, they are lost to God the Father, unknown to the blessing of the Holy Ghost. All for a drop of water and a Sign of the Cross, all for nothing. (*The Killeen* 120-121)

The irrationality of that practice as well as the incongruities with the fundamental principles of Christian faith are denounced here. Because of Thomas's illegitimacy, the parish priest and the rest of the community in Adrigole assume that he is unbaptised. Then, as Michael deduces, he is "abjected", that is, rejected "eternally, for eternity", realising that "in the school catechism, at the Lenten retreats, Eternity was more horrifying than hell" (130). However, the baby was indeed christened by Father Costello shortly after birth in Julia Mulcahy's house in Cork and before being given up for adoption (45). Leland hints here at the absurdity of a credo that alleged those babies to be responsible for a "sin" they had not committed and assigned them to a segregated space of eternal condemnation: "Nor did he know or hear or wonder how this happened, how children were born in such a way that they were dead at once, or killed, or not acknowledged, but taken here instead, sometimes

by night, in a shoe box or blanket, and placed in the ground, in a hole" (121).

In *DBR*, the consequences of Mary's future baby are obviously determined by the incestuous circumstances in which it was conceived. Because nobody except her is aware of this for the most part of the novel, its double marginalisation is simply acknowledged by the girl, who insists to Betty that an abortion is imperative because "[i]t wouldn't be a right baby anyway…It would be a freak" (125). However, once the pregnancy is made known and becomes a national concern, the baby is actually understood in different terms. Unlike Thomas, whose arrival to Adrigole had stirred the religious conscience of the community, the foetus Mary is carrying is liberated from its debased nature and acquires instead redeeming qualities. Such view is held by the group of Mary's neighbours who gather around her after she is forced to return to Ireland. In response to the girl's silence for most of the process, they insist that "it was that thing, the little life growing in the depths of her body which brought the truth to light, the whole sordid business of the rape, that the little life was the saviour and that it would also save the rapist" (152). Similarly, on the radio programme a woman says to the broadcaster that "the little life is what has saved the rapist, and is what has saved the child herself… God made the little girl conceive a child and this unborn child is the hand of the saviour leading them to the bed of the crime" (188).

According to feminist philosopher and theologian Mary Daly, "[t]he inculcation of anxieties and guilt feelings over 'heresy' and 'losing the faith' has been a powerful method used by institutional religion to

immunize itself from criticism" (337). Daly contends that women are the greatest recipients of that victimisation, but we can also add that in case of single maternity, its epitome can be ultimately found in the babies. In *Mothers*, the intersection of illegitimacy and the religious ostracisation of single mothers' babies certainly underlies the strategies followed by the women in order to remedy their "fall". Although as compared to the other two novels, more emphasis is laid on the possible social condemnation of the mothers, it is certainly the imperative adoption of Agnes's son organised by her God-fearing family what reveals the punitive treatment that the baby received. This episode also brings to the fore the involvement of the religious figures in the handling of the adoption procedures, as a "white veiled figure" is the one who takes care of the adoption (98).

But probably the final step in the process of moral transgression as represented by the single mothers in the novels makes reference to the idea of redress. In other words, the authors expose how the necessity for atonement figures also as a central component of the extent to which religious dogma could reach into female individual identity. The subsequent conflict that the expected stigmatisation of an unmarried maternity provokes upon women is similarly criticised in the three narratives. For Ronnie in *Mothers*, the earlier phase of her expiation could be, as we mentioned above, the possibility of her downfall from the middle or even indigence. However, Callaghan makes clear that social and religious signifiers force her to undergo a process of psychological alienation which clearly results from the presumably depraved essence of

her sexual initiation and conception before marriage. Operating at many levels since the early pages of the book, her emotional conflict and dilemmas cast her into a crisis that, according to the ideological teaching she had received over the years, can only be overcome provided she meditates on her acts and redresses her sins. Echoing that religious prescription, the author introduces a reference to the biblical parable of the Prodigal Son when closing Ronnie's digression about her presumable visit to Agnes in order to ask for money. Seeing her at the door, the old woman would say: "Lilly! Kill the spotted calf! Lay the good china! It's Veronica, come back to us at last!" (23). Here, as in the sacred writings, the message conveyed focusses on the need to repent from your sins in order to be redeemed. Turning her momentarily into an Irish prodigal daughter, the author reflects upon how single mothers are ideologically required to complete their mental and economic atonement by feeling contrition for the faults they have committed as the only means to be socially and morally saved.

In a similar vein, but probably opening up a clearer ethical debate about single mothers' rights and position within their community, in *The Killeen* the scolding of women in cases of sexual infringement figures as a significant point to grant the fulfilment of the Catholic doctrine. Accordingly, Margaret makes it quite clear when she acknowledges to herself after her sexual encounter with Earnán: "Sin was not something to be dodged; it if happened it had to be either erased or paid for, sometimes, she suspected, both" (36). However, the innocence and acquiescence with which this Catholic axiom is assumed by ordinary

parishioners like her contrast though, with the rigid interpretation by more solemn figures, like the convent chaplain –Father Costello. Also drawing on biblical sentence, Leland puts the religious condemnation of women, daughters of Eve, in the priest's words: "'In sorrow thou bring forth children!' he muttered, reminding himself how justified, in this case, such punishment was" (44). Interestingly, the implications of his conviction obviously call upon the entrenched religious mentality that not only considers women the material embodiment and bearers of the Fall but also finds in unmarried, pregnant women the targets of female expiation. The scapegoating of women as well as the cruelty with which religious authorities –represented by Father Costello– view them as sinful creatures and how female rights are undermined in favour of the Catholic ethics of suffering and atonement are then harshly attacked at this point in the novel. Further, the author's critique is also predicated on the fact that to the physical sorrow during childbirth there is also the added factor of the emotional pain felt by these women when, because of their circumstances, they have to part with their babies, but which often seems to be disregarded by the religious figures that in many ways control their maternity.[81]

For Mary, it is again on the radio programme where social commentary about her situation demonstrates that moral responsibility is laid upon her for having attempted to procure an abortion, whereas the

[81] This view can also be endorsed by the description in a number of publications during the 1990s about the hardship that unmarried pregnant women were forced to go through in childbirths taking place in the Magdalene Homes. For example, in *The Light in the Window*, June Goulding describes how in the Home where she worked as a nurse, these women were made to endure labour and childbirth without receiving any pain relief. The rule was carried out by the religious figures in charge as the utmost way of atoning for the sin they had committed (28-31).

reasons for that trip remain unknown. According to most of the audience, what really matters is that "she is a slut," "a little schemer" and she should be sent "to the laundry that she's named after," where she had to "scrub" her sins (*DBR* 186-187). This last comment obviously hints at the Magdalen institutions that we have commented at several points in this study and denotes the strictly punitive significance in which that kind of fall is termed and the "necessary" suffering that is usually due to women who have committed it.

4.3. The ethics of the family: of women and morals

4.3.1. Women's education: learning and expectations

In Ireland, as in many other countries, women's access to education broadened in the late nineteenth century. As briefly delineated in Part One of our study, national schools were established in 1831, and a couple of decades later, with the Intermediate Education Act of 1878, the educational system of the isle was analogous to that of Great Britain, allowing girls to sit for public competitive exams and to take university degrees (Breathnach 48). However, in that period the educational orthodoxy for women was mainly articulated around the patriarchal parameters of female conduct, that is, to make them dutiful housewives and admirable mothers. For that reason, this has been a key issue not only in the sociological analysis of the factors for cultural change but mostly in feminist claims for the need to achieve gender equality and a true social reform (Cullen 1987; Morgan and Lynch 1995). It has been recurrently argued from feminist circles that it is necessary to push forward in the concurrence of women into full educational rights. To that purpose, the signifiers and institutions that ultimately articulate the terms in which that access is granted must be dismantled.

From a variety of disciplines, Irish women have criticised the grip that the state apparatuses, like the Catholic church, have exerted over women by way of educational principles and institutions, showing at the same time, its many faults and inconsistencies. According to Gerardine Meaney, "it is after all sometimes very difficult to ascertain where Church began and State ended in regard to institutionalisation of individuals,

public health and education for example" (2006: 14). Joseph Lee points out that before the Famine, education was independent of churches, but afterwards, the clergy gained ground in its institutional authority as the educational system was spreading (39). As for the specific situation of women, he remarks that even if their access to education had improved in the late nineteenth century,

> it is ironic that at a moment when educational opportunities increased for Irish women, the educational system began to be more systematically used to indoctrinate them into adopting as self-images the prevailing male image of woman. Dutiful woman teachers, including many dedicated nuns, taught girls obedience, docility and resignation to the role assigned to them by a male providence, until the more gullible came to believe that the role was a law of universal nature and not simply the product of a peculiar and transient set of local circumstances. (40)

In the twentieth century, mostly after 1922, the mutual benefits of church and state determined the central role of the church in the educational arena, and it was at that time when the educational order established for women was most clearly delineated. Pat O'Connor comments that the reasons for the central institutional role of the Catholic church in Irish society included "its willingness to provide facilities and staff in the educational, health, and welfare areas at reduced cost to the state, in return for the acceptance by the state of the legitimacy of its influence and 'ethos'" (64). Margaret McCurtain describes those benefits as both financial and ideological, and goes on to suggest that on the single sex educational basis that was prevalent at the time, the girls' education was handed to the nuns because "the Catholic schools developed qualities that the State desired in its citizens: orderliness, discipline, obedience, and self-control" (1997: 249).

In the three novels under analysis in this study, women enjoy different rights and opportunities for education depending on the contextual circumstances in which their stories are set. All the protagonists of Callaghan's novel have a high level of education either for the possibilities granted by their well-to-do background –in the case of Agnes, who later funds Ronnie's studies– or their own potential –in the case of Harriet. In *The Killeen*, the women represent the different poles of class limitations that women had to comply with as regards educational issues, but at the same time, the shared parameters, irrespective of class, upon which such education was founded. In other words, women's access to education in rural communities, where options were more limited to economically vulnerable families, are set against the urban milieu, where girls from better-off families could more easily attend senior schools and have a higher-level education. However, as will be explored below, the author exposes that the delineation and expectations of women's instruction are ultimately modelled on the same paradigms in both contexts. Further, if explored from the educational perspective, *DBR* emphasizes how education is the contested terrain of the endorsement of female subject formation and the family duties to which many country girls are inevitably attached.

That religious teaching played a central role in the configuration of Irish womanhood is problematised in *Mothers* by means of Ronnie and her constant ruminations about the Catholic morality of Irish people. Her position strikes the reader as even more ironic because of the fact that she works as a reporter for a religious magazine. Very recurrently, we

hear through the narrator how she criticises the silence and obscurity that has characterised the Catholic dealing with sexual education in Ireland. According to Ronnie, the problem underlying such a conservative educational programme is not only that young people believe that "sex is the only thing you can do wrong," but mostly that teachers and family "never tell you anything. Just keep hinting at the great crime you are one day going to commit by kissing a boy" (15). Imposed naivety and secrecy during childhood and adolescence usually lead to confusion in adult life so that, as the author predicates here, sexual education should be a necessary step for the development of subjectivity. Ronnie actually grounds her claim for more open-minded approaches to that issue in the inexorable fact that sex is crucial for humankind, as she ironically comments: "But surely Christianity had something to do with sex? Otherwise how would the race go on while all the saints were out there praying in the desert and eating locusts? Yuck!" (15).

Probably because of that mystification, or as a result of an excessive focus on love and romanticism instead of sexuality, Ronnie embodies the disappointment many Irish girls suffer when adult life brings them face to face with the realities of heterosexual relations. To use her own words: "This love business is a mug's game. Where does it lead you? Down the garden path. Up the pole. Same old story. She couldn't even be original. But you keep living, hoping there'll be something overwhelming, something… at the end of childhood. But there's nothing, at least nothing worth waiting for" (39). Her expectations, like those of many of the women in the novel, are shattered when life is

not what they were taught at school. Hence, it is through her reflections that Callaghan interrogates the validity of the principles that Irish girls are brought up to embrace. A similar but less explicit process operates in the case of Harriet. Although she had taken six years of Medicine at Trinity, evidence from her story suggests that she left college when she got pregnant. Her marriage to James right afterwards, and her search for a job in Dublin when she becomes a widow in her fifties lead us to consider that her higher education had ended on her wedding day (65, 199).

Ronnie's Aunt Agnes —born and bred in a prosperous family— represents the intersection of religious education and class expectations that delimited the lives of girls from those family backgrounds. Edward's appearance had not only disrupted the moment when "her mother's doleful predictions for her seemed to be coming true" (90) but also brought her quietness and introversion to an end. However, what is really fascinating about the initial development of this character is the way in which she defies the kind of religious education that her mother and her uncle Christopher had contemplated for her and that she will end up resigning in adulthood. After her baby is given for adoption, Agnes stops going to Mass, and the religious learning and piousness that her family expect of her are contravened by her devotion to literature, which they do not take enthusiastically. Thus, when her uncle brings her pamphlets with "*Little Lives of the Saints, Devotions to St. Teresa, the Little Flower, St. Jude Patron of the Hopeless*," she simply makes use of her "eccentricity" and answers him: "I can't keep Jane [Austen] waiting" (110).

Literature had actually been her refuge in the reclusive days after the adoption, so much so that several characters from Dickens's novels are introduced as her only companions during that period (102-103). Throughout the book other literary allusions to works by such canonical authors in the English language as William Shakespeare, Samuel T. Coleridge, and William Blake; Irish writers like William Butler Yeats, Theresa Deevy, Bram Stoker and James Joyce; and British women writers like Charlote Brontë, Georgette Heyer and Elinor Glyn, demonstrate Agnes's and Ronnie's attachment to literature and pave the way for their later involvement in writing.[82] In addition, they also account for Callaghan's sources and influences in her literary career, as she has largely admitted (O'Brien 1983; Wessel-Felter 2003).[83] As for their function inside the narrative stories, these references and the characters they allude to work as the mirror on which the women see themselves in order to face their reality. They are the mechanisms that allow the author to make her protagonists extraordinary women who, nonetheless, get trapped into the predicaments of Ireland's patriarchal hegemony.

But the turning point in Agnes's education and in her attitude towards the prescriptions of her family comes with her stay in London,

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[82] A similar connection with literature can be found in Harriet, who works for an Arts Magazine and is preparing a special edition with interviews with Irish women writers, like Agnes (50). Quite significantly, then, literature turns out to be yet another link that, along with their respective relation with Ronnie and their common plight, brings the three women together.

[83] Callaghan's admiration for Edna O'Brien, which she has pointed out in several interviews (Haverty 8; Wynne-Jones 9), is articulated in the novel through one of Ronnie's reveries. During her ruminations about how to tell the news to her boyfriend, she starts a dialogue with a statue of the writer and they talk about her fears for her pregnancy and maternity (*Mothers* 26). Further, Wessel-Felter has interpreted this vision, together with Ronnie's literary ambitions and her search for a maternal figure as the creation of a "female Stephen Daedalus" accounting for Callaghan's veneration of James Joyce (1994:141). To our mind, the same can probably be said about Agnes, who despite having already found a literary name in Ireland, also daydreams and hungers for the non-existent comfort of her mother.

where she gets interested in the theatre and starts her career as a playwright. Her talent has her first play reviewed and praised by W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, and proposed for its production in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. However, in what constitutes a new conflict with her family, they see it as a disgrace, as uttered by her mother: "There was no need to write a play. […] This play will leave us open to the jibes of corner-boys. A family like this! A family which has shaped this country, not only in this generation, but for at least three. Since Parnell!" (105). Rather than being proud of her achievement, as she had expected, her family prefers her to be a "common" girl, so that the tension that grows between them reveals the little importance granted to literary skills as opposed to more standard attributes.

A similar prescription but mostly based on economic factors comes from Margaret's family in *The Killeen*. In her analysis of the novel Heather Ingman comments that Mrs Coakley "refuses to countenance the suggestion that Margaret attend senior school" (13). A number of factors determine that refusal, including the woman's malevolent character, her desire to destroy her daughter's subjectivity, and obviously, the economic hardships of the family. Actually, Ingman argues that because secondary education was fee-paying at that time, in the case of girls it "could not be taken for granted and had to be fought for" (2005: 13). Indeed, Margaret must fight in order to persuade and "reassure" her brother that she would be looked after in the convent, where she admits that, because of her class, "she had no right to be" but "she longed to be" (*The Killeen* 7).

Having overcome this first obstacle, her scullery work in the convent in Cork enables Margaret to pursue her educational aspirations. There she receives grammar lessons by way of the writings of Daniel Corkery,[84] and remains under the tutelage of the kind Sister Thomas Aquinas, who guides and protects her in a very maternal manner. The bond that grows between them can be read as the opposite of the relation with her own mother, while it is also presented as the necessary stimulation to the self-reliance that she lacked at home. Further, it is worthy of note here that the construction of this character allows Leland to re-inscribe the rigidity and the insensitive character that are associated with Catholic nuns in Ireland at that time. In fact, according to Joseph Lee, those women also suffered delimitations and gender discriminations:

> Nuns themselves were not exempt from the general image of woman that became prevalent in Irish society after the famine. […] The desexualisation of women in general had its counterpart in the depersonalisation of nuns in particular in the Irish imagination. Nuns were dehumanised in public images to a far greater extent than priests. (40)

Sister Aquinas's benevolence, manifested in various ways throughout the novel, humanises her quite visibly, while it also contrasts with the attitude shown by the male religious figures. As Adele Dalsimer puts it: "The liberality of Sister Thomas, for whom Margaret names her unfortunate son, is nullified by the men of God who both claim her child for 'the cause' and deny him Christian burial" (17). Her generosity and

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[84] Daniel Corkery was a teacher and man of letters from Cork. He was actively involved in the Gaelic League and defended Irish cultural revivalism through education at the beginning of the twentieth century. *The Hidden Ireland* (1924), his most famous work, is a reconstruction of the Gaelic Irish history of the previous centuries that had remained invisible to Anglo-Irish versions of it. An extract from this piece is actually quoted in *The Killeen*, during one of the lessons in which Sister Thomas teaches Margaret grammar and reading skills (12). For a deeper insight into Corkery's career and contribution to cultural nationalism, see Anne McCarthy, 143-155.

support lead Margaret to believe that she is her only comfort, and later, to develop a "sense of kinship" for the nun (*The Killeen* 14). Similarly, another nun in the convent school –Sister Benignus– stands out for her intellectual encouragement to the girls: "Think! Think, girls, that's what I want you to do. [...] *This* is an adventure, this, what we're doing here, learning. Learning is an adventure" (*The Killeen* 16).

Unfortunately, as suggested above with Harriet, education for Margaret also ends when she gets pregnant. Social respectability and the fear that her deviance would be propagated to the other girls in the school thwarts her desires for knowledge. To compensate for that sanction, Sister Thomas asks Julia to look out for Margaret: "'Even if you let her read some of your books sometimes,' the nun had said. 'And talk to her. I don't mean to give her ideas above her station in life. I mean, just, talk to her. Let her know about things, about the world'" (54). Quite astonishingly, it is the nun the one who does not completely condemn Margaret but rather, endorses her education. Thereafter, Julia is turned into a surrogate teacher and asked to instruct her on the need to "keep secrets" and on the existence of Michael Collins and "the [other] possible Ireland" (55-56).

However, none of this seems to really reach Margaret in the post-adoption period because, despite Julia's encouragement, she notices: "There was a good stuff in the girl, she was quick, docile, and kind, but there was no seeking after education of the kind Julia, if she bestirred herself, could have provided" (78). Actually, Margaret shows more interest in cookery and is absolutely indifferent to politics or the changing

course of Irish history. Yet, her decision at the end of the novel to rescue her son from the orphanage proves her belief that another world could be possible for them both, although she must leave the country for that and her baby is finally deluged in further tragedy.

With Julia, Leland offers different outlooks on the meanings and forms of education that were established for women in Ireland, some focussed on the traditional codes of femininity, and the others, like the Republican agenda of aunts, more revolutionary. At the convent, she had to go through its "ritual of purity and marriage, religion and property and responsibility" (45). At home, Mr and Mrs Watson envisage her life in line with marriage, but her desire to go to Paris to learn the language and take music lessons arises in them the fear that she would be "educated beyond the pale of local eligibility" (46). According to Pat O'Connor, "traditionally, education for girls, whether working-class or middle-class, was seen as a cultural resource which could be used to increase their marriage prospects" (163). Indeed, Julia's life had been organised around her future role as a distinguished wife: "in a house, with a husband, a family, staff and a social round; hair done by May Atkins, gloves and lace from Dowdens, a car, a yacht at the Royal Cork, the life her parents desired for her" (46).

However, Julia questions the limitations imposed upon women by nature and through the values of the patriarchal order: "[S]he had become aware that she had possessed something called womanhood, which did not have to be a limit on her attitudes" (45). Her second trip to Paris in her attempt to qualify for the Sorbonne had further appalled her parents

for the queer stories they had heard about the French city. Again, and quite shockingly, Sister Thomas intervenes in favour of Julia's self-devised educational course. In one of her conversations with Mrs Watson, the nun makes the woman admit that Julia "was always able to think for herself. With this kind of education she'll be able to get a job in any of four countries, more if you think of America" (48). Obviously, Mrs Watson is astonished after such a suggestion. Partly, these fears materialise when Julia meets Maurice and Sebastien in Paris. As happened to Harriet and Margaret, Julia's aspirations are overshadowed by her pregnancy and marriage, and although she continues quite alert on her own and Margaret's instruction, she must sacrifice her education to the political desires of men, to family duties and to the codes of womanhood and motherhood. As Julia recapitulates five years later: "She had wanted nothing except a sense of purpose, and when that came along, it was someone else's" (53).

In fact, the disruption of such rhetorics of marriage and education is perfectly inscribed by Leland through Miss Lou and Miss Bina, the spinsters involved in Cumann na mBan, who are the embodiments of the consequences of women's engagement in politics rather than on the typically "female issues." About the portrait of these two women revolutionaries, Christine St. Peter suggests that "while Leland's novel explores the political meaning of nationalism by considering its effects on the lives of women, she also eschews an essentialist position that would assume solidarity and innate pacifism among all women" (2000a: 76). Indeed, however fierce and manipulative

these women get to be, and although Leland mainly focusses on their violent notion of nationalism, they represent the anti-iconic materialisations of female parameters of education.

In O'Brien's novel, the local primary school is the context where Mary's education outside the family farm commences, but it is also where she begins her infatuation for the teacher. When Mary admits it, Tara remembers their "waiting outside the school for him and he coming out and just saying, 'hi girls'" (25). This form of teenage, unrequited love is quite significant for the interpretation of Mary's story as it enables O'Brien to locate the protagonist at the crossroads of the innocence she feels as any other youngster attending school and the crude circumstances she lives at home. The tragic consequences of this contradictory position can be grasped when Tara asks her to read from a magazine about her favourite topic: sex. Mary's attitude in the scene is that of censure and puzzlement for what she reads, and it illustrates her innocence about the content of the article, while it also serves O'Brien to articulate the irony arising from the fact that she is sexually abused by her own father:

> Mary reads stiffly, as if from a school book.
>
> *The hymen which partly blocks the vagina is the gift-wrapping proving that the product is untouched. Turn him on with a sassy walk or your fave raunchy film.[…] Get what you want in bed and more. […] Keep asking yourself am I climaxing. The average female orgasm last five seconds —beat the record, make it ten.* (27)[85]

Mostly worried about Tara's feeling for the boys, Mary is not interested in sexual details at all, thus highlighting the contradictions and hypocrisy

[85] Their conversation echoes Cate and Baba's talks about men, love and sex in *The Country Girls*.

inherent in keeping girls away from these topics while they may become the victims of rape or incest.

If we follow again Ingman's ideas, the convent is also what Mary has to "fight for." In line too with Margaret, a tragic family conflict is the catalyst for that move, but unlike Leland's protagonist, Mary is sent there as her mother's desperate attempt to keep her away from her father. Actually, it had been advised by Olwyn, the tinker and fortune teller that became "their last resort" to interpret and give a solution to Mary's nightmares about a man being cut up in pieces in front of her. The suggestion made by Olwyn that she "must go away and stay away" is interpreted by Bridget with how much "[i]t would break her father's heart to see her go" (31). Indeed, the father's heart is broken when she leaves for the convent, and the clash among the family education, the paternal (sexual) needs and the future of the girl are rendered visible in their farewell conversation: "'Why do you want to go away to school?' 'It's only for a while.' 'Why don't you stay at home with us … Why don't you'"(31).

Although Mary admits that "rules met her as she got out of the car" and the only information about the kind of learning she got in the convent is that "she shone at lessons," her stay there is described as a positive and liberating experience (32). The other girls see it as a jailhouse but for her it is more a place of retreat where, like Margaret, she meets a kind nun, curiously named Sister Thomas Aquinas too.[86] The

[86] In both cases, the choice of this name does not seem arbitrary, though. This may well be a commonly chosen name by professed nuns in Ireland but it is our belief that by choosing for these characters the name of one of the most influential philosophers of the Middle Ages, the novelists highlight the connotations of wisdom and intellectual prowess that underlie these particular religious women.

girl's admiration for this woman is evident from the beginning of her stay and a close bond grows between them during her time there. Not only does the nun nurse her during her first menstruation, but also she admits the hope that Mary had brought to the nuns and the convent (35-36). Sister Aquinas also instructs Mary on the human and female condition of the nuns, in what constitutes a similar process of humanisation to the one granted by Leland with Sister Thomas.[87] This kind of portrayal of religious figures can then be interpreted in both cases as the authors' insistence on the usual and questionable divergence between the institutional power of the church and the role of everyday and approachable nuns. Although these characters are quite exceptional among the widespread images of religious women, they represent a manifestation of the good influences that the female bonds they establish can entail.

However, this educational retreat and the complicity with "her idol" end when Mary's mother dies of cancer and her father asks her to stay at home to mind him, as we will describe in the next section. Back in the country, the teacher she used to be in love with tells her that "she could go far, she could sweep the country, she could make a name for the county" (66), but as most of the women in our study, her educational options become limited on the moment of her pregnancy.

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[87] The relation between Mary and the nun may be inspired by O'Brien's experiences in the convent where she studied. As described in the chapter "A Convent" in her autobiographical piece *Mother Ireland*, this woman had told her that "no, she would not have lived her life all over again had she foreseen its vicissitudes and I, full of strawberries and with the holidays looming, had no inkling of what she was saying, only that I adored her" (71-72). Actually, the whole chapter is a recollection of her schooldays in the convent.

4.3.2. Marriage: the ideal institution

Many of the assumptions regarding the codes of Irish femininity held by the protagonists of the three novels relate to the meanings and expectations of marriage, and they appear as rather shattered since they conceive their babies out of wedlock. The sacredness of this institution for the configuration of Ireland's cultural identity was grounded not only in its crucial role for the establishment of the family and the patriarchal principles of gender differentiation, but also on female typification and the widely sustained idea that all married women should become mothers, thus guaranteeing its essential function of genealogical perpetuation. As mentioned in Part One of our study, the constitutional text set the basis for the Irish family pattern and for women's role within it, giving rise to a number of limitations, like the marriage bar, imposed upon them on that account.

It goes without saying that in the agenda of feminist interrogations and rewritings of traditional family models there has always been an attempt to break that exclusive association between adult women and marriage, given that the gender polarity that it entails substantiates the patriarchal establishment of power and it affects women's attainment of independent subjectivity outside its parameters. For Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard, marriage and heterosexual relations sustain the system of male domination:

> From the start of the second wave of feminism there was a clear recognition that marriage and heterosexual couple relations generally were an important element within this system. […] It is therefore never a contract between equals, since men and women are not equals. Men are individual adult citizens in a way women are not. They have civic rights as contracting individuals and

> many customary rights that are denied to women. They usually have more money and property, and it is accepted that they 'need' more money, not only because they may have dependants, but also because they 'need' more food, they 'need' to have their domestic work done for them and they 'need' to have various pleasures catered for, etc. (13)

In this section we look at firstly, the monolithic vision of marriage that the protagonists of the three novels show as inherited from the Catholic, patriarchy-rooted and maternity-oriented education they received, and secondly, we examine their own approaches to this institution when their pregnancy becomes a reality. The novelists describe in a similar vein the expectations about the social meaning of marriage that women like the protagonists usually held and the position ascribed to female figures in such prevalent constructions. Essentially, marriage stands as a key component for the protagonists insofar as their single state is the ultimately distinctive factor that determines their situation both in the initial part of their stories and also in its more challenging sections at their end. However, through several revisions of this institution, which range from the protagonists' mistrust and interrogation of its implications, to the different terms in which women can articulate it, in the novels the reader can find alternative possibilities that go beyond the notion of marriage as an ideological framework of female conduct.

The naivety that characterises Ronnie during most of the action described in *Mothers* becomes quite evident as far as sexual and family issues are concerned. For this reason, she represents the archetypical and confused mentality pervading young Irish women in the 1980s as they approached adulthood, mostly concerning their views of heterosexual

relations. Callaghan portrays her as encapsulating all the traditional beliefs, expectations and frequent misinterpretations to which the conservative treatment of sexual issues condemned Irish girls. This childish unawareness revolves around her confusion about the intersection of physical contact, sexuality, conception and marriage, as can be inferred from one of her mental flashbacks into her childhood fears after having kissed a boy:

> Oh, God, and how I had lain awake in bed every night for a week, wondering if somehow I had got the 'life-producing fluid' I'd read about. It must be transmitted through kissing because I couldn't think of any other way. Or, would it ever have been transmitted through sweaty hands? Or, had God gone and planted a seed in my heart, and would it grow and grow and grow, until the doctor came and took it out? But it seemed you have to be married for that. (16)

Obviously, Ronnie's sexual unawareness permeates this quote, but it is her immediate association between pregnancy and marriage what really strikes the reader most forcibly, denoting the lack of sexual education provided by her family and in school, as delineated in the previous section. At the same time, this ignorance during her childhood is also constructed by Callaghan on the concealment of illegitimate pregnancies through the socially acceptable manoeuvre of marriage and which made this everyday reality of Ireland unknown to young girls like her at that time.

For Ronnie's aunt, the economic problems and social class differentiation that thwarted her marriage to her boyfriend determined many of the events and emotional traumas that would characterise her life after the conception of their child and their compulsory separation. Through them, Callaghan explores the purely social and economic terms

upon which marriage was founded in the early decades of the twentieth century and which could ultimately result into back street and undesired solutions like giving up illegitimate children for adoption. Thus, Edward had confessed to Agnes that he could not marry her because his working class background obliged him to take care of his sisters and his mother (91), so that theirs was an ill-fated relationship from the beginning because of economic and family reasons. However, an old Agnes admits that marrying him would have changed things: "But what if she had married Edward? The idea suddenly made her giddy with happiness. It would have been so immeasurably different" (125).

In *The Killeen*, Leland's critique of the restrictive terms of marriage for women in 1930s Cork is predicated mostly on Julia and her memories of how her parents had her whole life organised for her in the hope that she would become a respectable wife and mother. However, it is through her that we can also see how women's uncompromising attitudes towards this institution become polarised when their social respectability and that of their family are at stake, as in cases of illegitimate conception. Thus, quite early in the chapter where her character is introduced, the narrator portrays Julia as an intelligent, clear-minded woman who defies the plans that her parents had devised for her, as she is determined to lead a different life:

> She was thinking of establishing herself. She knew the connotations of the phrase and used it deliberately to herself in order to make her chosen meaning the one that mattered.[…] She would not marry or at least not yet. She would not *be* established. She would establish herself. (46-47)

Yet, after having met Maurice and getting pregnant by his friend, we hear that her unexpected state "had hastened their marriage" (79), and although she skilfully hides the true paternity of her baby and is the one to have eagerly organised the ceremony, the turn of events from what she had planned for her own life sheds some light on how she had to comply with the codes of correctness for a woman in her situation. From then on —but actually not for long, as we will see below— her previous views of her own womanhood and adulthood become diametrically opposed to the ones she had initially formulated, and inevitably comprise many of the patriarchal codes for married women, including as well those of being a republican martyr's wife.

The portrait of marriage in *DBR* revolves, on the one hand, around the relation between Mary's parents, whose life together until Bridget's death is described as one of monotony, secrecy and patriarchal submission of the wife towards the husband's desires. Thus, the everyday practices of this ideal institution are questioned from the beginning of the novel, with Mary going through an incestuous sexual abuse that resonates with the silenced neglect that her mother had felt in her life as a country wife. On the other hand, O'Brien brings to the fore the sexless nature of married life, in clear contrast to how teenagers like Mary and Tara envision entrance into it. The narrator describes the two girls talking about pre-marital sexual relations and the generational conflict around this practice as voiced by Tara herself: "'Did I tell you what I said to my mother?' […] she flew at me when I said to her 'Mummy, suppose you marry someone and he's not good at it, what then?' She

went every colour. I don't think Daddy and her… I never hear a sound… They're like corpses in there" (26-27). The implications of marriage are obviously analysed from a very different perspective here, although it is also quite significant that Mary does not really add on this conversation, which is mostly led by Tara. For this reason, not only does she contribute to the establishment of a generational contrast but also a more controversial contention against the moralistic and asexual grounds of marriage is introduced by O'Brien here, in an attempt to de-romanticise Irish girls' approach to it.

These differently acquired ideas about women's role within marriage become a reality and a source of uneasiness when the women have to tackle their unexpected pregnancy and some of them start to consider it as an option for the normalisation of their "deviant" situation. Taken together, all the protagonists under analysis in our study show different approaches to this institution by that time, although as outlined above, they all share a particular education of the marital codes of behaviour expected from women. These reactions vary from total helplessness in making plans for marriage –for Agnes, Margaret and Mary–, desperation to quickly arrange it –Harriet and Julia–, and serious doubts about the suitability of such an option –as in the case of Ronnie–. Thus, the texts offer a varied description of how initially marriage can be the only prospect as women and later as pregnant women, whereas in the end other possibilities are introduced.

Having grown quite sceptical about marriage –probably because of the situation she had seen at home with her parents and also because

of the wider options available to women in the 1980s–, Ronnie reflects about the immediacy of getting married to Brian after she learns her condition, but she also has doubts about its convenience. In a new intertextual reference, we hear that she dismisses this alternative because of the kind of relation they were leading and her discontent with Brian's character. To the comment about the eternal nature of marriage made by a Christian Brother she is talking to in a book launch, she wonders rhetorically: "Eternally bonded to Brian? She took a long, slow dip of her drink. Blake was right. Heaven was probably a place to avoid. Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven. No, that was Milton" (20). As in many other instances in the novel, eccentricity and literature appear as a common strategy used by the author in order to make her protagonists reflect upon the universe of important issues like marriage is in this scene. What also stands out in Ronnie is the promptness of her own response and the irony with which she judges the implications of this family structure, which deviates from the considerations she had when she was younger, as mentioned above.[88] Unlike her aunt, for whom marriage was not discussed as a possibility either with her family or with her partner, Ronnie can voice her discontent with the legal and moral terms in which marriage was conceived at that time, when divorce had not been introduced in Ireland yet. However, her disapproval particularly

[88] Liam Harte and Michael Parker's view of the intertextual nature of modern Irish literature also has relevance to what Callaghan does with Ronnie here. To use their own words: "Intertextuality plays a particularly significant role within contemporary Irish writing, much of which reflects the struggle by both individuals and collectives to come to terms with a history which once appeared to offer a secure source of cultural definition, but which is now open to radical contestation" (1). Therefore, drawing also on the turn to literature that Agnes had done when facing her uncle Christopher, as mentioned above, we can point out how Callaghan has her characters use literary references as a vehicle to decentralise female conventions. For further analyses of the significance of those references see Wessel-Felter 1994: 145 and my *Sólo ellas*, 94-95.

accounts for Callaghan's revision of the immediacy between single maternity and marriage that had been common for those women up to the more, but not yet fully, open-minded period of the 1980s. Actually, as Maroula Joannou remarks about single mother narratives, they are

> a rebellion against the dominance of romance and marriage plots, which show marriage as the conclusion of the heroine's quest for self-knowledge and also as the closure of the novel. In formulating how best to live a life outside marriage the contemporary 'unmarried mother' narratives questions the conventions of the novel as well as the social order. (57)

Further, the introduction of Lily —Agnes's housekeeper— in the story of *Mothers* enables Callaghan to portray, though tangentially, men's violence against women within the limits of marriage, and to comment on its tragic consequences. Lily is herself involved in one of the beatings after which her daughter is taken to the hospital by the police, and she then finds refuge in Agnes's house. When the aggressor appears at the front door, Agnes realises that he is "the bully poor Lily's daughter had to live with" and she faces him, falling on the floor and breaking her leg, which will send her later to the hospital (127). It is this marital episode what shortly earlier had made Agnes utter her views on the present day state of marriage in Ireland, as we hear through the narrator that she thinks that "[m]arriage was a risky business these days, and vastly overrated. You didn't know what you were getting. And yet the young wanted it" (124). Truthfully, she had fantasised with the idea of having married Edward, as mentioned above, but it seems that the reality of that marriage helped her admit that "she mustn't give in to her imagination. She mustn't give in to the past" (126).

But the sharpest comments and portrait of the intersection of single maternity and marriage as a socially valuable and morally necessary option, and also the reformulations of its social validity are offered through the story of Harriet. Her representation in the novel can be read in light of the intervention of the Church in the transgression of this basic pillar of the family ideology. In other words, her character is constructed upon the fact that to be married and blessed by the Catholic clergy was the only acceptable process for a couple willing to start a new family. Other options broke the codified principles, and access to marriage was a difficult quest in cases that defied the established parameters. Thus, when having conceived an illegitimate child, a marriage was procured, some priests refused to marry the couple and later, to baptise their baby at all. Occasionally, though, when the vows did take place, it was done in secrecy and often in a different place from where standard weddings took place. Drawing on a recent survey carried out on Irish women on this respect, Betty Hilliard notes that many respondents reported that pregnant girls were usually married in a separate area behind the altar (2000: 149). The distinction evidently suggests the low level of social acceptability of those ceremonies and the different approaches to marriage that priests, the family and even the spouses themselves internalised depending on their previous sexual behaviour.

These conflicts obviously permeate Harriet's approach to marriage when she finds herself pregnant by her already married friend, thus revealing the higher degree of anxiety that falls upon the woman in

cases of extra-marital conception, as well as the desperation that underlies her resort to a purely transactional strategy of social respectability, at the expense of her emotional subjecthood. As is indicated by the narrator, marriage was "a panicking reaction to her situation" (203) and she had done so because "[s]he just couldn't have faced the shame of being an unmarried mother" (204). Not surprisingly, the following quotation bears witness to all the practices described above and the anxiety that Harriet felt:

> When she hadn't succeeded in telling her father or Oliver about her pregnancy, she had wired James Roberts who was on leave from the army. […] They got married as soon as they got a dispensation. Standing at the side altar of Farm Street Church Harriet had agreed to all the mumbo-jumbo about the children. She had no understanding of the Catholic faith, but at the time she would have said anything. (200-201)

Quite roughly then, Callaghan portrays marriage in cases of single maternity as a very artificial procedure, infused with many forms of irony and contradictions. To further prove that, her protagonist figures from then on as a rather distressed woman and mother suffering the consequences of all the prejudices that exist around conception before marriage: "She had been in the wrong, she knew that, but that didn't make James's behaviour right. Catholics didn't believe in divorce, so he got every ounce of his revenge by never talking to her. There had been nowhere to go, not with a bulging stomach" (203). Time allows Harriet to view her own marriage from a different, disapproving perspective and also to approach it in a more cynic way when her boyfriend –Ian– proposed: "Once was enough to marry. She was too tired to begin again" (200).

In Leland's novel, marriage opportunities are different for Margaret and Julia, although this time class has not so much to do with that distinction. Margaret can not even inform Earnán about her pregnancy because of his sudden departure for America, whereas Julia, despite being pregnant by her boyfriend's comrade, immediately prepares the wedding herself. Her case is also remarkable because her parents are not involved in the organisation at all, but as we will see in the next section, she tries to convince them about it with the fact that Maurice is of Irish origin. In the case of Margaret, the possibility of married life arises long after the birth of her child, and it is introduced as a point of inflection for her final negotiation between her maternal self and her quest for self-fulfilment. Thus, marrying Dessie —a Cork builder planning to move to England— would mean to be far away from her son but also the achievement of "what she most desired, a way of life" (107). Yet, in a very subtle manner Leland incorporates the prejudices against out of wedlock pregnancy by having Margaret hesitate about telling Dessie about her "secret" or not, as she is afraid of his possible repudiation, which is not really articulated in the narrative but presumable from the baby's final allocation back to its family's country home.

Quite significantly though, it is Julia the one who encourages Margaret to approach marriage in a non-romantic way:

> 'Don't worry about love,' Mrs Mulcahy had advised her. 'We all think love matters. It doesn't. That feeling isn't important. It's nice, but it's not what makes a marriage work. You needn't feel, if you don't love Dessie, that you'll never love him. Perhaps you will, it could come. But other, good things can come before that. You won't be cheating him of anything.' (104-105)

Julia's participation in the final course of events for Margaret's story becomes very meaningful in the sense that her experience as an old time devoted wife makes her admit that "it all worked the wrong way" (105). For her, the social norms of femininity and maternity are not valid any longer, as we will see in the next chapter of our study, and she tries to project that upon Margaret, whose liberatory move resides in that she *opts* for marriage.

Mary's youth and the incestuous circumstances of her conception arguably determine the way in which O'Brien inscribes marriage in the narrative of *DBR*. Unlike the rest of the protagonists, this option is never discussed by herself or her benefactors, not even when she meets Luke in Galway and he kindly takes care of her. The prospect of marriage arises though, while waiting for the judicial decision at the end of the novel, and it is intended to soothe Mary and normalise her rather abnormal state in comparison to other Irish girls her age. Roisin and the other women who guard her in Dublin insist on her future as a "common" Irish girl: "I can see you getting married one day… You'll have a lovely quiet wedding over in the west.' One of the women says, and again they are saying how she would not or could not take a life" (183-184). However, obviously drawing on the ordeal she was made to go through both at home and after her pregnancy is discovered, her views on marriage follow the same sceptical patterns as the ones shown by the other cases analysed above. Thus, the narrator comments how for her the whole idea is an artificial invention: "A wedding. A word. Another word like death or truth or goldfish" (184). Finally, as in the case of the rest of the protagonists –except Margaret–,

Mary's story does not end up with a wedding, but simply with the hope that after her destiny has been changed by the miscarriage, she could find a way for herself, which curiously enough, here does not imply a total rejection of a relationship but on the contrary, a search in the crowd:

> The face she does not yet know. But would know the moment it materialised. And will know. She closes her eyes for an instant, thinking how it might be, hoe unimaginably beautiful it might be, that there would be a someone to whom she could tell it all, all of it, down to the last shred, but that there would be no need to tell it because it would already be known and that would be love. (261)

4.3.3. Family relations: stories of use and abuse

In his study *The Novel and the Nation*, Gerry Smyth has noted that, in the Irish rhetorics of colonisation and decolonisation, the patriarchal family has played a crucial role insofar as it is "one of the most enduring and resonant of Irish cultural obsessions" (55). His analysis of the effects of that discourse upon the collective imagination of the island revolves around what he considers the major components of Irish familial ethics, namely, gender coding and generation. For Smyth, on the one hand, the asymmetries between the articulation of male and female identities demonstrate how "nationalism imposed *within* Ireland the economy of unequal gender relations that colonialism had constructed *between* Ireland and England" (56). On the other hand, he notes that the conflicts arising from the obsession with generational reproduction and the authority of parents over children also permeate Ireland's reality, and it is commonly transmitted to literary texts. In his own words:

> [F]athers and sons, mothers and daughters, past and present —these relations and the wide range of social and cultural situations to which they can be applied haunt modern Irish life and art, constituting one of the fundamental aspects of the national life with which the new fiction has found itself obliged to engage. (57)

Along with state parameters and religious dogmas, the family stands as a sacred institution upon which attitudes to single maternity are constructed in Ireland. Often considered a repressive force that constrains women's search for individuality, it has also been portrayed as a source of self-reconciliation and liberation in some cases. In the novels under study, more emphasis is laid on the former interpretation, since a close reading of all the stories reveals that rather than an agent of

protection, the family appears as the place of emotional delimitation in cases of unmarried pregnancies. Following Smyth's argument about the grip of the concepts of gender and generation, but reversing his order of analysis, in this section we focus firstly, on the prevalent clash between the parental authority and the protagonists' search for self-autonomy. Then, we explore the polarity resulting from the crossed expectations and approaches to the experience of unexpected parenthood that the women and their male partners manifest when the pregnancy becomes a reality.

All the protagonists of *Mothers*, *The Killeen* and *DBR* are somehow at odds with at least one of the members of their family. Despite varying in nature and circumstances, these conflicts certainly affect the way in which they face and later deal with their single and pregnant state. So, by inserting them in the stories, the authors bring to the fore not only the psychological manipulation of women over the ethics of the traditional family, but also the extent to which these values determine their reaction towards an unwanted pregnancy. Arguably, as illustrated in the novels, the family constitutes the mediator between society and the individual, a fact that reaches higher levels of complexity when deviance from the established parameters is materialised by means of what is considered an "abnormal" behaviour.

In each text, the family setting of the protagonists is articulated upon different circumstances. In fact, we can find a broad spectrum of structures in the narratives that stand for the multiple conditions prevalent in Ireland and elsewhere, thus encompassing a quite realistic picture of its occurrence in everyday society. The purely nuclear pattern,

with a male breadwinner and a dependent wife and children, is only originally found in the stories of Ronnie, Margaret, Julia and Mary, although in the case of Ronnie, her family becomes extended with a half-brother sharing with her part of their childhood. The rest of the women —Harriet and Agnes— are brought up in families which would now be called "dysfunctional", with just one parent appearing in the text. However, what is worthy of note as we take all the cases together is that many of the supposedly nuclear families turn out to be quite dysfunctional in their own ways, which highlights again the hidden realities and anomalies that usually characterise them under the public view of happiness and stability.

This family distortion provokes an ontological crisis on the protagonists, a fact that bears out Colm Tóibín's arguments in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction*. Tóibín focusses on the narrative representation of the ethics of the family in Ireland and points out the persistence with which contention and tribulation inhabit its fiction. As he observes:

> How is it that we can make the following statements about Irish writing: there is almost no version of domestic harmony at the beginning of an Irish novel; there is no novel which ends in a wedding, or a match being made. Irish fiction is not like that; Irish fiction is full of dislocation and displacement. (xxiii)

Certainly, the novels that we have chosen for our study fall within that group, providing also a specific consideration of the emotional derangement of single mothers' inscription within those family commonplaces.

If we consider the preliminary relation between the protagonists and their family at the onset of the stories or once the action progresses, it follows that the women are all circumscribed by parental performance and by the values that they received from their parents. To start with Ronnie, this character represents a young woman's struggle to assimilate her familial past once her present and future as a mother are unexpectedly rendered manifest. By means of mental flashbacks to her childhood and adolescence, we get acquainted with the fact that although she had a good relation with her parents, she witnessed the degradation of their marriage, as her father had an affair and an illegitimate baby with Harriet, her mother's best friend. Despite these unhappy circumstances and her emotional strain while growing up with her half-brother Barry, the narrator insists that what really torments Ronnie about this three-dimensional situation is the mutual disappointments and snare that are generated among the three adults. She finds it difficult to come to terms with her father's lack of commitment about Barry, her mother's mourning passivity towards the adultery and Harriet's loneliness throughout those years.

Thus, by setting Ronnie's pregnancy in this unorthodox familial atmosphere, the author ironically comments on the double standards that lie behind this institution, which publicly proclaims its sanctity and consistency while it keeps shattering to pieces. This paradox is also quite apparent when Oliver warns Ronnie about the consequences of having bad companies (15-16) or when Laura tries to convince her that "when a man and a woman are in love, they are the world to each other" (39). All

these beliefs and ironies obviously inform Ronnie's standpoint when she must cope with her own prospect to form a family, whatever its final structure may be.

As the action and Ronnie's story advance, her pregnancy gradually becomes the catalyst to further investigate her family past and to understand the emotional links among Oliver, Laura and Harriet. It actually functions as a mechanism that locates her at a different, more mature position, as can be inferred from her reaction when she spots Harriet in a Dublin street: "I should go up and say, 'Hello, Harriet. I'm Ronnie. You remember me?' I can't. If mother ever found out… But why not? I'm an adult person now, my own person, expecting my own child" (35). By the same token, to identify herself with Harriet's pregnancy and the kind of life she had to lead being a single mother enables Ronnie to analyse from a different perspective the family situation and the role played by Harriet in the whole story with her parents: "that woman had ruined her mother's marriage, but she didn't look like a scheming wretch" (36). Clearly, this moment of female empathy prophesies the final scene of the novel while it also serves Callaghan to reformulate the straightforward judgements made on deviant family structures, in which the presumed agents of corruption are usually the victims.

Also important for Ronnie's psychological and emotional growth in the early days of her pregnant existence is the relation she has with her mother. At first, as outlined above, she objected to the kind of attitude that Laura had about her husband's fascination for Harriet. For that reason, when Ronnie gets trapped in a similarly bleak situation, she

keeps her distance from her mother, who does not stand for the nourishing maternal figure that she would demand. Her disappointment calls for Adrienne Rich's comments about the typical daughterly needs from the mother in the process of identity configuration:

> As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours. We need not to be the vessels of another woman's self-denial and frustration. The quality of the mother's life —however embattled and unprotected— is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist. (1997: 247)

Although the author does not really expand on this issue, —more than recurrent in literary accounts and critical interpretations of female subject formation—, we could easily state that the mother-daughter bond between the two characters is intensified throughout the narrative, and it certainly plays a significant role in Ronnie's response to her state. Gradually sympathising with how her mother sustained the family situation during her childhood and adolescence, Ronnie does not really reach a point of complete complicity with her, though, as she constantly hesitates about telling her about the pregnancy or not. The narrator insists on her affective entanglement between trying to forbear her mother's more than probable preoccupation about it (29), and her admission that the older woman will surely support her, but that the news would only add more misery to her own tragedy: "She would stand by, she would help —if she knew. But it wasn't fair to burden her" (169). However, the passage can also be read in light of Irigaray's notes in her essay "Women-Mothers, The Silent Substratum of the Social Order," where she demands that "we need to say goodbye to maternal

omnipotence (the last refuge) and establish a woman-to-woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers, in which they might possibly also feel themselves to be our daughters. In a word, liberate ourselves along with our mothers" (Whitford 50). This is precisely what stems from the kind of maternal protection that Ronnie performs here over her own mother, while it also serves her to move a step forward in her individual emancipation and her pregnancy awareness.

By and large, the mother-daughter plot has permeated literary narratives of women's search for individuation in the British, American and Irish tradition.[89] However, for Callaghan, as will be also the case for O'Brien and Leland in the other two novels, this relation is granted less relevance than we would expect, so that it does not really shape the novel or catches the reader's attention substantially. It is true that the lack of a supportive maternal figure places all the protagonists into a deeper quandary, but curiously enough, that absence is not portrayed in any case as the most immediate source of anxiety for the women by the time they find themselves single and pregnant. To our mind, in *Mothers* the mother-daughter story appears only as a representative element of the complex family order that frames and determines women's decisions. Actually, by the end of the book Ronnie has not shared her news with her mother (239), and finds a maternal figure in Harriet, as we will see below. This illustrates not simply the type of relation they have, but most

[89] A few illustrative examples are Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). In the Irish domain, important titles are Molly Keane's *Good Behaviour* (1981), Claire Boylan's *Holy Pictures* (1983), Mary Rose Callaghan's *The Awkward Girl* (1990), Catherine Dunne's *The Walled Garden* (2000) and most recently, Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* (2006). For a critical exploration of this crucial subject, see Hirsh's *The Mother-Daughter Plot* (1989) and Rosario Arias' *Madres e hijas en la teoría feminista* (2002).

importantly, the grip that the family ethics has upon both women, whose conciliation at this stage is thwarted by imposed social norms.

In turn, when the details of Harriet's out of wedlock pregnancy are explored from her own perspective in the two main chapters devoted to her story, many of Ronnie's ideas and misunderstandings are re-interpreted in the text, so that she ends up approaching this character with a very different outlook. To our mind, this is actually one of Callaghan's most productive narrative gifts and it has very positive results in characterisation, which are also praised by Maryanne Wessel-Felter in the following terms:

> In *Mothers*, characterisation is tied to point-of-view. Each of the three major characters has her own section of the novel written in dramatic monologue. This technique, of course, allows us to see the women from the inside, thereby allowing Callaghan to create characters to whom we are sympathetic.[…] We see each character thinking about the other two, giving us a kind of third-person perspective simultaneously with the first person narrative. Such a blending of perspective helps the author balance and fill out her characterization. (1994: 140)

The only information provided about Harriet's familial background is that her mother and brother had both died by the time when she had to grapple with an undesired pregnancy. Yet, the narrative dwells on how this circumstance had set the ground for the emotional breakdown she went through during her trip back home in order to tell her father. Disorientated and self-absorbed after these two deaths and his lonely living in the country house, Harriet's father responds to her news with only "bit dull for you, though. And there's your studies…" (68). The visit thus turns into a further source of helplessness for the protagonist, who feels not exactly repudiated but neglected: "How she'd wept that night

over her cold, bare room, pulling the faded eiderdown over her head so he wouldn't hear. Not that he'd hear if she had hysterics five inches from his ear. Yet her father hadn't always been like that" (69). So, in this case the author marks how the expected social condemnation of out of wedlock pregnancies is overshadowed by more private family problems, which nonetheless, impact negatively upon the women. Likewise, there is a veiled suggestion that the absence of the maternal figure in this story also accentuates the anxiety of the protagonist, although the call for the lost mother is not internalised or worded by Harriet at any stage during the novel. Also taking into account the delineation of Ronnie's story, this can lead us to think that Callaghan intended to portray the psychological strain of her protagonists as women under difficult circumstances, rather than as daughters in conflict with their mothers.

A rather different response to the same problem is found in the case of Agnes's family, represented by her widowed mother and the surrogate paternal figure of her uncle Christopher. The control that Mrs Legge had always exerted over her daughter, with constant prohibitions against her relation with the young Edward and trying to ruin all her possible moments of joy, subsequently persists throughout the life of the two women. Their antagonism only disappears after the old woman dies when Agnes is in her late fifties, leaving her "alone for the first time in her life, the freedom almost intoxicated her" (89). Years earlier, having disgraced the family by conceiving a baby out of wedlock in her teens, she had been taken to England to await the birth of the child and then give it up for adoption (98). In fact, Agnes stands among the protagonists in our

analysis whose pregnancy occurs at a very early age, but unlike the others, that is, Margaret and Mary, who at least try to escape from an equally suffocating family environment, she epitomises the stagnation that family domination can provoke upon women throughout their process from youth to adulthood.

Propelled towards the solution granted by adoption, in a move comparable to the treatment of Margaret's pregnancy, this character represents the extent to which generational conflicts are based on different schemes of personal individuation, such as class protection or the preservation of family appearances. Adoption is portrayed from very different angles in *Mothers* and *The Killeen*. These range from its conception as a mechanism to avoid social reprobation for single mothers and their families –in the case of Agnes–, through the external manipulation that pregnant women meet with by medical figures and relatives –in the case of Margaret–, to the more subtle manipulation of the woman in order to help childless couples, as happens indeed to Nora. About this last ethically controversial outlook Vivienne Darling comments that "Doctors for instance, may be under pressure to satisfy the needs of those infertile couples who present [*sic* themselves] at their clinics" (41).[90] Personal revelations and documentaries during the last decades have also

[90] Adoption became regulated in Ireland with the 1952 Adoption Act, which was implemented in 1964 and 1974. Until then, Ireland was the only country in Europe, together with Portugal and the Netherlands, that had no legal adoption. But according to Maura Richards what the Act meant was that "[i]t removed the religious ban on adoption by couples of mixed marriages, it allowed adoptive parents to apply to the High Court [...] it allowed widowers to adopt where a wife had died before an adoption order had been made". Because of all this, she concludes, "[t]his only confirmed our belief that all the shenanigans had in fact nothing to do with the welfare of the child, but were very concerned with upholding the institution of marriage" (1998: 150). Later, the Illegitimacy Act of 1987 removed the status of illegitimacy and gave property and maintenance rights to non-marital offspring (Hill 194).

brought to light that the children of unmarried Irish women had been exported to the United States in operations directed by nuns and other figures of the Church hierarchy (Inglis 1998: 128-129).[91] All in all, in these two novels what the authors emphasize is that the mothers' will is never heard. The collision between what women expect and what they are confronted with creates in them a sense of statelessness that often remains deeply embedded for the rest of their lives. Also, this state generates a rage that has been often unarticulated in literature.

Adoption is projected in *Mothers* as the most direct device to which families resorted when having to deal with an out of wedlock pregnancy. The immediacy of such a strategy actually correlates with the pace of the narration. In other words, Callaghan's narrator abbreviates in only a couple of paragraphs the whole procedure that goes from the moment in which Agnes's mother discovers her pregnancy and the inevitable handing over of the baby for adoption in England (98-99). Visibility and social defamation stood as the main concern of families, for whom only adoption guaranteed the occultation of the stigma that could threaten its reputation. Nonetheless, what is emphasized in that episode is that there was an inflexible dealing of the situation, in which no other options were discussed with the mother about the future of her baby and her own.

In fact, similar steps are followed in the case of Nora, the childminder who worked for Laura and Oliver, and whose out of wedlock pregnancy is intended to be "solved" and covered through adoption as

[91] This is fictionalised, for example, by Benjamin Black in his detective novel *Christine Falls*.

well. In Laura's words, "[Dr Tommy Quinn] has patients who want to adopt. The woman can't conceive and it's causing problems. […] So they're going to pay all the expenses and adopt Nora's child" (80). This story demonstrates that, even if as made clear by Laura, "the alternatives are grim," the wills and voices of the women involved were not heard, even in the 1960s. This can be inferred from what Nora tells Harriet about her own situation: "'Miss, you don't know about it. You don't know that they're making me give it away. […] I could keep him here with me. No one comes down the lane. No one but the breadman. I could look after them, like the children here.' Her eyes turned to Harriet in mute appeal" (82). Further, the arrangement of the adoption of Nora's child also indicates the use and spread of such device among the different classes, although as compared to the process Agnes goes through, the whole procedure certainly varied for well-off families that could afford a trip to England, where secrecy could be more easily obtained.

All in all, with the specific family surroundings of Agnes's story Callaghan underscores the life-long consequences that such constant surveillance, manipulation and external handling of single maternity may entail for these women. In other words, Agnes bears out the extent to which solutions modelled on moral principles rather than on individual choices can lead to female alienation, usually for life. Actually, Agnes's entrapment during the adoption episode recurs on several occasions when she reaches old age, as described in the many visions that are interspersed with the narration of her present life. Usually focussed on her wish to find her son and explain it all to him, these illusions reveal

the persistence of the damage and they represent her own attempts cope with her having been manipulated by her mother. She even makes up verbal exchanges with Mrs Legge, who keeps complaining "I could do nothing with you. Nothing! Such an obstinate girl. And a disappointment!" (216). Also, their confrontation haunts her with conversations like "'Mother, why didn't you like Edward?' 'Why should you be happy if I'm not'" (221), in which generational manipulation converges with the effects of female frustrations.

This decisive moment of maternal experience –along with other important ones in the novel like Ronnie's visions of her giving birth on a television show, as we will see later– are presented to the reader in the form of the protagonist's hallucination. Thus, it also engages with the theory of the ghostly domain of motherhood formulated by Kristeva. For her, visions, voices and usually, derangement are the expressions of the maternal when the subject does not have a female system of identification. Namely, although the mother-daughter bond can have liberating effects for women, it also generates tragedy and disintegration:

> For a woman, the call of the mother is not a call from beyond time, or beyond the socio-political battle. With family and history at an impasse, this call troubles the word: it generates hallucinations, voices, 'madness'. [….] It is a fragile envelope, incapable of staving off the irruption of this conflict, of this love which had bound the little girl to the mother, and which then, like black lava, had lain in wait for her all along the path of her desperate attempts to identify with the symbolic paternal order. (Moi 156-157)

Read through this lens, Agnes's haunting fears and her lack of reconciliation with her mother can be interpreted as a result of the absence of maternal signifiers outside the patriarchal ethos of the

twentieth century in Ireland. Similarly, they reveal the grip that such maternal articulations have upon women because, gradually acquiring more power, this representative of the Irish mother does not liberate but rather oppresses the protagonist. As is also made clear in the story, this takes the form of setting her apart from all her hobbies, epitomised in the curtailment of her commencing career as a dramatist and her prohibition from attending the first performance of her play in the Abbey Theatre: "Yes, they took everything. First Edward –they said she had fallen in love in the 'wrong direction'. Then her child. Then her personal liberty. Before the opening night, she was a virtual prisoner in her room. And afterwards, she never wrote again" (106).

With a different approach to the role of the family background not only for unmarried mothers but also for other personal quests, like that of Michael, *The Killeen* stresses the annihilating effects of the principles that sustain this institution.[92] At fourteen years of age, Margaret leaves her home in rural Adrigole because she feels suffocated by the family atmosphere in her house. The death of her father, who had been her only support with his many loving gestures during her childhood, certainly sharpens her mother's character even more. Mrs Coakley is reluctant to accept further school education for her daughter and constantly warns her "not to think herself different, not to be late back, not to be hobnobbing with the teacher" (7). Also, she constantly belittles Margaret and her siblings, but her wrath is mostly directed to the protagonist, who

[92] The mother-daughter plot is also central to Leland's story "Commencements", included in the collection *If Only*. For an analysis of this relation in the text as well as in Edna O'Brien's "A Rose in the Heart of New York", see Wan-Lih Chang, 54-64.

feels exasperated by it: "'With Dada gone,' she whispered to Nora, 'she keeps at me all the time. I don't know why'" (9). This character constitutes the demonic dimension that maternal omnipotence may reach and the plight in which it can submerge its objects. All those performances render Margaret, her brother Michael and her sister Mary completely circumscribed by familial exigencies, until sooner or later, that repressive bond is broken. Thus, as in the case of Agnes in *Mothers*, it is only when separation from the maternal figure is granted through escape from the family home that these characters can find individuation.

With the impasse that these familial conditions entail, the novel insists on how an illegitimate pregnancy only brings forth a further clash among the interests of its members. In turn, the protagonists must overcome the anxiety resulting from their family's fears of social degradation if an undesired pregnancy comes into light. Because Margaret was already in the convent far from home when she got pregnant, her mother and brother could only guess about her state from her strange change of address. Her letter saying she was going to work in "a private house" had raised her mother's suspicion, and as a habitual tactic, the parish priest was the designated person to search for information. However, his prejudices against the girl, "a slut who was better out of the parish than restored to it" (122), and the gossip that came out around her disappearance certainly prevailed over any explanation the girl could be allowed to give (126).

As John Legget puts it in his review of the novel, Mrs Coakley "hears only the resulting whispers of the townsfolk" (3) and for Catherine

Ward, in *The Killeen* "both land and community are destructive forces […] Their lives, even their very identities, merge with the soil, dulling their minds" (74-75). Thus, the construction of the story of Margaret illustrates Leland's critique of the primacy and authority accorded to external, religious judgements in this kind of contexts. Historically, in patriarchal and Catholic-oriented societies, female conduct has only been measured through church attendance and lack of social notoriety, whereas no other explanations about the circumstances were sought.

Similarly, the moral reaction to her situation intersects here with the rural context in which the news is spread. In other words, the mystery and plotting that characterise the reception of Mary's story in Adrigole contrast with the more compassionate and practical dealing of her state in the Cork-based atmosphere of Julia's house, although there the issue was not dealt with in an excessively liberal way either. For James Smith,

> Leland's reinscription of nationalist iconography is not simply levelled at rural Adrigole. […] The alternative urban Ireland, rife with political division and conservative middle-class Catholic morality, proves equally severe on mothers and children, particularly unmarried mothers and illegitimate children. (46)

To our mind, what is pivotal of the author's contextualisation of the stories is the widespread mentality that condemns these acts and their female subjects, whereas different attitudes and actions are taken depending on the circumstances.

But probably the most direct referent to grasp Leland's critique of the ultimate attempt to dominate women's consciousness in the name of social standards is demonstrated through Mrs. Coakley's violent abuse of

Thomas. The baby becomes for her and the whole parish the visible representation of Mary's sin and shamefulness, thus embodying the elements that threaten the values on which the traditional Irish family is founded. Innocent and helpless, Thomas is mistreated and violently beaten by a non-conventional Mother Ireland who, rather than protecting or nurturing one of her sons, certainly tries to destroy him:

> His mother was holding the body down on the table, the white scrubbed kitchen table, by one hand on his neck, the front of his neck. Crying and struggling, the child jerked on the boards, his nightshirt up around his chest. His small genitals were exposed to the frightful malevolence of the old woman: in her other hand she held the kitchen shears, open, sharp, arrested by Michael's entrance. (1985: 124)

Beyond its political symbolism, this scene is also rendered quite relevant for the development of the story, as it is precisely when Michael realises Mrs Coakley's extended battering of the child and "all that he had not seen before, the bruised forehead. The brown marks on the legs. Scars" (1985: 124). As for his progression as a character, the moment becomes an important catalyst because for the first time he confronts his madly rage-driven mother and threatens her with telling the priest, the doctor and the police. Significantly, the threat constitutes not only the end of materno-filial confrontation but most importantly, the realignment of generational power. Maternal oppression is doubly subdued here, because, projected as the extension of his sister's deviant maternity by means of his surrogate protection of Thomas, Michael represents the disruption of the stereotypical reach of family manipulation.

What is also remarkable about his reaction to the abuse is that while trying to grasp what he finds unjustifiable, our attention is drawn to

the external morality that prompted her mother to have such behaviour, as well as the contradictions with the religious models in which that conduct is founded: "Why was the child the tortured vessel of her hatreds, the disappointment of her hopes of life? This was a child already abandoned, lost, yet a child whose image she welcomed every Christmas with candles, and berried holly, and prayers" (125). It is through the description of Michael's innocent association of Thomas with Jesus that the author articulates her protest about the hypocrisy that characterises the social rejection and abuse of illegitimate babies. That prevailing attitude, as Leland suggests, ultimately leads to unreasonable tragedy, not only for the mothers who, like Margaret, are forced to abandon them because of prejudices, but also for the children themselves.

In *The Killeen*, generational confrontation and family constraints are also multi-fold for Julia, both before and after her pregnancy and marriage. However, of all the protagonists analysed in our study, she is the one who defies them all with a clearer determination, as we will see in subsequent sections. Starting with her parents, this attempt to direct her life according to the common parameters of female conduct in the 1930s is mostly focussed on her education and her future as a respectable wife, as outlined above. She operates as the vehicle by which her parents want to perpetuate the family name and business, but Mr and Mrs Watson's wish to have Julia near them clashes against her own plans to live in Paris, where she meets Maurice and Sebastien.

Her two stays in the French city mean for Julia's parents not only "her ruin" but also the possibility of finding a foreign boyfriend that would

endanger the purely Irish ancestry of their family: "A son-in-law was one thing, inevitable, perhaps, for the ambitious father of a splendid girl. A foreign marriage was something else entirely. By God!" (49). This complex dynamics of family formulations and reformulations enables Leland to call to mind the ineffectiveness of such parental worries as well as the absurdity by which externally devised plans prove to be paradoxically unsuccessful. In other words, the story unfolds in such a way that the perfect Irish husband that Julia's parents were looking for and whom she finally finds, ends up being a paternal failure, as she and her son are forsaken by him for the cause of republicanism.

In a similar vein, Julia is also circumscribed by the delineations of her dead husband's spinster aunts, Miss Lou and Miss Bina. Not only does she have to bear their constant reminding of the exemplary heroism in Maurice's death but also, their claim of educating Pat in the same values, while "guiding him in the right direction at every opportunity" (103). But 'the right direction' is to send the baby to a school where he can be indoctrinated and trained as a future military activist, which according to Julia, "was the precise reason for taking the child away" (94). The aunts even claim Margaret's son by way of their family relation with his runaway father, and they make sure that he is looked after in the orphanage school (101). For all these reasons, they are considered "a couple of old harpies" by the housekeeper (62), whereas Julia insists on their mischievous manoeuvrings when she tries to help Margaret to see her child, because for them "always the promise is bolstered by a threat" (102). Actually, according to Kristin Morrison, "Earnán's maiden aunts all

seem malignant versions of Yeats' image of Ireland as crone, delivering her young men to death. But they provide no later apotheosis, no transformation of themselves into beautiful Kathleen ni Houlihan, no renewal of their young men in glory" (299). Similarly, for Catherine Ward, they represent the "destructive forces in Ireland: bourgeois narrowness, puritanical Catholicism, and fierce nationalism" (76).

Family oppression acquires a rather different and tragic nuance in *DBR*. Of the three novels under analysis, it is the one that most clearly explores the destructive effect that traditional family patterns may certainly generate upon women, with a special focus on the devastation prompted by rape and other forms of sexual violence against women. However painful it is for the reader to go through the pages of Mary's sexual molestation by her own father, O'Brien suggests that to uncover the hidden realities of the perverse deviations from the happy nuclear family will contribute to curtail the occurrence of those acts, which certainly happen in everyday life. The novel takes the raping of the protagonist as its starting point but it moves on to interweave the events that result from such a vile conduct, with the added unfortunate circumstance of the death of the victim's mother. In general, this approach to the story accounts for O'Brien's use of the family background in her novels. Rüdiger Imhof has summarised it in that the author "deals with the break from the orthodoxies of home and education and fathoms the realities of personal choices, returning searchingly, nostalgically and painfully to the roots of the self in the childhood world" (71). Indeed, *DBR* is a story of a girl's compulsory and accelerated passage from childhood to

womanhood while trying to come to terms with the anomalies of the family background in which she grows up.

With an oppressive father and a silent and sick mother, Mary is victimised and sexually abused by him in what constitutes a tragic exponent of male brutalization over women. The incest plot is an additional element in this fictionalised story of X, but nonetheless, it provides the novel with more cruel realism and locates O'Brien among the various contemporary writers who, despite the ubiquitous psychological repulsion of this topic, decide to re-inscribe its occurrence through their narrative.[93] According to Christine St. Peter,

> any writer who chooses to put incest at the centre of a narrative risks a great deal. Incest is the most taboo of subjects, and the sexual abuse of children is generally considered among the most heinous of crimes –which may be why so few people are willing to consider it at all, much less take seriously its probable frequency. (2000b: 131)

In his extensive exploration of incest in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Levi-Strauss traces the different approaches that were followed before his work about the origin of this taboo and its prohibition for the preservation of the social order. Biological, sociological and cultural interpretations of incest had been common, but for him, the explanation of where it stems from has more to do with the transition from nature to culture. In his own words: "The incest prohibition is at once on the threshold of culture, in culture and in one sense, culture itself" (12). Also, he later comments that "[b]efore it, culture is non-existent; with it,

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[93] Other narratives by Irish women writers about female experiences of incest are Julia O'Faolain's *The Irish Signorina* (1984), Jennifer Johnston's *The Invisible Worm* (1991) and Lia Mills' *Another Alice* (1995). The subject is also treated, though tangentially, in Clare Boylan's *Home Rule* (1992), Kate Cruise O'Brien's *The Homesick Garden* and Mary Dorcey's story "The Orphan", included in Cruise O'Brien and Maher, eds. *If Only* (1997).

nature's sovereignty over man is ended. The prohibition of incest is where nature transcends itself" (25). Similarly, in *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva aligns incest with the rest of the forms in which abjection can be found, such as defilement, food, taboo and sin. Although she focusses mostly on the form of forbidden sexual relations with the mother, as formulated in Freudian theory, what is interesting about her association of the two phenomena is that both of them have a significant role in the articulation of the social and symbolic order, not only individually, but also for the collective psyche: "Abjection, just like prohibition of incest, is a universal phenomenon; one encounters it as soon as the symbolic and/or social dimension of man is constituted, and this throughout the course of civilization" (1982: 68).

Along with contraception and abortion, incest and rape have been historically considered noxious in Ireland. By the time of the emergence of the Irish Women's Movement in the 1970s, the ideological and practical rejection to such emotionally painful experiences was widespread, even in women's circles. Linda Connolly makes clear that it was only thanks to the work of a number of "radical feminists" that these issues were brought to the agenda of feminist activism, as evidenced by the creation of the Rape Crisis Centre in 1977 (214). In the case of incest, national awareness about this problem was raised after the revelations in 1993 of a Kilkenny woman who had been sexually abused by her father over a period of thirteen years.[94] According to Pat O'Connor, the widespread media coverage of this case placed the topic under public scrutiny and

[94] For an extensive study of the case, see Wood, K. *The Kilkenny Incest Case* (1993).

served to interrogate the role of the statutory forces in these issues as well as to meditate on the boundaries of family privacy. For her, "[t]he state has overwhelmingly been unwilling to initiate criminal proceedings against a father in cases of familial incest" and "[t]he ideological basis underlying such unwillingness is arguably the legitimacy of the father's authority as head of the household" (46). Until that date, incest had been commonly handled in private, usually within the family, although evidences and testimonies reveal that many of the female victims also went to Magdalene Homes in a widespread attempt to avoid visibility.[95]

Certainly, the lack of social sensibility about female suffering in these atrocities, by way of not questioning paternal legitimacy, is portrayed at various points in O'Brien's novel. One of the earliest and clearest examples is found with Roisin, the inexorable activist that tried to persuade and inspire a group of women about the inappropriateness of abortion whatever the circumstances of the conception may be. To a woman's comment that "scandals not only existed in dirty rags of newspapers, but happened to families, families all over, so that one read of girls' drowning themselves, or giving birth in graveyards and leaving the infant to die," Roisin simply answered with "Oh, the incest tosh" (*DBR* 23). Her position exemplifies the greater importance given to morally threatening issues rather than to the circumstances that have provoked them and which are threatening as well. Similarly, the critique of this

[95] As mentioned in Part One of this study, rape and incest victims were also among the interns of Magdalene Homes in Ireland. Goulding (1998: 66) and Conlon-McKenna (1999: 242-243) portray those cases in their respective works on these institutions. Similarly, Peter Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters* (2003) begins with the rape of one of the protagonists by a cousin during a family wedding, all that while a priest sings the popular Irish ballad "The Well below the Valley", whose lyrics also has incest connotations.

latent social undermining of family occurrences is extensively inscribed throughout the process from Mary's judicial instruction to return to Ireland to the final events by which her father is finally admitted to be the father of her child. The narrator insists on how people like Lizzie, the housekeeper who "had done washing" and "had seen things" (54), did not say anything, and even how Bridget and the lady doctor that is brought to the house in order to examine Mary after one of the rapes "are pretenders to one another. No one looks anyone in the eye lest they betray themselves" (29). Actually, as Ailbhe Smyth argues about men's violence against women, "hiding violence from others, from society as a whole, is also crucially about hiding it from ourselves" (1996b: 55).

To account for the paternal possession mentality upon which such mutism and impassiveness about family issues are founded, O'Brien emphasizes from the first rape the alignment of the exertion of patriarchal authority and the sexual objectification of women. Like the lands he owns, James McNamara considers his daughter's body a kind of property he is entitled to for his own sexual benefits, which quite visibly bears out the extent to which the Mother land of Ireland is materialised by a woman's body. This identification is clearly articulated in the opening scene:

> The road silent, somnolent yet with a speech of its own, speaking back to them, father and child, through trappings of sun and fretted verdure, speaking of the old mutinies and a fresh crime mounting in the blood. […] A wand, pronouncing his claim over the deserted but fabled landscape, over furze and fern, lakewater and bogwater, bogwort, myrtle, sphagnum, the warblers' and the bitterns' cry; his empire. […] 'And after the spuds, comes the strawberries,' he says and starts then to feel the stuff of her dress, pinching the bodice underneath it. (1-3)

His manipulation is also turned to the terrorisation of Mary about her own shamefulness after the abuse, as paradoxically, he appeals to the disgrace and shabbiness into which she has fallen: "What would your mother say… Dirty little thing" (5).

Although sexual violation stands in *DBR* as the most extreme form of paternal abuse, this physical manipulation also finds its psychological exponent in various moments of the novel. A remarkable illustration can be Mr McNamara's extortion over Mary after her mother's death in "A Promise." To her plead that he stopped drinking from then on, he simply responds by pulling out the promise that gives the chapter its title: "Will you stay at home for a few months and mind your father" (54). This exposition of paternal claim for authority and for daughterly submission underscores the grip that traditional patriarchal articulations of family roles may have upon Irish girls, who usually get trapped by family duties. However, the scene portrays not only the reversal of generational roles, as she sees his "childish expression" while the request is uttered, but also it is one of the first steps in Mary's process of forced and tragic maturation: "She knows what it will be and yet a gasp escapes her when he says it, when he pronounces it. Her death sentence" (53). In an ironic turn of the situation, her tears when having to comply with this duty are interpreted by Lizzie as grief for her mother's death. Although she insists to Mary "You're still a family" (54), only the girl and the reader know the paradoxical content of such comment.

Likewise, the portrayal of the conditions that lie behind paternal authority and daughterly submission in this case calls for the intersection

between family values and religious ethos, as can be interpreted from Mary's reference to Christ's obedience towards God the Father before going through his Passion:

> She ran out then through the hall door and shouted and prayed into the driving rain, and asked that it be not so, that the promise she had made she could be absolved from, that one of them would stand up and say 'She can come to us' and kneeling on the hard gravel, she prayed for that, then thought of Gethsemane and of the Saviour having to drink of the cup of pain. (54)

Correlating Mary with Christ —as Michael did with Thomas at the end of *The Killeen*— for the kind of fate they are made to accept after the decision of an omnipotent father, the author problematises how the family codes of generational behaviour enact the rhetorics of sacrifice proclaimed by Catholicism. The whole scene figures as a remarkable interrogation of the devastating effects that the ideology that informs the family in Ireland can have if the roles are strictly taken and manipulated towards patriarchal formulations.

The effects that incest has upon the victim are quite recurrently described in the novel, whereas not a single sign of remorse is written about the perpetrator's pathology, at least not until he is captured by the police and later suicides. In the chapter "A Pagan Place," whose title echoes her 1970 novel, speechlessness is the most immediate result of Mary's violation by her father, which here is materialised in the form of being forced to perform a fellatio.[96] Immediately afterwards, not only does she appear as "having fits", but also and quite symbolically, it is her victimised mouth that becomes defiled after having suffered her father's

[96] In *A Pagan Place*, the protagonist, whose sister had got pregnant out of wedlock, is forced by a priest to fellate him (1970, 176-178).

sexual tyranny, which renders her silenced: "She would not speak. Nothing would drag a word out of her, not threats, not coaxing, not their kneeling down and whispering. Her tongue was gone. It lay there like the tongue of an old show. It was stiff and defiled. Her tongue had become an enemy. Her mouth an enemy too" (28-29).

Silence is also the attitude that characterises Mary's mother, Bridget, throughout her appearance in the book. In fact, Fogarty suggests that "Mary's experience of abuse replicates and continues her mother's bruised existence, as she too is regularly the victim of domestic violence" (107). We can certainly assert that the mother-daughter bond is more evident and more deeply explored in this novel as compared to the others. Tragically linked by brutality, this silence stands as the force that also separates them. To quote Fogarty again, Bridget's silence is "as damaging as the abuse that she witnesses but never acknowledges" (108). Similarly, as we will explore in the next chapter, the narrator makes clear at the various abuse scenes that muteness is accompanied by bodily rejection so that her corporeality is also rendered inert.

In "Quandaries of the Incest Taboo," Judith Butler has explored the relation among incest, trauma and representability. According to trauma theorists and some psychoanalytic approaches to this subject, the resistance to or impossibility of narrating this kind of events is a sign of its traumatic nature. As she explains:

> [W]hen and where incest is *not* figurable as an event, that is where its very unfigurability testifies to its traumatic character […] Incestuous trauma, then, is variously figured as a brute imposition on the child's body, as the exploitative incitation of the child's desire, as the radically unrepresentable in the child's

> experience or, indeed, in the adult's memory whose childhood is at issue. (2000: 41)

However, Butler insists that "[b]y refusing to consider what happens to the child's love and desire in the traumatic incestuous relation with an adult, we fail to describe the depth and psychic consequences of that trauma" (2000: 42). Thus, her formulation engages in what seems to be the main purpose of the author when incorporating incest to the already traumatic experience of rape, that is, to let a victim's voice be heard as she contends with the many forces that circumscribe her.

Many critical comments have been made about the way in which the author approximates the issue of incest in her novel (Grossman 1997; St. Peter 2000b). By adding this plot to the real life events, O'Brien makes the story more poignant but at the same time, entirely thought-provoking about the innumerable facts that have been played with or concealed from the collective psyche of contemporary Ireland. Journalist Nuala O'Faolain praises *DBR* for being "a spiritual achievement", and her admiration towards O'Brien in this novel concentrates on her "detailed picture of Irish society in all its swirling unconsciousness" (1996: 12). She goes on to delineate her defence of the power and deftness of a writer to finally narrate in a credible way a topic traditionally absent, and somehow deliberately removed, we could also add, from the Irish social perception:

> Because Edna O'Brien is a writer, and not a silent visionary, we have access to what she sees. We can borrow her imagination. We can hear the complexities of her tone appalled almost to hysteria, but also poised, balanced out there at the very edge of what can be said at all. This is the only way it can be if we are to really face, really know, really imagine, what the sexual abuse of a

> child is. Because we need a sorceress's aid to 'take it in'. To stop it being foreign. (1996: 12)

Like O'Faolain, our admiration of O'Brien's mastery in *DBR* also resides in her detailed literary articulation of a traumatic event that few people dared to think about, even less write about, in a public context at the end of the twentieth century in Ireland. Her own contributions to the real life story are simply other plausible referents of the hidden parts of Irish historical and social reality, and like Callaghan's and Leland's, her objective proves to be the incorporation of female discourse and subjectivity in those contexts. Indeed, her inscription of a woman's voicing of private issues bears out Irigaray's argument when she notes that women

> have begun to say aloud what we each felt privately and individually. We have seen that it can be communicated, has been shared, and can be shared. It is no longer the private pain that once made us guilty. Guilty of suffering. Abnormal because we complained, made demands, were unhappy. (Whitford 50)

Also of paramount importance for the revision of the Irish system of gender relations and family articulations is the different attitude towards love, marriage and parental responsibility that the men that father their child have towards them and their pregnancy. Thematically, the three texts concentrate on the effects caused upon the women not only because they are unmarried, but also because of that relation with the men. All the protagonists are trapped in relations that are inappropriate either for the social standards or according to their own expectations. So, the authors share a concern with describing the preliminary barrier resulting from the strict system of gender coding that single pregnant women must

usually overcome, even before making their condition socially visible and open to external judgement.

For Ronnie, the reality of her transgressive maternity is burdened with the hectic and turbulent episodes she has lived with Brian since they met for the first time. They are rather opposed in character and prospects, so much so that their antagonism does not go unnoticed for her, as she insists throughout the book on the many differences that exist between them. For him, she is "a little hard to take" (11), whereas she thinks of him that "he was clever, he had good taste, and he knew a lot about books, and jazz, but he *was* silly" (28, original emphasis). Those differences stand as the initial obstacles that have Ronnie trapped and prevent her from telling Brian about her pregnancy, with also his arrogance and constant censure of any of her thoughts and movements as an added difficulty: "If I can't ever disagree with him, how will I ever tell him I'm pregnant?" (12).

Yet, what really distances them within their relationship is the contradictory aspirations they have about it. Ronnie projects her romantic visions about love onto their time together whereas Brian is much more sceptical about the traditional model: "'I don't know why we are quarrelling', she said weakly. 'I do. It's because you want children and marriage, and I don't. At least not without examining the alternatives'" (28). For that reason, when she overcomes her fears and doubts about breaking the news and finally tells him, she is irritated after his response:

> 'You'll have to get a scrape' 'A scrape?' 'An abortion. […] You know my feelings about love and marriage,' he said finally. 'Who

> said anything about marriage?' 'Well, if you want to play house, go right ahead.' His chair scraped the floor as he stood up. 'I'm going downstairs to buy some cigarettes.' (176-177)

In the case of Harriet, her undesired pregnancy follows the same pattern of male irresponsibility and indifference, but takes a further expression because of the illicit circumstances of her pregnancy. Oliver is a married man when the baby is conceived, and he literally ignores the two of them, because the sexual attraction he had felt for Harriet is simply gone by then. Also, his concern with having a legitimate heir had dissipated after the birth of his first son with Laura, so that, as we saw in the previous section, Barry can not participate of his lot because of the illicit circumstances of his birth, and he becomes Harriet's solely responsibility.

A number of obstacles also lie between Agnes and Edward, but they are mostly caused by the class distinction between them, which finally ends up separating them. Like Margaret and Julia in *The Killeen*, she is unable to tell the baby's father about its existence, both immediately after conception and when it is taken away from her shortly after birth, but in her case, the reasons that prompt such elusion transcend the political sacrifice and commitment of the men. The narrator simply points out that "she didn't dare tell him" and that "he had been dismissed by her family because he'd refused to take instruction, and had asked for a dot. They made such a fuss about that. But it was usual, customary. Perhaps if he had been more tactful. Her family's sensibilities were so easily affronted" (98). However, Edward's lack of common sense is also marked as the starting point for the isolation that

characterises Agnes afterwards. Hence, she demonstrates that the entrapment of single mothers is not only social but also emotional.

Left at a more vulnerable condition than Agnes, with no family around and having infringed the convent rules, Margaret is trapped even further when Earnán escapes to America without saying goodbye to her. She is aware, though, that telling him would not have changed her situation or stopped him from leaving the country:

> Even if he had said goodbye itself what difference would that have made to anything? Except, maybe, to how she felt about it herself. But there was so much to think about, to feel about, there was only room for the small needle-sharp occasional query; would she ever see him again? (25)

Much as for Callaghan's protagonist, these questions would weigh upon Margaret during all her life, along with the uncertainty of ever rescuing her son from the orphanage school.

With Julia, Leland presents a sharper perspective of male abandonment of women for political causes. Although Sebastien is the real biological father of her baby, Julia keeps that information from him while they are in Paris, and makes Maurice believe his own paternity. The fact that she keeps this secret obviously shows the double dimension of her illegitimate conception if her out of wedlock pregnancy by a German refugee was known, so that, like Harriet, she takes the safer option of marrying the Irish boyfriend. However, shortly after that, consternation for his complete surrender to republicanism arises in Julia and will haunt her ever since they move back to Ireland. Even if Maurice willingly and immediately admits the responsibility he is made to believe in, and he agrees to marry Julia, his abandonment demonstrates not only

the ineffective nature of hasty marriages in these circumstances, but also the negative consequences of men's lack of paternal commitment in favour of political activism, which happened in the case of the biological father as well.

For Maurice, to fight for the republican cause is a form of paternal performance, as sustained by Mrs Bourke, the housekeeper, who tells Margaret: "It's my belief that the boy being there made him go on. Like he knew there would be someone to carry on the name. *Name*! The long line of the Mulcahys!" (63). However, Julia tries to convince him to stop his hunger strike and threatens to stop the family nationalist lineage by keeping Pat away from the fight and from the reasons of his father's death: "'Pat,' he had whispered, not looking at her. 'Never. *Never*. You can believe me. They'll never get him. And don't think I'll tell him how wonderful you were. It won't matter to him anyway. All that will matter to him will be that you're *dead*'" (89, original emphasis).

Thus, these discrepancies in understanding loyalty to the nation and the offspring will end up separating the couple and result into her widowhood. After that, the woman who had been a single mother turns into a lone and deserted one that must take care of her child by herself. This double form of lone maternity embodied by Julia certainly enhances the author's interrogations of the parameters and structures of the family in Ireland, while it also approximates this character with the different predicaments faced by Margaret as a man-less mother.

In Mary's case, female apprehension to unveil the undesired pregnancy is exacerbated by the fact that her father is also the baby's

father. Thus, blinded by the social disgrace of her escape to Galway with Luke and in line with the increasingly violent relation they had had after Bridget's death, Mr McNamara threatens her "to get upstairs to get to the bedroom and he will defuck that bastard out of her" (*DBR* 105). It is at that point when Mary's frenzy is awakened and "she hears herself shouting crazily, zanily, incriminatingly, that she is having a baby, and she knows when it happened" (*DBR 105).* However, the father is unable to admit his responsibility in the impregnation, and simply blames Luke: "You were having no baby when you ran away and if you're having one now it's that tinker's" (104).

However, the fiercest form of his victimisation over Mary is materialised afterwards, in what constitutes the most savage, sadistic form of paternal control and assault: Mr McNamara tries to abort the foetus when Mary insists that the baby is not Luke's and that she will call the police upon him.[97] O'Brien blends quite brilliantly here her critique of the public responses to paternal abuse that will appear later in the story with that of most immediate treatment of illegitimacy and most tragically, the privy manoeuvres designed to hide the double scandal. Although we hear that "in truth he did not know what he was doing, fear and delirium having engulfed him" (106), this dehumanisation is certainly presented as unjustifiable and represents the epitome of the abusive treatment of women' in the name of family values, which rather than sacred, are nonetheless, usually degenerated.

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[97] The father-daughter relation in *DBR* has been analysed by Linden Peach in contrast to how Roddy Doyle articulates it in *The Snapper*, which portrays a father's interest in his daughter's unexpected pregnancy and the closer bond that grows between them thereafter (Peach 153-154).

As a result of the various degrees of tension between the disposition of the impregnating men and that of the women, the reality to which they are led in the whole process of pregnancy, childbirth, forced adoption or lone mothering in each case, becomes a solitary experience for the women, at least until either further control or support from other women eventually appears. In the three novels, the fate of the male characters follows a completely different path from that of the female protagonists. To this fact Callaghan referred in an interview and commented that her novel is about how women show a "relative strength in coping with weak and conveniently dishonourable men. The men she writes of aren't monsters, but 'they're men who abandon women'" (Haverty 48). About Mr McNamara and his sexual brutalization, Sophia Hillan comments that "O'Brien treats this with great delicacy. James [his first name] is not portrayed as a monster. She is deeply compassionate toward him, while sparing us none of the horror of his actions" (152). Despite their various ways of betrayal, none of them is literally punished by the authors; yet, interestingly, by the end of the novels they are silenced or obliterated from the narratives, which are more focussed on the women. Unlike them, the men are unable to resist the grip of some of the most powerful signifiers of Irishness, such as political sacrifice, in the case of Earnán, Maurice and Sebastien, or family imperatives, as for Edward, Brian, James and Mr McNamara. Only Michael –Margaret's brother– represents a counter-discursive reworking of Irish masculinity, but his exile from the mother land stands for the negative effects that the different signifiers of Irishnes can also provoke upon the island's men.

Actually, for Smith, his escape "undermines the symbolism of Mother Ireland as nurturer" (45).

4.3.4. Women's sexuality: (re)producing female bodies

The rhetorics of the body has exercised an enormous pull for western tradition, so much so that it has been constructed and deconstructed from a great number of disciplines. Historically undermined in favour of mind-based identity politics and contested as one of the most immediate objects of power acquisition, the body figures as a disputable signifier of human individuality. This view has been endorsed by critics and philosophers as diverse as Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, for all of whom history and politics have found in the body a practical object of categorization. Foucault sustains that the relations of power can be found at all levels of society, and the body is one of the means by which each society attributes its uniqueness through cultural articulation.

Kristeva goes a step further in her theorisation of the important role of the body in the social signification of the individual, based on codes of appropriateness and acceptability. In *Powers of Horror*, she delineates her notion of the abject, which according to her is that which "disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (1982: 4). In Kristevan theory, society has been constructed in such a way that only if the improper or unclean modes of corporeality are dismissed can the self gain stability and reach a symbolic position, as maintained by Lacan's theory of individual development. However, she claims, those repudiated elements that threat social unity should not be expelled or silenced as they are necessary for the complete social validation of the individual, who otherwise feels abjected. Under

those circumstances, the abject must be spoken through sublimated activities, in which Kristeva includes the production of art, literature or psychology and sexuality.

For feminist philosophy and literary criticism, the body constitutes a major component of the critique of the excessive socio-political regulation effected historically upon women on account of their patriarchal identification as purely corporeal beings. Like many other commentators, Moira Gatens has criticised the negative attitudes towards women and corporeality that result from their archetypical conceptualisations as "the underside of culturally valued terms such as reason, civilisation and progress" (1988: 60). Further, she has discussed that the body is the main focal point of sovereignty in that the body politics has limited active membership in it by virtue of the corporeal specificity of the individual. Thus, women's exclusion from political participation has been grounded on their bodily features, so that, to use her own words: "The modern body politic has 'lived off' its consumption of women's bodies. Women have serviced the internal organs and needs of this artificial body, preserving its viability, its unity and integrity, without ever being seen to do so" (1997: 82). Her argument goes on to notice that in its quest to affirm sovereignty, the (anthropomorphic) body politic becomes a unified entity that manipulates the terms in which power structures and bodily identity can be understood:

> The unified body functions, in political theory, to achieve two important effects. First, the artificial man incorporates and so controls and regulates women's bodies in a manner which does not undermine his claim to autonomy, since her contributions are neither visible nor acknowledged. Second, insofar as he can maintain this apparent unity through incorporation, he is not

> required to acknowledge difference. The metaphor functions to restrict our political vocabulary to one voice only: a voice that can speak of only *one* body, *one* reason, and *one* ethic. (1997: 82)

Also focussing on the social interpretations of the female body, Foucault highlights in *The History of Sexuality* the so-called "hysterization of women" that has notably characterised western thought. He contends that women's bodies have been thought as excessively infused with sexuality, which implied that they were infected by different pathologies and therefore, that they had to be regulated and remain under control by the agents of power and knowledge (104). For Gatens, the inference of women's inability to control the passions of the body has often been legitimised upon the propagation of "the a priori disorder or anarchy of the female body itself" (1988: 60). Under that excuse of the disorderly female body, external forces have taken charge in female corporeality in an attempt to avoid the effects that it "naturally" brought about.

In the Irish context, this system of body and gender coding has identified female corporeality with the most immediate source of national trouble. Hence, all kinds of ideological and physical mechanisms have been set up to prevent such alarm, as we are trying to demonstrate with the critical background of the present study as well as with our analysis of the novels. Corporeality stands as a key referent for Irish women's cause due to the social reality generated after years of entrenched patterns of womanhood and motherhood defended by the many strands of the body politics on the isle. In critical discourse, this topic occupies a central position in the interrogation of the reasons and consequences of the Irish national representations of femininity.

A very enlightening work on this respect is Cheryl Herr's "The Erotics of Irishness," where she attributes the Irish obsession with identity configuration to the repression of the body on a national scale. Herr focusses on what she calls "the psychohistory of Irish culture" and contends that the individual body has been manipulated in order to secure a sense of national consciousness. Using her own words:

> The identity-obsession marks a social repression of the body on a grand scale. As I see it, the loss occurs on both individual and collective levels. Ireland has literally eroded, in the sphere of representations that constitute social identity, a comfortable sense of the body; in traditional as well as in colonial and postcolonial Ireland, the body has frequently been associated representationally with danger and has been scrutinized with an intensity that stills (photographically). (6-7)

Herr concludes that the absence of the body as a signifier for subjective identity is "a sign of cultural trauma or denial" (7).[98] Her argument, then, becomes essential when discussing, as we have been doing so far in our study, Ireland's anxiety of cultural disintegration and its focus on spiritual and abstract issues at the expense of the material and physical aspects of individuality of which the body participates. Further, because corporeality has been intimately and persistently linked to femininity, embedded in that abstraction appear simultaneously the homogenisation of Irish women's corporeality and the negation of female individuality.

By this token, the idiosyncrasy of the Irish politics of the body can also be considered in light of the materialisation theory formulated by feminist philosopher and critic Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993). In a clear expansion of the idea of

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[98] In the same light, Gerardine Meaney sustains through her idea of "the Gothic Republic" that the maternal body of single mothers appears as a spectre haunting national consciousness (2006: 13).

gender performativity that she exposed in her previous work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler concentrates on the notion of matter, which according to her, must not be understood as "a site of surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*" (1993: 9, emphasis in the original). Adding on the refusal of corporeal materiality and the biologistic reduction of the body to the condition of object, Butler claims that the practice of corporeality is an integral part of subjectivity. Her interest in the bodily manifestation does not collide with the traditional views of the body as the site of sexual identity but rather, because for her a person's sex is not self-evident,

> what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect. And there will be no way to understand "gender" as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, understood either as "the body" or its given sex. Rather, once "sex" itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm. (1993: 2)

A similar point, but probably constructed upon more eclectic views, is made by Elizabeth Grosz with her study of sexual difference in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. For her, the materiality and material determinatedness of bodies should not be denied, but at the same time, she admits that social and historical variation shape bodily identity in both subjective and physical terms: "What are regarded as purely fixed and unchangeable elements of facticity, biologically given factors, are amenable to wide historical vicissitudes and transformations" (190).

Considering Butler's and Grosz' lines of reasoning, it follows that the Irish national discourse has traditionally articulated a complex and disorganized corporeal politics by which ideologically, female bodies are the abstraction of the nation-state but at the same time, the bodies of everyday women have been used as the vehicles to attain the objectives of its power artefacts. As Angela K. Martin puts it, "[the] discursive correspondence between the nation-state and gendered bodies materially mediates the ways in which feminine bodies are constructed, disciplined and experienced" (2000: 66). In other words, women have been exploited as the material objects of the nation through which, as Foucault criticised, culture is acted, but since the materialisation of their corporeality outside the codified patterns has been precluded, the performativity of their bodily identity has appeared as subversive and/or restrained.

In the Irish literary realm, the signifiers that construct the ideological framework of the female body have commonly informed the fictional lives of women characters. From the pen of a great number of male and female writers, fictional women have symbolically embodied the corporeal delimitation that the Irish signifiers wield upon common women on the island. However, a wide array of texts by Irish women fiction-writers has also been permeated by radical reworkings of the female body, trying to dismantle those signifiers.[99] In her study *The Irish Novel at the*

[99] Notable examples are the insights into the queer body made by Emma Donoghue in *Stir-Fry* (1994) and *Hood* (1995), and by Mary Dorcey in her collection *A Noise from the Woodshed* (1989); the description of female bodily awareness by young Irish women in Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* (1960) and Eilis Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* (1999); and the portrayal of female corporeality as experienced by a wife in Julia O'Faolain's *The Obedient Wife* (1982) and a prostitute in Donoghue's *Slammerkin* (2000).

End of the Twentieth Century: Gender, Bodies and Power, Jennifer Jeffers argues that in the 1990s there was a growing narrative representation of the body "as it is linked to a grid of power that is partly pre-established and partly rapidly changing in contemporary Ireland" (1). For her, its absence from the literary discourse as well as its cling to the collective religious imagination calls on the need to keep on interrogating and contesting the role it plays on the Irish psyche (29).

Within our discussion of the grip of the traditional family ethics for the construction of female identity as represented in Callaghan's, Leland's and O'Brien's novels, in this section we focus on how women's corporeal articulation remains a product of that persisting ethics. In the following pages, we will explore the representation of women's bodies and sexualities in the three texts, with a specific insight into the significance of the pregnant body and maternal corporeality for the articulation of unmarried mothers' subjectivity. Taken together, the protagonists are imbued with a sexual ideology that is ultimately derived from the conservative and religious education that they received. Thus, the common thread is the open exposition throughout the literary voice of women's bodily misconceptions, fears and experiences. The authors display the terms in which women get along with the internal conflict usually resulting from the clash between the traditional codes of Irish

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In the visual arts domain, we must also highlight the productions of a number of contemporary Irish women artists such as Kathy Pendergast, Alice Maher, Eithne Strong, Carmel Benson, Pauline Cummings, Louise Walsh and Julie McGowan, whose works deconstruct the traditional articulation of female bodily imagery on the isle. A detailed analysis of some of these artists and their works can be found in Grinnell and Conley, eds., *Re/Dressing Cathleen: Contemporary Works from Irish Women Artists* (1997), Luz Mar Gonzalez' *Otra Irlanda* (2000) and Aida Rosende Pérez' article "Transgressing Corporeal Boundaries: The Female Body and Representation in the Work of Contemporary Irish Women Writers," in Altuna and Andreu, eds., 127-139.

womanhood and the search for female sexual individuality and maternal consciousness in contexts of single maternity.

In order to follow this process, it is necessary first to analyse the complex of ideas and beliefs codified by unmarried women both before and while approaching sexual experimentation. The three authors' essential concern with the politics of the body does not concentrate so much on the gender polarity in corporeality as on the conflict between the parameters of female behaviour and the challenge to those codes that Irish women pose in their search for individuality. All the protagonists become at some stage the objects of corporeal prescription but the stories depicted are worthy of note because eventually the women manage to assert their bodily identity. The three novelists break the norm of discursive subjugation and voicelessness about any form of sexuality with which Irish women in general, and Irish women writers in particular, had been forced to comply. In doing so, they are also deliberately giving a sexualising voice to the traditionally sexualised objects that begin to disclose their thoughts and feelings before the reading public.

That the body is usually internalised by Irish girls as the most direct site of sin is problematised in similar terms in the texts. To a large extent, the Catholic education, in which all the protagonists were born and bred, shapes their understanding and attitudes towards female corporeality. When a nun found Ronnie at a school toilet comparing breasts with her friend Clare, it was regarded as a "nameless sin, horror" (32). What seems interesting about this episode, though, is that it is brought to the present by Ronnie while, once an adult woman, she

reflects upon the deviant act she has committed by conceiving a baby without being married. Her immediate connection between the two acts of deviance from the expected behaviour of pure, Irish girls emphasizes the subtle internalisation of corporeal vice that usually lingers in their psyche along their way towards maturity.

This understanding has its correlates in *The Killeen* and *DBR*. When the convent glasshouse atmosphere and Earnán's body magnetize Margaret in such a way that she submits to him sexually, the girl has mixed feelings about it. For her, the first sexual encounter with the IRA man is an act of love and pleasure, but she suspects that corporeal trespasses are the ones which the nuns most harshly condemn: "She had left him, her senses light and singing, and wondered in her bed later why nothing that they had done had seemed wrong, although she knew even while it was happening that *this* was what had been forbidden" (35-36, emphasis added). Likewise, bodily signification and religious imagination intersect at several points in *DBR*, but it is at the beginning of the book, when Mary's voice has not been appropriated yet by jurists or activists, where such overlapping is most apparent. At first, after being raped by her father in the early pages of the novel, and still unwitting of the extent of what has happened to her, she does know that her body is unclean: "she will wash in the river, wash and rewash and pleat herself back together" (5). Also, we hear of a habit she developed after the rapes, by which she brought salt to a shallow part of the river, "sprinkled it and squatted in it" (12). The narrator later insists on how she is ashamed of looking at the statue of the Virgin Mary in her bedroom because she is

afraid that "Our Lady knew" (7). Then, when she is sent to the convent school far from home, not only does she refuse to have any physical contact with the other students and decides that "no one touched her. She would become pure" (32), but also she avoids doing physical exercises because "[s]he was trying to have no body, to elude it" (34). Thus, Mary's body becomes objectified by herself as the focus of everybody's attention after the rape and also as the first move to expunge her sin, which demonstrates the association she makes between the corporeal and the (in)moral.

Another well-defined portrait of the intersection of religious beliefs, corporeality and sin can be found in the chapter "Shrine," in which Mary and her neighbour —Lizzie— go to a place of worship near their town in order to implore holy protection.[100] As they perform the ritual, their invocation to "Sweet St Bridget of the kine" is also mentioned, which implies that, as delineated in Part One of our study, their intention when visiting the shrine is closely related to some form of corporeal purification and sexually related issues with which the saint was associated. Prayers and other acts of devotion are thus mixed with a more pagan ritual in which the two characters wash their sexual organs, covering their bodies from each other but doing so before a statue of the Virgin Mary: "She [Lizzie] said that there was only one last thing and that it was very private and they would each have to put their coats over their heads while they did it. They were to touch the private part of their bodies with the water

[100] The contextual details of the place provided by the narrator as well as the fact that they get there by taxi indicate that the shrine could be the one in Tobernalt, only a few miles from Sligo town. There, pilgrims can also drink water from the holy well with a "cracked cup" and an altar to the Virgin of Lourdes "in blue and perched on cloud" presides over the whole site (*DBR* 67-68).

to banish all stain of past or future sin" (68). Quite meaningful throughout, the scene draws our attention to the holy-pagan nature of the ceremony while it also features the corporeal purification and spiritual redemption sought by the victimised object of sexual trespass. Mary's trip to the well is intended to purge a sin she has not committed and ironically, the ritual concludes with the writing of a sentence on a piece of paper in which her request to the Virgin is not for herself but for her father: "'Please cure my father's epilepsy,' Lizzie read aloud, thought about it, then nodded, said that God would understand, that it was in code, and that it meant something else" (69).

In the three novels then, the authors unveil how bodily conceptualisations are ultimately attached to religious discourse in the minds of the younger generations of Irish women. An ever-present reality, Catholic principles determine to a large extent what they think and "act" of their corporeality and sexuality, often remaining with them as they approach adulthood. As a result of this moralist ethics, there is also a considerable homogeneity in the protagonists' attitudes towards sex, which reveals how their perception of sexuality is filtered through the same patterns and modelled on the same paradigms. The normalisation of sex was considered by Foucault as one of the vehicles for power assertion and for the control of subjectivity. What is interesting about his theory is the importance he accords to how that regularisation is performed in discursive terms:

> What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all "discursive fact," the way in which sex is "put into discourse." Hence, too, my main concern will be to locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and

> individual modes of behaviour, the paths that give access to the rare or scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure —all these entailing effects that may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification: in short, the "polymorphous techniques of power." (11)

Arguably, as we have discussed in previous sections, in the Irish milieu religion has functioned as an important discursive agent. According to Tony Fahey, Catholicism has provided "the dominant cultural framework within which sexuality was thought about, talked about and regulated" and, he continues, "the completeness of its hold within the monocultural context of post-independent Ireland was scarcely matched elsewhere" (68-69). In the novels, the Catholic dogma acts as the regulator of female conduct, its repression leading to a widespread ignorance of the process of sex, conception and even childbirth. Indeed, Betty Hilliard remarks that most of the middle aged Irish women who around the year 2000 participated in her survey about family attitudes in Ireland admitted having brought to their marriage no knowledge of sex and reproduction, and that they had not received any sex education at home or at school. Further, not only did they bind up sexual activity with pregnancy, but also the process of conception and birth was a mystery to many of them (141-142).

As in every-day life, innocence and ignorance remain the joint position from which the protagonists of the novels are confronted with sex and all its bodily and social implications. Out of the three main female characters in *Mothers*, Ronnie is the one that best exemplifies the serious lack of awareness of the broad signification of sexuality for a woman in her twenties. In the novel we find that the ideological legacy of the

religious discipline that Ronnie received is still rather apparent in her adult life. Like most Irish girls, she had learnt that sex was "God's great blessing to mankind, so long as you didn't enjoy it; so long as it was kept for the *one* that was to be the love of your life" (12). Her naivety throughout most of the book hints at Callaghan's protest about the frequency with which women like her approach adulthood with romantic and confused beliefs on the dimensions of sexuality. In fact, in an interview with Jennifer Fitzgerald the author comments on how up to the 1980s the Church formed the Irish attitude to sex into that of "guilt and childish embarrassment" (12). At the beginning of her relationship with Brian, not only is Ronnie afraid of becoming a "*femme fatale*" if she consents to have sex with him, but also she equates sexual intercourse with conception and holds a purely sentimental view about it, as can be inferred from what she asks him: "But how can we sleep together if you don't love me?" (13).

A similar representation of the extraordinary gap between the meaning of sexual intercourse and the position from which young Irish women approached it in the 1980s is conveyed by means of Nora. When her crisis pregnancy is revealed, Laura comments of her to Harriet: "Nora said she didn't even know she'd made love. Can you believe that?" (79). Curiously enough, it is Harriet's immediate answer "Yes, I can" what seems more fraught with meaning in this dialogue. Her insistence on its credibility ironically reflects the ordinariness with which Irish women in the 1960s were completely unfamiliar not only with the possible consequences of sex without the use of contraception but also, and most

poignantly, with the physical nature of sex. Far from being a rarity, Nora is just one of the many women who suffered the consequences of the lack of sexual education, even by the time when the novel was published.

In Leland's novel, women's sexual unconsciousness is not as clear-cut as in the other texts. Thus, although Margaret is assumed by Sister Thomas to have arrived from the country "pure [...] and ignorant too" (5), and Julia had been indoctrinated by the same nuns that women's bodies were "Temples of the Holy Ghost" (69), neither of them seems to ignore the procedures of the sexual act. However, it is also true that not a hint of their awareness of a possible conception after sex is introduced in the narrative. After Earnán's question "Will you let me, *mo gra thu*? My love?", we hear of Margaret that "she knew what he wanted, thought she did" (35). The narrator thus emphasizes that she is only guessing what is going to happen. As for Julia, time enables her to realise that apart from the lust and passion she felt for Sebastien, it was also her emotional and sexual innocence what had "trapped" her (85). Each of them gets pregnant under very different circumstances but, like the rest of the women characters in the other novels, they are not completely alert about the social "risks" of having sex prior to marriage in twentieth-century Ireland. As Leland herself argues in a journalistic piece, "Irish people do not know either how to be sexually aware or happy. Prurience, as far as our education is concerned, is all we ever need to know" (2003a: 152). Contraception was not available to Irish women in the 1930s, which is probably what Leland is additionally putting forward in their case.

As the youngest of all the women characters that we are analysing in our study, Mary illustrates in *DBR* how at fourteen years of age an Irish girl can be completely perplexed after having been sexually abused. Certainly, her confusion may be also due to the fact that it is her father who has raped her, rather than the sexual act itself, but the narrator insists on how "[s]he does not know what has happened. And there is no one she can ask" (5). Actually, the scene is made up with an engaging symbolism in which the girl thinks about a cake she saw at a party and although it seemed to be uncut, "when she brought her face up close to it, every piece had been severed, every severed piece, side by side, a wicked decoy" (5). O'Brien's choice of this imagery is not arbitrary, as in many other examples in the novel: seemingly untouched and virginal, Mary, like the cake, has been ruined much as her childish thoughts also are. This dialectics is also explored shortly after the first rape, in a scene in which Mary is made to watch a stallion covering a mare in a farm near her house. To the owner's question "Did you enjoy that?", the girl only responds with sobbing, so that he comments "Christ… You must live in a doll's house" (14). Far from that, Mary knows about it more than he could guess, as the perfect family background to which the man allocates her paradoxically mirrors such animal practice.[101]

Further, it seems worth noting here that by choosing to depict the rape both before and after Mary first menstruates, O'Brien certainly insists on the various levels of victimisation that are performed upon her. In other words, to have her raped at the beginning when she is still an

[101] Curiously, the same image is used by Callaghan to describe Ronnie's earliest awareness of the sex and reproduction as she remembers how her father had refused to explain to her as a child that "boy horses could not have foals" (*Mothers* 15).

innocent child emphasizes the brutality of sexual abuse that can be infringed upon girls by a paternal/male figure. But most interestingly, by introducing her first menstruation into the narrative and having her raped again and conceiving afterwards, her focus can be said to turn towards the patriarchal elimination of female sexuality and the automatic association of adult women with motherhood. The distinction is not unproblematic, though, because it somehow reinforces the identification of the post-menstrual body with fecundation. However, O'Brien seems to underline the suppression of female sexuality that women have traditionally undergone, and which is here exacerbated with the rape and incest in which her protagonist is involved.[102] From then on, but only until the final chapter of the book, as we will see below, Mary's sexuality will be obliterated in favour of her becoming a maternal receptacle after her conception.

The idea of the unrepresentation of menstruation that O'Brien dismantles can be explained by Elizabeth Grosz' analysis of the gender polarity in corporeal development:

> Puberty for girls marks the development of the breasts and the beginning of menstruation as an entry into the reproductive reality that is presumed to be women's prime domain. Puberty is not figured as the coming of a self-chosen sexual maturity but as the signal of immanent reproductive capacities [...] the onset of menstruation is not an indication at all for the girl of her developing sexuality, only her coming womanhood. (205)

Similarly, the traditional exclusion of menstruation from narrative texts and even non-literary productions was criticised by Kristeva and Irigaray. For Irigaray, this cultural unrepresentability of female fluids has to do

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[102] Menstrual blood and its relation to the rules of exogamy in certain communities are masterly analysed by Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 20-23.

with the prevailing associations between solidity and rationality, whereas, she remarks, "fluids have never stopped arguing" against that relationship (1991: 113).

Taken together, the protagonists of the three texts conceive after sexual intercourses in which, for several reasons, they are not at all in control of the situation. Accordingly, a significant aspect of the authors' revision of the consequences of the morality inherited by them can also be found in their description of the lovemaking scenes. It is widely known that the female body has been denied agency and signification by itself, especially in contexts of sexuality. In Carol Gilligan's words: "For centuries, women's sexuality anchored them in passivity, in a receptive rather than an active stance, where the events of conception and childbirth could be controlled only by a withholding in which their own sexual needs were either denied or sacrificed" (68). The male body has figured as the parameter of social normalisation, whereas the female one has been rather silenced and projected as devoid of meaning.

Drawing on Jacques Derrida's theory of *différance*,[103] Hélène Cixous deconstructs the traditional association of the female body with the notion of pathos, in clear contrast to the logos of men, as she points out in her essay "Sorties": "Male privilege, shown in the opposition between *activity* and *passivity*, which he uses to sustain himself. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/passivity (64). Similarly, in her fascinating

[103] For Derrida, *différance* is the basis for the construction of meaning. Using his own words, it is "the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted 'historically' as a weave of differences" (12).

and widely cited work *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray notes how the pre-eminence of visibility and the domination of phallomorphism have traditionally silenced female eroticism and denied women their right to sexual pleasure:

> While her body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the 'subject', her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see*. A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A 'hole' in its scoptophilic lens. It is already evident in Greek statuary that this nothing-to-see has to be excluded, rejected, from such a scene of representation. Woman's genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back inside their 'crack'. (1991: 26)

Although there is a variety of the context in which each protagonist goes through sexual intercourse in the novels, the authors concentrate on the passive position from which they experience it as well as on how their needs, desires and pleasure are displaced in favour of those of men. In *Mothers*, sex is portrayed less graphically than in the other two texts, and there is no real passage in which intercourse is described as clearly as in Leland's or most of all, in O'Brien's novel. In fact, when the book was published, Callaghan admitted that she did not intend it to be "racy or anything. There is hardly any sex in my books" (Haverty 8). However, despite this conscious elusion of sexual explicitness, what she does portray is the protagonists' thoughts and feelings while intercourse is taking place. Very illustrative in that respect is the narrator's description of Harriet's first sexual encounter with Oliver, where the patriarchal views of women's conduct during sex are quite noticeably depicted:

> How stiff and terrified she had been that first time. And surprised. And disappointed. Even afterwards, other times, it had never seemed to strike Oliver that she was supposed to feel

> something too. At first she had been afraid of any intensity, and it was only after she had known him for a year that she could give herself to him. (74)

Although in contrast to the traditional (male) fictionalisations of female sexual experiences, the narrator focusses on Harriet's perspective of the episode, with this scene Callaghan tries to address the intricate sexual world that women like her protagonist usually enter after having been made to think of sex as an extraordinary act of love. Romantic expectations are broken for Harriet, and the position from which she experiences it underscores the perpetuation of the patriarchal disposition of men towards women as merely sexual objects. Consequently, as she seems to suggest, idealised visions of sexuality usually unveil the physical circumstances that may lead to unwanted pregnancies.

Unlike Julia, Ronnie, Harriet or Mary, but along with Agnes, Margaret gets pregnant as the result of an act of teenage love for a mystifying man, as she admits: "at least I was proud of his father, I loved him. I know that he's gone without a thought for us but I don't care about that. I *do* care about the body. Maybe that's the difference that matters: I loved his father, I was proud of him" (95-96). The glasshouse scene in which Thomas is conceived is described as one of the several encounters they had in the convent before she got pregnant and he left for America. Although the moment is a point of inflection in her performance of the rules established by the nuns and therefore, of the author's revision of what sex may mean for women, her attitude sheds some light on what she knew and expected of that occasion.

Much more plainly than in Callaghan's novel, but at the same time quite evocatively and symbolically, the narrative focus at this point of *The Killeen* is on the woman and how she feels as intercourse occurs. We hear that she is "breathless, almost frightened" and that "she trembled when his tongue thrust against her palate but moved her own tongue to meet him and pressed her hands tightly on his shirt and his body under it" (34-35). Her puzzlement can be clearly traced, but the whole scene emphasizes at once her assumptions and her delight as sex with Earnán is taking place:

> She felt safe in the perfect privacy of this hiding place, she was swimming in his arms, safely afloat on her buoyant senses. With her eyes closed she saw his body pale against the hill-side grass, a halo of blue sky behind his head, a hand, her own hand, turned up to toss the hair aside. [...] He covered her, and his weight seemed marvellous. His mouth was on hers when the startling pain split through her and as her body bucked against it, she opened to him like a sack and his seed thundered in. (35)

In clear opposition to this, the description of Agnes's sexual intercourse with Edward is left out of the text, but again, she seems to have enjoyed it as much as having deceived her mother by hiding her belly while already pregnant. As an old woman, she remembers those early moments with him and even recreates intimate meetings: "[W]ith Edward she was primarily a woman. [...] When she was with him, she was herself, as if someone had lifted the lid of her spirit and let it out" (125). These encounters then have the double implication of making her feel emotionally liberated while they also entail her detachment from the class impositions that had altered her personality, only genuinely exposed when she was with Edward.

In the case of the other four women, by contrast, conception follows either sexual abuse or casual surrender to the insistence of men. Women's sexual objectification is made clear in *DBR* with the various rape incidents that it portrays. As we pointed out above, the narrator is quite detailed in the descriptions of these episodes, as also happens with Mary's bodily disorders during her pregnancy and even with her miscarriage at the end. In the chapter "Disco Night," the protagonist, who was supposed to meet her friend Tara for a girls' night out at a disco, is again assaulted by her father. Their roles in the scene are diametrically opposed, with the girl trying to avoid him but the man forcing her to his pleasure:

> 'Give your father a kiss.' When she offers her cheek he smacks it aside, and with his two fingers purses her lips until they are full. Sugar plums, sugar puss, givvus a kiss. […] The words said make no difference, they are different words, opposing words —'It will hurt …It will hurt,' and 'It won't hurt … It won't,' mere syllables, clashing, passing one another by and dissolving in the maddened air. The hard spring of the chaise like a plank, then a spume of murmurs, maudlin, breathy, her dress and things gone and decrazing herself by thinking that in a given number of minutes it would be over. How many minutes she could not tell. (84)

The same assault to her body and her sexuality is suffered by Julia in Paris when she is practically raped by Sebastien, the biological father of her child. With the emotional distance offered by the flashback into her life in the French city, she admits having been passionately attracted to her boyfriend's political comrade. But as the details of her sexual encounter are unveiled, the narrator insists on the submissive position from which she experienced it. At first, she is "puzzled" and "weakened" by what she feels for Sebastien, and even seems to enjoy it, but then, he becomes more abrupt and ends up avoiding her (expression of) pleasure by force: "She had not thought she would cry out but when

the rapture reared up she opened her mouth and he pressed his hand against any sound that might escape. Held helpless likes this, tears came instead" (86). Clearly, the scene can be read in light of Irigaray's reclamation of female corporeal pleasure that we commented above. Here, Julia is not only denied any sexual agency but also the materialisation of her own sexuality is erased in favour of, we learn afterwards, a man's claim for revenge for having been politically overpowered by his friend and Julia's boyfriend, Maurice.[104]

As in the case of Mary, ultimately the author's insistence lies on the sexual commodification of female corporeality that characterises patriarchy-based societies, in which the interests of men –sexual, personal or political– are at the forefront whereas women remain merely objectified and debased. Her story also bears out Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories of male homosocial desire, by which women become the objects of the relations between men in their search for power assertion: "In any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many cases equivalent" (21). In the Irish realm, Ailbhe Smyth has read this commodification of female bodies in its association with the national claims:

> Women's sexuality is used as a pawn in men's power games, and classically so in struggles over 'ownership' of national territory. Trojan women, constantly reconstructed. Symbols, function and instruments of the nation, guarantors of its 'legitimacy',

[104] Male manipulation of women's bodies is also a key topic in Leland's novel *Approaching Priests*, where the 1960s Vatican II reforms against birth control converge with the protagonists' lovers trying to dominate her sexually. For a more detailed analysis of this novel, see Ingman (2005: 51-53).

> reproducers of its destiny, targets and prizes for its enemies. (1994: 16)

Quite the opposite cases, Ronnie and Harriet are described as having felt simply paralysed during intercourse with the father of their child, and the women just give in to their persistence in having sex with them. About the former protagonist, the narrator explains that when she got pregnant, Oliver was already bored with their relationship. However, we hear that "at least he stopped talking a lot of rot about love, which she had decided was usually a word flung around to describe a lot of selfish needs" (74). Later, she also calls our attention to how "she had never actually *decided* to have Barry. He had just happened" (204) and that "sex had never been that important to her. Her experience with Oliver had been so entangled with emotion that she didn't know what she felt. In retrospect, physically she probably felt nothing" (196-197). Ronnie, as well as Harriet, feels entrapped in an unwanted pregnancy after having lost on male sexual pushiness, as can be inferred from the dialogue in which she casually tells Brian the news: "'It's possibly just because I'm pregnant that I feel funny' [...] 'Didn't you take the pill?' 'Not when we were in France. I told you'" (176). In direct contrast to the other protagonists, as is made clear in this passage, contraception was made available to her,[105] but although the sexual intercourse leading to conception is not described in her case, Ronnie's "I told you" implies that

[105] It has been widely known that thousands of Irish women were taking the pill long before it was introduced in the Republic in the 1960s. Restrictions to its widespread use at the time of Ronnie's pregnancy certainly applied because the sale of contraception was legally banned up to the 1990s. Meanwhile, the pill could only be prescribed as a cycle regulator but its prescription for "social purposes" was commonly practiced among doctors and overlooked by State, Church and society (Hug 86-87). The contraceptive campaign is briefly discussed later in *Mothers* as Agnes's friend Phoebe reminds her of her petition to sign for the legalisation of contraceptives, which the old lady interpreted as "boycotting her chemist" (117).

somehow she unwillingly consented to having sex on that occasion. The scene in France had been also recalled by her when she was dreaming up with telling Brian about the pregnancy in one of the first person passages in the novel: "I told you. I forgot to take it for three days while we were in France. I told you it was at the bottom of the pack, but you wouldn't listen. 'Stop fussing.' That's what you said. Those were your exact words" (24).

Taking the sexual experiences of all the protagonists together, we can note that the divergence among them may lie upon the various degrees of victimisation that they suffer when they go through or are made to go through sexual intercourse. The difference among Agnes and Margaret, Mary and Julia, and Harriet and Ronnie then may respond to the fact that with the first two, the authors' insistence is probably not so much on unwanted sex as on how the protagonists are dismissed by the men who father their child. In the second case, more attention is paid to the striking, violent circumstances in which out of wedlock conception takes place and how women, despite receiving the most direct condemnation are indeed also victims at that moment itself. Finally, with the last two characters the most salient reflection about sexuality is that women's sexual ethics is often unheard by men, thus leading to unsolicited circumstances.

Therefore, also of paramount importance for the fictionalisation of unplanned maternity —certainly for any kind of maternal textualisation— is the moment in which the woman finds out about her new state. On account of the unbecoming condition of being single and pregnant in a

sexually repressive community, recurrently the moment figures as the initial phase for the crisis pregnancy[106] to which the mother-to-be is precipitated. Both in *Mothers* and *The Killeen* that moment sets out Ronnie's and Mary's story and consequently, on the whole narrative. The early pages open in *medias res* and the action moves backward and forward in the subsequent pages to narrate the circumstances and details of the conception. On the contrary, in *DBR* a number of chapters unfold before the protagonist gets pregnant after being raped by her father and later becomes aware of her new state. Despite this divergence in the structure of each narrative the common line is the authors' intention to depict the anxieties that, because of social parameters of ideal maternity, unmarried pregnant women are confronted with straightforwardly.

The case of Ronnie is the only one described in these terms in Callaghan's novel. Her reaction when learning about her pregnancy is portrayed along the whole book, whose actions actually encompass only a week in total.[107] Yet, to illustrate her alienation we can certainly refer to the episodes at the very beginning of the novel, when she reflects upon its consequences and mostly, on how to tell Brian. Her helplessness and turmoil are evident when she questions the support she may receive from the clinic where she got her pregnancy results with "How on earth could the voice help? What help was there now?" (10), and even if abortion is the first option that occurs to her, it takes several days before she decides

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[106] The term is widely used to refer to these cases of unexpected maternity. See Mahon *et al.*, eds., *Women and Crisis Pregnancy*, 1998.

[107] Notice the similarity with Joyce's handling of time in *Ulyses*. Much as the modernist master piece covers one day in Stephen Daedalus' life, Callaghan's novel concentrates on seven days in the life of her protagonists but taken together and considering their interrelation, she can extend back to the early decades of the twentieth century.

to go to England. All in all, the two chapters devoted to her story in the novel, along with the final pages in which she meets Harriet and Agnes, constitute an introspective into her mental examination of the reasons, the pros and cons and the consequences of her out of wedlock conception.

The central characters of *The Killeen* are also examples of the emotional tragedy of these women when finding themselves pregnant in the 1930s and up to very recent times. In a higher measure, because of her less fortunate circumstances as compared to Julia, Margaret immediately becomes alienated after her becoming aware of her unsolicited state. Particularly, she mirrors the dullness and solitude that women face when acknowledging that they are ultimately alone after having been abandoned by men. Rage and nostalgia get hold of her as she assimilates her new state in the convent:

> Her gaze sharpened and she looked hungrily, angrily at the walls and walks. Soon now she would be leaving this place seeking refuge. He who had sought refuge here was already gone. She turned away, pushing her body before her. Geraniums glared at her from the door. They would still be here, in the porch, in the greenhouse, this place would hold their essence, when she was gone. (22)

With a more favourable socio-economic position, Julia is nonetheless ensnared in a more complex trap of betrayal and political loyalties that lead to her unwanted pregnancy. Her anxiety when discovering her state does not radiate socio-economic or moral concern, but most wickedly, a plain meditation about her fate if her baby's paternal line is given away by its appearance: "She only wondered what Patrick would look like, and what she would say if Maurice ever asked. But he never did" (86).

With an inclination, more evident than in the other authors and novels, towards describing the female corporeal, O'Brien weaves into her narrative the bodily and mental processes that, as may have been the case for X, inhabit Mary until her pregnancy is a fact. Unlike the real-life events, though, her protagonist goes through her doubts and fears without any external support until Betty appears. For a while, her period becomes an obsession for Mary and the only positive prospect of change: "She would go down into the ladies and she would look and she would keep looking and she would keep willing it, and keep asking it and it would come, one berry of red on a mesh of hair, like a holly berry, heraldic" (97). However, she is soon faced with the corporeal and social reality that she had foreseen and worried about. As can be inferred from her first person description of her situation in her letter to Luke –the busker she meets in her escape trip to Galway–, she is certainly thrown into panic: "I know it's awful but I think I am going to be a mother and I am afraid" (98). Yet, despite her youth, the coincidence at this point with the other single pregnant protagonists lies in her immediate awareness of her new and undesirable state: "The person's whose it is is the last person's it should be. I would rather not say, ever. Out in the country things get very murky. I would like to live in a city because if you scream someone can hear you" (98). Rape and incest obviously accentuate the tragedy, but what stands out here is O'Brien's admirable blend of innocence and common sense on the part of a young girl. Her description of rural attitudes *vis-à-vis* urban reactions also sheds some light on the author's interrogation of the understanding of single maternity that, as

demonstrated by the various locations of the protagonists, can be irrespective of spatial differentiation in Ireland.

But once the corporeal reality of pregnancy is confirmed, the protagonists' psyche is infused with the various practical solutions that they could find in order to alleviate social scandal and by extension, to save their reputation. The three authors problematise the correlation between the two events while also engaging with Irish women's access to corporeal agency in cases of unwanted, out of wedlock pregnancies. They portray the female use of the body in relation to both self-inflicted or externally induced abortion, as well as the controversies around the ethical treatment of pregnant embodiment in the contemporary social order of Ireland. The novels make clear that the ways in which unmarried pregnant women understand and construct their own bodies are invariably at odds with how history, society and morality have traditionally construed them, so that their perception of corporeality is very frequently different from the one imposed upon them by external signifiers. Indeed, as Viviene Darling points out in her study *And Baby Makes Two*:

> When a married woman becomes pregnant there is a general assumption that she will keep her baby, this being the normal and expected outcome of pregnancy. For her unmarried sister, however, there is no such assumption. Even if there was never any doubt in her mind she will still be faced with the question 'what are you going to do?' (30)

By deciding to focus on single motherhood, authors negotiate the debate that has permeated international analyses of women's reproductive freedom and the position of Ireland in such a debate. Ailbhe Smyth has commented that abortion is the site of power agendas on the

island, even when it comes to sectarian politics in the North: "It has become a highly symbolic marker of the power struggle between tradition and innovation, male hegemony and feminist liberation" (1995: 39).

Viewed collectively, the three novels explore the dialectics between women's lack of autonomy in sexuality and pregnancy, and the existence of abortion as a "necessary evil". In the chapter devoted to violence in *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich examines this distinction, which has been very much commented within feminist circles. She refers to the fact that:

> No free woman, with 100 percent effective, non-harmful birth control readily available, would 'choose' abortion. […] In a society where women entered sexual intercourse willingly, where adequate contraception was a genuine social priority, there would be no 'abortion issue'. (1997: 268)

Similarly, Soran Reader questions the necessity to talk about abortion by making reference to its social treatment as a "debate". To quote her own words, "there can be no real question about whether abortion can be justified. To 'debate' such a question is to harm women" (132). She also goes on to say that changing the concept and expectations of motherhood may seem to be the alternative to the moral unacceptability of abortion, but, she concludes:

> The solution to the still too-frequent fact of women deciding to end the lives of their children through abortion is not to undermine maternal moral authority, but to make the world safe enough for women freely to decide to continue to mother. […] We need to listen much harder, to hear what women have to say about motherhood, what it demands of them and what it demands of the people around them. We need to support women as fellow human beings who have a hard and dangerous job to do in bringing the next generation to join the adventure of our species. (148)

Echoing these lines of reasoning, we can say that the novels criticise the well-grounded patriarchal reason that make women "become"

pregnant, the irrationality that underlies the ethical preocuppations around that issue and how the women's handling of the situation is undermined in many cases. As discussed in the first section of this part of our study, women are strongly framed by the law in Ireland. On the contrary, as the argument goes in Ireland and elsewhere, their agency is denied for the sake of common good. As Ailbhe Smyth puts it:

> Women's citizenship rights –to information, or to freedom of movement and of expression for example– may be curtailed or withdrawn at the whim of theological argument, judical interpretation, political protocol or some other patriarchal strategy. Women are not 'persons' (moral agents and/or citizens); they are reduced to reproductive or sexual functions. (1992: 16-17)

It has also been suggested that in such a struggle for women's reproductive control, the discourse use on the female body has undermined women whereas other issues like moral integrity or the foetus's rights have been favoured. Thus, Smyth has remarked: "Words conjure up a new hierarchy of 'life' values in which the foetus is promoted to the status of 'baby', while women are 'demoted' to the materially undervalued condition of 'mother'" (1992: 9). Drawing on these ethical principles of women's right to abortion, these novels offer different perspectives about how ethical concepts can transform the way we understand the texts and that those texts are a valuable source of moral deliberation for the kind of personal stories they represent.

In the chapters devoted to Ronnie in *Mothers*, Callaghan works on the extent to which women are determined by external factors, casting doubts upon them on how to react after their pregnancies. Interestingly, she examines the ironies underlying the distinction –psychologically and morally– between premeditated miscarriage and deliberate but quite

unconscious plans for a termination. In other words, the author addresses the inconsistencies of Irish moral attitudes towards abortion as there seems to be no clear contrast between Ronnie's thoughts about a miscarriage and the termination plans that are organised for her. Thus, in one of her reveries while at her mother's, Ronnie wonders: "Didn't hot baths make you miscarriage?[108] You drank gin and sat in a hot bath. […] Where will it go if I wash it down the drain? Find a home among the spiders? In the Liffey? In the Irish Sea? What if I met it in another life, and says, 'The frogs took me in.' (167). Many layers of meaning can be found here, portraying as it does a childish mentality that creates an imaginary world but also an eccentric as well as comic dealing of the situation, as in many other instances along her story. What is further inferred from this popular belief is not only that intentional miscarriage could be the easiest and less problematic option, but also that it figures as a sign of desperation. Indeed, Ronnie had earlier told herself at her office that she should stop running but that "maybe that was the best solution. Bring on a miscarriage. How could I do it? Horse-riding. If I had my pony Olivia" (147). Both moments reveal the internal negotiation within Ronnie's psyche for the possibility of using her own body as an ally in those circumstances.

Nonetheless, abortion had actually been the first "solution" that had occurred to Ronnie after confirming the news of her pregnancy (10). By virtue of these events, Callaghan also addresses the idea of the importance and effects of the discourse used in Ireland regarding the

[108] The same technique is contemplated in Maura Richards's *Two to Tango*, where a friend advises the single and pregnant protagonist to drink gin while having a hot bath (23-24).

ethical contradictions that it entails. The novel offers an analysis of most of the ethical questions about female individuality traditionally posited by the abortion issue, including the degree of personhood of the foetus or the mother's right to choose. This is constructed in one of the conversations between Breda and Ronnie, when the latter protests "But what if it's a human being?" and her flatmate answers "All this fuss about the unborn sickens me! What about the born? How many of them are human beings?" (138). Here Callaghan is also commenting on the debate about giving fetuses the status of persons whereas the rights of mothers are simply dismissed. Ronnie later recalls that conversation and wonders about the certainty on which Breda's opinion was grounded: "How was Breda so sure it was nothing? What did it look like? A poached egg? Some red lump? Nothing, not a person? And yet I was once inside my mother, and was I, then, a person?" (167-168). Her point reflects the position by which it is denounced that fetuses are recognised legally, morally and socially as separate entities and persons. In general, we can say that the author does not posit herself in favour of abortion, but as pro-choice. She actually admitted in an interview that "it's very hard to say you're for abortion. The book is not about abortion. If anything it's anti-abortion. The book is about three women. It's about choices" (Duff 13).

In *The Killeen*, the word abortion is not mentioned and not a hint of deliberate miscarriage can be found in the two protagonists' struggle to deal with single maternity in the 1930s. However, that absence suggests —also considering that the publication of the novel was close to the 1983

Abortion Referendum— Leland's critique of how women's deciding over their own corporeality during unwanted pregnancies was even more unthinkable at the beginning of the twentieth century, and how external agents recurrently took hold of their bodies instead. Indeed, decisions are immediately taken for Margaret, whose opinion is never sought on account of general assumptions about her inability to mother properly:

> Earnán was gone, the child was, or would be, here, its mother incapable of caring for it. The choice was between an orphanage or Miss Bina's 'arrangements'. Naturally her plans must be the best since they included the concern of a priest who was also a relative, a doctor who was also a woman, and herself. (43)

Many people take part in that pregnancy, including the priest whose views are exposed here, and who would obviously reject the option of an abortion both as the baby's uncle, and also as a man of the Church. The issue of Catholic authorities' intervention in abortions was raised by Leland as early as 1973 in one of her articles in *The Irish Times*, where she criticised the methods used by the anti-abortion lobbies in the country as well as the interference of the Catholic church in the social debate that was certainly being aroused in those times: "[I]t is to be hoped that the battle won't have to be fought with Catholic guns. The anti-abortion campaign, *any* anti-abortion campaign, should be well able to exist independently of the Catholic Church in Ireland" (2003b: 143).

The exploration of the relation between unexpected pregnancies and women's dealing of this state through their own corporeality obviously acquires a more painful and poignant hue with Mary's case in *DBR*. O'Brien masterfully wields on her narrative the many reasons that —as in the case of X— led Mary to leave the country in order to seek an

abortion. She underlies women's claim to control their body, and as Callaghan did with *Mothers*, she wonderfully details the psychological process that Mary goes through after her bodily state is unexpectedly changed. This ranges from her will to have a miscarriage, her double attempt to commit suicide, her father's brutal device to kill the foetus himself, the unsuccessful abortion arrangements through Betty in London and finally, the sudden miscarriage. All of them constitute bodily changes that inevitably affect her psyche.

Mary's case has resonances with what Rich points out about abortion, namely, that it is "the offspring, and will continue to be the accuser, of a more pervasive and prevalent violence, the violence of rapism" (1997: 269). Also, in her exploration of how abortion is justified, Soran Reader claims that:

> Because the fetus conceived through rape embodies the gravest possible harm to a woman, it should not exist, and there can be no moral obligation to mother it. Women who take themselves to be obliged to continue mothering after rape are raped not once but three times. First by the rapist, second by the anathema fetus, and third by the society that issues such a wicked obligation. (141)

O'Brien's novel brings to the fore many of the questions underlying the dialectics between sexual victimisation and abortion that have been largely contested among legal, moral and social forces in Ireland, as we detailed at the beginning of Part One. Her discussion of the pregnant interiority of its protagonist and her decision to procure an abortion are confronted with the public dealing of a pregnancy, which is seen as abnormal but in need of protection. As discussed above, events like the X case brought to light the necessity of examining the limits

imposed upon the victims of sexual abuse simply on account of the legal prescriptions of the safeguarding of the foetus at all costs. For that reason, the various sides of the ethics of abortion in Ireland and the specific dilemmas further raised by the X case are introduced through the presence of a plurality of voices that, as she is herself doing by her personal version of the case, provide a multi-layered perspective of the narrative events.

The most complex commentaries in the book regarding the different angles from which abortion can be viewed in cases of sexual victimisation are introduced through Betty and her role in trying to solve Mary's predicament. At the beginning, her moral hesitation contrasts with Mary's determination, influenced as the girl is by the physical brutality and emotional destruction she had been inflicted by her own father. To Mary's plea to bring her to England, Betty answers: "It's against God. It's against everything I believe in" whereas the girl simply adds "God can't be this cruel" (126). The incongruities between the moralistic arguments against abortion and the real circumstances that made her pregnant are harshly criticised here. At the same time, O'Brien problematises the Catholic, anti-abortion position by having a devout woman –much like X's parents– changing her system of beliefs for what she considers a more ethical move.

On the opposite side of the abortion issue we find of course Roisin and the other pro-lifers that campaign against abortion. Quite shockingly, to one of the women's questioning "What if a girl is raped?", Roisin answers that "An abortion won't unrape her, all an abortion will do

is compound the crime" (22-23). Their arguments are mostly founded on Catholic morality, and unlike Betty, who constantly shows her awareness of Mary's maturity despite her age, they treat the protagonist in a rather infantilising way. Their rationale –as well as their interpretations of Mary's role in her own condition– is commonly based on her relation with the foetus. In this light, Roisin tells her: "'A little thing that hasn't harmed you … Would never harm you … Totally dependent on you for its life,' Roisin said, inflamed. 'Already a person … Its sex, hair, eyes, finger, fingernails already there'" (151). Again, discursive manipulation of Mary is in operation here, and it appears combined with the insistence on the humanity of the foetus. So, as Thomas Jackson puts it in his review of the novel:

> O'Brien offers up a scathing representation of the anti-abortion fanatics who meddled in the case; they are people who define human spirituality not in terms of doctrine, but utterly and exclusively in terms of propaganda, one-issue propaganda. They are otherwise devoid of humanity, with an absolute incapacity for reflection. In their eyes the young incest victim is nothing more than an opportunity to rehearse their slogans and exercise their devotion to the Cause. (36)

And finally, the morality-oriented justifications that are discussed by external participants in Mary's case also run counter with what is expressed by another young girl going through the same experience of abortion. Mona is an Irish girl seeking an abortion at the same London clinic where Bridget brought Mary, and she is going through an unwanted pregnancy by her "gorgeous" boyfriend. Unlike any other character in the book, Mona holds a very practical view of abortion that undermines many of the ethical principles upon which pro-life arguments are based, and simply opts for abortion after having thought about herself first: "I was

awake all night and then I gave myself a talking, I said think of eight months from now and out to here… It's not that I don't like kids because I do…" (129). Her casualness throughout their time together in the room contrasts with Mary's terror, and she tries to calm her by describing the mechanical procedures of the operation, while also insisting on the feelings it inevitable raises:

> 'Look, listen… It's only ten minutes… You'll be brought in through the flip flop doors… You'll have had the anaesthetic… And when you come out you'll probably be crying. They told me I'd cry… Everyone does… It's only natural… We'll be a right pair… Me a Dub and you a Mucker… We'll paint the town… The Dancing Queens'. (130)

This blend of calm attitude towards an unwanted baby and a sympathising position about the woman's situation appears again in the chapter "Mona," where the two girls meet as Mary is waiting in Dublin for the judges' final decision. Her only accomplice there, Mona tells Mary about her consideration of the foetus: "It's the size of a ten pence piece –it doesn't have a soul or if it has it's not their sort of dried up turd" (230). Thus, O'Brien carefully presents this move as a choice. However, what really stands out in this final conversation is Mona's claim that it is Mary's decision what ultimately matters: "No one can tell you what to do… Only yourself… That's what's so hard… That's what so terrible about living" (232).

Whatever the final option of the protagonists is or whatever their pregnancy turns into, the three novels also problematise the idea that the pregnant woman has been historically seen as the incubator of her foetus. For a large part of philosophical thought and feminist criticism, the devaluation of the pregnant body figures as the epitome of the

construction of the gendered subject. Social artefacts expect from the pregnant woman to efface her own subjectivity in favour of society-oriented benefits, and to concentrate on complying with the codes of maternal behaviour. Under those expectations lies the belief that her body is simply a materiality at the service of the baby and ultimately, of the perpetuation of the human race. In Moira Gatens's words: "The female body in our culture is often seen and no doubt 'lived' as an envelope, vessel or receptacle. The post-oedipal female body, to paraphrase Freud, is first home for the penis and later for the baby" (1996: 41). Thus, we can argue that it is during the pregnancy period when inexorably, women abide the most extreme expressions of bodily and subjective appropriation by external forces.

Both *The Killeen* and *DBR* demonstrate that the ideology of woman as biological container is enhanced in cases of dysfunctional pregnancies. [109] However, the magnitude with which that ideology is materialised in each case is different, as the latter explores in more depth the political interpretations that it triggers in Ireland and the ultimate consequences that they may provoke on a personal as well as national

[109] In more recent times, the pregnant body of non-national women has also been used as a direct material referent to further delimit the Irish nation's boundaries, as demonstrated by the Twenty-Seventh Amendment to the Constitution. The results of the 2004 referendum provided that the children of non-national parents are no longer automatically entitled to Irish citizenship or nationality at birth, unless at least one of their parents has lived for three out of the four previous years in the Republic or in Northern Ireland. Manifestly, the restrictions suffered by pregnant women are then multiplied in the case of immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers who become pregnant or give birth on the isle. As a result of this, as has been argued by Heather Ingman: "Maternity continues to be the force through which the boundaries of the nation, now defined so as to exclude the threat of the immigrant woman, are worked out" (2007: 25). Breda Gray also terms this a new process of shame by which, much as had happened throughout the twentieth century, "it was these other mothers [...] that were being shamed as the Irish media and politicians attempted to reinvent the nation as culturally Irish, racially white, and a bounded population" (2006: ii). For a further insight into the implications of the referendum, see Silvia Brandi, "Unveiling the Ideological Construction of the 2004 Irish Citizenship Referendum: A Critical Discourse Analytical Approach," 2007.

level. Thus, while the unfortunate circumstances of Margaret's pregnancy call forth her indoctrination that "all she had to do was give birth" (58), the objectification of the maternal body becomes more apparent when Mary is obliged to return to Ireland after her trip to the English abortion clinic with Betty. At this point, as Heather Ingman remarks, "Mary's body and that of her unborn child now belong to the Irish state" (2002: 262). A long and painful process of legal, medical and social intrusion begins, and concentrates on her body as a sacred shrine for the development of a nationally appropriated baby: "[H]er stomach seemed like a porthole into which they were looking and prying" (*DBR* 184).

Both Margaret and Mary, then, are immersed in what seems an inevitable effacement of their personal subjectivity that is simply undermined in detriment of their pregnant state and the necessary unravelling of that predicament. Indeed, when talking about women's reduction to their sex, Gatens also explores the idea of hysteria, and she remarks that "[d]isorder created by women, in the political body, is thus translated into a physical disorder thought to be inherent in the female sex" (1997: 84). Also in line with Foucault's critique of the hysterisation of women that we mentioned above, and referring to the protagonist of *DBR,* Eileen Morgan points out that hysteria, "with its roots in the Greek word for 'uterus', aptly describes the frenzied efforts to control Mary's, and more generally, Irish women's bodies" (467).[110]

[110] This kind of analysis has also been brought to the fore in critical readings of other novels by O'Brien. For Example, Helen Thompson makes an interesting interpretation of the Freudian concept of hysteria as a repressed sexual trauma or sexual desire and its representation in O'Brien's novel *Night*, which describes the erotic reverie of a middle aged woman (Thompson 31-57).

However, it is when resistances to that pattern of pregnant corporeality occur that, as Susan Bordo has put it, "subjectivity comes to be construed as excessive, wicked" (79). This is indeed the case of Agnes in *Mothers*, whose pregnant body becomes not only the visible means by which her mother guesses her so far concealed state but also, and most interestingly, her source of empowerment before her family, even if it only lasts for a short period of time:

> 'Agnes, dear, is there something you should tell me? […] My dear, your figure looks remarkably as if you're expecting a child.' 'Mother! Really! I've got fat.' 'That's a lie, an impudent lie. It's that fortune hunter! That arrogant, ill-bred upstart. And a girl like you, after your upbringing!' (98)

In using the shape of her pregnant body and taking "such delight in flouting her mother, sticking her stomach out" (98), Agnes is undermining the older woman's moral accusations and appropriating her body as a subversive signifier.[111] This constitutes an act of defiance of the typical stereotype of the passive and demure pregnant woman in that she uses her (pregnant) corporeality to demonstrate an active subjectivity even in a circumstance in which she is reprobated and victimised by a representative of the socially condemning agents.

The bodily changes experienced by women during the pregnancy period also remain a focal point for the fictional examination of motherhood. Yet, there is an added dimension that I find worthy of analysis about this topic and its representation in the novels, which has to do with the possible distinction in corporeal self-perception during the gestational process depending on whether the conception was planned or

[111] Notice also the similarity with the protagonist's use of her unmarried pregnant belly in Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper* (94).

unplanned. In all cases under analysis in this study, women face an unrequested situation that to a large extent, may determine their perception. For that reason, questions about the unmarried subject's rights to pregnant integrity –with all the internal uneasiness and split sensibilities that it nonetheless entails, as we will see below– are evidently raised. The authors offer a critical viewpoint of the pressure that external bigotry about pre-marital sex exerts over female corporeal subjectivity during that kind of pregnancies.

The perception of the pregnant body has been the focus of some, but probably not much, critical thinking within feminism in the past decades. Probably one of the most important introspections into that absence of women's discourse in the rhetorics of pregnancy is Iris Marion Young's essay "Pregnant Embodiment." Here she argues that unlike the observations of patriarchy-based philosophy and institutions, preoccupied with the attainment of a unified subject, it is a sense of splitness, duplicity and decentredness what characterises the pregnant individual. Drawing on Lacan, Derrida and Kristeva's theory about the unfeasibility of the unity of the self, Young undermines the concept of the integrity of the individual during pregnancy by reflecting upon the fluidity, rather than polarisation, between outer and inner self: "Pregnancy challenges the integration of my body experience by rendering fluid the boundary between what is within, myself, and what is outside, separate. I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body" (49). Thus, following Kristeva's psychoanalytic postulates about the correspondence between the integrity of the body and the integrity of the

self, for Young pregnancy inflicts upon the woman a decentred bodily subjectivity, which in other words, implies that during that period she is herself but not herself.

In a similar vein, Adrienne Rich professed the need to analyse motherhood and pregnancy from the maternal subject's viewpoint. Like Young, she pointed out the continuity usually felt by pregnant women, as the baby is neither purely the mother nor distinct from her, that is, part of her but not exactly her. Therefore, she remarks, "[f]ar from existing in the mode of 'inner space,' women are powerfully and vulnerably attuned both to 'inner' and 'outer' because for us the two are continuous, not polar" (1997: 64). This view is also held by Naomi Wolf in *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood*, where she contends that even if in the contemporary world the childbirth mortality rate is very low, in pregnancy and childbirth women undergo some "symbolic deaths": "the end of her solitary selfhood, the loss of her prematernal shape, the eclipse of her psychologically carefree identity" (6).

In the same line, an important component of the understandings and practices of the pregnant body is the idea of boundaries, which, again, pose a number of contradictions not only to the ideological ethos of patriarchy but also to the principles of the integrity of the female self. In "Mothers, Monsters, Machines," Rosi Braidotti analysed the pregnant and the maternal body as the greatest exponent of the traditional association of women with monstrosity. She noted that with its ability to change its shape in pregnancy and childbearing, the woman defeats "the notion of fixed *bodily form*, of visible, recognizable, clear and distinct shapes as that

which marks the contour of the body. She is morphologically dubious" (80). Thus, because of the emphasis on visibility and (male) gaze, the pregnant woman endangers the patriarchal order: "The fact that the female body can change shape so drastically is troublesome in the eyes of the logocentric economy within which to see is the primary act of knowledge and *the gaze* the basis of all epistemic awareness" (80).

In the same way, we follow again Iris Marion Young's ideas of how the fluidity between the inner and outer side of the self described above affects the ways in which pregnant women visualise their bodily space. In her own words:

> In pregnancy I literally do not have a firm sense of where my body ends and the world begins. My automatic body habits become dislodged; the continuity between my customary body and my body at this moment is broken. In pregnancy, my prepregnant body image does not entirely leave my movements and expectations, yet it is with the pregnant body that I must move. This is another instance of the doubling of the pregnant subject. (50)

But 'the world' certainly has a key role in that dialectical vision. As her pregnancy develops, the woman is thrust upon an everyday reality that becomes increasingly aware of her as her belly grows. Visual perception becomes then a powerful signifier of the pregnant body and external judgement adds to the common alienation that pregnant women undergo.

In the Irish scene, the author and recent Booker-Prize winner Anne Enright reflects on that issue in her autobiographical piece *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*. Enright actually admits drawing on Kristeva when she notes that:

> We do not choose, sometimes, to be occupied by this other creature, and this is one reason why women find pregnancy unsettling. It is assumed that our bodies will 'know', even if we

> don't, what pregnancy is like and what it is for; that we are, on some cellular level, wise, or even keen on the reproductive game. But I do not know how such cellular knowledge might happen, or where it might inhere. (2005: 11)

She also mentions the everyday tension between inner pregnant consciousness and outer perception, which is described in the following terms: "A pregnant woman is public property. I began to feel like a bus with 'Mammy' on the front –and the whole world was clambering on" (2005: 19-20). The book has been actually considered exceptional in the Irish realm of feminist writing and criticism as it fills the gap of the textualisation of "physical, psychological and social aspects of childbirth and motherhood" that has characterised Irish women's writing (Ingman 2007: 75).

The contradictions around pregnant corporeality and female subjectivity are certainly embodied at different points by the protagonists of the three novels. In *Mothers*, the spatial awareness of the pregnant body on the part of the pregnant subject herself is problematised when Ronnie wonders in one of her interior monologues: "How soon will it show? How soon will I have to steer my stomach in front of me like some loaded barge?" (31). By then, she starts to become conscious that her current clothes will not fit her a few months later and that gradually, people in the street and at work will notice her state. Her perplexity certainly substantiates the objectification and alienation typically assumed by a pregnant woman, but in her case, it bears the added distinction that her belly will be that of an unmarried woman. Thus, bodily boundaries intersect here with social boundaries as she speculates about how she would hide her new, unexpected but inevitable figure:

> How do other women manage? Wrap bandages around themselves? Oh, simple enough when it's in books or the pictures, or happens to other people. Good for a cry or a giggle, or a bit of gossip. But this is me, nice me, Ronnie Bourke. And I'll get bigger and bigger, and grow and grow, and all the thinking and wishing in the world won't stop it. (31-32)

Similarly, visibility is also Julia and Maurice's major preoccupation when moving back to Ireland. They anticipate the reaction of Julia's father towards the hasty marriage and the premature pregnancy with "it'll be a while before he notices anything and then he won't suspect it's early" (80). Unlike the constant supervision on the part of her father that she had experienced, here Julia's pregnant body is turned into a mechanism that reformulates male power into female agency, with also the added irony of in turn, having deceived Maurice, the non-biological father of her baby.

For Margaret, by contrast, the process of pregnancy awareness and gestation is totally obliterated from the narrative as Part One begins with her "ruined" state, and in Part Two she is already working for Julia and about to give birth. In the meantime, there is no clear dimension of her corporeal alienation either inside the convent or at Julia's house. This could be interpreted as consequential to having been forced to believe that she will only be the biological vessel of the baby, as we commented above. Also Leland's decision to leave this out may respond to the silencing about pregnant corporeal awareness that was imposed upon young women under those circumstances at that time.

For the protagonist of O'Brien's novel, the rhetorics of space and visibility as applied to the body of the single and pregnant woman acquires a similar dimension to that of Ronnie. When she enters a shop

without any money, she sees the woman behind the counter as showing off her pregnancy: "The woman inside is pregnant and moves about like she is proud of it, her stomach pushed forward, a fleshed-out trophy" (121). Although Mary's direct comparison with her situation is not uttered or described by the narrator, the dialectics between socially acceptable and unacceptable conception is evidenced by the clear difference between the two women: one is married, well-off and pregnant, whereas the other is alone, penniless and pregnant as well. Thus, the author further interrogates the limits that distinguish the socialization of the pregnant body and the consequences that they have when they are blurred.

For those reasons, and because of the recurrence by which rape and physical brutality are inflicted upon her by her own father, Mary internalises her body as the site of disgust and abjection, to follow Kristeva's arguments. Especially, it is after her pregnancy is confirmed when corporeal repudiation is most apparent for the girl. According to Anne Fogarty, "[t]he experience of pregnancy terrifies her and alienates her even further from her body" (108). Initially apparent in her attempt to drink some poisonous liquid while she tries to drown in the river (109) and also in her refusal to be examined by Dr. Tom (115), Mary's corporeal alienation gradually increases as her pregnancy develops.

We must also highlight her growing detachment from her foetus/baby, whom she considers "a freak" and "only a globule" (125, 184). This separation certainly exemplifies the lack of pregnant oneness usually felt by women that we described above. This idea is elaborated by

O'Brien through a very significant image: "[S]he would believe it only when the feet pressed on the wall of her stomach and kicked and she would kick back, they would have a kicking match" (184-185). Mary's ideas of her foetus and her pregnant state are quite clear here. As delineated by Rich, it is when the baby's kicks are felt for the first time, the so-called "quickening" moment, that the woman actually feels distinct from it: "In early pregnancy the stirring of the fetus felt like ghostly tremors in my own body, later the movements of a being imprisoned in me; but both sensations were *my* sensations, contributing to my own sense of physical and psychic space" (1997: 63).[112] Likewise, the distinction of the two beings is intensified here and acquires an even more different dimension since rather than showing a possible maternal feeling at that time, the protagonist's reaction is that of rage and further detachment from it.

The opposite feeling is shown by Harriet when her baby quickens. Both women had not actually decided to get married, but in the case of Harriet she contemplates the moment from a different perspective than the incest victim. Thus, her baby's first stirring in her womb becomes the turning point of the loneliness she had fallen into after when her husband shunned her for her pregnancy by another man: "One morning, contemplating the mound of her stomach, she'd been kicked into the realization that she belonged to the human race. Quickening –the word itself still moved her" (204). Indeed, as Julia Epstein points out, since

[112] Rich's distinction of the cases in which a woman is pregnant as a result of rape also apply in Mary's case. For Rich, these women "seem often to assimilate that germ of being, creating in violence, not as something introduced from without but as nascent from within" (1997: 64).

early modern times and up to the twentieth-century intrusion of medical professionals into the handling of female reproduction, this crucial moment was traditionally interpreted as a source of female power and authority: "A woman only became officially and publicly pregnant when she felt her fetus *quicken*, or move inside her, and she alone could ascertain and report the occurrence of quickening" (112). Thus, unlike Mary's rage, what Harriet felt was that her baby would save her at that time and she would not be alone from then on.

The authors also illustrate that probably the most significant and material effects of the control over women's bodies are exerted during pregnancy and at the moment of childbirth. American critic Susan Bordo comments extensively on that issue in the chapter devoted to mothers in her book *Unbearable Weight*. While disserting about whether mothers are socially considered as persons or not, she mentions the so-called "doctrine of informed consent," that is, the acknowledgement that personal subjectivity should be protected in cases of bodily intrusion and that even if it is for the good of the patient, nobody else should determine what measures or risks are to be taken. However, Bordo continues, blurrings to this doctrine do happen quite regularly in everyday life across countries. The outcome endangers, then, individual bodily rights: "When that meaning-bestowing function is in danger of being taken away from the subject, the prevailing ideology (and the accompanying legal response)

conceptualizes the situation as a violent invasion of the personal space of the body" (74).[113]

Constructed upon a similar outlook of the female experience of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions* criticises the discursive domination over women in labour and childbirth as well as the corporeal appropriation that they undergo in such contexts, with forced epidurals and lack of encouragement from the medical staff usually taking place. In this vein, her denounce also underscores the blurring of the "informed consent" process that many women have to face during pregnancy and mostly, at childbirth. Its most critical consequences, as she recreates from her own experience, are not only that the woman ends up wondering about her ability to "labour well" but also that "it [feels] extraordinarily wrong and invasive" (116).

This consent appropriation and lack of negotiation with the mother is clearly depicted in *DBR* when Mary is examined and interviewed by a doctor once she is back from the unsuccessful abortion trip to London. Roisin and some of the other women are also in the room and the dialogue between them is quite engaging. The doctor admits that attempting suicide is "a very real option to a person who sees no way out" and shows his irritation at Roisin's intrusion in Mary's case. But it is actually the girl's answer to the pro-life campaigner what seems more thought-provoking here: "'It's not your child,' she [Roisin] said suddenly to

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[113] A fascinating text dealing with the considerations of these ethical questions in contemporary Irish society is Anne Enright's novel *What Are You Like?* (2000), in which one of the main characters develops a brain tumour while pregnant. Poignant issues like cancer treatment or abortion in this kind of circumstances are masterly described. For a critical analysis on that controversy also see Katha Pollit's article "Fetal Rights, Women's Wrongs" included in her collection *Reasonable Creatures* (1995).

Mary. 'The way your tonsils are yours or your mane of hair.' 'It's not yours either,' Mary said, the words a beautiful explosion that seemed to float out of her mouth and blacken the face that was only inches away" (154). As in many other cases throughout the book, the episode is absolutely forceful in that it raises troubling questions about the pregnant woman's right to her management of what is inside her body, however distinct from it she sees herself, as we discussed above. It also illustrates O'Brien's aim at questioning the position from which these situations are internalised, and most intently, acted on. Here, a doctor treats Mary as a medical case, but his attitude proves more sympathetic than that of the women who persistently urge the girl to leave her subjectivity behind and focus exclusively on the foetus. Thus, the author criticises the double process of corporeal appropriation that takes place when, blinded by morality and themselves the victims of patriarchal manipulation, these women try to take possession of the unborn, and by extension, of its biological container.

Following the lines of reasoning exposed by Bordo and Wolf, it can be fairly said that, as they also denounce, of all the issues that conform the politics of the maternal body and mothers' subjectivity, childbirth is probably the one which has been treated with a higher degree of secrecy and recurrently obliterated from public discourse and literary production. Like many other social domains, this important moment of pregnant and maternal subjectivity has been dominated by male figures, who take up the role of agents and subjects instead of that of mere mediators. In *Women Writing Childbirth*, Tess Cosslet remarks that up to the twentieth

century, childbirth stories had been scattered. Not only that, she claims, in those rare occasions in which they were brought to light, they were usually described from external perspectives, that is, from that of male figures involved in it (2). Cosslet and other feminists' critique revolve around the need to claim for the birth tale that was taken from mothers for long as an important part for inscribing maternal subjectivity.

In Ireland, the prevalence of patriarchal discourse in childbirth was harshly criticised by Murphy-Lawless in her contribution to *The Abortion Papers*. She argues that the feminist struggle about the issue of power in the birthplace has been excessively focussed on the gained control of male midwives over female ones, whereas the silencing of the female voice in this context remains an unsolved question. In her view, "[t]he power that doctors wield over women in childbirth is *par excellence* the power of the written word to shape the way our bodies function as we actually give birth" (1993: 17). A feminist ethical view of this dialectics then, starts from the premise that women's discursive agency must be guaranteed at that crucial moment of maternal subjectivity.

In the novels, the narrative representations of childbirth are indeed the expression of the traditional male intervention as delivery is taking place. In Callaghan's text, her introspection into that issue has tragicomic undertones but they are wisely and engagingly interspersed with details about how the female voice is unheard in those episodes. In one of Ronnie's delusions of her near future as a single mother, not only does the protagonist imagine herself as being patronised by a male obstetrician, who is in turn, keen on popularity, but also references to

"Gay, Gay" suggest that she suddenly becomes the focus of the famous Late Late Show, conducted for many years by the Irish presenter Gay Byrne. The fact that while the presenter also asks her about the missing father of her child, she is made to believe that all she has to do is "look at the little red light above the camera, and leave the rest to us" (25) demonstrates that male figures have something to say about her state, whereas her own explanations are silenced, as she barely speaks and remains puzzled throughout. The scene is full of men, with Brian's presence also in the shape of a famous Irish actor but denying any relation to her. The hallucination eventually finishes and brings Ronnie back to "real" life, but its inclusion in the narrative illustrates Callaghan's critique of how women's objectification in childbirth can alienate them and how they are often simply made into a public spectacle whereas their feelings are commonly silenced. Her interpretation overlaps with Anne Coakley's analysis of childbirth in her chapter "Birth as a 'Normal' Process," where she criticises how in that context medical professionals usually deprive women of any responsibility for their behaviour and decisions. By contrast, she continues:

> The wish to be seen as morally responsible is in part a claim to be seen as properly adult, and is certainly viewed as preferable to the kind of moral culpability foisted on women by obstetricians who deem women irresponsible and selfish (or childish) in some of the decision that we choose to make. (137)

The moment in which Agnes gives birth to her illegitimate baby in England, where it is adopted by a good Catholic family, can also be interpreted in light of the consent and infantilisation arguments exposed by Bordo, Wolf and Coakley. All the ethical controversies raised by the manipulation of women in childbirth on account of patriarchal

regulations of discourse and the body are epitomised in her case, where most challengingly, a young woman is having a baby after having strayed outside the limits of the corporeal. When she falls into an emotional crisis after the baby is taken away from her, the solution, as in many other cases, is mediated by way of the nursing nun's tormenting her with not revealing the sex of her baby and also with what is described as a medical invasion, that is, with the injection that she is given by a (male) doctor in order to remain quiet (99).

A quite notable description of childbirth can also be found in *The Killeen*, where the episode is again depicted from the male perspective of Father Costello, who is besides, a man of the cloth. What seems more problematic about how Leland portrays that moment is that Margaret's lack of control of her pregnant corporeality culminates in her assumed surrender to the decisions of the people around her. She even admits later that she had insisted on the baby to be baptised Thomas but that "she had let the Doctor and Miss Lou handle everything. She had been grateful in the end for the Doctor's skilful application of chloroform so that the final pangs had been blotted out and with them the physical residue of that separation" (58). However, it is also quite revealing that as childbearing is taking place, Father Costello remains rather confused about what is really happening in the room, so that on this occasion, his absolute power is dismantled:

> For the first time in his life he wondered, nearly, what it was like, the steady waiting time punctured by gasping, tearing pains, the rhythms building with moans and cries, the bursting out with floods of blood and liquids. […] The picture grew from the fireplace, a picture more confused and tortured because it was the flesh of imagination. The female legs splayed out, held down by

> rigorous hands, the black gap between suddenly gushing with blood and birth. (42)

Completely absorbed in his imagination of the childbirth, the priest is described as captivated by the grip of the female body, even terrorised, we could say, by its life-producing power. His reaction bears out the male uneasiness about women's corporeality that we have described at several points of our study, while it also reflects how women's bodies are linked up with sin, again as highlighted in the first part of this section. When his vision reaches a climactic moment as "he was excited in some way he could not relish, and with a creeping sense of sin" (42), Leland skilfully blends a religious man's sinful carnal thoughts with the traditional understanding of childbirth as bringing forth polluting effects upon the woman. This view, deeply rooted in the collective psyche of patriarchal societies, is materialised through rituals intended to cleanse the woman's body. Those practices were indeed common in Ireland, where it was widely expected of newly delivered mothers to be "churched" by a priest, so that they were purified after giving birth (Hilliard 148-149).[114] This kind of ceremonies has been considered by Elizabeth Grosz as "metaphors for processes of cultural homogeneity" (193),[115] while they also call for the gender asymmetries that lie behind them, as the impregnating men, let alone the rapists, did not undergo such cleansing.

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[114] This practice as well as the archaic Catholic mentality upon which it was constructed is problematised by Maura Richards in *Two to Tango*, whose protagonist criticises the way Irish women have been made to believe that their bodies are not clean after giving birth and that they had to be churched: "Received back into the fold by a man. Prayed over, candled over and told we were not fit to receive their sacraments again" (117).

[115] The ritual can also be read in terms of Kristeva's analysis of "defilement", herself drawing on the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas about the differentiation and social separation intended by many religious rites of the purification of polluted subjects. For a more contextualised examination, see Kristeva, 1982: 65-68.

In *DBR*, Mary is put away from that defilement since all the mental pressure and physical abuse she has gone through her pregnancy are disclosed when she finally miscarries while waiting for the judicial decision in Dublin. Obviously, a number of other biological and psychological reasons may have prompted such an end to her foetus, that had nonetheless survived her father's attempt to kill it by introducing a broomstick through her vagina (106). Yet, O'Brien concentrates on how her bodily symptoms of sickness at the time of the miscarriage are disregarded by her "protectors" in favour of further moral anti-abortion manipulation (255-256). She also emphasizes the solitude with which, ironically enough, Mary faces that moment —with only her own body as her ally— and offering a clear-cut description of her bodily pains and mental disquiet throughout the miscarriage, which is nicely interwoven with the narrator's use of short sentences and fragmented syntax:

> Awful pain. Getting worse […] Awful pain […] Her insides are mad now. Askew. It's coming down along the legs of the chair. Wet and clots. Both. Trying to call them but unable. Trying to get up. Unable. The chair up with her, a trio, the chair and her and it. Trying. So small a creature able to wreak such pain. There is a nest of brass buttons, brass beading along the side of the chair next to her and she puts her fingers to them, for something to touch, to implore of. The tablecloth is soaking, a flag after battle, bloodied through and through. The pain is wild, there is vengeance in it. It is going now, going out of her, departing, a nebula into nowhere. (258)

The scene has been interpreted in various ways by critical commentators of O'Brien's work. For example, Thomas Jackson considers this ending "a blow to the integrity of the novel" and relates it to the problems of fictionalising a true story. For him, Mary —or X— "surely deserved more than to become a character in someone's novel" (36). In Jose Lanters's sharp judgement, by letting Mary's pregnancy as its perpetrator's

problems somehow solve by themselves with miscarriage and suicide, respectively, O'Brien could be criticised for offering solutions that would not be so straightforward in real life. However, she emphasizes that to object to that ending would be to miss "the point *Down by the River* seeks to make about the involvement of church and state in what are often very painful and tragic personal circumstances" (135). O'Brien herself insisted in an interview that the coincidence of the miscarriage with the veredict of the judges represents the irony underlying the fact that by then, they had nothing to say (Moloney and Thompson 200). In our view, what is really outstanding is the extraordinariness of a description of a young girl's undergoing of corporeal transformation that however physically painful for her and spiritually dramatic for the women and the whole country, figures as a liberating act through a woman's body.

5. Individual matters: claiming alternatives

5.1. Another kind of maternity

Apart from portraying in their novels the many sided restrictions that delimit single mothers' subjectivity in Ireland, Callaghan, Leland and O'Brien also coincide in pursuing the description of how maternal feelings and practices can be sources of empowerment for the women on their way towards identity formation. Interspersed in their narratives —mostly near the end of the stories, when the protagonists are about to reach self-awareness and reconciliation with themselves—, the reader can find hints of a maternal order in which the traditional parameters as well as the social expectations for single mothers are reformulated. This new maternal spirit is gradual in that it takes the female characters a certain time, personal reflection and a variety of circumstances to come to terms with the possibility and the dimensions of their function as mothers. The three novels provide then, the added insight that despite the external pressure from the Irish cultural signifiers, single mothers can perform another kind of maternity, either before or after the babies are born.

As the title of Callaghan's novel ironically makes clear, all her protagonists fall under the category of mothers, although not all of them may be biologically so or manage to nurture their babies in a physical way. Thus, with their respective peculiarities, it is equally underscored that these three women reach maternal subjectivity despite that obstacle. In general, the dialectics between the presence/absence of the child and the mother's acquisition of individuation remains historically based on the purely relational aspect of the concept of the mother. As held by

Tuttle Hansen, this component needs to be interrogated, because motherhood also has to do with the absence of such relation and it is common to find women within its borders. Tuttle Hansen focusses on the so-called "mother without a child", which she describes as

> a rubric that includes nontraditional mothers and 'bad' mothers, including lesbians and slave mothers; women who have abortions and miscarriages, women who refuse to bear children, or whose children are stolen from them; and mothers who are, as we shall see, sometimes criminals, murderers, prisoners, suicides, time travellers, tricksters or ghosts. (10)

They all constitute instances of non-conventional motherhood while also demonstrating the constantly changing realities of motherhood. This transformation is certainly addressed by the authors in our study so that taken together, the three texts have women mothering differently under unfavourable conditions.

Callaghan, Leland and O'Brien similarly rewrite the maternal plots into stories of renewal. They suggest that with this reconstruction, the social anxieties that the single mothers generate are actually questionable and that they can be blurred indeed through the insistence on a new ethics of the maternal, much more focussed on the mothers' desires. The protagonists dismantle the anxieties they have experienced and transform them into new hopes, which are manifested in different ways. Thus, the novels map out the liberating effects of recognising the maternal potential that the authors seem to claim, whereas, they suggest, insistence on those constrains and limitations only brings further anxieties for them and those around them.

In *The Myths of Motherhood*, Shari Thurer examines the construction of the "good mother" and points out that it was after the

second half of the twentieth century when the maternal ideal and the role of the mother for the configuration of individual subjectivity came under closer scrutiny. For her, the idealisation of the mother was prompted by a post-Freudian insistence on ideal childhood and the role of the mother in it. However, Thurer claims not only that the way women perform mothering is culturally derived, but also that: "Our particular idea of what constitutes a good mother is only that, an idea, not an eternal verity. The good mother is reinvented as each age or society defines her anew, in its own terms, according to its own mythology" (xv).

In the early 1970s, Donald W. Winnicot talked about mothers as human, imperfect beings who perform a number of actions and who strongly influences her child's mental development and social adjustment, as formulated by object relations theories of subject formation. Although he tried to humanise rather than idealise mothers and give them a high stream of power, Winnicot offered very essentialist views on motherhood and women's relation towards it. Truly, for him the mother's role is social, not simply personal and individual, but he focusses on purely traditional patterns based on patriarchal and heterosexual notions, since he considers that maternal power is only acknowledged as long as the woman complies with the principles of marriage and family, as devised by patriarchal discourse.

Winnicot's most prominent contribution to maternal theory is the introduction of the controversial concept "good enough mothering." In *Playing and Reality,* he defines it in the following terms:

> The good-enough "mother" (not necessarily the infant's own mother) is one who makes active adaptation to the infant's needs,

> an active adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant's growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and tolerate the results of frustration. Naturally, the infant's own mother is more likely to be good enough than some other person, since this active adaptation demands an easy and unresented preoccupation with the one infant; in fact, success in infant care depends on the fact of devotion, not on cleverness or intellectual enlightenment. (10)

According to him, a number of prerequisites must be granted so that good enough mothering can occur. These refer to the presence of a male figure that supports the mother both emotionally and economically, and subsequently, to a stable atmosphere in which there are no penuries (142). In that sense, he is leaving out the origin of the pregnancy itself, for example rape, incest, or war ethnic cleansing, and also those maternal circumstances in which the mother is a widow, a lesbian, separated, divorced or single. Thus, we may add, Winnicot's utopian vision of ideal motherhood is focussed mainly on the child, takes place exclusively in ideal circumstances and does not take into account the everyday homes of everyday mothers living in economic difficulty or any other "dysfunctional" cases. Strictly following his reasoning then, the stories of Irish single mothers told in the novels are in many ways *not* good enough mothers.

Within psychoanalytical theorisations of the self, the mother has been used as a recurrent figure in the traditional conceptualisation of autonomous and unitary individuals, as well as the deconstruction of a fragmented one, as suggested by postmodernist theorists. Nancy Chodorow's work *The Reproduction of Mothering* meant a point of inflection in the feminist focus on mothering and the inclusion of the mother's perspective, which from then on, was to be analysed from

different frameworks, such as object relations theory, Freudian rearticulation, cultural theory and philosophy. Like Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* and Dorothy Dinnerstein in *Mermaid and the Minotaur*, Chodorow criticises the straightforward association of femininity with motherhood on account of the social roles expected of women and the perpetuation of such roles from mothers to daughters. For her, the woman's role is central to the kind of mothering that she reproduces for the following generation so that she is responsible for "sexual asymmetries and inequalities" (1978: 7).

Much as Rich, Chodorow conceives motherhood as an institution inserted in the social and family order so that it is not essentially a female condition, but simply assigned to women. For her, a woman is "a female self in relation" and she considers that a woman's mothering is inextricably bound up with the fact that she is a daughter: "The preoedipal relation stance, latent in women's normal relationship to the world and experience of self, is activated in their coming to care for an infant, encouraging their empathic identification with this infant which is the basis of maternal care" (2002: 15). Chodorow also argues that the socialisation of the mother has encouraged and expected her to focus on the infant's needs and become a self-less person. On the contrary, she insists on mothers' relational character and their need to go out of the private, domestic realm to which they have been allocated. She also claims for a system of "shared parenting" in which both men and women have the responsibility of care (1978: 219). Only that way the traditional dichotomy of production/reproduction will be overturned and a new

concept of family and parenting, based on relations rather than on division, can be established.

In her work *In a Different Voice,* Carol Gilligan provides an interesting outlook about the development of female psychology close to the postulates of the object relations theorists in the sense that both highlight the female features of empathy and interrelatedness which have been often underestimated by western societies. As Chodorow claimed too, these features must be emphasized since they lead to a different moral attitude based on gender difference but Gilligan becomes too essentialist in this. She points out that the two intrinsically female features of care and responsibility –as inferred from a number of interviews to women in her study–, figure as significant sources of morality, and configure what she calls "an ethics of care." What seems problematic about Gilligan's perspective is that she notes that men and women follow different modes of judgement so that it leads to a different moral domain for each gender (69). This interpretation obviously appears as rather controversial though, for the essentialist views that it offers on the attitudes pre-assigned to the female gender. However, her claim is that, rather than locating women into the private and passive sphere of caring for infants in the home, for her this ethics empowers women in their individual development, and grants morality a superior position over the typically male preoccupation with law or justice.

The affirmation of that ethics is fraught with meaning when it comes to the abortion dilemma that many women encounter in their life and which has been analysed above in our study. In her analysis of how

women deal with that decision, Gilligan argues that it is a moral understanding of that problem in terms of responsibility and relation with others what distinguishes women's attitude:

> The logic underlying an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach. Women's constructions of the abortion dilemma in particular reveal the existence of a distinct moral language whose evolution traces a sequence of development. This is the language of selfishness and responsibility, which defines the moral problem as one of obligation to exercise care and avoid hurt. The inflicting of hurt is considered selfish and immoral in its reflection of unconcern, while the expression of care is seen as the fulfilment of moral responsibility. (73)

To our mind, with her ethics of care Gilligan claimed that caring should not be equated exclusively with feelings as opposed to thoughts, but rather, her description of women's moral perspective of justice and care in cases of abortion implies that mental judgement and action are deeply embedded in their ideology of the maternal and the self. In this light, a parallel can be drawn between her contention and what feminist critics and authors have been doing on this respect in Ireland, as reflected in the works we have selected. Namely, the recuperation and assertion of women's power in cases of out of wedlock conception and dysfunctional maternity can not be achieved unless, in direct contrast to the historical tradition, women are allowed to exert their right to ponder about options —whether abortion, lone maternity or others— instead of being instantly objectified and decisions being made for them. Only when that thinking is not determined by imposed factors, self-empowerment can be more easily attained. Indeed, as Callaghan reflected concerning the inclusion of the abortion dilemma in *Mothers*, "novelists should address themselves to the preoccupations of the age, and single parenthood and the choice

whether or not to have a child is certainly one of them. The novel is really about choice" (Wyne-Jones 9).

However, if we take into account that maturity and growth from childhood to adulthood implies a move from selfishness to accountability, it is the idea of making a responsible choice —to nurture in loneliness or to abort the baby— what really should come out in these cases. The idea of the dilemma is extremely meaningful for the context and content of our study insofar as it brings to the fore questions about the straightforwardness with which unmarried maternity is usually treated in legal, social, economic and even political terms in Ireland.

A similar appeal to the need to construct a maternal ontology was made from the arena of feminist philosophy by Sara Ruddick in her influential work *Maternal Thinking*. Like Gilligan, her work is greatly based on Chodorow, and together they paved the way for the vindication of maternal subjectivity and its interrelating dimension. Like Rich, she distinguishes two dimensions of motherhood, namely, maternal thinking and maternal practice. For Ruddick, the performance of mothering transcends the traditionally considered maternal feelings and generates a particular way of thinking. Maternal tasks and care also include action and thoughts, and contribute to a specific understanding of the world:

> Few deny that motherhood is imbued with feeling, although the conjunction of feeling with thought may go unnoticed. Indeed, at times a mother seems, to herself as well as observers, utterly defined by the feelings that overpower her. But the activity of preservative love, although intensely emotional, can never be reduced to the sum of its feeling. Although feeling and action are conceptually connected, to feel is not tantamount to acting. (70)

By virtue of this, she claims that maternal thought, in transcending the domestic realm, can contribute to a new theory of justice and peace if it is taught properly (244). Similarly, and what seems most relevant for the narratives of single maternity that we are analysing in our study, she defends that telling maternal stories or engaging in maternal conversations is a good route to achieve female collectivity: "Learning to make up, share and revise good maternal stories is a social project" (101).

In line with most of these claims by critical theorists of the maternal, in *Mothers*, *The Killeen* and *DBR* the authors claim that different forms of maternity and non-traditional family structures should be recognised in the Irish society of the 1980s and 1990s. They also coincide in their description of how maternal feelings and another non-standard maternal performance can be sources of empowerment for women. Thus, through their protagonists they build up a new ethics of single maternity that challenges its traditional parameters, while at the same time granting women the subjectivity and agency they are ready to put in practice.

In her review of Callaghan's novel *Billy Come Home*, Claire Bracken remarks that its central theme is "the need to respect difference, treated negatively by a society that positions itself in terms of the 'standard' or the 'norm'" (10). A similar conclusion can be drawn, to our mind, after reading her earliest work. *Mothers* is structured around three women who are not only different among themselves, as women and as mothers, but also singular in their performance of the maternal paradigms prevalent in Ireland and internationally. Both perspectives are

probably intertwined in the sense that much of their alternative forms of mothering are determined by the circumstances they have fallen into. As we have insisted in various parts of our study, each socio-historical period provides a different framework for the particularities of their single maternity, but also their irregular situation prompts their attempt to negotiate a kind of maternity distinct from the one to which their condition ascribes them. This narrative configuration enables Callaghan to dispute the homogenising and enduring parameters of mothering while it also raises questions about the silencing of women's maternal possibilities. In this, her project coalesces with Judith Butler's contention in *Gender Trouble* that not all redefinitions are reproving and that they imply the redescription of already existing possibilities. Indeed, as Jennifer Fitzgerald observes in her review of *Mothers*: "Of the eleven women who appear in the book, seven have conceived outside marriage.[116] It reflects the hidden reality of life which gets brushed under the carpet of acceptable God-fearing society" (12).

Of paramount importance for the emotional development and identity formation of the protagonists is then the reordering of the boundaries and available options that are socially established for their feminine and maternal role. This idea of maternal defiance brings us back to Braidotti's alignment of motherhood and monstrosity. For her:

> It is because of this phallogocentric perversion that femininity and monstrosity can be seen as isomorphic. Woman/mother is monstrous by excess; she transcends established norms and

[116] Apart from Ronnie, Agnes and Harriet, the other minor characters who get pregnant out of wedlock in *Mothers* are Clare –Ronnie's friend from school–, Breda –Ronnie's flatmate–, Nora –the childminder at Ronnie's house during her childhood–, and Phoebe –Agnes' long time friend–. Although some of them had abortions, the title of the novel quite significantly places them all under the same category of "mothers", as mentioned above.

> transgresses boundaries. She is monstrous by lack: woman/mother does not possess the substantive unity of the masculine subject. Most important, through her identification with the feminine, she is monstrous by displacement: a sign of the in between areas, of the indefinite, the ambiguous, the mixed, woman/mother is subjected to a constant process of metaphorization as 'other-than'. (83).

To confront that kind of association –indeed historically in operation in Ireland throughout the twentieth century–, the author places her characters in a position that transcends the limits of the maternal parameters to which their former transgression of sexual codes had, in turn, attached them.

Ronnie stands out among the three protagonists for the wider variety of socially approved options available for her as a single pregnant mother in the 1980s. Although she had panicked at the fact of never being free again after her conception (150), and even in the final pages of the novel she still hesitates about what to do with the baby and regrets her state by wishing "to get unpregnant" (237), meeting and talking to Harriet in the hospital obliges her to finally reach a sense of maternal purpose: "'If I had the baby,' Ronnie said, brightening, 'I'd start by reading it *The Wind in the Willows*'" (239). A glimpse of her dismissal of the abortion option can be grasped here, and although her final decision is informally closed with a "Maybe I won't go to London" (240), it can be fairly said that her determination to put her maternity into play provides her with a feeling of self-reconciliation that she lacked earlier in the story. Callaghan herself commented on the significance of this ending in an interview, and remarked: "Probably in real life, Ronnie would have an abortion. But art ought to offer hope, and I felt that the whole point

should be that Ronnie is finally free to select what she wants herself. […] If a society offers only abortion —as Agnes's society in the novel offered only adoption— then it's not choice" (Fitzgerald 12).

A similar epiphany about maternity occurred to Harriet. Like Ronnie finds in her the catalyst to start delineating her future, so did Harriet find in Nora the reference to direct her life towards her own maternal definitions, rather than the ones imposed by others. From being terrified by the idea of becoming a single mother (204), as pointed out in previous sections, a conversation with the childminder working for Oliver and Laura, and during which Nora appears quite resolute about keeping her illegitimate baby despite her unfavourable circumstances, transforms the way in which Harriet envisions her life ahead: "Poor Nora. Did that conversation make me decide to keep Barry?" (83).

Later, although her marriage to James aligned her with socially sanctioned versions of the "good enough mother" —to use Winnicott's ideas mentioned above—, Harriet's uneasiness with such delineations is manifest by her disapproval of the boy's entrance in a boarding school, but she is certainly unable to overthrow her husband's authority over this (205). It is only when she becomes a widow that her own maternal articulations are materialised, but unfortunately, her son dies shortly after that. From then on, she falls into an emotional turmoil that has her psychologically and emotionally trapped despite finding support at work, from her lover and her friends. Nonetheless, Harriet embodies Callaghan's reworking of the maternal for the kind of bond she establishes with Ronnie at the end of the novel. By then she is a

motherless mother who becomes childless, namely, a paragon of Tuttle Hansen's "mother without child", but she finds in her former best friends' daughter her own lost mothering. Harriet reminds Ronnie of the support her mother would give her if she decided to have the baby, and while not trying to replace Laura's role, Harriet offers Ronnie unconditional help: "I have an empty flat in my house. It's completely self-contained. If you wanted, you could have it rent-free. Until you got on your feet" (240). Similarly, this newly acquired maternal role on the part of Harriet can also be interpreted as an ultimate consequence of her motherlessness. About this kind of situation Rich comments that:

> The woman who has felt 'unmothered' may seek mothers all her life [...] But the 'motherless' mother may react by denying her own vulnerability, denying she has felt any loss or absence of mothering. She may spend her life proving her strength in the 'mothering' of others [...] In a sense she is giving to others what she herself has lacked. (1997: 242)

A close reading of this final point in the story suggests that in Harriet, the absence of a motherly figure and of an object to mother are intertwined and transformed into an alternative kind of care. The relation established by Callaghan for these two women at the end of the novel can also be read in light of Ruddick's distinction between empathy and attentive love by which the former refers to "the importance of knowing another *without* finding yourself in her," whereas the latter "lets difference emerge without searching for comforting commonalities, dwells upon the *other*, and lets otherness be" (121-122). Harriet does not extrapolate her case to Ronnie and helps the young woman start following a different maternal course from the one she took one generation behind. All in all, their relation demonstrates the emotional growth that women can extract

from alternative ways of mothering while, taken together, the two protagonists also embody the emphasis on women's empathic character and interrelatedness that Chodorow and Gilligan defended.

To interpret Callaghan's depiction of maternal behaviour we can also follow Julia Kristeva's theorisations in "Stabat Mater", where she refers to the "abyss" that exists between mother and child, not only during pregnancy but most clearly, after childbirth. According to her, "the child, whether *he* or *she*, is irremediably an other" and there is a sort of sexual relationship between the baby and the mother if we take into account "the flash that bedazzles me when I [the mother] confront the abyss between what was mine and is henceforth but irreparably alien." The mother, then, must go through a process of "staggering vertigo" by which what was hers becomes an alien, and she can only maintain her identity by becoming aware of that separation. Therefore, what links mothers to their babies, she concludes, is the fact that "motherhood destines us [mothers] to a demented jouissance that is answered, by chance, by the nursling's laughter in the sunny waters of the ocean" (1987: 255).

Kristeva's argument of the mother's consciousness about the separation from the child serves as the critical framework for the process of alienation, and nearly dementia, that single mothers undergo in the novel. Together with this psychological double consciousness and dilemmas, for them there is the added factor of the social and moral ethos that circumscribes their particular, abnormal condition and that in many cases does not lead them to that "demented *jouissance*" delineated by the

French theorist. On the contrary, as described in the novels, unmarried mothers usually internalise a sense of alienation, at least in the early phases of their maternal state, that stems from the pressure exerted by external factors.

The absence of maternal *jouissance* quite clearly surfaces over the course of Agnes's story, whose son was taken away from her shortly after birth. The adoption of the baby by an English Catholic couple precipitates her into a continuous alienation that is manifested in various ways, like introversion and rejection of the Catholic faith, among others analysed in Part One of our study. Yet, to our mind, in the chapters devoted to her story, Callaghan gives special attention to the maternal spirit that occupies her despite her condition as a "mother without a child." In other words, Agnes appears throughout the narrative as a woman considering herself a mother but unable to perform her mothering. This thwarted maternity first appeared after giving birth in England, when Agnes asked the nurse about the baby: "Was it all right?... Why shouldn't I know?" (98). Then, we are told how she had repeatedly tried to trace her son and feels much concerned for his reaction to the adoption:

> Would, perhaps, some strange, balding man of fifty-three come forward (for he was fifty-four tomorrow)? And if he did, what would she say to him? I gave you up because they made me. […] How could she explain to a stranger? That's what he'd be now. No matter what she felt about the idea of him, he'd be a stranger. He'd think of others as his parents. (99)

In this vein, Agnes somehow blurs Ruddick's ideas of maternal thinking and action in the sense that she attains both without having the supposedly essential component of the actual relation with the infant.

The regular performance of maternal care is not made available to her by the author but it can be certainly asserted that her behaviour suggests a "maternal thinking."

Further, although the mother-daughter plot is not a major theme in *Mothers*, it is true that Callaghan articulates with Agnes the grip that such relation, and the social factors on which it can be founded, may ultimately cause upon women. In spite of being constructed from the perspective of the daughter, Agnes's attempt at reconciliation with her dead mother underlines the importance of listening to mothers that Ruddick also claims. Agnes's return to the maternal while she is in hospital in the final chapter of the novel is a way of rejecting the destructive way of thinking that her mother had and of trying to reconstruct it. To quote Ruddick:

> Learning how to be daughters includes learning to expect and respect maternal thinking. And this means really listening when mothers speak. Obviously, listening respectfully to maternal thinking cannot mean accepting the conditions in which mothers have been disdained and their work devalued. Indeed, given the contempt that. (39-40)

Callaghan's reformulation here is that it is Agnes herself the one who claims her mother for that maternal discourse, however late it is for them because of one being dead and the other about to die: "'But it's not too late. It's not –' […] Agnes faced her mother sadly. 'We wasted all those years, never speaking'" (216-218).

With the parallel but very distinct maternal performances of Julia and Margaret, *The Killeen* offers an unordinary look on the construction of motherhood in 1930s-Ireland. On one hand, Julia goes from being an unmarried mother protecting her baby by hiding the identity of its

inappropriate father, to becoming a widow and a lone mother after her husband's hunger strike and subsequent death. It is in the latter form of maternity that Leland elaborates the distinctiveness of the maternal dimension in this character. Thus, not only does she celebrate motherhood by having her son as "the one person from whom she did not hide herself" (63), but also she refuses to become the honourable and indoctrinating mother of a national hero's orphan. To spare Pat as much of his republican ancestry as possible, she decides to have only one photograph of Maurice in the house but as the narrator comments:

> That had been her last obedience to anything but her own judgement. Assessment and decision were now more real to her than instinct. She had learned to distrust instinct for everything except her child, whose gaiety released something still fresh and rapturous from her soul and whose bright love deepened in her heart that implacable suspicion of cheapness in the man who had been his father. (64)

In this light, the articulation of Julia's maternity follows the ideas of motherhood and non-violence pointed out by Ruddick when she mentions that: "Peacemakers create a communal suspicion of violence, a climate in which peace is desired, a way of living in which it is possible to learn and to practice non-violent resistance and strategies of reconciliation. This description of peacemaking is a description of mothering" (244).

All in all, Leland portrays Julia as finding in mothering her son far from the familial constrains a strategy of empowerment. Although she hesitates in separating her son from her family background, she finally leaves Cork for France, where "she could consider options if she had to" (65). As character and as a mother, Julia also echoes Thurer's reflections in the final part of her study, where she celebrates the presence of

mother's discourse in literature and also of new kinds of mothers: "[T]he mentor, the one who guides her children to independent adulthood. She is no angel, however. She makes mistakes; she is not wholly fulfilled by her experience; she is ambivalent about her children. In sum, she is real" (Thurer 299).

On the other hand, the impact of Margaret's alternative maternal practice rests upon the fact that despite being, again, a "mother without a child", a new awareness of her child's dislocation and manipulation in the orphanage school prompts her to negotiate his rescue with Julia (75). Maternal feelings and action converge in their conversation, where Margaret diligently appeals to Julia's maternity for comprehension:

> 'Would you be happy if you thought Pat was in that school?' […] 'There's a difference, Margaret.' The girl turned on her. 'I know that! But that's a difference other people care about, not me. And at least I was proud of his father, I loved him. I know he's gone without a thought of it but I don't care about that. I *do* care about the boy. Maybe that's the difference that matters'. (95-96)

Margaret's maternal urges are quite significant here and for the rest of the narrative, as she understands them as a way of saving her baby and herself. Yet, Leland adds a rather controversial turn to her single maternity story by having her take the baby to her family in the country. This may well mean that she does not define her identity through motherhood, but also, it can be suggested that she does not deny her maternal self and her mothering practice at all. What Margaret does is a double redescription of maternal possibilities for single mothers like her. First, she invalidates the adoption's long-term separation between the single mother and her child, and secondly, she approaches that maternal recovery in an unexpected manner. Thus, the narrator points

out that she longed for "some knowledge, some sustaining assurance, that Thomas, *no matter what she did herself*, would be all right. She could not say all this" (92, emphasis added). By finally making Margaret entrust Thomas to her brother Michael, the author suggests that the protagonist can gracefully reach womanhood by rejecting mothering when at last it is rendered materially possible for her, but that does not necessarily turn her into a bad mother.[117] In this vein, much as Julia did when finally separating her child from his family background, Margaret overcomes successfully the dilemma between motherhood and personal ambition that, as Thurer puts it, "are still largely seen as opposing forces" as it is "the virtuous proof of good mothering" (287).

Much as at the end of *Mothers*, here this maternal twist to the story is carried out through female interrelation, that is, the mutual support between Margaret and Julia. Further, in this case the narrator also insists on the younger protagonist's reconciliation with her mother: "I know I told you how hard she could be. But I'm different, I feel as if I could understand some of it now. She had a hard life. Very hard" (93). The return to the mother is here projected as one of the daughter's steps for individuation, although, as the events in the final chapter of the novel reveal, this promising turn leads to more negative consequences prompted by the traditional mother figure of Mrs Coakley.

But probably the most remarkable re-interpretation of the maternal and its possibilities in this novel is achieved by means of

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[117] For an analysis of the paradoxes, misunderstandings and meanings underlying the idea of "devious motherhood" see for example, Ann Dally's book *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal*, 224-240.

Michael and his attitude towards Thomas. At first puzzled by his new, unexpected paternal responsibilities (123), the narrator discloses how he gradually becomes comfortable with his protective role towards the baby, so much so that their corporeality fuses in a truly maternal way: "The body grew on his flesh now, became a part of his body" (126). Even after Thomas's death, he feels that "the child who was now dead was like a branch of his own body" (131). Simultaneously, by setting his "dysfunctional" paternity against Mrs Coakley's role in this final part of the novel, Leland questions the legitimacy of official and unofficial versions of maternity and femininity and their consequences.[118]

In *DBR*, given the circumstances in which Mary conceived her baby, the redefinition of the maternal role appears to be more straightforward but at the same time, a difficult task for the articulation of the subjectivity of this character. Nonetheless, the peculiarities of Mary's case enable O'Brien to elaborate on the unsustainability of the homogenising disposition towards maternity in Ireland. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd praises O'Brien for how "the unerring accuracy of her eye and the deft rightness of her phrase convinced many that here were believable, fallible, flesh-and-blood women, neither paragons nor caricatures" (566). Although Kiberd is referring to her early fiction, it is our belief that her achievement then correlates with what she manages to do in *DBR*.

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[118] Michael also enables Leland to question social constructs of masculinity, as his attitude towards the baby is clearly set against the way in which Father Rehill –the village priest and a representative of patriarchal law– reacts after he learns about its existence.

Since Mary finds out about her pregnancy, she is aware of the irregular nature of her future baby and shows mixed feelings about it, ranging from fear to repulsion and compassion. However, when she gradually admits her helplessness before the people who try to "protect" her, her sense of maternity is transformed into a less punitive and more understanding attitude towards the foetus. This is exposed in the novel when her writing is confronted with the words expressed by the leaflets and the people she finds when going out of one of the hearings:

> Her own letter is a scribble and is addressed to no one—
>
> *'I don't hate you, you know I don't. If only you were my sister or my brother but not my child. If you could be spirited out of me that would be all right, more than all right. It is just that I cannot bear you. I am asking your soul to fly off now and wait for the right mother. But I know that cannot be.'* (237)

This can be interpreted as a complex articulation of a mother's care for her child while admitting her unbecoming part in that relation. To our mind, O'Brien emphasizes here that it is the external agent that has made her mother, and the social signifiers that establish the appropriate boundaries of standard maternity what really alienate her. Therefore, hers is, like in the rest of the protagonists of the other two novels, a kind of maternity more distinct from the one accepted by the social norms and concealed behind its principles.

5.2. The power of female and maternal self-expression

The development of the stories in *Mothers*, *The Killeen* and *DBR* marks the importance of the protagonists' final negotiation of the external signifiers that delimited their actions, in favour of self-delineated parameters. Significantly, in these three texts this can be found in their re-arrangement of the patriarchal codes of female discourse. As discussed in the first section of the previous chapter, discursive control has commonly granted assertiveness and authority for collective consciousness and individual entities, not only in Ireland but elsewhere. So far, we have discussed in this study that the idiosyncrasy of Irish culture, as imprinted on its social order, has contributed to the internalisation of unmarried mothers as the epitome of discursive subjugation, with the stately-favoured and long-sanctioned repression of their cases as well as of their voices. As we have been pointing out, they have been the material embodiments of the prevalent ideology of containment and suppression on account of the Irish cultural anxieties of national disintegration. In other words, social fears have required silence in order to avoid the degenerating effects of terrifying objects or situations like those that these women stand for.

However, in this study we have also hinted at the redressing of such agenda carried out by Irish women from many different disciplines. In literature, Irish women authors like the three novelists we have selected have expressed through their characters one of the most important issues that have historically terrified Irish society most, that is, female sex outside marriage resulting into illegitimate conception. By

rejecting the stronghold of women's silencing about maternal and sexual issues as evidenced in the progression of the stories in the novels, the authors do not simply create controversy, but most importantly, they allow the voiceless objects to utter unpronounced words through their narrators or the characters' dialogues. Thus, the three novels suggest that only if we listen to the full spectrum of experiences of single maternity can its stigmas and prejudices be dismantled. Most particularly, our attention is drawn to how single mothers' voices are a sign of their rebellion against the established codes and that their self-fulfilment is reached not only by another kind of motherhood, as described in the previous section, but also by means of their recovered handling of discourse. Thus, the three texts offer interesting portraits of how the protagonists acquire their voicing while coming to terms with their maternity.

In *Maternal Thinking*, Sara Ruddick contends that since the act of speaking certainly changes the speaker, this transformation operates quite positively in the case of mothers, who must speak for themselves and be heard, so that the transformative potential of motherhood is rendered possible. Particularly, she emphasises that despite growing out of a long repression, maternal discourse is not a fixed element and remains in constant transformation:

> Maternal voices have been drowned by professional theory, ideologies of motherhood, sexist arrogance, and childhood fantasy. Voices that have been distorted and censored can only be *developing* voices. Alternately silenced and edging towards speech, mothers' voices are not voices of mothers as they are, but as they are becoming. As mothers struggle towards responsible thinking, they will transform the thought they are beginning to articulate and the knowledge they are determined to share. (40)

Using Ruddick's ideas as a theoretical framework, we can indicate that *Mother*s brings to the fore the importance of single mothers' definition of their own position –past, present or future– by means of breaking the various degrees of silence to which they have been allocated, and by transforming, or trying to transform, their subjectivity and their reality that way. By this token, Ronnie's narrative story is that of a young woman struggling for her own subjectivity throughout the first week of her unmarried pregnancy. During that lapse of time, interior monologues, as well as conversations with friends, relatives and colleagues enable her to finally see her projection as a single mother, whatever her ultimate decision about her situation will be. Thus, Callaghan suggests that articulating all these problems, either in her mind or verbally, finally brings about a gradual sense of empowerment.

Her visit to her mother's house appears as a point of inflection in her illumination about what to make of her situation. It is after she hears that Barry had died in a car accident that she gets acquainted with her own role in deciding her future because she would not want to lose her baby as eventually happened to Harriet. Particularly, what permeates this moment is her coming to a state of mindfulness and determination of which she was not aware before, thus leaving her fears of vulnerability behind: "[S]omehow it didn't matter what he (Brian) thought anymore. It didn't matter what anyone thought. Barry's death had put things into … perspective. Yes, that was the word" (177). Up to then, she had constantly been anxious about Brian's reaction to her pregnancy, but

after this moment, still holding many doubts regarding her future, though, his opinion becomes irrelevant.

Callaghan is more subtle in her description of Harriet's and Agnes's coming to voice, probably because of the limited options they had at the time of their out-of-wedlock pregnancy. However, their voices –lost for long to the designations of family and social respectability– are channelled through the final events of the novel, and contribute to their self-fulfilment. On one hand, although we pointed out that Agnes made use of her eccentricity as a response to the oppression of her family, it must be admitted that she could never fully put their requirements aside throughout her life. For that reason, her raving moments in hospital, in which many of her fears, regrets and unvoiced wishes are rendered verbally alive, finally bring her to examining her past (213-236). At the same time, it must be pointed out that, as will also be the case for Harriet, memory –here combined with mental frenzy as she is on the brink of her death– does not figure as a self-pitying technique, but rather as an attempt to construct things differently and transform whatever is possible.

On the other hand, Harriet's discursive ability had usually failed her in crucial moments of her early stage as a single mother, as when telling her father, being unable to tell Oliver, and trying to keep –more or less successfully– the secret of her single maternity all her life, and when informing her husband on their wedding night. However, as the story is coming to an end, Harriet's multifaceted evolution can be grasped from the enthusiasm with which she envisions Ronnie's condition and her own

spontaneous role in helping her out. Earlier, her project on Irish women writers had got her in contact with Agnes and also given her a sense of professional purpose. But it is when she meets Ronnie again that experience, emotional growth and self-reconciliation finally allow her to advise the younger woman and share her views on unmarried maternity and how to handle it. Sentences like "you should not run into an abortion," (237), "Your baby is another person you'll really care for" (239) and "There's no need to panic, not nowadays" (240) reveal a much reconciled character going through a cathartic moment of putting her own disappointments behind for renewal and being transformed into her friends' daughter's future as a single pregnant woman opting for single maternity.

All in all, with these two characters Callaghan demonstrates that single mothers' discourse, however late it is acknowledged and produced, can have liberating effects for the individual and ultimately, for the women in such plights. The author's masterful dealing of her protagonists' discursive power is made clear during the moment of confusion on her deathbed in which Agnes calls for her child and Ronnie thinks she is referring to her own unborn child:

> The old man took Ronnie's arm. 'Yes, she keeps talking about a baby. You, actually.' 'What?' Ronnie looked from Phoebe to the old man. She recognised him now as Cousin Aggie's friend who used to jog all the way to Dalkey. Suddenly, she let out a wail. 'Oh, but how could she know? [...] She means my baby. I'm pregnant—' (232-233)

In other words, should Agnes have finally died without wording her feelings and pain for the baby she gave up and her relation with her mother, then probably Ronnie would have ignored this and remained

quiet about her own unmarried pregnancy, finally not receiving the support of Harriet. Hence, our interpretation is that voice figures as a linking element for the single mothers in the novel, as much as the narrative text is for the readers and the characters.

In *The Killeen*, Leland similarly delineates her protagonists as going through a process of linguistic liberation. To start with Julia, the narrator insists that she was already making plans for her escape from Cork. Quite often, she remembers her time in Paris with Maurice and Sebastien, in what turns out to be a channel of self-awareness and reconciliation achieved by memory, as for the protagonists of *Mothers*. After several years of suffering the political oppression of her husband and his family's republican ideology, as well as the social delimitations of female and maternal behaviour, she feels eventually able to address her past and her future. What strikes us most clearly about her conviction at that point is the explicitness with which she views and enounces the exceptional attitude she had had towards sexual immaculacy:

> She had been an unconscious virgin; conscious were those girls who had really believed what Sr. Thomas Aquinas had said at school about their bodies being the Temple of the Holy Ghost and short of being pure and free from stain forever, had to be pure and stainless at least until they got married. And they set about that with gusto, that guardianship. All that had meant little to Julia, on whom men had not broken in. (69)

When recognising this to herself, Julia is also rewriting the meaning of female virginity by appealing to the woman's mindfulness and determination rather than complying with external, religious instruction about physical sublimation. Likewise, that process reaches a climactic moment when the underlying reasons of her love affair with Sebastien

—and probably of the occurrence of her whole adult life— are described. Julia finally acknowledges that what attracted her to him was not an intellectual enchantment, "but it was sex" (69). Quite unusual for the times in which she lived, this acknowledgement underscores not only the linguistic possibility of women like her but also a woman's declaration of sexual longing. Actually, using Tom Inglis's words, "the new language of sexuality helped [Irish] people discover the pleasures of sex… Desire and fantasy were liberated from the cells of sin" (1999: 103).

Julia's wording ultimately allows her to come to terms with her life story and to see her time ahead with a new perspective: "She slept. She supposed they [Sebastien and Julia] both slept until she awoke on the new life that was only ending now" (71). Its relevance rests upon the fact that, finally uttering the main catalyst for her single maternity condition, she simultaneously asserts her lack of fear and her determination to fight for the new life she was devising for her child and herself:

> No, she was not afraid to go back to France. There were no ghosts there. Any that had been had followed her to Ireland and would be left behind for this journey. Memories? No, after this she would have the power to resist them. They would fade, her life before next year would become a dream to join the other dreams of her life before Maurice. (65-66)

As in the case of her mistress, for Margaret the repossession of language intersects with the rearticulation of religious discourse. The moment of her realisation comes when she is answering little Pat's doubts about behaving badly and being forgiven by God. Only then does she become aware of the real implications of her past actions, but instead of regretting her sexual transgression, she rewrites the significance of sin:

"Margaret had been thinking of a different example, her own sin which still held radiance for her, and her own child whom she did not know. Who would explain to Thomas? What puzzled grief would that child feel, and would he be alone with it?" (74-75). For Margaret, now sin is a different thing and it has to do with her subdued maternity rather than with religious codes. The guilt-oriented ideology that she had received fades in favour of self-devised patterns that rather than idealising it, enhance the tangible aspects of the maternal, and start from the premise of a psychological turning of that ideology and its linguistic voicing. Forced adoption and maternal indifference become then the most distinguishing meaning that her out of wedlock conception begins to entail for her from then on and which she tries to compensate for by rescuing Thomas from the nationalist oriented school and by bringing him to his own family. In this sense, it is at this moment when she starts to be a mother in a "state of becoming," as Ruddick suggested.

The case of Michael and his alternative kind of motherhood towards Thomas, as commented in the previous section, is also worthy of note for the author's articulation of the transformative effects of the control of discourse. Like his siblings, he had been subjugated by Mrs Coakley's omnipotence. However, his newly acquired paternity places him in a position to defend the baby and plead for its rightful belonging to the family and the community. Not only does he face his mother and threatens her but also he challenges the parish priest and questions the grounding of the killeen practice. So, considered within the wide frame of the novel, his story and his questioning are the final instruments that

contribute to Leland's exploration of the killeen and its possible re-articulations so that the hidden discourses of Irish history are rendered visible. In general, as critic James Smith puts it:

> Only by admitting into visibility such 'narrative retellings' can Ireland inscribe an alternative national narrative, one which accommodates the plurality of Ireland's stories and the inter-dependency among such stories. Only by listening to such 'narrative retellings' can Irish society provide accountability for, and facilitate recovery from, the injustices of the past. (43)

The past that O'Brien claims for revision in *DBR* is a more recent one as compared to the other novels, but it is certainly informed by many of the same limitations, and it depends on the same silences. As sustained by Losada, O'Brien is aligned with Joyce in that they both knew about the difficulties of writing about the hidden relations of Ireland (104).[119] Probably for that reason their works have been treated with much anxiety by critics and readers. As far as single mothers are concerned, *DBR* presents an interesting picture in which an innocent girl, voiceless at home and because of the community, gradually gathers the courage to face the incest she had suffered, confronts those who control her case and performs her discourse in public. As commented above, being raped had rendered her silenced (129), but to use Anne Fogarty's words, "[i]n particular, language enables [Mary] to overcome the vicissitudes of her existence" (108).

Probably the most enlightening passage on that respect can be found when she is once more surrounded by the pro-life activists who

[119] Many other topics and narrative strategies align O'Brien's work with that of Joyce, but that comparative analysis falls out of the scope of our present study. Losada examines the literary biography of the author in O'Brien's *James Joyce*, and also mentions several explorations of the influences of Joyce in the early novels of the Clare author, like Senn (1965-1966) and Donoghue (1970). For an explanation of O'Brien's novel *Night* in comparison with the Joycean production, see Helen Thompson, 31-57.

keep wondering about her introverted character and her muteness throughout the events: "'Why do you never talk, Mary?' 'I talk to myself.' 'What do you say to yourself?' 'Anything.' 'What are you saying now?' 'I'm saying that if I could be the judges and they could be me, that if we could swap and they'd know every bit of my life'" (239). The scene is constructed as a revelatory moment not only for the people who accompany Mary before the final decision, or for the court itself, but mostly for herself. Her voice, O'Brien seems to claim, was not inexistent but simply silenced by external agents. In this light, this step forward brings to mind what Anne Norton points out about O'Brien's characters going through "epiphanies", much like some of Joyce's main characters did. These are "sudden spiritual manifestations" that mean some mental acknowledgement after an important moment (85). As Norton comments, Mary "needs to translate her epiphanies into lessons that will allow her to live with some happiness and safety" (87). Therefore, rather than keeping silently plain, Mary displays an interest in speaking so that the silenced object challenges the interpreter of her silence, thus demonstrating not only that she can have a voice of her own but also that the discursive hegemonies of Ireland can be overturned. These deconstructions are quite apparent in the final chapter, "Love is teasing," when we hear that Mary and Mona prepare for an improvised singing show in a bar:[120]

> Her voice was low and tremulous at first, then it rose and caught, it soared and dipped and soared, a great crimson quiver of sound

[120] The fact that the beginning of Mary's process of individuation takes place in the pub also raises important questions about the family's obstacles for sociability. Pub-culture is the typically Irish form of socialisation but curiously enough, it takes place outside the family (O'Connor 1998: 89). Previously suffocated inside the family setting and by the patriarchal authority of her father, Mary is now here set free to express herself and mingle with other people.

> going up, up to the skies and they were silent then, plunged into a sudden and melting silence because what they were hearing was in answer to their own souls' innermost cries. (265)

At this point we can finally indicate that a closer reading of *DBR* reveals that it is rich in natural imagery, but probably the most interesting one is already present in the title itself and hints at the final turn that O'Brien gives to the story of X. In other words, the *Down by the River* is not arbitrary and neither is its contextualisation in the rural environment of County Sligo, which we have demonstrated through several spatial references that can be identified in the book. If we take all that information into account, then it can be inferred that the 'river' she refers to is the Garavogue River, passing through Sligo city and giving the place "its principal attraction" (*DBR* 107). Yet, to our mind, what is most worthy of note about this choice is that the word *garavogue* can be translated into English as "tough youth", which obviously denotes the kind of attitude that her protagonist, despite the circumstances she had to go through, finally has when facing her plight.[121] Thus, playing with language O'Brien can appeal to women's transformative power.

[121] Similarly, the title of the book can be related to the ballad of "The Cruel Mother", in which the two babies answer to the mother who had tried to kill them; and to another ballad called "Weile weile waile".

5.3. Women's networks and solidarity

Quite interestingly, the challenge to single mothers' subjection to the patriarchal codes anchored in national formulations of Irishness is made in the three novels at the level of a successful articulation of female interconnection. Equally laying emphasis on the creation of a female order that counteracts many of the obstacles that single mothers meet with, the texts predicate a defying positioning in favour of an ethics of single maternity based on women-devised principles. In this light, the authors follow an important premise of feminist agendas by which female bonding and women's common experiences have been defended by many writers and critics as a key issue for the advancement of women's cause. Many of them have reacted against the notion of a unified and autonomous self based on fragmentation, absence and dislocation, as posed by Lacan and other French philosophers, and have insisted on a relational female individual whose identity is constructed upon the links established with others. For example, Mary Daly argues about the importance of sisterhood insofar as it is "a revolutionary act. It is the bonding of those who have never bonded before, for the purpose of overcoming sexism and its effects, both internal and external. It is the coming together of those who are oppressed by sexual definition" (340).

In the realm of motherhood, Nancy Chodorow is one of the theorists that construct their ideology of the maternal by drawing on this concept of the relational self. She concentrates on the importance of connection and relation for the attainment of female (and mothers') individuation (1989: 156). Similarly, for Irigaray the creation of a female

imaginary is crucial for women's entrance into the symbolic order, as is their access to language in order to have a system of differentiation other than the one imposed by patriarchal hegemony. These ideas are exposed in her article "The Limits of Transference," and they have resonance, to our mind, with the final analysis that we are doing in this study insofar as they refer to a maternal ethics and to the women's use of discourse that we have explored in terms of their representation through the single mothers in the novels. Irigaray argues that in the relation between the mother and the daughter or among women in general, there has not been an intermediary or negotiating object that may help them in their own development as distinct from the phallic designations of men (Whitford 105). On the contrary, she claims that women/daughters should base their subjectivity upon an alternative female imaginary articulated by women's plural pleasures and language, independent from the patriarchal order.

In the Irish scene, probably one of the most notable examples of a narrative piece on the configuration of that issue on the island can be found in June Levine's autobiographic account *Sisters.* This feminist journalist and writer described her own fight for the Women's Movement in Ireland as well as some personal experiences of contraceptive rights, abortion and marital breakdown. What seems quite interesting about her work is her insistence on female sharing and coordination during the various phases of victory and fragmentation that the movement experienced up to the 1980s. In this vein, Levine argues that:

> [A]ny woman who says 'I'm not a libber, but I believe in women's rights' is a sister of the movement. Her life will be affected by

> changing attitudes and legislation changing her own statues and attitudes. Increasingly, women are making personal connective changes in their own lives, contributing to further possibilities of change. The women in the world who have not yet awakened to their right to make choices about their own lives are like sleeping beauties whose time may or may not come. (267)

If we follow these premises, we could reasonably point out that Callaghan's novel could also have been entitled "Sisters" as well as *Mothers*, as we will try to prove below. In her review of the book, Anne Donovan remarks that Harriet and Agnes "converge in their common experiences of motherhood and loss to support Ronnie's decision" (508). Indeed, the two women are not connected by family but become entangled by similar experiences of having been single and pregnant, and lacking the support of their partners. It is through this particular and spontaneously created link that Callaghan emphasises the complex network of female ties that operates at various points in the book. Firstly, the author's purpose in highlighting this necessary element of women's personal growth and social progression can be clearly observed when Agnes, much concerned with the violent marriage of her servant Lily's daughter, constantly worries about her state and even plans to help the girl as much as she can: "Well, the children would be safe here. She'd sell some shares for the girl, get her away from that brute" (124). In a similar mode, she had financed Ronnie's studies and treated her as her own child. Therefore, even if we mentioned earlier Agnes's reluctance to engage in the contraceptive activism defended by her friend Phoebe, the author engagingly articulates her character as that of an old woman fighting her own cause from home.

But if we particularly focus on the protagonists' interconnections as single mothers, then it comes to light that it is their common experiences and their various degrees of suffering and learning what remain at stake for Callaghan's transformative project of a future unmarried maternity ethics. This becomes clear in the case of Breda's help in the first few days of Ronnie's pregnancy, which initially offered out of friendship and personal experience, turns out to be quite promising for the confused protagonist. Her listening means for the pregnant woman "a relief, like confessing when you did something wrong as a child" (139). So, by virtue of this comparison, Callaghan is not only addressing the implications of women's use of discourse but also, and echoing some of the ideas discussed above about Foucault's analysis of the confessional, she rewrites the dichotomy between the subject of the fall and the authority of the confessor that is implied in the traditional and religious understanding of this Catholic ritual. Actually, Breda's objective mind makes Ronnie analyse her circumstances and options in a more critical and self-focussing way, while she does not judge her behaviour at all. She organises the trip to the London abortion clinic and most importantly, she helps her relativise the situation and lends her some money, advising her: "Have your hair done. Buy a lipstick. But don't mope. Remember, it's not the end of the world" (140).

As for the relation among the three protagonists, what each of them finds in the other two is either a source of inspiration to solve their own condition or a motivation to come to terms with their past. This emotional provision is in fact more evident in the case of Ronnie and

Harriet, whose generational differences but similar plights are portrayed as mutually favourable for the kind of situation they go through at the end of the novel. Thus, Harriet finds in Ronnie the possibility of looking at her own single maternity from the distance and with the objectivity granted by the years and by the higher opportunities that are available in the 1980s, but also the emotional hope she was looking for after the death of her son and her boyfriend's insistent marriage proposals. By this token, her final words introduce the new signifiers of an alternative and promising single maternity in which the women take the leading role: "[T]hink seriously about what you're doing. Remember, *if* you decide to have the baby, there are people who'll help. Miss Legge would have. She's not here now. But there's your mother. And —I can. I can help" (240). A new ethics as well as a sort of extended family are created here as Harriet dismantles the difficulties that Ronnie will surely find with an insistence on the power of female solidarity.

For this reason, Ronnie simultaneously sees Harriet as the condescending maternal figure that, in turn, empathises with her because of her own past. But ultimately, despite her teenage rage at Harriet's part in damaging her parents' marriage, this character has been experiencing a gradual transformation as her own single maternity becomes real, and rather than blaming Harriet, Ronnie humanises her. For example, when she spotted Harriet in the street, she thought that she looked "just like a girl with white hair. A girl in her fifties in floral skirt, but not looking like mutton dressed as lamb" (36). In this light, it can be fairly said that her own unmarried and pregnant situation had changed her perspective of

her father's mistress and would ultimately lead to their reconciliation and future projects in the last scene of the novel.

Finally, the three narrative stories reach a climactic point when thanks to Agnes's feverish hallucinations involving her mother, Edward and her grown up son, the three women's interior subjectivity as single mothers is rendered united, although Agnes dies without truly knowing about Ronnie's pregnancy. The scene turns out to be a very powerful and engaging one, also throwing some light on the lasting effects of the signifiers of Irish culture that we have commented, and on the remaining parameters that despite the decades, delimit single mothers' actions. Wessel-Felter analyses these final moments as the overlapping of sisterhood and motherhood between the two characters, and even finds resonances of Joyce's characters in their relation, as she points out that:

> Searching for empathetic maternal comfort, Ronnie finally connects with Harriet Roberts. […] If Stephen finds Bloom and Molly, Ronnie, a late twentieth-century would-be feminist and writer, finds Harriet and Aggie, both maternal, both understanding, both 'sisters' as well as 'mothers'. Hardly Molly Bloom, Harriet nonetheless manages to unite all three women at the end of the novel. (1994: 141)

In *The Killeen*, single mothers' mutual ties are mostly portrayed through the close relationship that, in spite of their class and personal differences, is developed between Margaret and Julia, while there is also a hint at this connecting project in the linking character of Sister Thomas. If we focus first on the complex construction and incidence of this character within the framework of the whole story, we can point out that although as a female representative of Irish religious figures Sister Thomas embodies the extent to which they acted as the bridge between

the individual and the family, and also the Church and the State, Leland gives her a quite feminist twist, as evidenced by her attitude towards Julia and Margaret's condition as "special" women. Her encouragement is materialised in the form of a defence of female agency and the vindication of women's education, which given the historical context of the novel, functions as a catalyst for them to start finding their rightful space in society despite their "fall." Hence, the humanisation of this character, as commented above, collides with the traditional image of Catholic nuns in Ireland, so that her contribution to Julia's quest for individuality in France as well as to Margaret's awakening to a more ascertainable reality —however further complex consequences it turns out to have— indicates Leland's attempt to highlight the many possibilities of female connections and of reciprocal support.

As for the interactive effects of the relation between Margaret and Julia, it exceeds the initial working contract and becomes, even beyond what seemed to be a doleful shelter, a respectful friendship. The many pieces of advice that Julia gives to Margaret, who is younger and more inexperienced, take the form of the predication of her own disappointments, findings and achievements while at the same time, Julia is aware of the differences that exist between the two women and their two cases: "Julia couldn't pretend that she had seen what she came to know about the girl, or guessed how their lives would draw together for a brief while touching at discernible points as though two parallel lines had suddenly, crazily deviated and glanced off one another" (54). Similarly, the narrator insists on the unexpected outcomes that they bring about for

the mistress, who is gradually stirred by Margaret's reflections about her own life and the circumstances that led to her single maternity. To Margaret's energetic defence of her maternal right to get her baby out of the school, Julia reacts in a perplexed way, but certainly those words infuse her with more determination to handle her own maternity in the terms she was planning from the beginning of the novel: "Was it that she was not proud of the father of her son? That made it easy for her to think of her child as all her own, owing no debt to any idealism, any philosophy held by Maurice" (96).

Julia keeps wondering at various points in the novel if she had truly done the right thing with Margaret, whom in turn, she had agreed to have in the house for the close relation she had always had with Sister Thomas (78, 91). Also, in the final chapter of Part Two, Julia confronts the firm delineations of the two aunts in order to attend Margaret's pleas for seeing her son before she leaves for England with her husband-to-be:

> She'll go more happily if she has seen the boy just once, been with him for a little while. She is ready to go, it's just that by leaving the country she feels she'll be giving up all interest in the child and I suppose she wants to feel that at least he'll know about his father, even about his mother. (101)

Ultimately then, this move can be read as liberatory and as the culmination of their bond, even if each woman will settle in a different country and upon different conditions, while at the same time, it suggests that a female imaginary is created, dismantling the stagnation that the patriarchal and nationalist order in which they used to live.

For O'Brien, the construction of women's connection becomes also a relevant strategy to counteract the constant manipulation and isolation

that Mary suffers throughout most of the action in *DBR*. Actually, the whole book can be seen as an attempt to make readers connect with what Mary —or X — felt during all her rapes, abortion arrangements and judicial proceedings. As Anne Norton puts it, "*Down by the River* emphasises that this happened to a human being and not to a symbol; it is an empathetic imagining of the trauma she must have experienced" (83). As in the other two books, several female bonds provide the story with a quite optimistic turn towards an energizing process of individuation, and figure as complementary to the protagonist's final self-reconciliation and self-recognition.

As mentioned in a previous section, in the first part of the novel the relation with Sister Thomas Aquinas means for Mary a sisterly as well as motherly tie that stimulates her during her time in the convent school, ultimately helping her to face the patriarchal authority of her father after her mother's death. Yet, it should be pointed out that the nun also finds in Mary and her alertness about everything around her a new hope within the convent walls: "I'm glad you came to us… It gives something to look forward to" (36). In a similar vein, ever since Betty's appearance in the narrative, she represents the maternal figure that Mary had lost by then, and she actually tells her: "Mary, you have no mother; think of me as a mother over this" (111). But the situation in which the protagonist is immersed at that time entails that Betty's role in 'this' is quite intricate, including her having saved Mary from her attempt to drown in the river, the unexpected alternative to the isolation that Mary was suffering, and also her guessing that "the child, herself a child, is expecting" (111). The

bond that grows between them is not instant, but the narrator insists throughout the chapters after their first meeting in the river that it is Mary's touching unfolding and ruthless analysis of her own story what gradually makes Betty defy the country's legal conditions at that time, the sacredness of family relations and the fatherly handling of offspring. Thus, from statements like "I'm not your parent… We're not even related" or "It's going against God, it's going against everything I believe in" (125-126), Betty's engagement in the story of Mary proves to be a rather daring and sacrificing step forward in the name of female solidarity. In other words, this childless woman is not portrayed as trying to find in the protagonist the daughterly figure she never had, but most significantly, the author shapes her as representing the power that a female order can have for women's assertion of agency and individuation.[122]

The inclusion of Mona in the narrative also bears out O'Brien's purpose to emphasise the extent to which shared experiences, particularly of abortion in this case, may liberate women or at least help them reach a sense of objectivity and hope. Also of Irish origin, but coming from an urban background, Mona is an interesting female character insofar as her determination in the clinic contrasts with Mary's

[122] Solidarity is also embodied in the novel by Luke and his protective attitude towards Mary, whom she had met by chance in Galway, as described in the chapter "The Bohráin". Although he also suffers Mr McNamara's scorn and undergoes police investigation because of having helped Mary shortly after her escape, to our mind this character mostly figures as the representative of the straightforward association between male social outcasts and women's sexual abuse while observance of family members remains a much neglected procedure. In *The Killeen*, a comparable reading can be made of Michael's direct involvement in his sister's attempt to let her baby be raised in their family home, despite the bewildering, tragic consequences of his supportive move.

worries and doubts, trying to undermine the importance and pain of an abortion:[123]

> 'Look. Listen. It's only ten minutes… You'll be brought in through the flip-flop doors… You'll have had the anaesthetic… And when you come out you'll probably be crying… They told me I'd cry… Everyone does… It's only natural… Would you like to meet up when we go home.' (130)

However, the narrator also goes on to highlight that "[t]hey felt very close then, Mary and her, on account of feeling so alone and so afraid" (130). Quite interestingly, the articulation of the notion of fear in this scene offers a notable outlook to our main focus exploration in this study because if read in comparison with the wider frame of national anxieties about single and pregnant women's bodies, these unmarried mothers' terror figures here as a tangible and physical feeling, much real, substantiated and distinct from the cultural preoccupation with national disintegration that has traditionally overlooked it.

But this common plight of the two girls is constructed by the author as going beyond simply sharing pains, as Mona later visits Mary when she is in the middle of the judicial turmoil after having been made to return to England. Mona's encouragement while at the moment in which Mary is waiting for the final decision of the judges figures as one of the few empathic approaches to the whole situation and also as a source of inspiration for Mary, who is more confused than ever at that stage: "'You've got to be a babe… You've got to fight… Fight for the freedom to say yes or no, to do yes or no… Fight for others… That's what it's about. That's what life is about'" (232). Straightforward and full of optimism,

[123] In "Shepherd's Bush", Maeve Binchy makes a similar portrait of female solidarity as an Australian woman shows her spontaneous support to the puzzled Irish receptionist with whom she shares the room in a London abortion clinic (1978).

these words encapsulate a greater part of the complex female imaginary that Irigaray and other critics defended, as they are informed not only by the need for single mothers to 'fight for others' in order to contribute to the establishment of a new single maternity order, but also by the assertion of their position as rightful individuals within the social milieu in which they live.

Taken together then, *Mothers*, *The Killeen* and *DBR* reflect the extent to which a female politics of resistance by way of the communal action and in favour of women's assertion of their self-consciousness can bring about an alternative order in which the traditional hegemonies posed by Irish cultural signifiers are finally dismantled. Particularly, the three texts emphasise how the creation of an emotional and psychological network among single mothers endorses the disruption of the punitive ethics that has traditionally condemned these women and the direction towards a far-reaching imaginary in which their stories follow self-devised paths of personal fulfilment.

CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

The guiding principle behind our study has been the significance of fictional narratives by Irish women writers for the critique of the victimisation exerted by agents of power over those female subjects who do not conform to the ideal parameters of femininity and family formation on the island. Particularly, we have highlighted how these textualisations expose the various forms of delimitation that single mothers have suffered on account of the grip of the cultural signifiers of national identity. In the introduction, we suggested the widespread attempt at rescuing the voices and experiences of these women, veiled for too long by gender biased processes of cultural formation. Traditionally ignored, they have been brought to the fore of social discussion, and by virtue of this and the dehomogenisation of their experiences, it is our belief that a ground breaking ethics of unmarried maternity has begun to dawn upon the Irish order. With this dissertation, we hope to have demonstrated that a variety of portraits of their historical ostracisation as well as the incorporation of their own negotiations of self-definition mark a transformation in the island's understanding of their predicament also leading to the encapsulation of the changes that they render possible.

Our analysis of Mary Rose Callaghan's *Mothers*, Mary Leland's *The Killeen* and Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* has meant a collective but detailed approach to the configuration of single maternal subjectivity in contemporary Ireland. These novels address this issue by portraying the stories of women whose out of wedlock pregnancy precipitates them into psychological and emotional alienation because of the deviance of the social paradigms entailed by their unexpected state. Our analysis has emphasized

the contribution made by the three texts to the literary portrayal of the various forms of oppression that for the greater part of the twentieth century women experienced when they conceived a baby outside the limits of the sacred institution of marriage. To contravene that practice, the authors converge in minutely describing the effects of such deviation while also exposing a kind of maternal subjectivity that distances itself from the long-entrenched patterns of womanhood.

We started our study by suggesting in Part One the authority of the maternal trope in the articulation of Irish cultural identity, and we have provided a historical overview of the ideological foundations and everyday projections of that symbolism, focussing on how it has affected women. From the power of the Goddess, the maternal content of the legendary heroines, to the Marian images imposed by the Church over common women and the national significance of the Mother Ireland iconography, we have shown that an insistence on the maternal has been a recurrent feature of the historical idiosyncrasy of the island. Likewise, we have tried to prove the ongoing presence of images of motherhood and their materialisation in the everyday reality of Irish women along time, besides the strategies and mechanisms used upon them when they transcended the pre-established paradigms. We hope to have clarified the persistence of a maternity oriented model of womanhood and how, always linked to national identity, it could be hardly detached from social reality, thus making women the most direct targets of victimisation when such patterns were not followed.

Irish society has also been inexorably influenced by contributions and delineations of critical theories, which have been outlined in the second chapter with the intention of providing a framework that helps to shape the

cultural manifestations that the novels represent. As our analysis of the novels is not simply textual or historical, we offered an overview of the critical angles from which the productions of Irish fiction writers –particularly women novelists– have been examined in the past few decades. Approaches to the notions of power, national identity and female subjectivity used by these trends have allowed us to introduce the positions from which the stories are exposed. By describing contemporary re-imaginations of Irishness as well as the insistence on the portrayal of women's search for individuality undertaken by Irish women, we have seen that literature figures as a significant mediator between the hidden parts of Irish history and a more promising future of the island and its people. To that purpose, in works like the ones we have chosen, it has been a common project to bring the stories of deviant women to the fore, focussing above all in the abnormal character of their search for pregnant and maternal inviduality, in each case. Callaghan, Leland and O'Brien illustrate then, this critical and literary engagement with single maternity, and they can be aligned with important authors –male and female– that in recent decades have addressed this issue in their works.

In Part One we carried out a comparison of the treatment of single mothers in each of the three novels, and we discovered similarities that suggest a great deal about the ways Irish society functioned for most of the last century. We have analysed the working of three major cultural signifiers to which Irish people have been inevitably subjected and which have had an impact on single mothers in a very direct way: the state, religion and the family. The protagonists of *Mothers*, *The Killeen* and *DBR* are portrayed as going through a process of social adjustment and

psychological strain that is prompted by the everyday performances of such highly influential signifiers. Their lives, like those of many Irish women, have been articulated around the paradigms dictated, individually or collectively, by these agents of cultural distinction in Ireland.

Special emphasis has been given, on the one hand, to the role of the State in the projection of social images of single maternity and its treatment in everyday life. Thus, the protagonists of the novels bear witness to the repressive politics exerted over them as the expression of power, a concept we largely discussed in relation to how motherhood has been recently grasped and controlled in the Republic. Because of the patriarchal foundations of the contemporary Irish order, single mothers have figured as threatening the artefacts of the ruling system, and a complex set of formulas have been devised in order to transform them into powerless individuals. Ethical questions of full citizenship and individual rights have been raised while discussing the submission to constitutional prescriptions that Irish women have been made to comply with since the early periods after independence. Thus, through insights into the stories described in the three novels, we appreciated the entrapment into the legal system of Ireland that those women suffer, ranging from Ronnie and Mary's predicament with the illegal option of the termination of their pregnancy, the concern with the illegitimate status of their child as felt by Harriet and Julia, and the adoption arrangements equally made for Margaret and Agnes, despite their class distinction. All the women are, as we detailed in our analysis, circumscribed by external forces that consider them mere objects of legal fulfilment instead of rightful individuals willing to care for their child, or at least to decide whether they want to or not.

To emphasize the degree of power of the Irish state and its consequences, the authors also call to the fore the socio-economic vulnerability to which single pregnant women are exposed and their lack of confidence on the provision of social policies because of the stigmatised considerations of single maternity. Further, Callaghan, Leland and O'Brien show how the intersection of social, personal and economic degradation prompted by the conception of a baby out of wedlock very much depended on values of cultural stability. These values are clearly portrayed in the novels, where the political background of each period informs the life of the protagonists, as in the case of the nationalist struggle in *The Killeen* or abortion debates and campaigns in *Mothers* and *DBR*.

On the other hand, the hold of the religious discourse in the Irish collective psyche has been examined in relation to the politics of punishment stemming from women's deviation from the ideal codes of femininity that was articulated by the Catholic church, always at the service of the state. The presence of the Virgin Mary as the model of femininity to which Irish women are ascribed is evident in the stories. The authors describe how such paragon is deeply embedded in the protagonists' psyche and they concentrate on the interpretations that women made of it in their everyday lives. Thus, with our analysis of the novels we have shown that because virginity constitutes the standard of perfection and the starting point for Irish women's entrance into adult, married and maternal life, they have been made to conform to such principles at the expense of their own subjectivity.

As a result of that, women who followed different patterns have fallen into derogatory categorisations whereby they have been equated with

evil and moral degradation. To demonstrate such process of demonisation, the authors emphasize the rhetorics of punishment that falls upon unmarried, pregnant women, with also a subsequent insistence on their need to atone for what is considered a mortal sin. Quite illustrative of that evil character to which these women are allocated is the discourse used upon them. As masterly depicted in the novels, the way they are addressed by the people around them or how their "situation" is socially treated have profound psychological effects on the women while it also affects the status of their children, as most clearly epitomised in the burying practice of the killeen. Redress is then presented as the only possible means to find social acceptance and moral forgiveness. However, to refer to what we saw in the later part of our study, the authors also expose how in most cases this imposed atonement does not necessarily lead to their protagonists' regret for what they did.

And finally, the materialisation of the limits inflicted by traditional parameters is quite significant in the case of the family. As the link between the individual and society, and intertwined with the other two aspects analysed above, this institution poses a number of restrictions on women, not only because it is based on marriage and procreation within its boundaries, but also because the defence of its ethos permeates the whole social system of Ireland. Our examination has insisted on the extent to which education in the family and the school is intended to mould Irish women into representations of the ideal icons upon which the State and the church articulated femininity. As argued above, marriage stood as the aim and destiny of every woman, with different methods designed for them to aspire to it since childhood. Hence, when conception preceded it, obstacles

of all kinds appeared for the women —but curiously not for the men— involved in those actions. Different strategies were implemented to avoid hysteria and ease anxieties of cultural disintegration, like the condemnation, silence and ostracisation of undesirable female conducts as well as of the illegitimate pregnancies that frequently followed them.

The many incongruities underlying these beliefs are analysed in the longer section devoted to the introspection into how Callaghan, Leland and O'Brien treat the realities of Irish family through the stories of their protagonists. The authors call the readers' attention to poignant issues like the relation of the protagonists with the members of their family and their partners, which quite often determines the conception, as in the case of Mary and her rape by her father in *DBR*, and Margaret, who left her country home because of the suffocating atmosphere within it, as described in *The Killeen*; or where the relatives are the agents of external control both during and after pregnancy, as happened to Agnes and the adoption of her baby organised by her family in *Mothers*. Taken together, then, these stories reflect the manipulation exerted over women within the private and supposedly "sacred" boundaries of the family while also appealing to a more sensible examination of the abuse —psychological, physical or both, as we saw with Mary's mistreatment through rape and incest— that can take place inside it.

With the same objective of critical revision of the values upon which the family is constructed in Ireland, the authors also comment on the multiple forms of control that the agents of power wield on women by way of external delineations of corporeality. Our interpretation covered from the ideas of sexuality encapsulated by the protagonists before and during

intercourse with the men who fathered their child, to their reactions when pregnancy becomes a reality and the bodily transformation and mental states into which this event precipitates them. Accordingly, we hope that our reading of the novels has shed some light on the repressed and ignorant position from which women view corporeality, sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth, as endorsed by the similar reactions to these bodily matters that the protagonist share.

The strategies that come to the protagonists' mind in order to solve their condition call for the predicaments that circumscribe illegitimate pregnancies in Ireland. By bringing issues like intentional miscarriage and abortion to the fore of our analysis, we have revealed that access to bodily integrity –and even less to reproductive freedom by contraception– remains a much contested terrain for Irish women on various degrees. Callaghan, Leland and O'Brien reveal that many prejudices and cultural interests remain in operation when it comes to the exertion of women's reproductive rights, because of the primacy accorded to the foetus and its life. Further, we suggested that the stories map out the appropriation of the female body in pregnant states and also during childbirth, thus bearing witness to the ethical contradictions that in general apply to the situation of women in Ireland.

Likewise, ideas of self-development during pregnancy and the psychological as well as physical turmoil that it usually entails have been explored in light of the arguments exposed by feminist critics like Susan Bordo, Naomi Wolf, Adrienne Rich and by the Irish novelist Anne Enright, and also in relation to how the protagonists experience them in the novels. With the similar questioning purpose, the three authors criticise the

obstacles faced by Irish women to gain control of their own body as they are purely seen as the incubators of their baby. Childbirth figures as the epitome of such lack of management of their own bodies, as the novels provide the insight that patriarchal values and direct control by men characterise this crucial moment of reproduction, whereas women have been traditionally silenced in these contexts.

To demonstrate the feminist and more promising turn to an alternative ethics of single maternity undertaken by the authors, in the final chapter of Part Two we explored how many of the repressive strategies over women's psyche and bodily integrity are subverted. Along with the interrogation of the means by which cultural signifiers have been applied to single and pregnant women, Callaghan, Leland and O'Brien also seek to restructure the female imaginary in which these women have inhabited. The three novels present a serious challenge to the values of Irish society as far as women are concerned, and with the choices and agency that they render possible for the women, they posit quite alternative forms of identity coding. A collective view of the novels has demonstrated that, beyond the criticism that informs the authors' objection to the normative concepts of femininity, there is also a common strategy of including in the stories the various ways in which single mothers can achieve subjectivity far from the imposed rules.

Our argument that these three texts make an important contribution to debates on the scapegoating of single mothers in Ireland moves on to the suggestion that they also offer substantive views of women's capacity for self-identity. To ground such interpretation, we considered it appropriate to analyse first, the three authors' engagement with the

maternal consciousness of their protagonists and the challenge to the traditional paradigms of motherhood. They propose the re-enactment of a different alternative kind of maternity that liberates women from the oppressive position in which they have traditionally experienced it because of the "abnormal" conditions of their conception. Drawing on the lines of reasoning of some important figures of maternal theory, we have suggested that the maternal order in which the stories of the protagonist unfolds shows that motherhood can be a source of empowerment and renewal for women in their situation, as despite the obstacles, it can be eventually directed towards their own understandings and desires.

Secondly, we also pointed out the significance in the three novels of the negotiation of discourse that single mothers can achieve, as well as the liberatory effects of such transformation. This has the form of the protagonists uttering their feelings about their own cases and the system that oppresses them. With their discursive reconstruction, they defy the traditional patterns of female submission and silence, and it leads instead to a self-devised concept of female and maternal subjectivity. And finally, self-realization, whatever the final outcome of their pregnancy gets to be, is achieved by the women in the three novels by means of the creation of an ethics of female interconnection that echoes one of the most important aspects of feminism and women's cause, not only in Ireland but also internationally. Thus, solidarity among women stands as a considerable point of personal growth and maternal individuality, as the protagonists of *Mothers*, *The Killeen* and *DBR* find in women's mutual understanding and support a catalyst to break the patriarchal yoke and find liberation.

To conclude, we finish this study in the hope that it has provided a fuller appreciation of the literary representation of Irish single mothers' reactions to the social artefacts that have objectified and abjected them. It has also been our purpose to expose the paths that the three authors have taken not only to counteract such delimitations but also to describe their protagonists' survival and to accommodate dawning understandings of female and maternal subjecthood. Further, we can also stress that by contextualising the action of the novels in different periods of the twentieth century, the three authors question the extent of social change that has taken place in their country in relation to attitudes towards deviant female sexuality, illegitimate conception and women's reproductive rights. It seems to us that with this kind of stories, Ireland began to come to terms with its past and its present a couple of decades ago, but also that they appealed to the reader to reflect on the extent to which those agendas are still immanent to Irish society and on what can be done to change them. With its new present-day social reality, in which racial and ethnic diversity is gaining ground and changing the contemporary order, the country and its literary expressions are arguably having, and will continue to have, a new spin in the near future. This does not mean that single mothers in the twenty-first century in Ireland would find it easier to face their situation, as there is still a long way to achieve the full recognition of women's reproductive rights on the island. However, as we have tried to prove, these texts reflect a kind of collective rethinking of women's role in the country's imagined community and contribute to stir social consciousness over it, hopefully in order to usher in a more egalitarian future.

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Resumen en español de la Tesis Doctoral

La maternidad ha sido un tema recurrente en la literatura irlandesa debido al papel fundamental que se ha concedido a la iconografía de la madre en la configuración de la identidad de la isla. Sin embargo, a causa de las pautas patriarcales que determinan las ideologías y las prácticas de la maternidad, así como las estructuras de poder masculinas que han caracterizado su historia, tradicionalmente las representaciones literarias de lo materno se han articulado por parte de escritores masculinos canónicos, mientras que las visiones de las mujeres han sido relegadas a un papel secundario. Para contrarrestar esa marginación, durante las últimas décadas un buen número de escritoras han desafiado notablemente la situación patriarcal de la literatura irlandesa con la publicación de obras de gran calado crítico, producciones de éxito, la creación de editoriales para mujeres y otros avances clave para su reconocimiento dentro del panorama literario del país. Bajo gran parte de esos proyectos subyace una creencia acerca de la necesidad de poner un mayor énfasis en lo materno, con la intención de conseguir un cambio social verdaderamente efectivo al que esas voces ocultas durante tanto tiempo pueden contribuir de manera muy positiva.

Particularmente, muchas de estas escritoras han transcendido esa marginación de un modo aún más visible con la creación de relatos sobre mujeres y madres cuyo comportamiento se aleja de las pautas tradicionales de feminidad y maternidad, generando así debates ineludibles por parte del público lector. De entre todas esas conductas consideradas irregulares, los embarazos ilegítimos han recibido una atención especial en el mapa literario de la Irlanda contemporánea en tanto que las mujeres que los experimentan

ejemplifican el alcance de los efectos provocados por una supuesta desviación sexual femenina de la norma cultural irlandesa. Estar embarazada siendo soltera vulnera el ideal femenino de pureza y la sacralización de la institución del matrimonio en la que durante tanto tiempo se ha fundamentado la familia, transmisora de las creencias y los valores católicos defendidos durante mucho tiempo por el Estado irlandés. Por ello, el país se ha caracterizado por una regulación estricta de la corporeidad femenina, mediante políticas represivas de la libertad reproductora de las mujeres, las cuales, a pesar de ciertos avances importantes, todavía persisten en el siglo veintiuno. Igualmente, al retratar las experiencias de las madres solteras en sus textos, estas autoras están desafiando el silenciamiento de un imaginario femenino que amenaza los principios de la santificación de la familia nuclear en la que reside gran parte de la identidad cultural de la isla.

En este trabajo de investigación, hemos estudiado creaciones literarias y visiones críticas de la maternidad en solitario con una metodología de género que enfatiza la labor de los proyectos de transformación social que se han llevado a cabo en los últimos tiempos. Nuestro propósito es contribuir a la visibilidad de la incorporación de una nueva ética de la maternidad en solitario a la realidad contemporánea de Irlanda mediante el análisis de la obra de tres novelistas irlandesas. Creemos que su producción literaria plantea debates interesantes respecto a esta problemática social que afecta a las mujeres y supone un gran avance en el reconocimiento de cuestiones tradicionalmente marginadas y que poco a poco ha ido caracterizando la última parte del siglo veinte, abriendo paso de modo indiscutible a las muchas autoras que en la actualidad están

cuestionando las categorías arcaicas. Conceptualmente, nuestro estudio se articula en torno a la representación literaria de cómo las madres solteras personifican los temores ideológicos sobre la degradación cultural irlandesa debido a su trasgresión de los códigos morales, de tal forma que han sufrido una victimización directa por medio de formas diversas de marginación social.

Las tres novelas seleccionadas son *Mothers* (1982) de Mary Rose Callaghan, *The Killeen* (1985) de Mary Leland y *Down by the River* (1996) de Edna O'Brien. Estos textos convergen en su representación de la intersección de la historia, los elementos socioculturales y la codificación de género en contextos de maternidad fuera del matrimonio, y están construidos de un modo similar sobre aspectos relacionados con el entramado y la escritura feminista que adquieren una doble dimensión. Por un lado, Callaghan, Leland y O'Brien coinciden en su propósito de sacar a la luz los obstáculos psicológicos con los que las mujeres irlandesas se tropiezan cuando, sin estar casadas, se ven involucradas en embarazos no deseados, y proyectan desde sus páginas las experiencias vividas por estas mujeres desde un plano individual. De hecho, como Julia Kristeva afirma en su estudio *New Maladies of the Soul*, la particularidad de la mujer como persona es lo que debería preocupar a las revisiones contemporáneas de la situación de las mujeres. Así, para desmantelar los principios homogenizadores y totalitarios de la feminidad, para Kristeva es importante "apoyar en cambio la singularidad de cada mujer, sus complejidades, sus muchas formas de expresión" (221). Por otro lado, las tres novelistas objeto de estudio ponen en entredicho las fuerzas que subyacen a las dificultades con las que se encuentran las madres solteras, al crear un espacio de

expresión alternativo en el que se subvierten los parámetros que las delimitan, y encuentran fórmulas para acomodar el lado materno a su propia adquisición de subjetividad, cualquiera que sea su forma final.

En este estudio exploramos los términos en los que colectiva e individualmente las novelas describen los diferentes niveles de normalización de las experiencias y las reacciones de las madres solteras así como la articulación de una ética diferente de la maternidad fuera del matrimonio, que ha permanecido silenciada y oculta pero ciertamente latente en el orden contemporáneo de Irlanda. En *El género en disputa*, Judith Butler argumenta que para alcanzar un proceso completo de formación de identidad, no es necesario crear nuevas identidades, sino rearticular lo que ya existe. Usando sus propias palabras, "la tarea aquí no es celebrar cada una de las nuevas posibilidades tal y como posibilidad sino redescribir esas posibilidades que ya existen pero que existen dentro de los dominios culturales designados como incomprensibles culturalmente e imposibles" (189). Siguiendo el argumento de Butler, consideramos que esos textos exponen varias formas de victimización de las mujeres que conciben a sus hijos fuera del matrimonio, mientras que al mismo tiempo describen las identidades que han subyacido a esa marginación, dando lugar así a una nueva ética de la maternidad en solitario.

La selección de las tres novelas objeto de estudio responde a un intento de reunir representaciones literarias similares sobre cómo el entorno cultural de la Irlanda del siglo veinte afectó las vidas de las madres solteras. Al mismo tiempo, esta elección ha estado determinada por la importancia de considerar un espectro de textos que ofrecen un conjunto de visiones complementarias de las posibilidades que tienen estas mujeres de desafiar

los significantes de subjetividad femenina que prevalecen en estos contextos. Publicadas dentro de un marco cronológico cercano —con sólo un intervalo de catorce años entre la más antigua y la más reciente—, y contextualizadas en diferentes momentos del siglo pasado, las novelas plantean lecturas interesantes acerca del alcance actual de la delimitación de la agentividad de las mujeres involucradas en embarazos fuera del matrimonio. El hecho de que la novela más reciente se publicara sólo trece años antes de la finalización de este trabajo tesis también aumenta ese propósito preliminar y nos permite reflexionar sobre la solidez de la transformación social en ese aspecto.

También de forma interesante, una lectura exhaustiva de las novelas demuestra las polaridades de género que existieron en Irlanda durante todo el siglo veinte y a través de las cuales las mujeres que se quedaban embarazadas fuera del matrimonio fueron condicionadas por los elementos culturales de una forma muy intensa, mientras que sus compañeros no han sido afectados por tal determinación. De este modo, siguiendo la trascendencia de los sucesos personales que apuntaba Kristeva, entendemos que Callaghan, Leland y O'Brien construyen sus ficciones sobre las dificultades psicológicas y emocionales a las que mujeres particulares, solteras y embarazadas, han tenido que enfrentarse en estos casos.

En *Mothers*, Callaghan describe el modo en que las mujeres irlandesas experimentan los embarazos fuera del matrimonio y la adopción de sus hijos, así como la influencia que las conexiones entre las mujeres pueden tener en el desarrollo de la subjetividad femenina. La novela se divide en seis capítulos, cuyos títulos corresponden a una primera y una segunda secuencia de los nombres de las tres protagonistas —Ronnie,

Harriet and Agnes–, cuyas vidas están entrelazadas por lazos familiares o de amistad en común. Los capítulos están narrados en estilo indirecto libre, una estrategia que manifiesta no sólo el interés de la autora por mostrar los sentimientos internos de las protagonistas sino también fomentar la identificación con sus experiencias, que son particularmente complicadas en el tiempo y lugar en los que viven.

La novela se sitúa en tres periodos, que van desde los años ochenta a los veinte, cambiando así el orden cronológico que describe la acción. Esta técnica es manejada perfectamente por Callaghan mediante retrospecciones al pasado de la familia de las protagonistas y por medio de la interconexión de la vida de las tres, que comparten las mismas reacciones emocionales a pesar de los diferentes contextos socio-históricos en los que se mueven. El libro está organizado según las respuestas que típica y casi involuntariamente, estas mujeres tuvieron que seguir para solucionar su estado y que corresponden a la situación social y moral de Irlanda durante el periodo en el que se producen sus embarazos no deseados, es decir, la adopción, el matrimonio y la maternidad en solitario o el aborto.

La acción comienza con la protagonista más joven –Ronnie–, la cual se queda embarazada a la edad de veintidós años en la Irlanda de los años ochenta, después de una relación poco formal con su intransigente novio. Aterrada ante la posibilidad de perder su empleo y de decepcionar a su familia, duda sobre si viajar o no a Inglaterra para someterse a un aborto, lo cual era ilegal en Irlanda en aquella época y todavía en la actualidad para mujeres en sus circunstancias. Seguidamente, nos encontramos con Harriet, una mujer de mediana edad cuyo hijo ha muerto en un accidente de moto. Éste fue concebido fuera del matrimonio en los años sesenta después

de una relación extramatrimonial con el marido de su mejor amiga, que resulta ser el padre de Ronnie. Ante la negación de éste a reconocer al niño, Harriet busca como solución casarse con un viejo amigo, pero la unión resulta ser un desastre tras contarle la realidad de su embarazo. Y finalmente, la primera serie termina con Agnes, la tía de Ronnie y ahora una anciana atormentada que no ha sido capaz de superar la tragedia de haber perdido a su hijo ilegítimo, que fue entregado en adopción en las primeras décadas del siglo veinte.

La segunda parte de la serie expone cómo las protagonistas se reencuentran. De nuevo, la narración pasa de Ronnie a Agnes pero se cierra con las tres compartiendo su dolor y sus traumas justo antes de la muerte de Agnes. La interconexión de estos tres personajes permite a Callaghan no sólo ofrecer diferentes visiones de la situación en la que desembocan sus vidas sino también retratar varias perspectivas del mismo personaje y de su situación, que se ve y se describe desde dentro y desde fuera. Igualmente, el vínculo femenino en las últimas páginas de la novela permite ver la defensa por parte de la autora de la solidaridad entre las mujeres como uno de los elementos clave para la liberación de las mujeres del dominio patriarcal, y también su apelación directa al muy deseado derecho a elegir que, en casos de embarazos no deseados, se les ha negado a las mujeres irlandesas.

The Killeen está narrada en tercera persona y consiste en tres partes divididas en veinte capítulos y un epílogo. La primera parte está dedicada a Margaret y su entorno familiar, aunque se introducen algunos otros personajes. Se explora su vida en el colegio de monjas donde fue educada, así como su "pecado" al quedarse embarazada tras ser seducida por el jardinero del convento, que la abandona para luchar por la causa

republicana. La segunda parte narra la vida de Julia en el Cork de los años cuarenta, cuando como viuda y madre de un niño concebido antes de su matrimonio, sufre las presiones sociales y políticas por parte de la familia de su difunto marido para que se comporte según las normas habituales para una mujer en sus circunstancias. Su opresión psicológica sólo se reduce con la llegada de Margaret, a la que trata de una forma muy maternal. Las dos mujeres comparten sus miedos sobre el futuro de sus hijos, y se entrelazan las reflexiones emocionales de la joven sobre su hijo —al que nunca vio— con una aproximación a los pensamientos de Julia acerca de su matrimonio y la educación de su hijo en el ambiente republicano de su familia política. Y finalmente, la tercera parte describe el temor que atenaza a Margaret cuando siente que debe sacar a su hijo del orfanato al que fue entregado y llevarle con su familia antes de casarse y trasladarse a Inglaterra. El niño queda bajo la supervisión del hermano de Margaret —Michael— el cual lucha porque sea aceptado por su familia y por el vecindario pero, por causa de la moralidad puritana de todos ellos, Michael no lo consigue y tiene que enterrarle en el *killeen* —la zona del cementerio para los niños no bautizados— cuando muere en extrañas circunstancias.

Down by the River es parte de lo que se ha considerado la trilogía de la Irlanda de los noventa escrita por Edna O'Brien, junto con *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) y *Wild Decembers* (1999). El libro es una crítica directa al modo en que la concepción nacionalista de Irlanda entendida en términos femeninos y maternales permanece apoyada por medio del control social y legal del cuerpo femenino, ya que se centra en las calamidades por las que pasa una joven cuando su embarazo fuera de la norma se considera un instrumento para reafirmar los valores tradicionales irlandeses, tales

como la pureza femenina y el sacrificio, siempre a favor del bien nacional. La narración se organiza en ochenta y tres capítulos cortos con títulos muy simbólicos y siguiendo una estructura episódica. La narración omnisciente ofrece visiones detalladas de acontecimientos que, a pesar de ser personales y bastante privados, se convierten en asunto de todo el país. Además, las cartas escritas por y para la protagonista y algunos pasajes con párrafos de narración en estilo indirecto libre muestran cómo los sentimientos y opiniones de la joven contrastan enormemente con los pensamientos de otros personajes, aportando así perspectivas múltiples de los mismos hechos.

O'Brien ya había explorado las expectativas de las mujeres irlandesas frente a un abuso o a los embarazos no deseados en *A Pagan Place*, publicada en 1970. Casi treinta años más tarde, *Down by the River* narra cómo una chica del campo –Mary– sufre los abusos sexuales de su padre tanto antes como, sobre todo, después de la muerte de su madre. La acción principal del libro está inspirada por un caso real, el llamado "Caso X", en el que en 1992, se le prohibió a una adolescente de catorce años, embarazada después de haber sido violada por un conocido de la familia, que viajara a Inglaterra para obtener un aborto. Los hechos y sus terribles detalles habían sacudido la conciencia colectiva irlandesa, que fue vista como puritana y a menudo, pseudo-ingenua, estando atrapada en el mantenimiento de la sacralidad del matrimonio. Sin embargo, como se critica en el libro, no se percibían los varios fallos que destruyen su supuesta estabilidad, y niegan a sus víctimas la oportunidad de salvarse y hablar por sí mismas. En *Down by the River*, Mary se queda embarazada de su propio padre y, después de escaparse del hogar familiar y de conseguir

que se le organice un aborto en Inglaterra, se la obliga a regresar a la granja, donde recibe más tortura por parte de su padre y de la comunidad. Su vida se encuentra por tanto entre los grupos de activistas pro-vida que intentan evitar que busque un aborto y las muy pocas personas que se interesan genuinamente por ella y quienes finalmente desvelan las circunstancias verdaderas acerca de su embarazo. Como ocurre con otros personajes femeninos, O'Brien intenta liberarla de su posición silenciada y concederle la voz que merece tener.

Dada la defensa de las autoras de la situación de las madres solteras en la sociedad, los elementos subversivos que conforman a los personajes y el desafío que se manifiesta en las novelas, ofrecemos una aproximación feminista a los textos, pero también enfatizamos en nuestro análisis cuestiones sobre orden ético y subjetividad. De hecho, nuestro estudio intenta ofrecer un examen de un tema que a pesar de ser recurrente en el orden social de la Irlanda contemporánea y en sus producciones literarias, ha sido muy obviado por la crítica literaria. De ahí que sea éste un proyecto pionero en recoger conjuntamente perspectivas sociológicas e interpretaciones literarias de la maternidad en solitario, en lo que esperamos contribuya al cuestionamiento de una parte y un discurso escondidos en la historia reciente de Irlanda. De esta forma, coincidimos con Rosi Braidotti en su teoría del "nomadismo epistémico" al afirmar que

> La crítica teórica feminista hoy en día sólo puede aparecer "en tránsito", moviéndose, de paso, creando conexiones donde las cosas estaban des-conectadas anteriormente o parecían no relacionadas, donde parecía no haber "nada que ver"... también implica el esfuerzo de continuar con la creación de nuevas formas de relación, de construir pasarelas entre nociones. (1994: 93)

Visiblemente, el orden contemporáneo irlandés aparece "en tránsito", dado el creciente carácter cosmopolita y la secularización de la isla en la

actualidad. Sin embargo, las muchas delimitaciones para el acceso pleno de las mujeres al control de la reproducción que todavía persisten hacen de las representaciones literarias de la maternidad en solitario y de estudios como éste elementos cruciales para el progreso efectivo hacia una visión más simpatizante con la realidad de las mujeres.

Según las estrategias metodológicas y los objetivos críticos de este estudio, creemos oportuno señalar que la expresión "maternidad en solitario" recoge una variedad de connotaciones que deben especificarse. Aunque muchos factores determinan la situación en que las mujeres en las que nos centramos se ven obligadas a vivir, es la concepción accidental fuera del matrimonio lo que nos hizo reunir estos tres textos. Por lo tanto, el matrimonio es probablemente el elemento de distinción que marca la posición marginal dentro de los códigos establecidos de conducta femenina (sexual). Nuestro interés no está simplemente en las mujeres solteras que crían a sus hijos en solitario, sino también en aquellas que, siendo solteras, pasan por un embarazo no deseado, cualquiera que sea su decisión final. Igualmente, el término "maternidad" que aparece en el título de este trabajo se refiere a la condición biológica y experiencial por las que las protagonistas pasan, aunque no todas las mujeres analizadas pasan por todo el periodo de gestación al final de las novelas. Dicho de otro modo, y en sentido estricto, sólo dos personajes femeninos de las tres novelas seleccionadas ponen en práctica algún tipo de cuidado maternal de sus hijos pero, en nuestra opinión, todas ellas pueden entrar dentro de la categoría de "madres" dado el tipo de subjetividad maternal a la que las autoras las adscriben. Sin tener en cuenta el tiempo, el espacio o el contacto físico, pues, la maternidad que se describe en las novelas es un estado mucho más íntimo y

psicológico, que caracteriza la vida de las protagonistas durante la acción descrita en los textos.

La frase "novela irlandesa contemporánea de mujeres" también necesita aclaración ya que nos referimos a la idiosincrasia que caracterizó a la República de Irlanda durante la mayor parte del siglo XX, hasta la publicación de la novela más reciente de las tres seleccionadas. Sin embargo, como mencionamos arriba, dichos textos también se prestan a una lectura más contemporánea, en relación con el vertiginoso cambio social que se ha sucedido tras la explosión económica irlandesa de mediados de los años noventa, el llamado "Tigre Celta". En cuanto al término "novela de mujeres" puede sugerir que el tema de la maternidad en solitario nos interesa desde un punto de vista pura y exclusivamente femenino. Por el contrario, la expresión responde a un propósito más práctico de poder unificar criterios y de dar a este estudio una coherencia significativa. Como describimos al final de la Primera Parte, novelistas contemporáneos irlandeses también han explorado este tema durante el mismo período que recogen las tres novelas que hemos elegido, pero incluirlos dentro de los contenidos principales de esta tesis o en comparación con las novelistas, haría de éste un proyecto excesivamente ambicioso, aunque sin duda esto abre nuevas posibilidades de estudio para proyectos futuros. Creemos que, como demostramos con este trabajo, en las novelas se repiten ciertos elementos temáticos y estrategias narrativas, que las transforma en ejemplos de "novela de mujeres" y de cómo la maternidad en solitario ha sido tratada por escritoras irlandesas de ficción. En efecto, como sugirió Elaine Showalter poco antes de la publicación de la primera novela de nuestro trabajo, mediante un estudio de las mujeres (escritoras) como

grupo, se pueden descubrir paralelismos en su uso de imágenes y modelos (1978: 11).

Las tres autoras pertenecen a la misma generación de escritoras, que recibieron una educación conservadora y católica y fueron seducidas por el movimiento feminista irlandés que empezó a consolidarse en la década de los sesenta y setenta. A lo largo de toda su producción literaria, sostienen que la reconfiguración de las continuadas categorías de conducta sexual femenina y de las posibilidades de la maternidad no sólo cuestiona las bases tradicionales de la identidad de las mujeres irlandesas, sino que también demuestra que las voces silenciadas tienen mucho que aportar a la vida cotidiana de la isla. Siguiendo posiciones y discursos feministas de la última parte del siglo veinte, sugieren que el revisionismo histórico y sociológico del pasado irlandés es necesario para alcanzar una visión más amplia en la que los objetos marginados dejen de ser excluidos e incorporados a la realidad social de la isla. Particularmente, se preocupan por la victimización que las mujeres han sufrido en casos de conductas sexuales irregulares, en embarazos ilegítimos y en las posibilidades de la maternidad con ellos relacionadas.

Aunque, como hemos señalado, las tres novelas se publicaron en un intervalo de catorce años y Callaghan es la más joven de las tres autoras, comenzamos nuestro análisis con *Mothers*, ya que su acción narrativa se retrotrae a un tiempo anterior –los años veinte– en comparación con *The Killeen* y *Down by the River*, que se localizan temporalmente en los años treinta y en la mitad de los noventa, y espacialmente en la ciudad de Dublín, el Condado de Cork y el Condado de Sligo, respectivamente. Son éstas tres latitudes diferentes que, consideradas en conjunto, constituyen un valioso

análisis de las distintas consideraciones de los temas principales de las novelas. Esta variedad permite no sólo la evaluación de contextos urbanos y rurales, sino también las similitudes y las prácticas comunes que demuestran la peculiar idiosincrasia de Irlanda.

Callaghan, Leland y O'Brien proporcionan visiones reveladoras del tratamiento restrictivo y a menudo abusivo de los embarazos no planeados de mujeres en su país, con descripciones específicas de los diferentes niveles de opresión femenina en casos considerados maternidades "disfuncionales". Influidas muy a menudo por su entorno social y económico, las protagonistas se precipitan involuntariamente hacia un estado de crisis psicológica y emocional que determina sus acciones durante un cierto periodo de tiempo. Sin embargo, gradualmente cada una de ellas va obteniendo el empoderamiento que se les había negado por su condición femenina y estigmatizada, y adoptan una conducta diametralmente opuesta a los roles con los que se supone que deben cumplir. Así, tras años de sumisión patriarcal, estas mujeres encuentran nuevas fórmulas que las llevan a un estado de reconciliación consigo mismas como mujeres y como madres.

Por estas razones, en este estudio nos parecía justo e interesante analizar estas novelas desde una perspectiva crítica, y también porque en el caso de *Mothers* y *The Killeen*, los textos han sido generalmente ignorados por la crítica literaria irlandesa y la internacional. Creemos que las obras componen un espectro muy valioso del tema general que nos ocupa, y que un gran número de preocupaciones sociales se repiten en las tres, demostrando así la influencia de la ideología en la que se fundamentan las diferentes tramas. Sin embargo, cada relato constituye no sólo una nueva

perspectiva de los mismos puntos que nos interesan, sino también una reacción y un tratamiento diferentes de esa opresión, lo que abre posibilidades múltiples para el futuro al que Irlanda y las mujeres irlandesas están dirigiéndose inevitablemente.

La caracterización es también un punto común de interés de las tres autoras. En nuestro estudio nos centramos principalmente en seis protagonistas femeninas que pasan por un complejo proceso de construcción de identidad. Ronnie, Harriet y Agnes en *Mothers*, Margaret y Julia en *The Killeen* y Mary en *Down by the River* constituyen, como intentamos probar, un muestrario excelente de las madres solteras del siglo veinte. A lo largo del estudio hacemos referencia a otros personajes secundarios, tanto masculinos como femeninos, con la intención principal de complementar el tema principal de la maternidad en solitario que nos interesa.

El estudio se ha organizado en dos partes principales subdivididas en sus correspondientes capítulos y secciones. Partiendo de la extendida premisa de que la literatura irlandesa siempre ha estado influida por la historia de la isla (Foster 1989; Kiberd 1996; Villacañas 2007), la Primera Parte trata sobre el marco histórico en el que se ha localizado el discurso irlandés sobre conductas sexuales y prácticas de la maternidad que se apartan de la norma. En efecto, las tres novelas se encuentran condicionadas por el contexto y la realidad socio-histórica en la que se concibieron y se publicaron, por lo que este trasfondo contextual resultaba de rigor en nuestro estudio. Tratando las configuraciones de la feminidad y la maternidad en los periodos prehistórico, celta y medieval y en la época colonial, nacionalista y post-nacionalista, el primer capítulo describe

algunos de los instrumentos culturales que han dado forma a la correspondencia entre las articulaciones sociales de la maternidad y las experiencias de las madres solteras, ya que éstas determinan en última instancia las representaciones literarias de este tema. Prestamos especial atención a cómo la sexualidad femenina en sus formas irregulares y el ejercicio de la maternidad han sido construidas y reconstruidas a lo largo de su tradición sociocultural.

Comenzamos nuestro estudio sugiriendo la autoridad de la metáfora maternal en la creación de la identidad cultural irlandesa, y ofrecemos una visión general de las bases ideológicas y las proyecciones cotidianas de ese simbolismo, centrándonos en cómo ha afectado a las mujeres. Desde el poder de la Diosa, el contenido maternal de las heroínas legendarias, hasta las imágenes marianas impuestas por la Iglesia a las mujeres y el significado nacional de la iconografía de la Madre Irlanda, hemos sugerido que la insistencia en lo materno ha sido una característica recurrente en la idiosincrasia histórica de la isla. Asimismo, hemos intentado demostrar la presencia continua de las imágenes de la maternidad y su materialización en la realidad cotidiana de las mujeres irlandesas a lo largo del tiempo, además de las estrategias y los mecanismos utilizados sobre ellas cuando trascendían los paradigmas pre-establecidos. Esperamos haber evidenciado la persistencia de un modelo de feminidad orientado hacia la maternidad y cómo, siempre unido a la identidad nacional, apenas podía desvincularse de la realidad social, convirtiendo así a las mujeres en objetos directos de victimización cuando tales modelos no se seguían.

La sociedad irlandesa también ha estado indiscutiblemente influenciada por las contribuciones y las propuestas de las teorías críticas,

que hemos señalado en el segundo capítulo con la intención de proporcionar un marco de referencia que nos ayude a configurar las manifestaciones culturales que representan las novelas. Como nuestro análisis no es simplemente textual o histórico, ofrecemos un repaso de las perspectivas críticas desde las que la obra de autores de ficción –particularmente novelistas– se ha examinado en las últimas décadas. Los enfoques relacionados con las nociones de poder, identidad nacional y subjetividad femenina que manifiestan estas tendencias críticas nos han permitido introducir las posiciones desde las que se trazan las historias de las novelas. Al describir las revisiones contemporáneas de la identidad irlandesa así como la insistencia en retratar la búsqueda femenina de individualidad, hemos visto que la literatura aparece como un elemento mediador muy significativo entre las partes ocultas de la historia irlandesa y un futuro más prometedor para la isla y sus gentes. Con esa intención, en obras como las que hemos seleccionado, ha habido un proyecto común de sacar a la luz experiencias de mujeres que se apartan de la norma, centrándose sobre todo en lo poco convencional de su búsqueda de una individualidad durante su embarazo y su práctica maternal, en su caso. Callaghan, Leland y O'Brien ponen de manifiesto, pues, este acercamiento literario a la maternidad en solitario, y pueden compararse con otros autores y autoras importantes que, en las últimas décadas, han tratado estos asuntos en sus obras.

El segundo capítulo de la Primera Parte detalla el entramado teórico que proporciona el espacio conceptual para analizar las textualizaciones por parte de escritoras irlandesas de la subjetividad femenina, y en concreto, de las mujeres embarazadas. Teniendo en cuenta el núcleo narrativo de este estudio, ofrecemos un breve estudio de las particularidades que hacen de la

novela irlandesa de los años ochenta y noventa, como las obras seleccionadas, un excelente corpus literario que refleja la idiosincrasia cultural de la isla en aquella época. Particularmente, la segunda sección resalta el tratamiento en la ficción del modo en que las mujeres han negociado y alcanzado su subjetividad, mientras que la tercera sección explora el tema de la maternidad irregular tal y como ha sido tratada por parte de diversas novelistas irlandesas contemporáneas. Así, figuras como Maeve Binchy, Evelyn Conlon o Emma Cooke comparten con las autoras el interés por exponer en sus obras versiones de la realidad oculta bajo procesos de silenciamiento, y han conseguido potenciar un cuestionamiento sobre cómo la sociedad irlandesa trata a estas mujeres.

La Segunda Parte es un análisis de las tres novelas seleccionadas a la luz de varios aspectos que tratan de forma similar y que consideramos relevantes para la articulación de las experiencias de las madres solteras irlandesas y para la construcción de una nueva ética de la maternidad en solitario. Se estructura de nuevo en tres capítulos que cubren, en primer lugar, la contextualización de los relatos en la producción literaria de cada una de las autoras, aportando brevemente algunos datos de su biografía y de su obra. El segundo capítulo es de mayor extensión ya que recoge un análisis de las representaciones textuales de los objetos sociales que tradicionalmente han reprimido a las mujeres en Irlanda, en concreto a las madres solteras. En sus tres secciones, nos centramos en la opresión ejercida por el Estado, la doctrina católica y la familia, dada su implicación directa en ese programa represivo. Las protagonistas de *Mothers*, *The Killeen* y *Down by the River* pasan por un proceso de ajuste social y de presión psicológica que viene dado por la puesta en práctica de esos tres

significantes. Sus vidas, como la de muchas otras mujeres irlandesas, se han articulado en torno a los paradigmas dictados, individual o colectivamente, por esos agentes de distinción cultural en Irlanda.

Hemos prestado atención, por un lado, al papel desempeñado por el Estado en la proyección de las imágenes sociales de la maternidad en solitario y su tratamiento en la vida diaria. Así, las protagonistas de las novelas atestiguan la política de represión ejercida sobre ellas como forma de expresión del poder, un concepto que hemos analizado ampliamente en su relación con el modo en que la maternidad se ha concebido y controlado en la República. Por causa de las bases patriarcales del orden social irlandés contemporáneo, las madres solteras han figurado como elementos amenazadores del sistema, y se ha creado un grupo de complejas fórmulas para convertirlas en seres indefensos. Hemos planteado cuestiones éticas sobre ciudadanía plena y derechos individuales mientras que discutíamos la sumisión a las prescripciones constitucionales que las mujeres irlandesas han tenido que seguir desde la época inmediatamente posterior a la independencia. De esta forma, mediante percepciones sobre los argumentos de las novelas, hemos comprobado el atrapamiento dentro del sistema legal de Irlanda que estas mujeres experimentan, que van desde el aprieto de Ronnie y Mary ante la ilegalidad de la opción de una interrupción voluntaria de su embarazo, la preocupación por la ilegitimidad de su hijo que sienten Harriet y Julia, a los preparativos para la adopción que organizan para Margaret y Agnes, a pesar de su diferencia de clase. Todas estas mujeres se encuentran, como señalamos en nuestro análisis, rodeadas de fuerzas externas que las consideran meros objetos de cumplimiento legal en vez de

sujetos con plenos derechos y que desean cuidar de su descendencia, o al menos decidir si quieren hacerlo o no.

Para enfatizar el grado de poder del Estado irlandés y sus consecuencias, las autoras también destacan la vulnerabilidad económica a la que se exponen las mujeres solteras embarazadas y su falta de confianza en la disponibilidad de ayuda social por causa del estigma asociado con la maternidad en solitario. Además, Callaghan, Leland y O'Brien muestran cómo la interacción entre la degradación social, personal y económica provocada por un embarazo fuera del matrimonio dependía en gran medida de valores relacionados con la estabilidad cultural. Estos valores se describen claramente en las novelas, en las que el marco político de cada periodo repercute en la vida de las protagonistas, como en el caso de la lucha nacionalista en *The Killeen* o los debates y las campañas sobre el aborto en *Mothers* y *Down by the River*.

Por otro lado, la autoridad del discurso religioso en la conciencia colectiva irlandesa se ha analizado en relación con la política de penalización que se aplica a las mujeres que se desvían de los códigos de feminidad articulados por la Iglesia católica, siempre al servicio del estado. La presencia de la Virgen María, como el modelo de conducta femenina al que se adscriben las mujeres, queda patente en las ficciones. Las autoras describen cómo tal modelo se encuentra adherido en la mente de las protagonistas y se centran en las interpretaciones que las mujeres hacen de ello en sus vidas cotidianas. Así, con nuestro análisis de las novelas hemos mostrado que, dado que la virginidad constituye el principio de perfección y el punto de partida para la entrada de las mujeres en su vida adulta, de

casadas y como madres, se les ha pedido que se ajusten a esos principios en detrimento de su propia subjetividad.

Como resultado, a las mujeres que seguían diferentes parámetros se las ha encasillado en categorías negativas que las han asociado con la maldad y la degradación moral. Para demostrar ese proceso de demonización, las autoras enfatizan la retórica de castigo que recae sobre las mujeres solteras que se quedan embarazadas, con la consiguiente insistencia en la necesidad de que expíen su culpa por lo que se considera un pecado mortal. Lo que resalta del carácter de maldad con el que se las asocia es el discurso que se utiliza para referirse a ellas. Como se refleja magistralmente en las novelas, el modo en que la población se refiere a ellas o en el que se trata socialmente su situación tiene grandes consecuencias psicológicas sobre estas mujeres, al tiempo que también afecta al status de sus hijos, como queda perfectamente ejemplificado con la práctica de enterramientos en el llamado *killeen*. El arrepentimiento se presenta, por tanto, como el único medio posible para lograr la aceptación social y el perdón moral. Sin embargo, las autoras también muestran cómo en la mayor parte de los casos esta expiación impuesta no necesariamente lleva a las protagonistas a arrepentirse por lo que hicieron.

Y finalmente, la materialización de los límites impuestos por los parámetros tradicionales es muy significativa en el caso de la familia. Como enlace entre el individuo y la sociedad, e íntimamente ligado a los otros dos aspectos que analizamos arriba, esta institución implica una serie de restricciones en las mujeres, no sólo porque está basada en el matrimonio y en la procreación dentro de sus límites, sino porque la defensa de su ética persiste en todo el sistema social de Irlanda. Nuestro análisis ha insistido

en el grado en que la educación dentro de la familia y en la escuela se encamina a moldear a las mujeres irlandesas para que se conviertan en los códigos ideales en los que el Estado y la Iglesia articularon la feminidad. Como defendimos, el matrimonio figuraba como el objetivo y el destino de las mujeres, y existían muchos medios para hacer que aspiraran a ello desde pequeñas. De ahí que, cuando un embarazo precedía al matrimonio, las mujeres involucradas en ellos –pero curiosamente no los hombres– se encontraban con numerosos obstáculos. Se desarrollaban diferentes estrategias para evitar la histeria generalizada y atenuar la ansiedad sobre la desintegración cultural, tales como la condena, el silencio y la marginación de las conductas femeninas indeseables así como de los embarazos ilegítimos que a menudo se derivaban de ellas.

Las muchas incongruencias que subyacían en estas creencias se analizan en una sección más amplia que se dedica al análisis de cómo Callaghan, Leland y O'Brien tratan la realidad de la familia irlandesa a través de sus protagonistas. Las autoras llaman la atención del público lector sobre asuntos controvertidos como la relación de las protagonistas con sus familias y sus parejas, que a menudo determina la concepción. Tal es el caso de Mary y la violación que sufre por parte de su padre en *Down by the River*, y el de Margaret, que abandona la casa familiar por el ambiente asfixiante en el que vive, como se describe en *The Killeen*. En otras ocasiones, los familiares actúan como agentes de control externo tanto durante como después del embarazo, como le ocurrió a Agnes en *Mothers* con la adopción de tu hijo, que fue organizada por su familia. En conjunto, pues, estos relatos reflejan la manipulación de las mujeres dentro de los límites privados y supuestamente "sagrados" de la familia al tiempo que

solicitan analizar más sensiblemente el abuso –psicológico, físico o de los dos tipos, como vimos con el maltrato a Mary por las violaciones y el incesto– que pueden suceder dentro ésta.

Con este mismo objetivo de revisar y criticar los valores en los que construye la familia irlandesa, las autoras también exploran los diversos modos de control que los agentes de poder ejercen sobre las mujeres por medio de normas externas relacionadas con su corporeidad. Nuestra interpretación va desde las ideas sobre la sexualidad que tienen las protagonistas antes y después de tener relaciones con los padres de sus hijos, hasta sus reacciones cuando el embarazo se convierte en una realidad, y la transformación corporal y los estados mentales que conlleva. De esta forma, esperamos que nuestra lectura de las novelas aporte algo de luz sobre la posición de represión e ignorancia desde la que las mujeres entienden su corporeidad, su sexualidad, el embarazo y el parto, como demuestran las reacciones a estos asuntos que comparten las protagonistas.

Las estrategias que se les ocurren para solucionar su situación reflejan el conflicto que generan los embarazos ilegítimos en Irlanda. Al enfatizar en nuestro análisis cuestiones como el aborto provocado o solicitado, hemos revelado que el acceso a la integridad corporal –e incluso más aún a la libertad reproductiva mediante el uso de los anticonceptivos– sigue siendo un tema muy discutido por parte de las mujeres irlandesas en diferentes medidas. Callaghan, Leland y O'Brien dan a entender que muchos prejuicios e intereses culturales siguen en funcionamiento en lo que respecta a la ejecución de los derechos reproductivos de las mujeres, por causa de la primacía concedida al feto. Además, sugerimos que las ficciones trazan la apropiación del cuerpo femenino en los embarazos y también

durante el parto, mostrando así las contradicciones éticas que en general se aplican a la situación de las mujeres en Irlanda.

Igualmente, exploramos las ideas de auto-definición durante el embarazo y el conflicto psicológico así como físico que normalmente implica, basándonos en los argumentos expuestos por críticas feministas como Susan Bordo, Naomi Wolf, Adrienne Rich y por la novelista irlandesa Anne Enright, y también en relación a cómo las protagonistas las experimentan en las novelas. Con el mismo objetivo, tres autoras critican los obstáculos a los que se encuentran las mujeres para tener control de su propio cuerpo, puesto que se las considera puramente las incubadoras de sus bebés. El parto aparece como el ejemplo de tal ausencia de control corporal, ya que las novelas reflejan los valores patriarcales y el control directo por parte de los hombres que se suceden en este momento crucial de la reproducción, mientras que las mujeres han sido tradicionalmente silenciadas en estos ámbitos.

El tercer capítulo de la Segunda Parte ofrece una lectura de cómo las novelas describen las experiencias de las madres solteras, de tal forma que demuestran que el proceso de subjetividad por parte de las protagonistas así como de todas las mujeres irlandesas en su situación, puede conseguirse en tanto que se redefinan los paradigmas tradicionales. Afirmamos que, mediante una descripción común de la búsqueda personal y la práctica de modelos auto-definidos de maternidad en solitario, las autoras indican con sus personajes y argumentos que, si se analizan de forma perceptiva las particularidades individuales, pueden abrirse posibilidades más estimulantes que aquellas marcadas por agentes externos de construcción social. Así pues, nuestro trabajo encuentra su validez interna y externa en

el sentido de que las tres novelas ofrecen diferentes negociaciones de esos parámetros limitadores, mientras que todas estas evoluciones finales ejemplifican las liberaciones múltiples que las mujeres pueden conseguir. Las autoras se sirven de las madres solteras para transmitir la marginación que han sufrido a causa de la fuerte trascendencia de los significantes culturales que han prevalecido en Irlanda.

Para demostrar el giro feminista hacia una ética alternativa de la maternidad en solitario, en el capítulo final de la Segunda Parte exploramos cómo muchas de estas estrategias represivas sobre la mente de las mujeres y sobre su integridad corporal resultan subvertidas por parte de las autoras. Además del cuestionamiento sobre el modo en que los significantes culturales se han aplicado a las mujeres solteras y embarazadas, Callaghan, Leland y O'Brien también pretenden estructurar el imaginario femenino en el que han vivido estas mujeres. Las tres novelas presentan un desafío a los valores de la sociedad irlandesa en lo que respecta a las mujeres, y con las opciones y la capacidad de acción que se les conceden a éstas en las tramas, plantean nuevas formas de codificación de la identidad. Una visión de conjunto de las novelas ha demostrado que más allá de la crítica que caracteriza el rechazo de las autoras a los conceptos normativos de feminidad, también existe una estrategia común de incluir en las ficciones las diferentes formas en las que las madres solteras pueden alcanzar una subjetividad lejos de las normas impuestas.

Nuestra argumentación sobre el hecho de que estos tres textos constituyen una importante contribución a los debates sobre la culpa que recae sobre las madres solteras se completa con la indicación de que también manifiestan la capacidad de las mujeres para alcanzar su

identidad. Para fundamentar esa interpretación, consideramos apropiado analizar primero, el interés de las tres autoras por mostrar la conciencia maternal de las protagonistas y su desafío a los parámetros tradicionales. Proponen la construcción de un tipo de maternidad diferente que libere a las mujeres de la posición de opresión desde la que tradicionalmente la han vivido por causa de las condiciones "anómalas" de su concepción. Partiendo de los razonamientos planteados por algunas críticas expertas en teorías de la maternidad, hemos sugerido que ésta puede ser un medio de empoderamiento y de renovación, ya que a pesar de las dificultades, ellas pueden encaminarse finalmente hacia sus propias interpretaciones y sus propios deseos.

Además, hemos señalado la relevancia de las tres novelas en la negociación del discurso que las madres solteras pueden alcanzar, así como los efectos liberadores de tal transformación. Esto se traduce en cómo las protagonistas expresan sus sentimientos sobre su caso y sobre el sistema que las oprime. Con su reconstrucción del discurso, desafían los modelos tradicionales de sumisión y silencio femeninos, y esto conlleva en cambio un concepto propio de subjetividad femenina y maternal. Y finalmente, en las tres novelas las mujeres terminan sintiéndose realizadas, cualquiera que sea el resultado final de su embarazo, y lo hacen mediante una ética de la interconexión femenina que se hace eco de uno de los aspectos fundamentales del feminismo y la causa de las mujeres, no sólo en Irlanda sino también internacionalmente. La solidaridad entre las mujeres figura como un punto importante para el crecimiento personal y la individualidad maternal, dado que las protagonistas de *Mothers*, *The Killeen* y *Down by the*

River encuentran en el entendimiento y el apoyo mutuo de las mujeres un mecanismo para vencer los obstáculos y encontrar su autonomía.

Como conclusión, esta tesis intenta aportar una mayor comprensión de la representación narrativa de las reacciones de las madres solteras irlandesas frente los agentes sociales que las han cosificado y rechazado. Nuestro propósito también ha sido exponer las vías que han seguido las autoras no sólo para contrarrestar esas limitaciones sino también para poder sobrevivir y acomodar sus propias visiones de la identidad femenina y maternal. Asimismo, podemos señalar que al contextualizar las acciones de las novelas en diferentes momentos del siglo veinte, las escritoras cuestionan el grado de transformación social que ha tenido lugar en el país en lo que respecta a las actitudes hacia la sexualidad femenina que no se ajusta a las normas, a los embarazos ilegítimos y a los derechos reproductivos de las mujeres.

En nuestra opinión, con este tipo de ficciones, Irlanda ha podido empezar a asumir su pasado y su presente desde hace un par de décadas y a la vez, mediante los retratos literarios que llevan a cabo las autoras, se apela directamente al público lector para reflexionar sobre el alcance de esas formas de actuar en la sociedad contemporánea y sobre qué puede hacerse para cambiarlas. Con su nueva realidad actual, en la que la diversidad racial y étnica va ganando cada vez más terreno, el país y sus expresiones literarias están experimentando indudablemente un giro importante en su futuro inmediato. Esto no implica que a las madres solteras del siglo veintiuno les resulte más sencillo enfrentarse a su situación, ya que todavía queda un largo camino que recorrer hasta alcanzar el reconocimiento pleno de los derechos reproductivos de las mujeres en Irlanda. Sin embargo, como

hemos intentado demostrar, estos textos son excelentes documentos culturales que articulan los diferentes ángulos del conflicto social que rodea a la maternidad en solitario, considerando sobre todo las experiencias de las mujeres, tradicionalmente silenciadas. Las interpretaciones renovadoras por parte de las escritoras de las posibles actuaciones de estas mujeres estimulan la conciencia social sobre ellas y han abierto camino a un futuro más prometedor.