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**To my mother and father,
with love and gratitude**

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Declaration of Authenticity

I confirm to have conceived and written this paper in English all by myself. Quotations from sources are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references. Any ideas borrowed and/or paraphrased from the works of other authors are truthfully acknowledged and identified in the text and/or in footnotes.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Group One: Marginalised Figures of Society.....	5
2.1 Walk the Blue Fields	5
2.1.1 Narrative, Style and Structure.....	7
2.1.2 The Priest and the Marriage Party	12
2.1.3 The Priest and His Walk in Nature.....	16
2.1.4 The Priest and the Chinaman	17
2.2 Night of the Quicken Trees.....	20
2.2.1 Narrative, Style and Structure.....	23
2.2.2 Margaret Flusk	26
2.2.3 Stack and Josephine	35
2.3 Celibacy, Shattered Hopes and Superstitions	40
2.3.1 Religion, Priesthood and Superstitions	40
2.3.2 Bachelorhood in Rural Irish Society	47
2.3.3 Selected Signs and Symbols	48
3. Group Two: Lonely Men in Love	55
3.1 Dark Horses	55
3.1.1 Narrative, Style and Structure.....	57
3.1.2 Brady	58
3.2 Surrender	61
3.2.1 Narrative, Style and Structure.....	64
3.2.2 Sergeant Francis McGahern	66
3.3 Parallels, Different Approaches to Love and Alcohol.....	69
4. Group Three: Family Dysfunction.....	77
4.1 The Parting Gift	77
4.1.1 Narrative, Style and Structure.....	78
4.1.2 The Girl and her Family	80
4.2 The Forester's Daughter	84
4.2.1 Narrative, Style and Structure.....	86

4.2.2 Victor Deegan and Martha Dunne	90
4.2.3 Victoria Deegan and her Brothers.....	96
4.3 Close to the Water's Edge	99
4.3.1 Narrative, Style and Structure.....	102
4.3.2 The Harvard Student	103
4.4 Silence, Power Relations and Emigration.....	107
5. Conclusion.....	115
6. Bibliography	119
Primary Sources	119
Secondary Sources	119
Online Sources.....	121
Index.....	123
German Abstract	125
Curriculum Vitae.....	127

1. Introduction

The foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else [...] Style counts; plot counts; originality of outlook counts. But none of these counts anything like so much as the convincingness of the characters. (Woolf 21)

This thesis deals with the short stories in Claire Keegan's collection *Walk the Blue Fields*. The author manages to create stories around a combination of complex character types who have to deal with daily struggles in Ireland. Keegan's style is far away from popular contemporary Irish female short story writers of so called chick-lit fiction whose narratives are more shallow and satisfied with more trivial, sometimes unrealistic solutions. Keegan's writing is different. Her stories hardly ever feature a happy ending but remain in the darkness of sorrow or hardship. Claire Keegan herself says: "I'm often told I'm dark, [...] I don't know anyone who doesn't live without pain in some way. Books without pain don't interest me, *but* I do think lots of my stories are hopeful – people are coping" (Keegan 2007-2).

Taking this quotation as a starting point and Woolf's statement as a confirmation, this thesis sets out to look closely at the characters and the problems they deal with. In addition to this, in an attempt to grasp Keegan's style, the narrative technique, themes and symbols of the narratives will be discussed. On the surface, the stories seem to be depressing and unappealing. Still, Keegan's style veils the suffering and turns the stories almost into poetry. In this paper the stories will not be treated separately, but grouped according to the themes and topics they deal with. Rachel Balik describes the collection thus: "It reads less like a series of short stories and more like a novel that happens to switch venues and protagonists in each chapter. There are two priests who break vows and fall in love with women, a number of men who would rather work than love, and women who are both ignited and heartbroken by their power to hope." (Balik 2008)

Each chapter of the thesis is dedicated to a group of stories: the first group consists of the title-giving story “Walk the Blue Fields” and “Night of the Quicken Trees”. They both centre on priests who are unfaithful to their duties as they fall in love with women. The first narrative focuses on a priest who is in distress as his faith leaves him and the memories of the pleasures of the flesh return. The second focuses on a woman who had intercourse with a priest once and whose life is filled with superstitions and haunted since then. The second group consists of “Dark Horses” and “Surrender”, both of which focus on men who are either lonely as they have lost their loved one or because they have not yet found the courage to propose. Interesting in the two narratives is the problem of alcohol and late bachelorhood which are both associated with Ireland. The last group consists of three stories: “The Parting Gift”, “The Forester's Daughter” and “Close to the Water's Edge”. In each of these last three stories a character tries to escape from the daily hardships their lives consist of. One girl is abused by her father, one woman feels lonely in an unsatisfying marriage and a young student cannot tolerate his mother's and stepfather's presence.

Each character is different, as is each story. Still, they are united by Keegan's style and knowledge that the short story is not “a comforting genre. It's not a comforting read. Often it can be quite a disturbing read” (Van Dusen 2009). Also, Keegan finds that „[h]appiness [...] writes white. Pain is inarticulate“ (Keegan 2007-2). This certainly applies to her stories in this collection: the fact that the characters are suffering or the reasons for their suffering are never marked as such. Therefore, the rather philosophical research question of this thesis is focused on the characters and the themes they are embedded in: how are the characters portrayed and how are they coping with their lives? Is their quiet desperation self-induced or are they victims of their fate?

2. Group One: Marginalised Figures of Society

This first group comprises the stories “Walk the Blue Fields” and “Night of the Quicken Trees”. These are the second and the last story of the collection and are similar in themes and symbolism. They portray the fiercely and widely discussed problem of celibacy, but from two different angles: In the first one, the reader gets an insight into the priest who is performing the marriage ceremony of the woman he had an affair with. He is suffering greatly and even questions his vocation as a priest. In the second story, a woman who has once loved a priest and has been abandoned by him flees from society and her memories. In addition to this topical closeness, there is an amalgam of symbols, intertextual remarks, superstitions and themes. These aspects are presented in a poetic language that is only found in these two stories in this collection. Claire Keegan gives the readers complex and well conceived stories which challenge them to untangle the narrative thread. This might not be done in the first reading, which is one of the differences between Keegan's stories and Irish chick-lit fiction, which populates the book market. An example by Hadley illustrates this well: “In bald summary [*Walk the blue fields*] could sound as stickily romantic as Lorna Doone” (Hadley, 1¹). However, due to Keegan's choice of topics, her language and complexity she stands out from the crowd of female Irish short story writers.

2.1 Walk the Blue Fields

The first story to be discussed is “Walk the Blue Fields”. This is appropriate as, firstly, its title is also the title of the collection, and secondly, because it is the ideal introduction to Claire Keegan's style. Also, the title is very interesting and, like all titles of this collection, would serve Renate Brosch as an example for her theory: “Um einen Überraschungseffekt zu erzielen, umgehen Kurzgeschichten meistens einen direkten, entschlüsselnden Hinweis auf das Thema der Geschichte und bevorzugen einen lediglich andeutenden oder sogar tarnenden gegenüber einem kommentierenden oder enthüllenden Titel” (Brosch, 64). The

¹ Page numbers given refer to the print out of the online source.

given title is highly appropriate for a short story as it does not give anything away, but at the same time fits the story and its mood perfectly. It combines the priest's passion for walking, the power of nature and the symbolic richness of the story into one phrase. Still, it does not summarise the story in any way or anticipates any action. The story briefly summarised, as was quoted above, could really sound like a weird romance. However, it has nothing romantic about it: an unhappy marriage and a priest that sticks to his decision to remain faithful to priesthood. Hadley sums up the topics and atmosphere appropriately:

These elements, another writer, in another decade, might have been combined to make a story about a waste, a mistake: how could this man have turned down the gift of sensual love and marriage in return for the dead letter of the faith? Here, however, we're made to feel that the conflict around the priest's choice of his vocation is a real one, though not in a sense that requires any underpinning from the Catholic belief. (Hadley, 2)

Especially the last part is important as the Catholic Church is omnipresent in the daily life in Ireland and this priest recovered from his doubts by looking at something other than the institution of the Church. This also illustrates that although the affair seems to be at the heart of the story it is only one element of the conflict the priest carries around in his heart.

“Walk the Blue Fields” is set in the month of April in an unnamed town in rural Ireland, which has a chapel and used to be inhabited by rich Protestants. The priest mentions in passing that the hotel in which the wedding reception is held was once a protestant's estate. The description of the town itself does not suffice to identify its exact location or name. However, the priest mentions “the Blackstairs tower” (Keegan, 32²) which might refer to a place close to the Blackstairs mountains, which stretch from North to South on the border between County Wexford and County Carlow in the South-East of Ireland. This at least narrows down the possibilities. Other places in County Wexford are mentioned

² Whenever the primary source *Walk the Blue Fields* will be quoted, only the page number will be given.

as the two lovers meet secretly in Cahore, Blackwater and the wood of Avondale. The most far off places mentioned are the guest house in Silent Valley and Newry town, in County Down, Northern Ireland, so they travelled a great distance in order to be alone and not disturbed. The year in which this narrative is set is relatively easy to determine: the fact that the wedding guests have to go outside to smoke shows that it has to be set after March 2004 when the national ban on smoking in public places came into effect in the Irish Republic. It can be argued that this story is not limited to a specific point in time because of the universal validity of the theme.

2.1.1 Narrative, Style and Structure

When analysing the narrative technique employed in this story it is best to look at its structure first. The story can be roughly divided into two parts: the first part consists of the wedding ceremony and the reception held at the hotel. The second part begins when the priest steps out into the fresh air and walks the fields to the Chinaman. The opening of the story is interesting as it takes the reader outside of the discourse time to something that happened before. Hadley rightly points out: "Why begin with the word 'earlier' which might seem a weak link back out of the story-time? Earlier than when? Why not just begin at the moment the women bring the flowers?" (Hadley, 1). The first two paragraphs happen "earlier" and summarise the wedding ceremony and the general atmosphere in brevity. The organist had to play the toccata a few times and the "slant of the morning sun" (17) had moved through the church. The focalizer here is the priest who looks at the waiting brides-maids and the cloud moving behind them. This scene evokes the tense atmosphere before the wedding ceremony and is presented almost in slow motion. The third paragraph opens with "now" and ends this excursion into the immediate past as we meet the priest outside the chapel in the fresh air.

This technique is very effective as it delays the actual beginning of the action, and thus emphasises just how late the bride arrived at her own wedding. This

delay with which the main action begins accompanies the reader throughout the wedding party as the bride seems to be reluctant in all her (e)motions. This method of storytelling appears once more in the story when the priest remembers how he met her and how they spent their time together in a flashback. This switching into the past ends abruptly by the return to the recent discourse level by “now” (34). For the priest this results in the recognition that “[n]ow she is married” (34). At an even closer look at the first words of the paragraphs it becomes clear that this technique of structuring accompanies the reader throughout the second part of the narrative: ‘so’, ‘when’, ‘down at the river’, ‘there’, ‘now’ are only a few examples of paragraph beginnings. They introduce the reader to a new place, a new thought or even a different time in space.

Another important structural feature is the use of foreshadowing and flashbacks. This is employed widely throughout the first part of the narrative. During the dinner and dance at the hotel the allusions to the priest's affair are numerous but the reader knows nothing about it yet. This allows Keegan to build up tension and to keep the reader interested and curious about what really happened. At some point it becomes clear that there was some relationship between the priest and the bride but only when the priest starts daydreaming in the second part, the context of the plot is revealed in a flashback. Until then, allusions, memories and associations leave us guessing, as much as the priest, who might be involved and who might know something. The first occurrence already happens before dinner is served when the groom “raises his glass and smiles” (23) and the priest admits to himself that “[i]t had never occurred to him, until now, that Jackson might have known” (23). Later, when the bride caresses the stem of her wine glass the priest has a “clear, resurrected memory that makes him wish he was alone” (28). It gets more and more explicit further into the story and as we are about to leave the wedding party it is almost unmistakably clear to the readers that they had an affair: “[...] he would take her hand and take her away from this place.[...] It's what she once wanted but two people hardly ever want the same thing at any given point in time” (30f). The

affair will be discussed in more detail below. For now it will suffice to say that his regrets definitely come too late, but it is not impossible she still wants him to take her away.

These are not the only utterances that can be associated with the affair, but there are also allusions and sayings whose connection to the affair become obvious at close analysis. One of these indications is revealed by the priest himself: "Things have their own way of sorting themselves out" (22). This is of course a universally applicable saying that happens to match the affair, but has been put here consciously as the memories are haunting the priest especially on that day. Another allusion to the affair is Sinnott's remark: "And we all know the white cloth is aisy stained" (26). This does not necessarily indicate that Sinnott must know of the affair. It is a common enough expression and it could mean that priests in general have faults on many different levels and Sinnott is simply no friend of the church. Only later, statements by Sinnott and the way he looks at the priest when the latter looks at the bride suggest that he could have known. In the second part of the story several references complement the elements of foreshadowing as flashbacks finally reveal the priest's past. For example, her red hair and white scalp that was described right at the beginning of the story was also the beginning of their love. Also, the incident with the caressed stem of the wine glass reappears (33) and the full content of the plot line is revealed at a later point in the story.

"Walk the Blue Fields" is presented by means of an authorial omniscient third person narration combined with internal perspective. The priest is the protagonist as well as the focalizer of the story and could be described as a reflector character, using Stanzel's terminology. Thus, the reader sees the events through the protagonist's eyes in addition to that of the narrator. For example, the sentence, "[a]ny time promises are made in public, people cry" (23) feels like a general judgement on the occasion that could have passed the priest mind. Also, many pieces of information are obviously accessible to the

priest only, for example, the fact that Sinnot is “a wiry man who seldom pays his dues and has confessed to stealing sheep off Jackson’s hill” (24). The narrative moves even deeper into the priest’s consciousness as his walk is presented in free indirect discourse which feels like an interior monologue. For example as he steps out of the reception: “Lovely to be out in the avenue again, to leave that terrible music behind” (31). This sentence is a quoted interior monologue and is a perfect example of indirect discourse as the smallest distance possible is created between narrator and protagonist, and thus between protagonist and reader. There are other instances when the priest’s interior monologue is narrated: “Never once has he come this way without seeing her” (32). This focus on the protagonist’s consciousness makes him sympathetic to the reader, which is vital as he was the one who caused the unhappiness of this marriage. The narrative makes use of dramatic presentation and scenic presentation during the reception and in the caravan. The omniscient narrator reports the emotions and intentions of the speakers as well as facial expressions and gestures wherever necessary. The second part is focused mainly on the priest’s consciousness and the description of nature and the general surroundings. In the priest’s interaction with the chinaman, narrative and dramatic presentation are combined in almost equal parts.

The creation and description of the atmosphere is not only a central factor of the narrative in the second, but also in the first part. Firstly, Keegan uses numerous colloquialisms in the dialogues which render the dramatized scenes very authentic. Examples range from lexic – aisy, alvocadoes, yez, wud, me dinner – and syntactic colloquialisms – “there’s people goes to him” (25) – to swearing and insulting: “Sure he’s a chink – ates dog and shites tay” (26) or “fucken day” (31). Moreover, the Chinaman’s speech is well dramatized in the scene in the caravan. The readers have been prepared by the wedding guests’ prejudices that he speaks little English and likes to keep to himself. His utterances are short and he does not speak in full sentences, but there is no need for this. For what he does, his English is sufficient.

The second factor adding to the atmosphere created by Keegan is the description of the surroundings. The reader might not get an overly detailed picture of the room, but the mood of the guests, the colours surrounding them as well as the sounds are as well described as the clouds, the landscape and the chinaman's caravan. The red of the flowers and the bride's hair, the green of the dresses, the pale white of the clouds as well as the blue shadow on the fields create a unique picture and makes an otherwise dull moment bright and colourful. Also, the mordant heat in the hotel, the nervous movement right before dinner - "There's a ripple of surprise. Women reach for their handbags. Drinkers panic and order another round," (22) - or the comment that "nothing was broken, no one went without" (27) adds up to a complete picture of the atmosphere on that particular day.

Lastly, complementing the second point is Keegan's poetic language that makes out this story's particular style. The author writes of a wind that is strangely human so that "a tender speech is coming through the willows" (18) or imagines clouds that throw "legitimate shadows" (19) over the fields. Especially the description of nature brings out Keegan's poetic vein: "The alder is shooting out, her pale limbs brazen" (38), or "At the marshy patch where the alders grow, there's panic on the water, a flutter, and the wild ducks rise" (32).

Another point that has to be addressed is Keegan's ability to say so much without actually putting it into words. The mass of information that is implied and recognised by the reader without it having actually been spelled out for them is uncountable. This is one of Keegan's great talents which the reader will also encounter in her other stories: with omission she achieves so much more than with explicit explanations which, in the worst cases, could be perceived as boring or redundant. Without being said, it is clear that the priest is the outcast at the wedding reception, which is indicated, for example, through the seating arrangements. What is also left out is any confirmation of who really knows

about the affair. The reader gets the idea that everyone might know, but as it is never said, the tension and doubt is almost unbearable. On the other hand it is interesting which pieces of information are included that, at a first glance, seem irrelevant. The bathroom scene for example seems vulgar and inappropriate but then serves to show the priest's diminishing influence with the youth as well as the primitivity of the best man. Another example is the exact and poetic description of nature. Only at the ending it is fully understandable why the narrator shared so many details. The priest has always been deeply connected with the outdoors and takes comfort in walks at the river. It is natural that his personal and spiritual revelations are manifested through nature.

2.1.2 The Priest and the Marriage Party

The priest is the central character of the story and we first meet him when he is standing in the chapel, waiting for the bride and then conducts the ceremony. He is a central figure in the local community, but feels quite at loss at the wedding reception and would rather walk down to the river where he can be alone. This is the first indication that this is a hard day for him although it is yet unclear why. It is obvious that not many people want to come up and talk to him, but he knows that there will be some that have the desire to talk to him, others "owe him money" (20) and therefore stay clear of him. He is good at the 'game' that is played at such events and he is good at charming the women that seek attention from any man. Only one girl almost embarrasses him when she points out that he cannot know much about women: "Easy knowing you're a priest [...] A man would never say that" (20). This, as is later revealed, is not true at all as he has more experience with women than he should have. A couple of women approach him as well as the bride's father, but when he orders a hot whiskey he seems to be a nuisance even for the bar maid. Also the seating arrangement clearly indicates that he was invited out of pure courtesy.

While drinking his whiskey he remembers his childhood and the moment he knew he wanted to be a priest. This scene is of great relevance later in the story:

[His mother] had encouraged without pushing him towards priesthood. Once, as an altar boy, he'd stood in the vestry and let his hand trail over the cassock, the surplice. Winter light was staining itself on the high window and in the chapel the choir was practising 'How great Thou Art'. He has, at that moment, felt the path opening, but there is no time to dwell on such things here. (21)

Maybe there is no time to dwell on it for too long, but later, before dessert, he again finds the time to think about the topic shortly as he is twice asked to pray, firstly before dinner and then again before dessert.

Again, the priest is handed the microphone. He stands up and says grace without feeling any of the words. Lately, when he prayed, his prayers have not been answered. Where is God? he has asked. [...] His faith has not faltered – that's what's strange – but he wishes God would show himself. All he wants is a sign. (29)

Here, the theme of the narrative reveals itself: on the bottom of his regrets and doubts about his past decision lies an inherent doubt in his faith. It seems that he always saw 'how great' God is, but now lost his blind belief. This was probably triggered by the prospect of this wedding. It is almost impossible not to show any reaction as he once loved her, but chose to end the relationship. Instead of open regret and a lamentation for her, his thought evolve around his profession.

Inevitably his thoughts repeatedly turn to the bride. It is obvious that he is not at ease. He watches her movements and expressions. They hardly interact on the day: Apart from the ceremony itself they only converse during the photo session:

She looks calm but the bouquet in her hand is trembling.
'You must be cold,' he says.
'I'm not.'

'You must be.'
 'I'm not,' she says. 'I feel nothing.' (19)

Here, we learn not only that they must know each other intimately, but also that this is not at all a happy day for her. The other occasion when they are close without speaking too much is when he picks up one of her pearls: "It is warm in his hand, warm from her. This, more than anything else in the day, startles him." (30) In this scene at the hotel the narrator reveals how far their intimacy went. "There are tears there but she is too proud to blink and let one fall. If she blinked, he would take her hand and take her away from this place. This, at least, is what he tells himself" (30f). This is what she once wanted but he had refused her. The priest reads her thoughts, but is she really too proud to blink or is it only part of the priest's fantasy?

The priest has a formed opinion of such events: "Weddings are hard. The drink flows and the words come out and he has to be there. A man loses his daughter to a younger man. A woman sees her son throwing himself away on a lesser woman. It is something they half believe" (23). This statement summarises the wedding day perfectly. The priest has to be there, even after the ceremony, a father is in doubt if his daughter gets married to the right man and a mother sees her eldest off to live with another woman. The reader learns a lot about the priest, his thoughts and motives throughout the story. The other characters are mostly characterized through his eyes or through conversation. The more reliable source is probably the dramatisation, but the descriptions add up to a fuller picture of the characters' position in society.

The first ones to look at are the bride and the groom, the central couple of the day. The groom, Jackson, signs his name with "bold strokes" while the bride's hand is shaking. This is the first indication of how confident he is about his marriage and how nervous and doubtful she is. Further on in the story he is said to have blue eyes, a muscular body and to be of lower social standing than the bride. The bride is characterized in a different light, as a beauty with freckles on

her shoulder, red hair with the white scalp shining through. This, of course, is the biased view of the priest, which is probably only shared by Lawlor, the bride's father. Her family possesses a considerable amount of land and the father has taken on the attitude that he has to let her "make [her] own mistakes" (22). Little does he know what she has already done in her life. This day seems to be the unhappiest in her whole life: she arrives late at the chapel, does not want anything to drink and even loses the pearls of her necklace in a terribly embarrassing moment. It was not her own fault, but seems to have been the cherry on top of a dreadful day.

The loss of the pearls turns the attention to the best man. His presence is always a cause for embarrassment and his mother is afraid he will never find a woman who is willing to marry him. He gets utterly drunk in no time. His rude and obscene behaviour is shown best in the toilet scene: he openly boasts with the size of his member and even addresses this topic to the priest by comparing sizes with him: "A fucken ornament, Father," he says. "Much like your own" (23). Such a topic was obviously a taboo with people of the church and a joke that shows the lack of respect for the priest: "Going out the door, the priest hears laughter. There was a time not too long ago, when they would have waited until he could not have heard" (23). The best man's speech is another opportunity for him to embarrass his family, but this time he is interrupted by his brother shortly after his opening sentence: "'Good day to yous all!' the best man cries. 'I hope ye've had your fill' (27). He obviously had his as he is very drunk and hardly able to stand upright. His brother is in a rage after the pearl incident and cannot understand why he could not even behave "for the one fucken day" (31). This is the last incident at the wedding party as the next scene focuses on the priest walking all alone through 'the blue fields'. Alone with the terrible truth: "So, she is married" (32).

2.1.3 The Priest and His Walk in Nature

This second part of the story is crucial to the priest's character development and also supplies the reader with information about the affair that is vital to the understanding of the narrative. The importance of this scene is already suggested by the title of the story. The protagonist sees the "strange blue shadow" (32) of the Blackstairs tower, walking in the "blue night" (38); hence the fields he is walking in must be bathed in a blue light. Also, the topic of walking is addressed repeatedly in the first section: "I walk', he says, letting out a sigh." (25). His inner restlessness is underlined by the aimless walk he is now taking and that it is hard at times to keep on one's feet: "It is slippery, in places, and he tells himself he does not really know where he is going" (32). The reader does not know where he is going but certainly guesses or hopes at this stage that his destination is either a place where he met her or the Chinaman's caravan. Both is true. In his mind he revisits all the places he visited with her, but his feet take him down to the river and then to the caravan. Walking around in these parts of the area is a frequent pastime of his, as his clerical duties do not keep him busy all day. Adding up to this are his nagging doubts and these surroundings surely prove to be perfect for musings or to clear one's head. The priest somehow feels that it would be better to go home and forget about this day, but he "is unwilling to let the day end" (34). Even when he already sees the caravan he still denies that he is in need of company and that he came down here to see the Chinaman. Before this, when he is still close to the river, where "the peace is deeper" (32) he lingers and takes the first step to salvation.

When he finds the piece of veil in his pocket he cannot suppress his memories any longer: "He takes [the piece of bridal veil] out, lets it fall. Before it touches the water, he regrets it, but he had his chance, and now his chance is gone." (33) After this follows the revelation of how the priest and the bride met, the course of their relationship and the final ultimatum she gave him. This must be the first time in a long while that he allowed himself to actively think of the past. Interestingly enough, she seems to have been the active part in their

relationship. It all started with a misunderstanding: he wanted to feel “the heat of the fire on her hair” (33) and she, misunderstanding his gesture, “reached out to clasp his wrist” (33). It remains unclear whether she wanted to defend herself and when he explained his intention they laughed at it and their affection began, or whether she had fancied him before and welcomed his gesture. He was still young, as he himself remarks before, so it does not seem impossible for her to have fancied him. They met secretly for about a year and when they stayed in Northern Ireland she addressed the nagging problem that it could not go on like this. She demanded that he has to decide if he wanted to stay with her or with his profession. This was also the night she “caressed the stem of her glass” (33), the memory of which caused the priest much pain at the wedding. He remembers the weather and scenery vividly³, which again shows how much these memories mean to him and what a burden they are to him.

2.1.4 The Priest and the Chinaman

Without wanting to admit it, the priest's feet direct him to the caravan of the Chinaman. One might call it fate that he comes down to this place on this particular night: he knew nothing about the Chinaman living here, offering a cure before the wedding. Had he not steered the conversation to his walks in the area, Miss Dunne would have never brought the attention to the Chinaman – probably out of pure curiosity: “Where you ever down wud the Chinaman, Father?” (25). This innocent question starts a conversation full of references to stereotypes and prejudices, it is almost comical. Firstly, the presupposition that the priest does not know him because he is no Christian and that he offers a mysterious 'cure', secondly the wild speculations of his origin and occupation: “He's a refugee, some relation of them people wud the Chinese, [...] Redmond of the quarry hired him as labourer and now he's down there tending the ewes.’ [...] ‘Says he hasn't lost a lamb yet,’ [...] ‘They say, in all fairness, that he's a

³ Scenery and nature is not only an important part in his memory, but also in the rest of the story, which shall be discussed in more detail in 3.3.

good man even though he doesn't always do it our way" (25). The fact that bothers the speakers most is that he does not mingle with others and that he chooses to do things differently. This, of course, is another source for prejudiced attitudes: For example, "[h]e won't have a dog. [...] 'He'd probably ate the bloody sheep dog'" (25). The harshest judgements come from Sinnott, the same who had admitted to stealing in the confession box. With all this information it is important to know whether they have just heard about it or were actually down there for the cure themselves.

The priest finally reaches the Chinaman's caravan. Maybe he was curious about what the cure really is, but he was definitely surprised by many factors. The Chinaman is described as a man wearing flip flops and a loose track suit. Although he is practising an ancient Chinese cure, he is modern in his clothing and the whole scenery of the spotless, white and clean caravan make the scene a little bizarre. The priest envies the Chinaman for his secluded home with a magnificent view of the peaceful river. Without any detour, the Chinaman analyses and inspects the priest: "Why is tenderness so much more disabling than injury?" (36) is the priest's first thought as he has not been touched for many years. Then, when lying down and being massaged, the transforming impact starts immediately as the priest remembers the end of his affair three years ago. But this time it is different as he remembers the more important, life changing scenes: "She said a man could not know himself and live alone. She believed physical knowledge lay at the far side of love-making" (37). This again proves how strong her personality actually is as these declarations remained unquestioned by him. Then, the end of the affair is reached: "Later that morning when she turned her head and looked at him, he said he could not leave priesthood" (37).

As the massage goes on many sensations are elicited: "The Chinaman is dragging something from the base of his spine. From his tailbone, up through his body" (37). This healing massage not only relaxes him, but forces everything

he ever repressed or denied out of his body until “it crashes from his mouth, a terrible cry that is her name and then it's over.” (37) It was her all along. Although the affair ended three years ago he never allowed himself to dwell on it, but somehow transferred his sorrow on his life's vocation as a means of coping with what he has done. He ruined her life, and almost his as well. This is what makes this story so special: Hadley rightly pointed out that in other cases this would have been the story of a mistake that should have been reversed and the only happy ending could have been the reunion of the separated lovers. However, this is no conventional chick-lit love story. The priest finds consolation through the cure of the Chinaman and not by the touch of a woman.

His revelation does not stop after shouting her name, it has only just begun. He realises that she was wrong. A man can live “happily in a clean place on his own” (37) and believe in what he does. Another helper to this revelation was her metaphor of the empty bowl, and the picture of the alabaster bowl on the Chinaman's wall. She once said that “in every conversation, an invisible bowl existed. Talk was the art of placing decent words into the bowl and taking others out. In a loving conversation, you discovered yourself in the kindest possible way, and at the end the bowl was, once again, empty” (36f). When the priest asks the Chinaman about this bowl it remains unclear whether he even understands him. If he understood the priest, it shows that the priest sees an empty bowl, as he has troubles. This draws a parallel to a conversation at the wedding of the glass being half full or half empty. The alabaster bowl takes this metaphor of pessimism and optimism a step further and makes it life changing. It is again Hadley who acknowledges the importance of her presence in the caravan and the priest's thoughts through this bowl:

Her distinctive image – it establishes her as much more than the necessary woman-sign around which the priest's dilemma can revolve – inadvertently gave him a way of making sense of his choice against her: the idea of the bowl has multiple resonances, but among its meanings must be that emptiness can be a kind of wholeness, after the end of exchanges in the flesh. (Hadley, 2)

Freed from the joys of the flesh, his regrets and the burden that lay on his heart and mind he steps out into the fresh air. In what had seemed immovable, quiet and sad before, he now sees a new beginning: spring. This cure, which freed him from his sorrow came at the right moment. Only one day earlier he would not have been healed as the wedding and the confrontation with her played a big part in this as well.

He sees this experience as an answer from God for which he had prayed so long and sees God in everything, as “God is nature” (38). He can now look back without shame as the healing process has finally begun and he looks forward to the Easter festivities. The image of spring and Easter are particularly suggestive in this story. The priest was lost and saw no hope for the future in winter, where even nature provides no sign of hope. Spring is commonly associated with new beginnings, resolutions and changes in life. Easter is the time of redemption and resurrection of Christ and the liberation from all our sins. The priest's new found trust in God confirms this and his preparation for the Easter festivities will probably be as heartfelt and grateful as never before.

2.2 Night of the Quicken Trees

The second story of this group is “Night of the Quicken Trees”. This story also features a priest who chose priesthood over a woman's love, but this time the story is told from the woman's perspective and does not end on an as happy note as the first one. This story, as tragic and complex as it might be, only serves as a background used to give the character of Margaret Flusk more depth and to provide her with a past that explains her oddities. These oddities, or rather superstitions, are at the centre of the story. The narrative has many elements of a fairy tale and includes many Irish traditions and customs that are not practised any more in most parts of Ireland. This main theme of the story is easily identified not only because of the many superstitions featuring in the narrative, but also because of its preface. This story's preface happens to be an

introduction to a well known story which is sometimes called “The Horned Women” or, in this case “The Feet Water”. It is undoubtedly possible that this version of the tale also appears in other books or family collections, but the same version can be found in Kevin Danaher's collection called *Folktales of the Irish Countryside*. The tale in short summary is about a woman who forgot to take out the feetwater one night, so horned witches with spinning wheels could enter the house easily as the feet water opened the door for them. The women spun for hours and the house was in a big fright, but the daughter sneaked out to fetch water and went to a wise woman she knew to ask for help. Luckily, the woman could help and instructed her to cry out in front of her house: “There is Sliabh n mBan all on fire!” (Danaher, 128). While the witches ran to the mountain the daughter threw out the tub and the remaining water and went back to bed with her mother. When the witches came back neither key, nor feetwater could let them in again and they had to go their way. In other versions of the story the witches send out the woman to fetch water with a broken bucket and make a cake with the blood of her daughter, but the lesson learned is always the same: never forget to throw out the feetwater.

This preface introduces the theme of the story but also underlines its mythical and moral qualities. Moreover, it familiarises the readers with the legend and the consequential custom of the feet water, which is essential for understanding the story, as the folktale is not known outside of Ireland. That this short story is a rewriting of a folktale is also suggested by the setting. It is set in the West of Ireland, which is generally seen as the mythical part of the country, as the Irish language and old customs and superstitions were longer conserved here than in the East of the Island. Terry Eagleton puts it this way:

[...] the wild western coast [...] has come to be associated with all that the Celtic Tiger was busy putting behind it: priestcraft, mythology, the Celtic Revival, folk wisdom, romantic nationalism, dancing at the crossroads, and English language replete with the rhythms of Irish. (Eagleton [2011] 23)

The truth, of course, is something completely different as he pointedly adds in his book *The Truth about the Irish*:

Far from being some Celtic Garden of Eden, [the West] was a bustling, fairly go-ahead sort of region. The idea of the west as an ancient paradise in which time has been suspended didn't fully develop until the end of the last century. Like most dreams of primitive rural paradises, it was the fantasy of townsfolk. (Eagleton [2002] 173)

Keegan takes up this 'fantasy of townsfolk' and creates the ideal surrounding for this story of superstition and wild weather. Margaret Flusk's and Stack's houses are on Dunagore Hill, on the highest point next to the mast, looking out over the Cliffs of Moher. The Cliffs are in walking distance as the characters frequently make their way to the sea in the narrative. Some other towns⁴ close to the houses as well as farther away are mentioned: Ennis, the county town of County Clare, Doolin, a small fishing village about three kilometres away from the Cliffs of Moher, Ennistymon, a prominent village and market town in the North of County Clare, and Dunagore itself, famous for its Castle, situated also in the North of County Clare. Other towns mentioned are Lisdoonvarna, the host of the well known match making festival, and Knock, a small town in county Mayo best known for its pilgrimage sight, the Knock Shrine where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared in 1879.

Margaret is originally from County Wicklow, but no specific town or area within the County are mentioned. Her parents seem to have been farmers as they depended on making hay in the summer. The countryside on the East varies greatly from the West of Ireland and Margaret misses especially the trees tremendously. For her, Dunagore is a strange place without trees, but with a shivering bogland and hard salty wind. She cannot and maybe does not want to adjust to this climate and constantly thinks back to the woods and thick ash-trees back in County Wicklow. It is autumn when she arrives in Dunagore and

⁴ The source for all references to Irish towns except for Ennis, Doolin and Dunagore is wikipedia. The references to Ennis, Doolin and Dunagore are based on www.dubhlinnhouse.com.

she sees no autumn leaves, but only bogland and sod. The December is very wet with hard, salty rain and wind. When spring finally comes the “heather was thick, took on new growth like hair all over the boglands” (144). This is the only gleam of hope one gets in these parts of the country. In the end she travels even farther West to Inis Mor, which is the farthest Island on the West of the Aran Islands and also the farthest Western point of Ireland. According to the seasons described in the book and the age of Margaret's son when they left, she must have stayed near the Cliffs of Moher for about nine years.

2.2.1 Narrative, Style and Structure

As with the previous story “Walk the Blue Fields”, the analysis starts with the structure of the short story. The narrative is structured by seasons: “It was autumn when she came” (125), then winter, with spring following: “Daylight lasted longer but towards evening the red sun always sank into the sea” (144). The next time reference is Valentine's day, then “February turned into a March of many weathers” (146) and finally “[s]ummer came and the rain eased off. Swallows flew back and found their nests, woodbine climbed the ditches and the heather bloomed” (150). Every season has its special events which are significant to the story. For example, Margaret arrives in autumn, meets Stack in winter, starts healing people in summer and in the end of summer sleeps with Stack. The pace is steady and the actions are evenly distributed, also in length, among the seasons. Only when Margaret starts helping people with their ailments the story time accelerates, and even more so when she becomes pregnant and Michael is born. At this point the narrative moves from one year to the next fairly quickly and all the reader knows about the boy's childhood are glimpses of his character, and then suddenly he is seven years old and taken away by his mother to the Aran Islands.

Narrative and dramatic discourse are nearly evenly applied. Although narrative discourse dominates the story, the dramatic discourse serves important

purposes: firstly, it structures the story. While Margaret and Stack serve as reflector figures during the narrative, the dramatisations give the illusion of an unbiased view on their opinion. The thoughts are mediated through a covert narrator. Therefore, the narrative discourse relates the characters' thoughts, feelings and memories and their interactions are almost exclusively dramatised scenes with only some remarks to weather, mood and gestures. Secondly, they clarify the awkward behaviour of Margaret and Stack and their lack in the ability to have interpersonal relationships. Thirdly, and most curiously, they serve as a platform for wit and sarcasm. These stylistic features are surely the last ones a reader would expect in such a mysterious story, but wit and sarcasm make the story and the scenes appear rather more realistic and the characters more human. These features also appear in narrative passages: A first example would be the flashbacks of the summers Margaret spent with the priest and how he "then went off to the seminary, became the pride of a family who no longer called him by his name" (130). This for one part makes fun of the custom of calling a family member having entered the priesthood, no longer by his name, but only addressing him with 'Father'. Sarcasm also emphasises her bitterness and hatred. Another, funny situation arises when Stack struggles with the instructions to cook peas for the Christmas dinner. He probably wants to boast in front of Margaret and offer a healthy dish for her, but his efforts go unnoticed: "Margaret could read the directions from where she sat. Maybe he was going blind" (139). Margaret's matter of fact statement manages to undo all his efforts, which creates a rather comic scene for the reader. A last example shows that Stack's clumsy behaviour in front of women makes the woman herself and the reader laugh. Stack has been wondering about her oddities for quite a while and confronts her with them bluntly: "Tell me this: what sort of woman pisses outside?" (150). Surely he must be really desperate to know why she does it by now, same as the reader, but the only answer she gives is laughter – again, the same response is evoked in the reader.

The last point to be made relating to structure is the density of information. Right from the beginning of the narrative the reader is presented with numerous

pieces of information about the characters' appearance, nature and their thoughts. They are almost too numerous and some crucial details might escape the reader's attention. For example, the fact that Stack's father still had a head full of hair when he died is extensively reported with the important information in a subordinate clause: "The undertaker had combed it [ie his father's hair] as he laid him out in the parlour *but Stack hadn't cried until the burial was over*" (137, emphasis added). The close connection to his father and his belated grief reveal important features of his character, but are mentioned only in passing. The same applies to Margaret's outer appearance: the narrator describes her looks whenever necessary, but the most accurate and objective descriptions surely come from the people in town when they compare the size of the two neighbours, and Stack himself, when he muses about having seen her bare breasts, her long legs and her wild, long hair.

Coming back to the folktale qualities already addressed in the previous chapter, these can also be discovered by the use of perspective and point of view. Firstly, the story is written in past tense, which is traditionally used in myths and folktales, giving the illusion of a distant past. In this case it is more complex as the story is set in the late 20th or early 21st century which can be derived from the characters' use of cars, television sets, radios and Christmas decorations. This story, different to others in this collections, could not happen to anyone at any time, but is rather intended to teach a moral. Secondly, the perspective and point of view are also well chosen for this kind of mock-mythical narrative: a covert third person narrator renders the story using Margaret and Stack as alternating reflector characters. Thereby, the reader gets the chance to view the characters from both the outside and the inside. This gives more depth to the characters and allows for a more balanced and thus more reliable characterisation. Moreover, it allows readers to judge the motivation of the characters' decisions and to infer the moral of the tale.

The last element that adds a mythical and folk tale quality to the story is the occasional use of the Irish language. Irish gaelic is still a symbol of Irish independence and the last areas where Irish is still spoken as a mother tongue, the Gaeltacht, are in the West of Ireland. Margaret Flusk has known Irish since her childhood which is proven by the song her mother sang and which she understands: “Cad a dhéanfamid feasta gan adhmaid? Tá deireadh na gcoillte ar lár.” (132). Keegan herself provides a translation at the end of the story: “What will we do for timber now that the woods are gone?” (161). Furthermore it is suggested by the Nowlan woman in her prophecy that Margaret should educate her child in the Irish tongue. Another Irish language association is established to the quicken trees, albeit only in the appendix to the stories. Keegan explains that the term 'quicken tree' is another name for the mountain ash and that it possesses “formidable magic and protective powers” (161). It is described in mythology as having the power of enchantment. The adjectives given to the trees by Margaret Flusk in the story are supported by the translation of the Irish word for the tree: caorthann, where caor means “both a berry and a blazing flame” (161). Margaret describes the “bright orange berries of the quicken trees” (141) and their “silver boughs” (133). Keegan also adds that the word 'quicken' refers to the quickening and life-giving powers of the tree which Margaret felt for herself. The Oxford English Dictionary⁵, on the other hand, says nothing of this etymology, but simply refers to an unknown etymology probably from the word 'quick' and an unknown suffix.

2.2.2 Margaret Flusk

Margaret Flusk is an interesting albeit eccentric woman, she is a strange, weird and superstitious Irish woman. The episodes revealing her oddities and the reasons for her peculiar decisions indicate the uniqueness of character. In this

⁵ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156423?redirectedFrom=quicken%20tree#eid27115331> or *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume XIII, page 18

character analysis the focus will thus be on her past, her superstitions and talents, and her relationship to Stack.

When Margaret Flusk arrived in Dunagore she had never lived on the coast before. Her past life was spent in County Wicklow, on the farm of her parents, “Skies were blue back then” (129). The first page is almost exclusively used to describe and characterise her by means of direct characterisation. This helps the reader to understand moments later in the story better: she is “a bold spear of a woman” and “had neither hat nor rubber boots nor a man” (125). The last three items are clearly what one is expected to have living in this area – the last one is at least something society would expect. Margaret is different: she has long brown hair, “like seaweed” (125), and a sheepskin coat “that fitted her to perfection” (125). The loose hair and the coat are definitely not appropriate for a life near the coast as she will soon find out, but still never change. On this first page are three additional pieces of information, vital to understand the rest of the story: Firstly, “when she looked out at the mortal world it was with the severity of a woman who has endured much and survived” (25). Secondly, that she is superstitious and thirdly, that she is “not yet forty but it was past the time when she could bear a child.” (125) All three traits introduce her almost as a creature of another world and show that she has had a turbulent past the reader is eager to find out.

This life- and character changing past is laid open in pieces in the course of the story by means of memories that come back to her from time to time. The associations and moments she remembers show that these memories are still fresh and on the surface of her mind, but some are still suppressed and not at all overcome. Margaret tries hard not to think of the priest as it hurts too much. Not much is known about him. He was her first cousin and helped on the farm to make the hay every summer. Life seems to have been good to her when Margaret was a teenager, until the priest told her they would marry with the Bishop's permission and be together. For him it was probably just a flirtatious

game he played. If his character was good, he was unaware of the harm he has done, but it is more likely that he was aware of it and tried to suppress his own feelings. Why else would he sleep with her, ponder on it for a while afterwards and then just leave her. He possibly left his house to her in order to make up for his wrongs as he surely must have found out about her pregnancy. Margaret only thinks the worst of him: she wonders if he rots in hell now and sees no overall importance in his life: "Nothing in the house she'd come across meant anything" (130).

All her sufferings are traced back to the one, fateful and magical night she spent with the priest under the quicken trees. "A heavy shower fell out of the blue" (133) and the hay was ruined. Due to the bad mood at home she ran away into the forest where she "always felt marginally safer" (133). Interesting about this memory is also the way in which it is described: this moment changed her life and character forever: "[...] the thrill of it: the thrill after a decade of sitting on ticks of hay, eating scallions, him leaving the first primrose on the saddle of her bike. By breaking his vows of celibacy it felt possible that he might, somehow, make others" (140). Still, she later describes it full of bitterness, as if it was nothing special to her and the first disappointment of many: "The experience was like almost everything; it wasn't a patch on what it could have been" (134). Margaret blames every downfall after that on this night and thinks she is being punished for what she has done: she becomes pregnant, loses her child, loses the ability to bear children and cannot find inner peace: "...forgiving might mean forgetting and she preferred to hold onto her bitterness, and her memory. But always she blamed herself" (145). Her obsession with infertility is present at many moments as she compares herself even with animals: "Ponies stood with their backside to the wind as though the wind would fertilise them. Every creature seemed capable or on the verge of flight" (126).

It is strange, but understandable that she chose to live in the priest's house after his death. It is unknown from whose or which money she lives on and this does

not seem to be the first stop on her flight from the past either. Her flight will go on as far West as she can without leaving Irish soil as she does not wish to be harmed or harm anyone. Margaret specifies the aspects of the past that hurt her the most, namely the things that could have been: "The greatest lesson the priest had taught her was the lesson of where one step can lead" (134). She made her presence known to him in the wood and mistook the cry of the Banshee for a "stray cat" (145) the night her child died: therefore she blames it all on herself. Her life seems to change, firstly after her menstruation started again and secondly, after she visited the Nowlan woman. She said: "It wasn't your fault the child died" (148). This day she cries for what seems like the first time and the bereavement can finally start to be overcome, although her opinion used to be that "[r]emorse altered nothing and grief just brought it back" (130). Life looks better, especially after she is a mother again. She fears greatly for her child's safety and overprotects her son. What has been almost forgotten as the years pass is her vow to leave as soon as someone gets hurt, Stack's dream and the prophecy of the Nowlan woman: "Don't stay in the place you're in. There's a shadow in the back of that house" (148). Stack has not forgotten. Also, the shadow of the past and the priest she saw sometimes in the beginning had to come back at some stage, therefore, she left. Although her burden and sorrow seems to fade Margaret can never overcome her superstitions and search her true inner self. She likes being alone and is so used to running away she probably cannot help herself. The purpose of the priest's house was fulfilled and there was little reason for her to stay.

Margaret Flusk's superstitions are at the centre of the story. Whether these beliefs are just hers or widely spread is of little importance here – the focus lies on her and the choices she makes and in which situations. She tries to get rid of them when her son is born, "[b]ut however she changed her behaviour, she could do nothing about her nature" (157). Also, the question arises when these superstitions started to control her life. We do not know this for certain as Margaret always seemed to have had a vivid imagination and dreams, which is illustrated by her attempt to fly off the roof with an umbrella. This character trait

disappears later in her life. It was replaced, probably after the night under the quicken trees, by her superstition. Already as a child Margaret's favourite place was in the wood: the trees are what she misses most in the West of Ireland, probably because of the fond childhood memories and because the most life changing moment in her life happened under trees. Even during the sexual act with the priest botanical vocabulary is used and matches the reproduction of trees: "he was planting his seed in her" (134). This also forms a connection between her and the trees around her and she knew she would be punished for this. The West is all different, "[t]he landscape looked metal, all sturdy and everlasting but to Margaret, coming from a place of oak and ash, it was without substance" (127). She thinks that "[s]he'd never get used to Dunagore, knowing no seed would take root and grow into a sycamore anywhere near that house" (135). These thoughts alone show how rooted she actually is to her home and how deep her wounds have to be for her to leave her beloved woods behind and go farther and farther West. In her opinion "people were nothing but a nuisance" (127) and so she keeps to herself. Only when Christmas comes it is remarked that "the postman was run off his feet but Margaret didn't even get a card" (132). This might just be a remark to stress the difference between her and the other 'normal' people around her, but could also suggest her loneliness and that she secretly longs for a card, especially from her mother about whom she knows nothing.

As Margaret said, she cannot change her nature. Her superstitions are rooted in her and cannot be overcome easily. Here, in the West, her superstitions seem to deepen as they keep her relatively sane and alive. Her rituals and beliefs can be divided into three categories: signs from the world around her to which she reacts, her very own superstitions that make up her unique character, and old, widely known traditions. Beginning with the first category, there are two examples which are important for the progression of the story. Vital is probably the cry of the Banshee Margaret has mistaken for the cry of a stray cat in the night her first child died. Banshee means translated "female of the elves" (de Vries 34) and they are rarely seen by humans. Only their wailing in the night

can be heard and is taken for an omen of approaching death. (cf. de Vries) This is one of the reasons Margaret blames herself for her child's death: in her opinion she should have been able to read the omen rightly and act upon it. So after the quicken trees made her fertile, the Banshee told her that her child was dying. It is quite probable to become superstitious in her position. She blames herself, but there is something else behind the wrongs that happened to her, so they can be coped with more easily. The second mistake she made with her child was not to sell the caul to a sailor. The man came to her shortly after she had given birth and offered to "give you me last penny for it. Me father and the one brother I had on this earth drowned." (145f), but she refused to sell it, neither "for love nor money" (146). Margaret knew that this was the wrong decision, but she could not be parted from it and in the end had to throw it away anyway. A caul is a membrane covering the newborn's head after birth and is, according to de Vries, said to protect a sailor from drowning. If kept by the child itself, it is predetermined for a religious service, is "clairvoyant, [is] able to see ghosts" (de Vries 87), lucky and especially guarded from witches or fairies (cf de Vries 87). It probably ails Margaret not to have sold it as she left the sailor unprotected and is responsible for his death, as she finds out by the Nowlan woman's prophecy. She does not make the same mistake twice and not only gives it to a sailor as a present, but also treats him like royalty. One more example from a sign she is reading is not generally important for the course of the story, but shows that she is ever ready to read the signs. When she goes to town and goes to a pub "a cat [is seen] sitting with her back to the fire [so] she ran out and ordered more coal" (146). This is another act of superstition as a cat sitting with her back to a fire is, according to de Vries said to predict frosty weather in folklore. In the same breath it is observed by her that "the hills looked closer or black before it rained (146) and that when she saw a crow on top of her wardrobe she "drove to the chapel and lit a candle for the soul of her child" (146). Crows are "generally a bad omen" and in Celtic mythology "connected with terrible beings who were once goddesses and, after Christianity, live on as hags or monsters" (de Vries 120). To go and light a candle is thus Margaret's own response to the sign.

This leads us to the superstitions which Margaret interprets or responds to in a peculiar manner. To start, on the first page it says: "Being superstitious, she kept [the priest's] clothes" (125). She does this so that he has to go naked into the next world. Not only is this a first hint at her hatred towards the priest, but also to her oddities. Also, she wonders if the priest is now in hell and whether she would join him there, but then concludes that "it seemed more likely that she'd be turned into a pucán or a dock leaf" (133). It is hard to understand why someone would imagine oneself as a "sexually active male goat" (161) in one's next life. Also, she sets fire to any item in the priest's house she does not need. The same will happen later to Stack's possessions. This seems to give her great satisfaction, probably because she loves the sight of burning wood. The most curious of her habits and also the one that puzzles Stack most is that "[s]he wants to pass water on every blade of grass around her house, she could not say why" (127). One possible explanation could be that she wants to mark her territory like a dog, but no specific reason is given in the story itself. Another interesting personal choice is that she decides to believe in the prophecy of the Nowlan woman. It is arguable and for everyone to decide whether this is a 'real' prophecy or whether the woman heard people in town talk and filled in the missing pieces of the puzzle herself. Irrespective of the source of the prophecy, it changes Margaret's life greatly: she is told that her first child's death was not her fault, that there is a man with an "s" in her future, that she should not stay in this house for long, that the goat is unhealthy and that she should have another child now. Margaret follows all the advice given to her by the woman, but this was not all the fortune-teller did: she also sent the man with a toothache to Margaret's doorstep as he says: "The Nowlan woman in the caravan told me. She says you're a seventh child, that you have the cure" (151). After she healed the first man, "the whole parish started to come" (151). Strangely enough, the fortune-teller is right and Margaret starts to help everyone who comes to her door: "Margaret placed her hands on these strangers and felt their fears and their fears put her heart crossways" (152). The people are incredibly grateful, but never grant her a break and almost besiege her home night and day. This continues until her son Michael turns seven and she decides to stop. This is

also the end of her stay in Dunagore as the people of the parish start to turn against her and threaten her. So she keeps her promise to herself and leaves before anyone gets hurt.

There are several examples in the narrative fitting into the third category – widespread and well known customs she lives by. Driven by her desire to avoid any more bad luck she “never threw out ashes of a Monday or passed a labourer without blessing his work. She shook salt on the hearth, hung a Saint Bridget's cross on the bedroom wall and kept track of changes in the moon” (126). Salt, for example, protects “against evil spirits, witches, even the Devil” (de Vries 198). To live life according to the phases of the moon has been done for many hundred years all round the world and is especially associated with the female cycle. In the beginning Margaret has lost her fertility, so tracking the changes of the moon could be interpreted as a desperate clinging to the past. Saint Bridget is a Christian saint considered as another Mary because of her piety. Her celtic ancestor is Brigid who was “honoured for her protecting care” (Ó hÓgáin 61) and whose cross is hung up to “ensure health and good fortune for the ensuing year” (Ó hÓgáin 64). Another folk custom is mentioned when she starts to clean out the priest's house after moving in. She scrubs the floors, paints the walls and disinfects the doorstep (125), because “although she did not come from Clare, she knew nothing good ever happens in a dirty house” (125).

Probably the most important superstition and focus of this short story is the incident with the feet water. The theme has already been introduced and explained in the preface so the reader is prepared when it happens in the narrative: on the night before Christmas Eve Margaret falls asleep in her chair with her feet still in the feetwater. When she awakes she dries her feet and goes to bed, but leaves the water where it is. After waking up she finds the first magical act of the feet water: she is bleeding and is therefore “still a child bearing woman” (135). One of her biggest sorrows has vanished and she feels

newborn. The second magic is performed with Margaret's help when she sees the cold feet water "[s]he opened the back door and threw it out on the wind. The wind was so loud it shouted like man" (135). The wind is of course Stack, who feels and acts differently after this night:

[...] he felt light in the head, was hot in himself then cold. He started to sweat and passed wind. He felt the stone that was always in his throat growing bigger, going down into his stomach. He sat on the toilet for a long time before it passed and when it did it was the size of a stout bottle. When he looked in the mirror, a stranger looked back at him." (136)

After this he has strange dreams and sleeps a whole day. This incident changes both their lives: without it Margaret would never have gotten pregnant and Stack would have never found the courage to talk to her. The first hint at Margaret's possibly wilful enchantment comes from herself: "She was expecting a child. She knew this the way she knew, after Christmas morning, that it was Stack, not the wind, on her doorstep; it was him who shouted" (154). The question arising here is whether she knew as soon as she opened the door, as soon as she splashed the water on him or only when she mused on the scream after she had closed the door. This is not revealed in the narrative, but what we do know is that both Margaret and Stack are aware of the feetwater's magic powers.

When describing the life of Margaret and Stack it is mentioned that "[t]hey say something bad will happen if you don't throw out the feetwater. They say man should not live alone. They say if you see a goat eating dock leaves, it will rain. Margaret gave birth to her son in the priest's house" (156). All these pieces of information are seemingly unrelated to each other, yet, the part about the feetwater could relate to the fact that Michael was born in the priest's house. This place, loaded with memories and old grief, might not be the right place to raise a child. After Michael's birth Margaret tries to change and even to give up on her superstitions. - She did not succeed: "In all the years she lived in Dunagore, she never lit her own fire, never failed to pull rushes in February and, hard as she tried, could never throw out ashes of a Monday or go out as far as

the clothesline without placing the tongs across the pram" (157). – Furthermore, she tries not to dwell on thoughts about the priest, but cannot help herself:

If she hadn't lost the priest's child, she would not have inherited his house. If she hadn't inherited his house, she could not have been washing her feet that night and she might have remembered to throw out the footwater instead of throwing it like a spell over Stack and eaten his Christmas snake and had his child. (158)

All these regrets do not help her now as all this might have been prevented had she said "Seachain!" (Danaher 127) to protect an innocent soul, as she was told by the folktale. Stack for his part knew right away that this incident changed him. In the end he is wiser than before and vows that even "if he lived for a hundred years he would never again venture up to a woman's house in the night nor let her come anywhere near him with footwater" (160).

The last important point to be made about Margaret is her relationship to Stack. This is particularly interesting as they are both not used to another person's company, especially of a member of the other sex. This is particularly well illustrated by all the misunderstandings, unfulfilled hopes and the brutality of everyday life together. However, before focusing on their time together it is necessary to analyse the character of Stack.

2.2.3 Stack and Josephine

Stack's character is - like Margaret Flusk's – important to analyse as the narration gives an insight into both minds. Thus, a situation is presented either through her or his eyes, through both alternatively or through a conversation, which means the narrator presents both points of view. Stack's view of things varies greatly from hers from time to time. This only stresses how little they both know and learn about a relationship and of living together. At the time when

Margaret moves into the priest's house Stack is 49 years old, a bachelor, has no hair left on his head and "seeds of grey in his eyes" (127). He has lived in this place for all his life and worked the land with his father. Eleven years ago his father had died and his mother must have died even before that. Now he is left with the bogs and earns money by selling turf. In this house he hoards everything from the past and even dedicated whole rooms to memories to his mother and father. Also, he has become bitter after all these lonely years and thinks nothing about the youth of today who want to see the world and know nothing about the values of the homeland. In the course of the story it becomes clear that he seems in one way satisfied with his life, but in another way he wishes for female company. On some nights he cannot sleep and "liked being up knowing others were asleep" (135). He had once courted a "small farmer's daughter" (128) for twelve years and "bought her six hundred and twenty four Sunday dinners" (128). Still, she would not let him touch her anywhere and eventually went away and married someone else. When Margaret moves in he is of course curious about her, but decides right away that this woman is weird because of the way she dresses – not at all suitable for a life near the sea – how she acts and what she does: "Margaret Flusk is wild, he thought. Hadn't he seen her bare breast under the fur? Sure didn't she piss outside?" (137).

The whole situation of Stack, apart from being a 49 year old bachelor, becomes more curious when it is revealed that he does not live alone: "but with Josephine, the sleek brown goat who had the run of the house" (128). After the farmer's daughter married that other man he had bought the goat through an ad in a farmer's journal. Josephine lives a very privileged life in Stack's house: she sleeps in his bed, is milked gently every night, gets fig rolls from town and is even taken for rides in the car. Also, she has many advantages in comparison to, for example, a dog: she eats anything, goes anywhere, is like a radiator in winter, and gives milk. The only disadvantage with her is that Stack has to keep some doors closed as "Josephine liked to go in there and eat his mother's slippers" (128). This move of the goat is for one thing normal for the animal, but also a way of her to erase any other woman's presence in the house. This goat

is easily jealous and is even more so when Margaret intrudes in her happy life. Goats are complex creatures as is recorded through folklore. Margaret for one thing knows that goats can see the wind – meaning she can forecast the weather - just like herself. She-goats are also “a poor man's cow” (de Vries 218) and stand for agility, elegance as well as stupidity. Other mythological references are made mostly about he-goats as they are seen as descendants of ancient gods and are part of many fertility rites as well as the witches Sabbath where they stand for the Horned God, the Devil himself (cf de Vries 218).

Coming back to Stack and Margaret it is quite amusing to read about Stack's fantasies about them being together, first in horror - “Wouldn't it be terrible [...] if that woman took a liking to me? She'd have nothing to do only break down the wall between the two houses and destroy our peace for ever more,” (131) – and then later in favour of her: “He was putting the two of them together, adding them up in his mind” (140). Little does he know at that time that all his thoughts were prophecies that will eventually come true. Also rather amusing is his pondering about women in general which is commented on by the narrator: “Stack, like every other man who has never known a woman, believed he knew a great deal about women” (131). This topic turns up repeatedly in the story until at the end Stack himself is certain that he will never understand women. On the magical Christmas day after he has been bewitched by her footwater he took a bath, started to cook, “bucks himself up, came to his senses” (138) and went over to her house where Margaret, instead of staring him down, “out of common decency” (138) opens the door and follows him to his house. Stack feels especially young on this day and so does Margaret: “It was strange to be producing eggs again. Wouldn't it be lovely to lay out? She thought, like a hen” (138). At this point the readers probably expect them to make a baby right away, but she is still of the opinion that it would be better to cut men out as they were only a nuisance.

At this point the reader sees Stack's house for the first time from a different perspective which is quite necessary as the bachelor sees it as a haven of memories of good old times. All Margaret sees are goat droppings on the lawn, innumerable old possessions all around the house, goat hair in the bed and "[a] live snake was being fried in a pool of oil" (139). The whole situation of these two characters together is full of wit, sarcasm and changes of mood. Although she is uncomfortable at first – Josephine's "eyes were frightening," (141), "Maybe the goat slept with him. Just imagine," (140) – and is insulted mildly by him, she decides to stay: "It is the stomach, not the heart, that drives us" (141). In the month following this night where she stayed, "drank the tea, ate several cuts of toast and most of the eel" (142), Stack is the driving force behind their relationship. They both, independently from each other, muse about being together and having a child. Again, the amusing point here is that they both think of each other as extremely odd, but decide not to mind. For Valentine's Day he buys her sticks of ash so she can build an enormous fire with it. However, their relationship only takes the next step after the fortune teller's prophecy and after they became friendly at the Cliffs of Moher where he followed her and sees into her for the first time. But again, the reader's expectations are disappointed as "[w]hen she reached Dunagor she didn't even bid him goodnight but walked into her own house and shut the door" (150).

Stack wishes greatly to be with her at this point, and that he had not wasted his years on that farmer's daughter. The next step is taken by Margaret herself: as they are already friendly she shares a particularly funny wish for a cure with him and then seduces him. After this she feels wonderful: "The whites of her eyes were like snow and her skin had turned into the skin of a woman who lives in salt wind" (153). It looks like she finally accepted where she lives now. A twist is given to the scene by yet another of Stack's prophecies: "He suddenly knew she'd move away and couldn't bear the thought of her being gone" (152). Although the superstitions in the narrative are all about her, the biggest gift of prophecy is truly Stack's. Firstly his dream prophesises her flight before he even knows her, and then he repeatedly has further revelations as the story

progresses. What Stack did not see coming was just how much his life would change. Some changes are for the better as he, for example eats better than ever before, has a clean house and a family. Other changes did not turn out quite as he hoped they would: Margaret sets fire to all his mother's belongings – again a woman that cannot cope with another woman's presence in the house – and keeps far away from him so he again, has a woman he is not allowed to touch. Margaret is “as bad as the small farmer's daughter who, in all fairness, never threw up her dinners” (156). Josephine also does not like the new situation as she is tethered outside in the shed, her milk is taken by Margaret, not by Stack, who also does not seem to love her any more. A change for the better is that Stack is finally a part of society. This will be discussed in further detail in the chapter below. For now it suffices to say that he feels and looks younger than ever and goes to town more often now. Stack loves being a father although the child is nothing like him, which “mystified without surprising him” (158). He walks the bogs with his son, who grows to be “tall as a stake” (158) which is a pun of Stack's name as he himself is rather short.

Margaret was ferocious as a mother, defending her child and overly caring for it, was especially ruthless when it came to protecting her child. As soon as she started to be harassed by the people from town she decided to leave with Michael. The boy was seven by that time and as odd as his parents: he never crawled, but just walked one day, could write his name backwards and upside down, and loved to ride on Josephine's back over the bogs. The flight of mother and son is only seen through Stack's eyes and also foreseen by him: “Stack knew she was going before she went” (159). He was at the strand when she stepped into the boat without a word. Only Michael cried out so Stack “[h]eld his son in his arms, then let him go” (159). It says a lot about Stack's character that instead of “making his future happy” he “stood on the strand and watched the only woman he had ever loved vanish from sight” (160). One argument for him could be that their life together was not what he had hoped for, so he opts to be alone with Josephine again. The Aran Islands are not too far away, still the reader as well as Stack probably knows that he will never see them again.

Stack acts as if he wanted to erase the recent past: he plans to brick up the wall again and only looks into the future: “There'd be long winter nights and storms to blot out and remind him of the past. Although he was no longer young his near future was certainty” (160). He has always led a simple life, so this simple outlook is enough for him. Having a family was only a short adventure.

2.3 Celibacy, Shattered Hopes and Superstitions

After analysing the narrative technique and the characters of “Walk the Blue Fields” and “Night of the Quicken Trees” separately and in great detail, it is now time to look at the similarities and overlapping themes and symbols. Firstly, a large section will be dedicated to religion in Ireland with a special focus on tradition and customs and celibacy. Also, the shattered dreams of the two women – the bride and Margaret Flusk – will be considered, as well as the unusual cures and dreams that feature in both narratives. In addition to these aspects, a smaller, but nonetheless important, part will deal with bachelorhood in Irish rural society. Lastly, some features that have already been hinted at above will be discussed in more detail, namely the lexic and symbolic richness in the two stories. The last part of this chapter will be dedicated to some selected symbols and images which are employed in one or both of the stories.

2.3.1 Religion, Priesthood and Superstitions

Before contrasting and comparing the two priests in “Walk the Blue Fields” and “Night of the Quicken Trees”, it is advisable to look at the status of religion in Ireland. The thematic choice and unique approach Claire Keegan employs in these short stories can only be understood properly when the importance of the Catholic Church in Ireland is taken into account. Arensberg argues in his article from 1937 that there are many different versions of Ireland to be found when taking a closer look at the island. There is the “mystic land of the past”, then the “happy-go-lucky” place, but also the “sober, hard-working land of minute towns”

which is “a land of hard realities” (Arensberg 4). Most important here is the fourth kind of Ireland he identifies:

It is the Ireland of the Faith, the Island of Saints and Scholars. It is the land of the devout, where word and deed breathe a religious fervour which most of us have forgotten. [...] Well-filled churches rise above every hamlet now and the black-frocked priest is a familiar friendly figure. (Arensberg 4)

Although this picturesque statement on religion was written about seventy years ago, there is still some truth in it today. Being Catholic has been a crucial factor of daily life in Ireland for hundreds of years. It affected decisions on “family life, education, health care and social welfare and has influenced the schools people attended, the friends they had and who they married” (Inglis 59). This has been true for many countries in Europe, but while the majority of these states has been rigorously secularised, the Catholic Church has retained its powerful position in Ireland and still „over 90 percent of population in the republic [of Ireland] is Roman Catholic“ (Inglis 63). Not only the sheer number of members of the Catholic Church is astounding, but also the regular practice of religion in the daily life of the Irish looks for its match. For example, the prayers in the morning and the rosary in the evening are fixed rituals in many households that are not to be missed. These rituals are incorporated in many Irish novels, for example, John McGahern's *Memoir*, which will be discussed in the following chapter. The gender issue in these daily religious practices is quite interesting: although men hold the higher and more powerful positions, women seem to be more rigorous in their daily practices. In other words: “All of the world religions are patriarchal institutions. Yet in Catholic Ireland, as elsewhere, women have tended to have higher levels of religious belief and practice.” (Inglis 66)

In modern times, since the Celtic Tiger, there has been a decline in the importance of religion in issues of daily life. Inglis blames it on the shift from a rural society to a modern industrialised society: “With a shift towards an economy based on manufacturing and services, the practice of each generation of married couples having large families declined. This considerably reduced

the need for permanent celibacy, late marriage and emigration“ (Inglis 72f). Where the church had its say before, namely in moral issues concerning business men and politicians, a modern viewpoint started to push aside the old moral values. Moreover, the masses that used to attend church on Sunday declined. This, of course, mainly applies to city surroundings where the new values were adopted faster than anywhere else. The factor that is interesting for the two short stories is that “[i]n this new system sex, sexual feelings and emotions were no longer hidden and denied; [...] These changes are reflected most in the demise of the image of the shy, pious, humble, pure, chaste and modest Irish colleen and her replacement in cultural representation by an urbane, confident, assertive and sexually adventurous young woman“ (Inglis 73). Now, in a time when sexuality is lived out more freely, the question whether celibacy is still up to date is bound to have reached Ireland. As a last point it is important to add that despite all these changes and the diminished range of influence of the institution of the Catholic Church does not automatically mean a “decline in Catholic culture. [...] This will remain the case until people devise alternative ways of celebrating transitional events such as birth, marriage, and death“ (Inglis 73f).

On such a celebration, in our case a wedding, we meet the priest in “Walk the Blue Fields”. He seems to be the only one available in the area, otherwise he probably would not have been asked to perform the ceremony. Not much is known about the town itself, but it seems to be rather small and surrounded by farms. The nameless priest is mesmerised by the nameless woman's blazing red hair, her white scalp and her freckles. They have shared a love affair for one year until she could not take it any longer. Still, the priest chooses priesthood over love. This shows the reader the importance of his faith in his life. So the question that arises is, why did his faith start to fade? It might have been the upcoming wedding he had to perform and the thoughts of their time together and that it is almost impossible for them to ever be together again. He finds happiness in the end. The unnamed bride, whose name the priest cries out once in the story, but is never revealed to the reader, had not. The other priest,

in “Night of the Quicken Trees”, is only described through Margaret Flusk's eyes. This makes it impossible to judge his character in an unbiased and objective way. What can be derived is that he flirted with a teenage girl every summer over many years and promised to marry her. Then he became a priest and stopped talking to her. What might have happened is that he had no choice but to become a priest and then had to suppress his true feelings until they met under the quicken trees. It was her decision to talk to him, but he seduced her and, judging from the way the act is described, almost took advantage of her. He made her hope for more, but simply left without a word and went away to his parish near the Cliffs of Moher. It cannot be said whether his life was happy or miserable, but her life was certainly ruined by him.

In a superficial attempt to summarise the two plots, it can be said that two priests who were devoted to their profession could not help themselves and indulged in the pleasures of the flesh. The two women who surrendered to the priests' desire ended up leading unhappy lives with men they do not love. The priests, on the other hand, might have fits of regret or a bad conscience, but mainly live a quiet and contemplative life within the security of the Catholic Church. Still, while reading the stories, it does not feel as cruel and heartless as in this summary. Quite on the contrary, the readers are lured into feeling what the protagonists feel: the pain, then the relief of the priest, the sadness of the bride; the pain and unhappiness of Margaret Flusk, the helplessness of Stack and the priest. These many emotions that make up the stories make it quite impossible to take sides, as Keegan manages to make every viewpoint understandable.

Another topic that should be discussed, if only briefly, is the fact that some characters are not given any names. The priests are obviously nameless, which is aptly explained by Margaret Flusk when her suitor “became the pride of a family who no longer called him by his name” (130) and is only referred to as 'the priest' and addressed as 'Father'. In “Walk the Blue Fields” the priest, the

Chinaman and the bride are some kind of nameless trinity. The priest lost his name after ordination, the Chinaman's name is probably unknown by the others, but the bride has a name that is not revealed. At one point in the story the priest cries out her name which has been released from his spine by the massage: "[...] and it crashes from his mouth, *a terrible cry that is her name* and then it's over" (37, emphasis added). A possible explanation could be that the reader is not meant to be well acquainted with her and leaving out her name makes the relationship even more impersonal. The focus and sympathy of the story lies with the priest, not with the nameless bride, although she is the one who is suffering the most and also the longest. The wedding "in literature [...]" has traditionally supplied the happy ending to comedy, connoting social stability, happiness, and the renewal of life" (Seigneuret 819). Her wedding proves to be quite the opposite, although the romantic reader still has the choice to dream up a happy future for her when she overcomes her grief and embraces her new life with her husband. This she probably has to achieve all alone, just like Margaret Flusk, who chose to manage her life on her own.

The link between Margaret Flusk and the Chinaman is their ability to cure others. Both apply unorthodox methods to heal people's ailments and both are asked to treat the priest of the parish. In "Walk the Blue Fields" the people at the wedding think the priest knows nothing of the Chinaman as the latter is no Christian and thus not part of the community. This is rather presumptuous as the priest possibly does not join in the general gossip and usually does not walk this far, so he had no chance to hear from or meet this Chinaman. His feet carry him to the Chinaman without knowing what awaits him. Margaret Flusk, on the other hand, is known by the priest and consciously sought out by him to help him with his "bad leg" (156) as he has heard what she does for the others in the parish.

Both healers are outsiders of society, like to keep to themselves and do things in an unconventional way. The Chinaman heals the priest with tea and a

massage that brings his suppressed feelings to the surface and thus allows him to be healed. What he does to treat other ailments, why people started coming to him and where he learned his cure is unknown. Margaret Flusk has the gift of healing, according to the Nowlan woman, because she is “a seventh child” (151). According to folklore as de Vries explains “the 7th daughter of a 7th daughter has special gifts, especially healing” (de Vries 416). We only know of one cure she utilises: she catches a frog and asks the man to put its hind legs in his mouth without hurting the frog. Then she lets the frog free again and the man is healed. The frog has always been a mysterious creature and is often associated with God. In history, “early Christians in an effort to stamp out every other religion, condemned the frog as a heretic and a devil” (Garai 85). In folklore, the frog is described as “curative: esp. against diseases for which he may be responsible” (de Vries 205). Why Margaret Flusk knows of all this is never revealed, but her healing capacity also seems to involve her feelings and hands as it says: “Margaret placed her hands on these strangers and felt their fears” (152).

Another magical element of the two stories is the power of dreams. Dream interpretation is a very old art which has been taken up again by psychoanalysis. Dreams have been analysed in many ways, one of them focusing on the prophetic qualities of dreams (cf. Seigneuret 407). In “Walk the Blue Fields”, the priest dreams that “the wind had blown the freckles off her body. Later that morning, when she turned her head and looked at him, he said he could not leave priesthood” (37). While an interpretation of the dream is rather difficult, it had an impact on the priest as he afterwards found the heart to confess his decision. The blown off freckles might indicate a process of purification of her body and he thus felt assured that he should end the affair. Another one of many possibilities is that he saw a feature he loved about her being blown away which might symbolize the loss of his fleshly desires after the end of the affair. In “Night of the Quicken Trees”, dreams take on a more obvious prophetic nature. Margaret Flusk is the first to have an intense and memorable dream:

There was a loft in her dream whose floor sprouted grass. [...] Margaret lay supine, wearing nothing only a man's trousers and when she put her hand down there, instead of a penis, was a fat lizard which was part of her, [...] A woman looking like herself came in [...]. When she saw the lizard she didn't flinch but took it inside her anyhow and when Margaret woke she felt herself to make sure she wasn't turning into a man. (135)

This happens during the night she leaves the feetwater inside, which is also the she starts to menstruate again. Margaret finds herself in a weird sexual situation, again in open nature. Lizards are in no way connected to fertility, but after her dream she discovers that she is bleeding. In folklore, lizards are directly connected to witches, according to de Vries. The latter also claims that B.F. Thomas attributes them to the phallic father, "the opposite of the mouth = vulva, mother" (de Vries 303). The lizard could also stand for her fear of the male genital or men in general as a man has hurt her so badly. Also, the dream in a way fulfils her biggest wish. It frees her of her fear in a way and opens her again for what is to come. The meaning of the second dream in "Night of the Quicken Trees" is a little more obvious. It is dreamt by Stack and had haunted him for years: He dreams of Margaret

[...] wearing a bearskin, riding Josephine across the bogs of Clare. Her legs and arms were muscular. [...] The woman slapped Josephine hard with a wet leather strap, urging her on into the sea and the pair took off. [...] Stack stood on the edge of the strand, calling out to Josephine to come back [...] and in the end he saw Margaret getting down on the coast of Inis Mór and men with red hands surrounding her, leading Josephine by the birdle, taking her away, bribing her with chocolate. (137)

Interesting about it is firstly that Stack dreams this before he knows Margaret Flusk and, secondly, that the dream is again connected to the feetwater. He obviously tries to handle what he sees and what he fears: instead of her sheepskin, Margaret is wearing a bearskin and has big muscles. This already shows the reader that Stack acknowledges, but also fears her strength. Furthermore, he fears that Josephine, the only female and stability in his life, is taken away from him. This will, in some way, happen as Margaret tethers the goat to a barn outside the house, but they are united in the end. The marvel

thing is then that he dreams of Inis Mór, the exact place where the woman wants to go to when she is being hurt. He even incorporates the men that will eventually lead Margaret and Michael into the boat. In some way the men take away his son, but because he had no idea about him, he substituted him with what he knows: Josephine. In the end Stack then “knew she was going before she went” (159). What then shows the reader that Stack never forgot this dream and knew how to interpret it, are his final thoughts on the strand: “Hadn't he always known she'd go? Hadn't the dream told him?” (160). Margaret repeatedly dreams another kind of dream. She dreams of the quicken trees, of their berries being blown off by the wind and “how the berries changed into beads of blood which fell on the greass [sic] all around that place where she had lain” (158). Here, she is haunted by the memory of her sinful union with the priest as she still tries to cope with what has happened.

2.3.2 Bachelorhood in Rural Irish Society

Life in a small town or in rural areas generally differs greatly from life in a big city, as everybody knows what the others are doing, e.g. whether they are attending mass on Sunday: „For both Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, going to church on Sunday is not just about individual efforts to attain salvation but rather acts as a public display of community solidarity“ (Inglis 60) - how their marriage is holding up and how the children behave. The community has a particularly strict eye on bachelors as the “failure to marry in peasant society, according to Shanin (1973: 68), prevented men attaining full adult status” (Curtin 289). Despite this general opinion it was not uncommon for farmers to marry rather late or not at all (cf. Curtin 287). However, Ireland did not remain untouched by modernisation and suddenly there were fewer legal marriages, a generally higher age of marriage and higher rate of separation. The whole tradition of the Irish family started to change as women who bore children later, automatically had fewer (cf. Tovey 148).

As to the attitude to bachelorhood there are contrasting viewpoints: Curtin quotes Brody and Scheper-Hughes, who wrote in 1979 that as women became “disenchanted with rural society [...] [u]nmarried landowners emerge, in this analysis, as one of the main groups left behind and marginalised in the process of modernisation” (Curtin 287). The men's parents also play a big role in the decision, as sons who have to postpone their hopes for marriage and suffer from an identity crisis, spend their time tending to their aging mothers and fathers (cf. Curtin 290). Curtin himself then summarises that within and outside of farms there are no longer only unhappy bachelors: “Bachelorhood is now too commonplace to be considered deviant, and, though many retain a preference for marriage and endorse the ideal of generational continuity, there is a widespread appreciation that the reasons compelling people to stay single are often very real” (Curtin 303).

Applying these analyses to the stories, the priests have to be left out. Their kind of bachelorhood is idealised and accepted by society. Women expect priests to know nothing about women. Sometimes their perception goes even farther as they see priest as almost asexual, as, for example, the scene in “Walk the Blue Fields” shows: The priest flatters the groom's mother which a younger guest comments with: “Easy knowing you're a priest' [...] 'A *man* would never say that” (20, emphasis added). Stack, on the other hand, tended to his parents and only started to court a girl after both his parents had passed away. Furthermore, his acquisition of Josephine could be a sign of a crisis and a cry for company. He is only an accepted and frequent part of the town's society after his union with Margaret. Before that, it seems, he kept to himself, except for the visits to Lisdoonvarna where he was most likely searching for a match.

2.3.3 Selected Signs and Symbols

The last section of this chapter will now deal with the most prominent signs and symbols in the two stories, divided into colours, nature and the passing of time.

These elements add a richness to the narratives and are complemented by the poetic language and the sense of mystery that are both to be found in “Walk the Blue Fields” and “Night of the Quicken Trees”. According to Garai, “symbol and myth making is still a natural condition and activity of the unconscious mind” (Garai 8). The examples have been chosen with care, and only those symbolising or pointing to a feature of the characters or the surroundings that are vital for the narrative will be considered. Before starting the analysis, the difference between 'sign' and 'symbol' should be explained:

A symbol suggests what it conceals and cannot easily be explained because it is based on analogy; it is a visible sign of the invisible. [...] A sign is intentionally used to represent a definite object or an idea. [...] A symbol has much deeper meaning than a sign and refers to something mysterious and unknown which has been created by the part of man that is God. (Garai 8)

The above mentioned groups – colours, nature and the passing of time – will be treated separately, though they may occasionally overlap.

The first group, colours, is especially prominent in “Walk the Blue Fields”: There is hardly a scene without colourful description, the most commonly used being blue, red and white. Blue is already present in the title of the story and is somehow presented as a puzzle to the reader as blue is rarely used to describe fields. In the text it says that “the Blackstairs tower over the land, [throws] the fields into strange, blue shadow” (32). In the end the “blue night” (38) has spread over the fields, therefore, the priest again walks the blue fields. According to de Vries, blue is connected to eternity, heaven, harmony, spirituality; genuineness and love (cf. de Vries 54f). Furthermore it is connected to the sky, the “inconstancy of the sea”, the “mother-goddess” of the moon, contrasted to red. It is the colour of “faithfulness, loyalty, steadiness, spotless reputation” and “melancholy” (all de Vries 54f). Some of these associations, like loyalty, are opposed to the main theme of the story, others, like melancholy and spirituality, are in conformity with the mood of the story. As the priest walks the blue fields, he is in a sad and melancholic mood.

Red and white are colours that appear both separately and in combination throughout the narrative: Red bears many symbolic meanings, for example fire, blood and resurrection and is also the colour associated with witches and fairies. The connotations which are likely to be applicable to this story are love – passion, emotion – masculinity, fertility and, in combination with white, romantic love and beauty (cf. Ferber 169, de Vries 382ff). White on the other hand, is mostly associated with purity, chastity and virginity (de Vries 499). In the story, the colour red weaves itself like a red thread through the story, intertwined with images of white: firstly, the bridesmaids carry red flowers, which Hadley finds rather peculiar: “[...] although it must be the flowers that are 'each one a deeper shade', it sounds as though the women themselves are meant, each one redder than the last? And anyway: red flowers, at a wedding?” (Hadley 1). This colour at a wedding is not as unusual as she depicts it, as red and white are often associated with wedding celebrations where red means love and white stresses the innocence of the bride (cf. Gross 95). These colours are also in correspondence with the bride's looks: her flame red hair and white scalp are what attracted the priest and are also her prominent features on her wedding day with the white dress and red flowers corresponding to it. Only the green dresses of the bridesmaids are the odd ones out. Later, a “pale cloud in the sky” (17) is followed by a scrap of white veil in a tree; then, the red carpet with the red haired bride and her green eyes. Later, we meet Mrs Jackson in a lily dress “clashing with her red skin” (20) and Mr Lawlor who has literally a “red thread” (22) in his suit. At the wedding party, Sinnott's remark, which has been analysed above in detail, combines red stains on a white cloth. This is of course a veiled reference to the priest's stained past and the doubtful virginity of the bride. Near the river a “single cloud floats on the sky, so pale and out of place, like a cloud left over from another day” (32). The bride could be described with similar words, as she is pale and unsuited to her situation. Then, in the Chinaman's caravan, we encounter an alabaster bowl on the wall which the priest links again to the red haired bride, which reminds the reader of the pearl necklace which broke during the wedding party. Alabaster is often used “in comparison with a woman's fair skin” (de Vries 7) and the pearl stands, due to its “beauty,

rarity, and great price [...], not surprisingly, for beauty, rarity, or great price” (Ferber 151). In summary, the bride herself is not only omnipresent in the priest's thoughts on this day, but also in his surroundings. Therefore, also love, beauty, thoughts of chastity and wild love affairs, symbolised through the colours, accompany the priest on his walk towards salvation. In the end, the prominent colours are white and blue which both stand for innocence, calmness and purity.

The second and third groups of symbols and signs in the narratives are difficult to consider separately as the passing of time is manifested in the environment in which the characters are placed. In “Walk the Blue Fields”, the priest remembers his past and is simultaneously reminded of an ancient past, for example, by a derelict house on the side of the road. However, not only the priest is taken back in time, also the reader:

The material is a border country where exchanges happen between myth, a historical past and a contemporary Ireland. The wedding reception, for example, is held in a hotel in the grounds of a former Protestant estate; [...] but at the wedding feast we know we're up to date, because the guests have to go outside to smoke. (Hadley 2)

Standing in the open space in front of the church the priest muses: “On either side, the trees are tall and here the wind is strangely human. A tender speech is combing through the willows. In a bare whisper, the elms lean. Something about the place conjures up the ancient past: the hound, the spear, the spinning wheel. There's pleasure to be had in history. What's recent is another matter and painful to recall” (18). He finds pleasure in the past as, at this stage of the story, he is not ready to dwell on recent events. Especially the chosen signs for the ancient past are interesting: the hound certainly stands for Cú Chulainn, the “mythical champion who predominated in the Ulster Cycle” (Ó hÓgáin 131). His name literally means “hound of Culann” (Ó hÓgáin 131), which was attributed to him later as his birthname was Setanta. The spear then could be a reference to the famous spear of Lug. It was made in Gorias, one of the four cities of the Tuatha De Danaan and “no battle won against it or him who held it” (Colum 53).

These two associations come from the mythological history of Ireland. The third one, the spinning wheel, is more difficult to attribute to a specific item of ancient history. In folklore, women often spun threads, for example in the story "Feetwater". As a conventional symbol employed in literature, weaving and spinning "are the chief female occupations, as they no doubt were in life" (Ferber 228). Also, "the greatest spinners in classical literature, of course, are the Fates" (Ferber 230).

In "Night of the Quicken Trees", the passing of time is indicated through the passing of the seasons as well as the changes of the weather. For example: "Time passed and little happened in Dunagore. Wind off the Atlantic pushed the clouds one way and then the other, blew eerie notes through the mast, blew gates open. Cattle and sheep escaped went roving and were captured," (129) or "Summer came and the rain eased off. Swallows flew back and found their nests, woodbine climbed the ditches and the heather blooms" (150). In contrast to "Walk the Blue Fields", nature has a strong bond with the protagonists. The main symbol of this narrative is the tree, which can also stand for the passing of time as well as humans: „Since man has always searched for identity with the world around him, nature in the form of plant and tree life provided him with an image of his own existence. [...] But above all, the annual cycle of growth and decay symbolises for him the mystery of death and resurrection“ (Garai 105). Margaret Flusk has a special relationship to trees and woods, where she feels safe. „A forest in folklore and legend is symbolic of darkness and the unknown, the unconscious and the female. [...] In Druid mythology, it was a perfect partner in marriage to the vital and male emblem of the sun“ (Garai 105). This quotation by Garai sums up what is portrayed in the short story. In the darkness of the forest, under the quicken trees, Margaret Flusk experiences the unknown with a man. Before this, her description of nature is favourable: "The wet Douglas fir looked almost blue. There was the scent of damp fern. Wild anemones shivered in the damp breeze. [...] She stopped in the clearing where the quicken grew. Their silver boughs shook pleasantly, their leaves trembling" (133). Later in the story, Margaret imagines other features of the tree, like its

berries changing into “beads of blood” (158). The Mountain ash, “as 'quick-beam' it is the Tree of Life; a 'wicken-tree', it is a witch tree; both refer to its being one of the most important [...] trees connected with the Great Goddess of Love, Life, and Death” (de Vries 393). Its berries are said to be extremely nourishing, a substitute for many meals and to have healing powers (cf. de Vries 394). The tree's life-giving qualities are thematised in the narrative as well as its connection to witches. As Margaret associates herself and her fate with this tree and, furthermore, has healing powers, she can stand in direct connection to the quicken tree. This connection was probably formed on that fateful night that changed her life.

3. Group Two: Lonely Men in Love

Finding a wife is a difficult enterprise. Making her happy and keeping her at home can also be challenging. The two men in the following stories have each succeeded in finding a woman: one is about to marry her, the other has already lost her again. These two men are completely different in character, occupation and background. What connects them with each other is their solitude: the first man, Brady, in "Dark Horses" is lonely because 'his woman' has left him and he has to endure lonely days without her. The second man, the sergeant in "Surrender", is clinging to his familiar loneliness as he is about to marry a woman. Apart from this similarity, they embody quite different stages and kinds of sorrow and suffering. Also, one of these stories allows the reader to hope for a brighter future for the protagonist while the other narrative only causes sadness and pity.

3.1 Dark Horses

"Dark Horses" is the shortest narrative in Keegan's collection but by no means less complex than the others. The melancholic mood of the story is evoked in the first sentence and the title reappears as early as in the second sentence: "In the night, Brady dreams the woman back into his life again. She's out in the yard with the big hunter, laughing, praising her dark horses" (41). This already foreshadows the climax of the story and the man's obsession with her, her horses and his miserable life. The readers know that it is the woman who loves the horses and that they are now gone, just like her. The main theme of the narrative – coping with loss – manifests itself in the omnipresence of horses that serve as a reminder of what the protagonist once had. Brady seems to be surrounded by horses all day long and Keegan conscientiously incorporates them into the story. The "slice pans" (42), working Leyden's horse, the rain "whipping the galvanised roof" (42) are only a few examples of the dominance of horses and equine vocabulary throughout the story. This obsession with

horses becomes comprehensible when it is revealed that the woman left the man for what he threatened to do to her beloved horses. He does not only dream of her lying next to him like she did on the first day but also of "her dark horse [...] grazing his fields" (48). The phrase dark horse in itself means 'underdog' in sports or 'outsider', 'the odd one out'. This phrase does not refer to the horses but might relate to Brady or 'his woman'. The woman was, as Leyden says "the finest woman ever came around these parts" (46), and being almost too good for the neighbourhood. Brady himself is also an outsider: he has no job, does not belong to the group of men in the pub, wants a better life and is therefore a stranger in his own hometown. The general importance of horses in Irish rural society is unquestionable: "The horse was the chief beast of travel, work, hunting, and war" (Ferber 94). In folklore, horses are generally considered a token of luck, loyal and sacred (cf. De Vries 259ff) and Terry Eagleton goes as far as to say that "[h]orses in Ireland are a religion as much as a sport, a spiritual cult as well as an immensely lucrative industry" (Eagleton [2002] 100). Therefore, the omnipresence of and love for horses in the story is in no way exaggerated.

The hometown of the protagonist is in County Cavan, close to the border to Northern Ireland. Brady lives near Belturbet, a now popular touristic town, where he owns a house with surrounding fields. The only other town in County Cavan that is mentioned is Cootehill, a prominent market town and angling centre, which is where Brady meets 'his woman'. The Belturbet depicted in the story seems to be a well enough established town with at least one pub, a fish-and-chips shop and a rather fancy hotel, according to the meals they serve and the music they play. The weather on the day on which the story is set is wet; the narrator says "[o]utside, the October rain goes shuddering through the bamboo" (41). This dreadful weather is in accordance to or even mirrors Brady's mood on that day. Judging from what we learn about Brady's life, if the weather always adapts to his mood, it is likely that most days in Belturbet are rainy and depressing. In the story there is no hint at the year it is set in. As there is no mention of a war and Brady is driving a car, it could be set any time between

1950 and today. The fact that a woman is free to leave her husband and take her possessions with her, might suggest a date after 1996 when the new divorce legislation became effective in Ireland. Leaving one's husband was unthinkable before that time, but exceptions often prove the rule.

3.1.1 Narrative, Style and Structure

"Dark Horses" is told in present tense, which gives immediacy to the actions, and is narrated by a third person narrator with Brady as a reflector character. The narrator describes the surroundings in a neutral, seemingly unbiased, way, for example: "In the yard a pair of chestnut trees, heads over every stable door" (42), or "[o]ut in the street, schoolchildren are eating chips from brown paper bags" (45). The second mode of presentation is dramatic or scenic and is rendered in direct speech. The conversations in the pub, the chip shop and the hotel are all in direct speech, thus presenting the speech acts unadulterated and without comment. It is thus the reader's responsibility to infer certain qualities in the speakers from the dialogues. We cannot know how the accent of all the speakers sound, but McPhillips, for example, uses the word "garsún" (44) in the pub with which he wants to show off his education. Yet, the obviously wrong pronunciation of the French word 'garçon' shows he is not as learned as he thinks he is. Another example is Brady himself, who seems to speak a heavy dialect as he answers the girl in the chip shop with "Ay. [...] And tay." (45), 'tay' meaning of course 'tea'.

The third perspective employed in this story is the most complex one: free indirect discourse and free indirect speech. At certain points the narrator focuses on Brady's mind, which gives the reader more immediate insight. For example: "In the kitchen he boils the kettle, scalds the pot. The tea *makes him feel human again*. [...] The two heifers *need to be brought in* and dosed. [...] *One part of him is glad the day is wet*" (emphasis added, 41f). Another example reveals Brady's memory when he remembers how he met 'his woman'. Here,

Brady's immediate memories are intertwined with free direct speech "*If you bring the chips, I'll light the fire and put the kettle on*" (45), and stops as abruptly as it has begun by the girl serving his dinner. In these passages, in which Brady's consciousness is revealed we learn important facts about his past, his suffering and forlornness. However, the most important actions and his real problems come to light in direct speech. In the pub he is quiet and picked at by the others which shows he is not a respected member of the group. In the second long conversation with Leyden the true drama of his guilt is revealed. It is even more dramatic and effective, as Brady is forced to say it out loud. The reader can feel his sorrow, but with this revelation a facet is added to the character of Brady no one would have expected; it was all his fault. After this, the calm language is resumed as we follow Brady back to bed. The story ends, as it has begun, in his bedroom. The tragic scenery the reader is already familiar with becomes even sadder: no one will ever make this bed or change the sheets for him; no one will cook him breakfast or set the table and even the dog has become disloyal and does not return for his dinner. This chronology not only shows us one entire day of his life; through the cyclic structure of events it is suggested that all his days are spent like this.

3.1.2 Brady

The reader learns a lot about Brady in the course of the story: his habits and his past life through indirect, authorial and also figural characterizations. This enables the readers to form a substantial picture of him. The readers can feel his grief and pain, as Hadley phrases it: "His panicking despair is vivid because it's never named, but made tangible in the cold, neglected kitchen, the knife in the empty marmalade jar, the bread left on the step because the dog hasn't come home to eat it" (Hadley 3). The reader sees his suffering and constructs him as the victim in his or her mind, but the missing piece in how he came to suffer is postponed until later in the story: it was his fault that his 'woman' left him.

But before discussing her leaving, it is important to look at the way Brady is presented before this revelation. Even prior to the scene in the lonely, unhomely kitchen Brady's despair is tangible. He wakes up dressed from the waist down, which repeats itself at the end of the story where it is explained why: "He wants to take his boots off but he is afraid. If he takes his boots off he knows he will never get them back on in the morning" (48). Although the reader lacks this information at first, the quiet desperation and depression can be grasped from the beginning. On the next pages Brady wastes away the day in town after a minimal amount of work at Leyden's. Thus, the question forcing themselves upon the reader is whether Brady is lazy, reluctant to work or a drinker. He does say that "[o]ne part of him is glad the day is wet" (42). Work could busy his mind but would also keep him near his empty house and he would have to make decisions and admit life goes on without her. It is easier to just drink during the day - and also more comfortable. But even at the pub, where he could be at rest, he fights his urge at first and finds the drink too bitter and too cold. So he does not even fit in with the others wasting their days away.

At this point we should take a look at the other characters in the pub: Leyden, Long Kearns, Norris, McPhillips and Big Sean. Leyden was Brady's boss for a long time and still helps him now and then by employing him for minor tasks. He is the character closest to Brady. Thus, our main character feels obliged to order another round although he thinks "[i]t isn't right to be drinking at this hour" (44). Norris has a "slight shake in his hands" (43) which shows us he likes the drink and probably is in the pub every day. Long Kearns also sits there already "with his powers" (43) in the middle of the day. McPhillips then is quite a show off, as was discussed above. He, for example, says "It's a job for a younger man, [...] I did it myself when I was a garsún" (44). Not only does he show off his working skills, but also his language competence by using the French word 'garçon' for 'youth', however mispronounced it might be. Like the others, Brady seems to be lost in his days and without any focus. "The day is no longer his

own" (46) when he orders another pint alone in the hotel. Then and there he is also very self-conscious as he watches his neighbours, the McQuaids, eat a meal he can only dream of. He is extremely jealous of his neighbours, which is shown very well in his thoughts that the grass is greener on McQuaid's side. He knows he will never be as rich, and the reader knows it just as well. In the end the reader is taken back to his bedroom where we see the full effects of his struggles and paralysis. The story could start anew as probably every day has become the same in Brady's life since his woman left him.

The only thought Brady seems to have day in and day out is that 'his woman' has left him, and, the hope that she might come back to him. The reason why she left comes as a surprise: during the conversations with the men in the pub or with Leyden, Brady is presented as a strong man, a hard worker, but a poor slob. The other men in the pub seem to have nothing against him, and yet he does not really belong to them. He also does not belong in the hotel where he ends up later and meets Leyden again. The only time he did belong somewhere was when the woman was still there, although it is unknown how much he did for her to stay happy. Leyden informs us that "that was the finest woman [who] ever came around these parts" (46) and pities Brady for his loss. This woman with her dark horses who made Brady's house a home must have had a strong personality. She was the one who invited him back to the house not vice versa. The last sentence of his flashback shows Brady in a manner the reader would not expect: "That morning [after their first intercourse], walking down the main street, buying milk and rashers, he felt like a man" (45f). This strong woman made him feel like a man, consequently her absence makes him weaker. He almost loses contact to reality. His first and last thoughts of the day concern her. The first sentence and the last few lines tell us everything we need to know to understand his sorrow, grief and disillusionment: "In the night, Brady dreams the woman back into his life again" (41), and: "He lies in his bed and closes his eyes, thinking only of her. He can feel his own heart, beating. Soon, she will come back to forgive him" (48). Does Brady really believe she will come back or

will she only come back in his dreams? Obviously he does not do much to convince her or win her back.

Leyden is the only one who knows what really happened. His conversation with Brady is the only dramatic climax in the story. The rest is calm and melancholic. The conversation and word choice emphasise the problem even more: "I told her to go fuck herself!" [...] 'Did you have drink on you?' Brady hesitates. 'A wee drop.'" (47). The otherwise quiet and passive character suddenly comes to life and the reader knows now that it was all his fault: he is not a victim after all.

3.2 Surrender

The story "Surrender" is more complex than it may seem at first glance as it can be read on two levels: firstly, without any knowledge of Claire Keegan's inspiration. Secondly, in the light of Claire Keegan's inspiration for this narrative: John McGahern's *Memoir*. This reading is even more interesting and satisfying as all the missing pieces the reader encounters in Keegan's rewriting of the novel, can be filled in. Even the ending of the story can be analysed differently if one knows how it will end in the text building the base of this rewriting. The sergeant is based on Francis McGahern, John McGahern's father, but this can only be recognized by readers of the *Memoir*. Both viewpoints shall be taken into consideration in this chapter, but as definite arguments can only be made by consulting the source the major part of this analysis will presuppose that the reader knows both works of fiction, "Surrender" and *Memoir*.

John McGahern's *Memoir* is an account of the author's life as a small boy, of his mother's death and his life with his father. The incident that inspired Claire Keegan appears quite early in the book. After an account of his earliest years and detailed characterizations of his paternal grandmother, his father and his mother, the author discusses possible reasons for marriage. He argues that

people marry to have sex, but that there were others, reluctant to do so as they knew of the downside of the satisfied desire: children. "My father seems to have shared this reluctance to marry" (McGahern 52), he muses before explaining that his parents were engaged several years before marrying. His father was sent from barrack to barrack, presumably had one affair after the other or at least one flirt after the other, and showed no haste to marry his future wife. The turning point came in the seventh year of their engagement, which is also the day on which "Surrender" is set: "In May of 1932, the year of the Eucharistic Congress, she returned his engagement ring" (McGahern 54). John McGahern does not know the exact reasons for his mother's decision, but there was talk of other suitors. The reaction to this letter was unexpected: "What is certain is that the return of the ring was not done for effect, but the effect was instantaneous. He, who had all kinds of excuses for postponing his visits over the years, was in Ballinamore the very next day and did not leave until she agreed to marry him in August" (McGahern 54). As he sets out to his visit and marches towards her house "Surrender" ends.

This alone would provide enough material for a short story, but was not the trigger for Keegan's inspiration to write the story: "'Surrender' was inspired by an incident recollected in John McGahern's *Memoir*, concerning his father who sat on a bench in Galway and ate twenty-four oranges before he married" (161). Keegan chose the perspective of the father in contrast to *Memoir* where the reader learns about the sergeant from his son's point of view. This son never managed to persuade his father to talk to him about the past. Still, he overheard his father's conversation with another man about how expensive oranges were in his youth. "My father said he loved oranges then, and when he knew he was going to be married he bought two dozen oranges in Galway and went to sit on a park bench and ate them all" (McGahern 57). Keegan slightly changes the setting and in "Surrender" he eats the oranges while hiding in his dayroom at the barracks. This change adds emphasis to the sergeant's character as he was rather stingy, always accusing his fiancée to be too extravagant. The funny thing about this last wild act in freedom is, as McGahern points out: "In those

first years his fears couldn't have been much realized other than in his imagination. My mother's salary was higher than his" (McGahern 57).

While the incidents in the shop, where the sergeant buys the oranges and the loaf of bread and is ridiculed by the others, have sprung from Keegan's imagination, the life in the barracks has not. In *Memoir* McGahern gives a detailed account of what is done day after day in the barracks as he spent some time there in the holidays and during his mother's sickness. In the small towns in the time of the civil war there was obviously little need for sergeants in the barracks. Thus, their duties consisted of documenting the rain and unusual activities on the roads and in the town. Despite the war going on, the uselessness of these actions becomes clear when the young McGaherns notice that the other guards invented their accounts and passed their days idle. Only his father was accurate in his reports and always ready for an inspection.

The setting of *Surrender* is not specified; the main reference is to a barrack close to a town. According to *Memoir*, Francis McGahern was stationed in Shanaglish in County Galway when the letter reached him. The road the sergeant cycles on with the row of yews really exists, but in *Memoir* they are Sycamore trees (cf. McGahern 26). They are part of the barracks near Cootehall where the children live with their father during their mother's illness. Another, rather short, incident that could have been sparked off by *Memoir* is the couple the sergeant meets on the road to town. The young man is called Francie, like a distant relative of his corresponding character in *Memoir*. It is quite unlikely that this young man is the same Francie, but the identical names suggest at least some kind of reference to the original. Another possibility is that Francie sounds like a younger Francis. This would then be a direct reference to the sergeant himself as the focus of this scene clearly lies on the scolding of the youth for being idle while the sergeant spent his youth fighting, longing for idle afternoons.

3.2.1 Narrative, Style and Structure

This story's narrative technique is different to all the other narratives in the collection. It is told by an omniscient narrator who depicts the story in past tense. The narrator mostly focuses on the sergeant's mind, but also allows insight into other characters, as, for example, the guard Doherty. The tone is sober and factual and the surroundings are described in great detail. This serves to underline the character of the sergeant, who is a sober and respectable character. Furthermore, the short interval the reader is connected to Doherty gives further insight into daily life with the sergeant and the impact he has on other people and his employees. The covert narrator stays distant and objective, except for the passages where he moves into the sergeant's consciousness. Here, the relationship between sergeant and reader grows closer, which is, according to Renate Brosch, the main aspiration of a short story. In Brosch's opinion, an omniscient narrator is not unusual for a short story, although a small distance between reader and narrator is desirable. This small "Erzählerdistanz" (Brosch 144) is also possible with an authorial narrative situation as is proven in this story. The key factor is the perspective and focalization which makes up the closeness or distance between the reader and certain characters.

"Surrender" depicts one important day in the life of the sergeant. At the beginning of the story, like in "Walk the Blue Fields", the action starts before the time frame that is to be the main focus of the story. The first paragraph introduces the reader to the sergeant's situation and also to his character. The main action starts in the second paragraph with "[a]ll that day, he went about his duties" (107). The five days he had kept the letter in his pocket have passed and the day he is to make the decision has arrived. Although this paragraph serves as a preface and prepares the reader for the actions to come, the story misses many pieces of information. Claire Keegan, as a reader of *Memoir*, knows all the missing pieces required to create a fuller picture of the sergeant, but chooses not to share them with the reader. Firstly, the sergeant in

"Surrender" has become her own character and is to be treated separately from Francis McGahern. Secondly, a stylistic feature of her short story writing is leaving out or holding back information. As Renate Brosch phrases it: "Für die Wirkkraft der Kurzgeschichte ist eher eine Erzählweise von Nutzen, die Fragen provoziert statt Antworten zu geben" (Brosch 145). This proves to be right not only for "Surrender", but also for all other stories in this collection.

Next to the sergeant, whose consciousness is openly accessible to the reader through the focalisation, the other voices are presented through direct speech and commented on by the sergeant in his mind. The speech of the military man is pedantic and mostly sounds like orders emphasising his position. The woman and the boy in the shop have a lower standing, at least in the eyes of the sergeant, and they obey him. The third character, who speaks in the narrative, is Susan whose letter is opened towards the end of the story, printed as it is, not recalled from memory or through indirect thought or speech. This evokes authenticity and immediacy.

A lexic feature worth mentioning is the woman's use of Irish vernacular: "a leanbh" (113), meaning 'child, infant' (MacLennan 206). This adds authenticity to the conversation. In rural parts of West Ireland Irish is spoken more widely than in the big cities – mostly, of course in the Gaeltacht areas, which covers the West and South-West of the country (cf. Eagleton [2002] 82ff). Yet the Irish language is an important part of national culture and Irish identity: even if adults forget most of what they have learnt at school, "they still see it as part of their heritage, the essence of an ancient culture of which they are proud" (Ardagh 290). Another expression that requires background knowledge is when the sergeant remembers standing "under the gorse with a Tommy in the sight of his gun" (111). A Tommy is a British soldier, nicknamed in the 19th century but

mainly used in World War I as Thomas Atkins was said to be a typically English name⁶.

3.2.2 Sergeant Francis McGahern

Sergeant Francis McGahern is a very interesting character in "Surrender", but is, according to Hadley, "too dependent on McGahern's version of his father" (Hadley 3). This judgement is not entirely correct as this character cannot be "too dependent" on the source of inspiration. Keegan clearly draws on the character traits and faults John McGahern provides. By giving the sergeant a voice of his own she brings a new aspect to the story. The son clearly cannot comprehend how his father could do something as absurd as eating two dozen oranges, and Keegan provides possible surroundings for his action. She makes him buy and eat the oranges in hiding which underlines the extravagance of the action. Furthermore, she gives us his whole day and his thoughts whereas in *Memoir* we only get an account of how fast he made the journey to his fiancée. This is another difference between the stories: in *Memoir* he sets out to Ballinamora the day after he receives the letter. In "Surrender" his reluctance is emphasised as he waits five days until he opens the letter and sets out only on the following morning. In addition to this Keegan manages to imitate Susan McGahern's writing very well. It is dear, candid, shows her standards of education and discloses her compassion and good nature.

Before looking closely at the sergeant in "Surrender", the father of John McGahern should be characterized briefly: Francis McGahern never knew his own father and it was rumoured that he was an illegitimate child. Before joining "the new garda force when the Civil War began" (McGahern 48) he spent three years in the IRA. This especially impresses his son as he must have joined the IRA right after secondary school. He had always had an air of "stance and

⁶ According to the Oxford English Dictionary (www.oed.com) Tommy, or Thomas Atkins, is "a familiar name for the typical private soldier in the British Army" which arose "out of the casual use of this name in the specimen forms given in the official regulations from 1815 onward".

vanity" (McGahern 48) around him which he seems to share with his mother. Generally the character traits the author attributes to his grandmother also apply to his father and vice versa: The sergeant is proud of his position, he could stand "arrow straight" (McGahern 5) even into old age and he is "violent and wilful" (McGahern 6). He is intelligent and handsome but has no sense of humour. Also, he could be charming at times, but within a second he could change to aggressive and violent. He possessed the same "calculating coldness" (McGahern 7) as his mother. Furthermore, he rarely stayed at home with his family but preferred short visits during which he accused his wife to be weak and too gentle with the children. He demonstrates the different views on proper education, for example, by shaving John's hair or forcing him to attend a strict school with harsh methods of punishment. His father was also correct, organised – especially in the barracks – and secretive concerning his past and his feelings. In his later life he showed more compassion towards his wife and children, but this is far away from the moment depicted in "Surrender".

The sergeant the reader encounters in "Surrender" surely possesses the same characteristics, but they are presented in other circumstances than in *Memoir*. In "Surrender", he is not a father who is analysed by his son, but a man occupied with himself on the day he will make the decision that will – in his eyes – change his life. The reader becomes acquainted with the sergeant through the eyes of the guard Doherty and the actions of the people in the shop. This figural characterization supports what John McGahern tells us about his father. When the sergeant puts on his cape Doherty muses: "Never once had the guard seen him rush. Every move he made was deliberate and enhanced by his good looks. [...] If his moods often changed, the expression in his eyes was always the same, intemperate blue" (108). Also, the sergeant does not allow a waste of timber and even watches the barracks to see whether Doherty keeps his orders. When in town, the sergeant sees no need in knocking, but simply enters through the door at the back of the house, which enables him to eavesdrop on the conversation next door. His anger rises while he is assumingly ridiculed by the others and memories of the war come back to him: "He felt himself back

under the gorse with a Tommy in the sight of his gun [...]" (111). This thought is brought to an abrupt end by the woman entering the back. The following interaction shows how carefully he planned his venture with the oranges and how important it is to him that it is kept a secret. First he calls them "pigeons" (112), later she calls them "onions" (113) when her child asks, weak with hunger. The sergeant is not concerned about the mother and her child, although he takes away the child's supper. What he does care about is the way people talk about him. They have respect, but as he imagines them to act behind his back shows that he assumes to have lost some of his authority. The reader cannot know whether the others have found out about the oranges or not, but he must be so conscious of the extravagance of his action that he is afraid they could. What the reader also learns during the scene on pages 114 and 115 is that he thinks more of the woman than of the rest of them. She comes into the room while baking another bread and makes an end to the ridiculous scene in the front room. The sergeant, while thinking less of the others, has developed something like respect for the woman who helps him and does his laundry – a rather unexpected but welcome character trait. A glimpse at his past allows for another moment of sympathy for him: his upbringing was very strict, as were the punishments. "His mother had taken him out to the bicycle and spun the wheel, holding his fingers at an angle, tight to the spokes. It went on for an age and the pain he felt could not have been worse had she actually dismembered him" (118). This incident, which probably was not the only time he was punished, explains why he had become the person he was.

Back in the barracks his strength of will and sense of order are tangible again. He cleans his bike, comparing this action to the joyous feeling he got when cleaning his gun, hangs up his clothes to dry and, finally, reads the letter. The sergeant's reaction and especially the word choice are unexpected for the reader: "It was as he suspected: she was calling him in. He felt solace in the knowledge that he was right and yet it struck him sore that he had hoped it might be otherwise" (117). Keegan cleverly uses military vocabulary here: he is 'called in' and will not be free again for the rest of his life. In a way, he

'surrenders' to her wish. He must have known what the letter was about before opening it. The oranges have been ordered, which means he had planned his luxurious feast in advance, but it is arguable whether he had intended to eat all the oranges at once when ordering them. Then, he sets out to eat the oranges in front of the fire, destroying every trace of his action. The narrator does not explicitly say so but it becomes clear that he has no deep feelings for Susan. Maybe he once had, but now every woman is the same for him (119).

Much about the sergeant's character and motives is left for the readers to guess at and even *Memoir* cannot explain everything. One should not forget, even if the sergeant is modelled on, or even is a portrayal of Francis McGahern, Claire Keegan made him her own character. "Surrender" is an independent story, but once one has read *Memoir*, the original sergeant and Keegan's version of him are fairly similar. Why does he wish to wind up the clock until it breaks? What "same old anxiety was there shining like dark waters at the back of his mind" (120)? Why does he go through with the marriage if he is filled with doubt? It is arguable that his sense of duty leads to this decision, or he needed this sudden wake up call to make him act. Another possible explanation is given by the last sentence of the story. He might have waited so long to marry as he did not want to be confronted with the suffering a war and poverty bring along. He would have to support a whole family and not just himself. For him, the future will bring the picture of "the woman's bony hand striking a hollow sound in the loaf and the boy with the hungry gaze asking for bread" (120). By reading *Memoir* we learn that not all of his concerns were to come true, but that they would certainly never be rich.

3.3 Parallels, Different Approaches to Love and Alcohol

In the first group of this analysis, men were encountered, who either choose to be alone or consider whether it would be better to be a bachelor and follow the

path of life they choose or rather that has been chosen for them by fate. The men in group two are different: they are neither men of the church nor eccentric characters like Stack. This chapter deals with the themes that either compare or contrast the two stories of group two. Firstly, the characters of the men will be compared and then their marital status. Secondly, the theme of courtship and marriage in 20th century Ireland will be touched upon. Lastly, this chapter will deal with Brady's drinking problem.

Brady and sergeant McGahern share an obsession with certain women and the fact that they go to bed fully clothed. In other respects they are as different as can be. Brady is weak, stands in the shadow of his neighbour and does not find the strength or will to search for his woman. He is passive, waiting and wishing for her to come back on her own account. The sergeant on the other hand is confident, thinks he stands above others and knows when the time to act has come. He actively conquers the woman who belongs to him. Brady first met the woman he courted in a ballroom. It was she who suggested to go home together and who made him feel like a man (cf 45f). The sergeant does not need anyone to make him feel like a man. He is conscious of his power over the guards and residents in the towns. Also, he must have power over Susan as she seems to have waited quietly for many years before acting out her feelings. She must have truly loved him or she was too dependent on the prospect of being married that she did not dare to end it sooner. This underlines the theory that there was another suitor involved. No woman voluntarily ends up as a spinster.

The reader knows nothing about Brady's pre-marital life except for the short courting scene in his memory. This, and the fact that she is only ever referred to as 'his woman', gives rise to the question whether he is actually married. Divorce was not possible in Ireland until 1996 and is still strongly frowned upon until today. The couples' only possibility was to separate; some even found new partners with whom they could live – but of course without the consent of the

Catholic church. In the story it is suggested that she already lived with Brady in his house when her horses were grazing on his fields. Furthermore, she demanded that he should pay the bills or take her out for dinner (47). These are unmistakable signs for their living together, yet, he never refers to her as his wife or the 'missus' or any other term suggesting matrimony. As it cannot be said when exactly the story is set, it could take place in pre-divorce times in Ireland. Ardagh phrases it well in his book (published in 1994): "So Ireland has remained the only country in Europe without divorce, in a situation full of anomalies both legal and social" (Ardagh 196). She simply leaves him and as he still waits for her return there could not have been a divorce. In short, Brady could have lived in a 'sinful' union without marriage with this woman, or she could now live sinfully without her husband but still be married. This leaves it open to the reader to opt for the scenario of his or her preference.

As marriage rituals are thoroughly planned and rather traditional up until today this deserves special attention. The sergeant fully complies with the rules, except for the fact that his engagement lasts a little too long and leaves his fiancée in doubt. His age is not in question, as men generally married rather late: "Two striking demographic facts characterizing Ireland up to relatively recently were that most people married very late and many people did not marry at all" (Curtin 287). This statement is not new, it also applies to Stack as has been discussed in the previous chapter. Bachelorhood is not a modern phenomenon but has been the rule, especially before the time of the famine. It was also common for men to marry very late, most commonly when both their parents had passed away in order to avoid conflicts between the older generation and the young wife. Other rules that still apply in the twentieth century are those of courting. The couples meet in public, never alone and never in each other's homes (cf. Humphreys). As Brady must have had premarital sex with 'his woman' this makes him and especially her sinners, even in the modern Irish rural society.

A study was published by Margaret Humphreys in 2010, which shows the gender relationships and match-making practices in rural Ireland⁷. The youth of the town Kilbrack, where Humphreys interviewed the participants, developed an awareness of the physical and mental differences between males and females in puberty. This was not at all encouraged by their parents and topics like menstruation or puberty were never discussed at home (Humphreys 16). It was common that girls were educated shorter than boys despite their brightness or willingness to study. While some girls from farming families saw injustice in this system, "girls from 'cottage' backgrounds seem to have been content to fulfil the traditional expectations of their families" (Humphreys 18). As a consequence, the women that had experienced educational injustice in their childhood, made sure all their children received second or even third level education. Concerning marriage, the customs were clearly defined in every decade: In the 1940s every young couple had to be patient and obedient as there were plenty of rules and regulations when and where it was allowed to meet. When couples were finally married, most of the time the woman would move in with the man and they were free to start a family. The partners were never brought home to be introduced, this was a more modern innovation. "It is clear that a pragmatic approach to life was the norm during the 1940s" (Humphreys 19) as most marriages were matched out of economic reasons.

Men had to be very careful not to frighten women away as they learned early that men always wanted 'more'; a woman who complied to male sexual expectations could even end up in prostitution (cf. Kilfeather). In the 1950s the ballroom era started and meeting the opposite sex became easier. Whole towns transformed into match-making venues, as Lisdoonvarna in County Clare, for example (cf. Eagleton [2002] 123). Changes were continuously happening and through the media or weakening parental control match-making became more and more an affair of the couple itself. Even until the 1990s the unsaid rule was that a farmer's daughter should marry another farmer who had enough land. On

⁷ This topic is also applicable to Stack in chapter 2.2.3 and Deegan in 4.2.2. This is why it is given more attention than might seem necessary in this context.

the other hand, a woman could rarely deny a man's offer as nobody wanted to end up as a spinster (Humphreys 22). When finally married, "there was an inordinate emphasis on having a large family, despite an overall puritanical attitude towards all aspects of sexual relationships" (Humphrey 29).

Applying this study's results to Brady and the sergeant what this study has found out, some parallels can be found⁸. Brady met his woman in another town and then brought her home to live with him. However, it seems that they did engage in premarital intercourse. The sergeant was, also due to his love of liberty, an example of good courtship, but then both partners were from a non-farming background which allows for different rules and customs. Brady and his woman had no children but her horses could serve as a compensation for this lack of offspring. The Irish are "demented after horses" (Eagleton [2002] 100) after all.

Turning our attention to a different matter, the themes that show the contrast between Brady and the sergeant best are heavy drinking and hard working. The sergeant is a diligent worker: he broods over Susan's letter for days but never stops working. He is also strict about the guards in his service and rather stingy when it comes to lighting a good fire in the dayroom. He goes as far as to stop in a safe distance to the barracks and watch if Doherty makes a mistake – not without any reason as Doherty clearly has the wish to do the opposite of what he was told. Fortunately, Doherty obeys: "He'd stood there for close to an hour, on watch, but the quality of the smoke hadn't changed; neither was there any sign of Doherty going back out to the shed" (110). Then at night, the only ever deviation from his routine is his pleasurable but guilty feast on the oranges. It seems as if he does not drink a drop of alcohol. In the barracks this was probably not allowed and he is apparently not welcome in town where the others even hide their drink from his view. Also, the Irish do not drink as much

⁸ Other aspects are applicable especially to the girl's parents and Deegan in 4.1 and 4.2.

at home as they do in the pub. Drinking "is essentially a social act, subject to a variety of rules and norms regarding who may drink what, when, where, with whom and so on. Drinking does not, in any society, take place 'just anywhere'" (Tovey 373).

Brady, on the other hand, has no one who is inferior, but is himself the worker. He used to work for Leyden and it is not stated why he ended his full time work there. He has land of his own which he should work on but he rather spends his day idle in the pub. The interesting aspect about Brady is that he knows it is not right to drink at an early hour, he knows about the 'rules and norms' mentioned above. As he had "a wee drop" (47) on him when he insulted his woman enough for her to leave him, it is suggested that he has visited the pub already before her disappearance. This seems to be an old problem of the Irish who are said to be one of the "booziest nations on earth" (Eagleton [2002] 11). Eagleton also suggests there was a reason for heavy alcohol consumption at certain times or in certain situations: "There wasn't much else to do, and it was an escape from the poverty and hopelessness around you. Next to emigration, it was the quickest way out" (Eagleton [2002] 13). It is unlikely for Brady to have felt the need to escape as she made him a man and his house a home. It is more likely that he was too much at ease and unaware of the fact that a relationship needs attention and is not to be taken for granted. For an incredibly long time, women were the property of their husbands and in addition to that not allowed in the all-male public house. Humphreys states an instance where a wife had to wait in the car with her children while her husband visited the pub. It was not approved of if a woman drove a car and he would not do without his "good few before he got home" (Humphreys 25). This was the hardship of many farmers' wives and it is very likely Brady also liked his 'good few' before coming home at night. What disturbs this picture is that his friend Leyden did not see Brady as someone who could be this unfair and brutal to his woman: "Christ, [...] I didn't think you had it in you" (47).

Tovey sums it up: "It could be said then that Ireland, like many other societies, has a contradictory and ambivalent attitude towards alcohol: 'drink was both a pleasure and a curse, but the tirades against alcohol led to ambivalent attitudes and ambiguity as to whether it was a good or bad thing' [...]" (Tovey 372). It has to be added that a nation that drinks as much as the Irish is also likely to develop movements against drinking. An amusing fact about these movements is that the Irish think nothing of having just one pint, but coined the slogan "just two will do [...]" which implicitly recognised that it was not socially possible for a person to have 'just one' drink in a social situation of reciprocity" (Tovey 380).

4. Group Three: Family Dysfunction

This last group consists of three stories, all of which deal with the themes of family dysfunction and escaping strategies. “The Parting Gift” opens the short story collection and is not only interesting because of its narrative technique, but also because of the protagonist’s only way out: emigration. In “The Forester’s Daughter” it is the mother who dreams of leaving and hoards money with which she wants to finance her flight and life afterwards. The protagonist in the third story, “Close to the Water’s Edge”, thinks about escaping from his stepfather’s mocking and derogatory remarks, but it is never revealed whether he accomplishes his flight or not. Happy moments are rare in these stories and each family has its own problems and reasons for not living in harmony together. One member always wants to escape their miserable life, a mother, a daughter or a son – but interestingly, it is never a father.

4.1 The Parting Gift

“The Parting Gift” is the opening story of Keegan’s collection and tells the moving tale of the incredibly miserable life of a farmer’s youngest daughter. It is one of the shortest narratives in the collection and also the one with the fewest characters. It is set in rural Ireland on the family’s farm where the girl grew up and spent more time than any of her siblings. This is, of course, with the exception of Eugene, her protective brother and eldest male offspring. The house is rather run-down and old. The girl’s room, for example, is described as follows: “walls papered yellow with roses, high ceiling stained where the slate came off, cord of the electric heater swinging out like a tail from under the bed” (4). This shabby place was one large room before Eugene initiated the building of a wall and a door with a lock. This was probably the place where all children slept together whenever they were in the house. The brother wanted to protect her, but she started spending most of her time outside. Nature and the world outside the house is described in a radically different manner: “Outside, dew lies

on the fields, white and blank as pages. Soon the sun will burn it off. It's a fine day for the hay" (3). The mood that has been sad and depressed turns happy and blissful: "The scent of hay drifts up from the neighbouring fields. As soon as the dew burns it off, the Rudd brothers will be out in the meadows turning the rows, saving it while the weather lasts. [...] Laughter will carry up the avenue, clear, like birdcall over water" (4). In addition to providing an image of the surrounding fields and the work that will have to be done there, this extract shows how well acquainted the girl is with the customs and way of life around her and how much she is at home in this place.

The exact location of the farm is not given in the short story. The only place names mentioned are Barna Cross, close to which the girl went to school, and Baltinglass and Blessington, which are on the way when the siblings approach the airport. Two facts lead to the conclusion that the family might live in the East or South-East of Ireland: firstly, they have to leave at seven o'clock in the morning when the plane leaves at noon - "The ticket says you will arrive in Kennedy Airport at 12.25, much the same time as you leave," (4) – and secondly, they head to Dublin Airport rather than Shannon Airport – which can be derived from the above mentioned towns which are on the route from the South-West to the airport in County Wicklow. Also, their kind of farming is associated more with these areas than with the West of Ireland.

4.1.1 Narrative, Style and Structure

What makes this narrative special and different from all the other stories in this collection is its narrative situation and mode of narration: "When sunlight reaches the foot of the dressing table, you get up and look through the suitcase again" (3). "The Parting Gift" employs the rarely used second-person narration about which especially Monika Fludernik has written extensively. This mode is not an invention of post-modernist writers, but was already used as early as the 15th century (cf. Fludernik [2009] 113). She distinguishes different kinds of

second person narration. Firstly, there are those “which tell the story of a narratee” (Fludernik [2009] 31) by either addressing the reader or a fictional character. Secondly, second person narratives can be employed “to conceal the gender of a main protagonist” (Fludernik [2009] 49) by only referring to him or her by ‘you’ throughout the whole narrative. Both options are not applicable to this particular story as the reader knows the protagonist’s gender because of the reference to her as “Sis” (5) by her brother. Thirdly, the second person narrative can provide an “in-depth focalization through the eyes of the *you*-protagonist. [...] By using the pronoun *you*, which ambivalently hovers between reference to the narratee/reader and the second-person protagonist, the effect of internal focalization is enhanced and takes on an almost hypnotic quality” (Fludernik [2009] 50). This is partially applicable as the reader might feel to be addressed by the narrator in an initial conception, but soon discovers that ‘you’, in this case, refers to a fictional character. In this case, no narratee emerges from the narrative. The girl, being “the fictional you[,] predominates as an experiencing self in what [Fludernik] would like to call [...] a reflector mode narrative in the second person” (Fludernik [1993] 220). As most other narratives in this collection employ third person narration with a reflector character, this variation from the ‘norm’ proves not to be as different as it might initially seem.

In summary, the girl is the protagonist and can be categorised as a reflector character in a variation of the third-person narration. While reading the story, especially in the instances when the girl opens up about her past, the narrative is close to a first person narration. On the other hand, in some statements, ‘you’ can be synonymous with the neutral and generalising ‘one’. By reading this story along these lines it gains universality and makes “the reader feel personally responsible [and] personally caught in the discourse” (Fludernik [1994]). The fate of a particular girl becomes the fate of many unknown and unnamed girls in rural Ireland who are abused by their fathers and see no escape other than emigration. With a topic so widely known and which is so attached to the Irish culture and history, this works very well. Furthermore, the narrative perspective can give, in great contrast to its reading as ‘one’, the

biggest possible mediacy between protagonist and reader, as well as the highest degree of empathy. The present tense, employed in the major part of the story, further adds to this immediacy of thought and creates, as Hadley puts it, something that “feels like a headlong rush away: anywhere, elsewhere, towards an unknown America” (Hadley 3).

Another feature of the narrative technique of this story is the factual and seemingly detached tone that dominates it. After the etic beginning the actions and memories are densely packed, one after the other, as the girl says goodbye to her home. An early example in the story is: “Your mother didn't want a big family. Sometimes, when she lost her temper, she told you she would put you in a bucket and drown you. [...] As you grew older you knew it was only a figure of speech, and then you believed it was just an awful thing to say” (5f). This seems to be just one of the things she cannot change. Later, at the busy airport, the language further adds to her alien situation, where it shows that she does not know anything about the world she decided to become a part of: “You step onto moving stairs that frighten you,” (12) and “[a] stranger asks for your handbag, and you give it to him. You pass through a frame that has no door and your handbag is returned to you. On the other side, the lights are bright” (12f). The comic elements are quite unexpected, but welcome in the gloomy story slowly reaching its end. Further attention should be paid to the comments added in italics at some points in the story. These seem to be the girl's comments on events as they pass through her mind or sayings she has heard again and again. For example: “The cherry trees are bending. *The stronger the wind, the stronger the tree,*” (9) or “Someone asks are you all right – *such a stupid question [...]*” (14).

4.1.2 The Girl and her Family

The girl in “The Parting Gift” is one of thousands of Irish girls or women who saw their only possibility for a happy life in emigrating from Ireland to the United

States. In her particular case she needs to escape a household where she is the youngest, most disadvantaged and abused child of an unloving couple. Her mother never wanted many children, but as the years passed, she bore more than enough. The first ones were finely made up and sent to boarding school in order to become educated. Although Eugene did very well he was taken out of school to help working the fields. As the years passed, “[t]he others just came along, as nature took its course, were fed and clothed, sent off to boarding school. [...] You could see them remembering everything, the existence, turning rigid when your father's shadow crossed the floor” (6). All these siblings lead happy lives far away from the place they were born in and had an innate fear of their father. The girl, as the youngest, was not sent to boarding school: “By then your father saw no point in educating girls; you'd go off and another man would have the benefit of your education” (8). After her birth the mother seems to have had enough of her husband and sent him to the other room and they only had sex on his birthday. Separation was apparently not an option.

The girl remembers the other events that shaped and ruined her forever in a detached and insensitive way: “And then that too stopped and you were sent instead, to sleep with your father. It happened once a month or so, and always when Eugene was out” (6). She even went willingly into the room and liked the attention she received. The fear came when

the terrible hand reaching down under the clothes to pull up the nightdress, the fingers, strong from milking, finding you. [...] The mandatory kiss at the end, stubble, and cigarettes on the breath. [...] You'd go into the bathroom when it was over and wash, telling yourself it meant nothing, hoping the water would be hot. (7)

The years passed and the visits eventually stopped when she started to menstruate. Still, her fear and loathing for her father never ceased. The shocking element of the story, other than the mere fact of the abuses, is the role her mother plays in it. This woman must hold an infinite amount of hatred and aggression against her husband, her unwanted children, and the life she leads. For example, the girl stands in the house, “trying to remember happiness, a

good day, an evening, a kind word. [...] Instead you remember that time the setter had all those pups. It was around the same time your mother started sending you into his room. [...] That day she drowned the pups, she turned her head and looked at you, and smiled" (7). The mother needs some outlet for her frustration and as she cannot drown her own children, despite her threats, she drowns the puppies and all her emotions with them. The smile described seems very cruel, but at the same time it could be read as a cry for help. Of course, for the child whom the mother sends to the father in order to be sexually abused, this would be impossible to understand. The mother's high grade of desperation is analysed by D'hoker:

As her husband uses her, so this mother uses her daughter, instigating her husband's incest as a way to escape her own annual 'duty'. [...] The passive voice [with which her going into the room is described,] suggests the reluctance of the nameless young woman to acknowledge her mother's role, even to herself. Mothers in earlier incest-texts fail to protect their daughters, but Keegan's mother actually throws her daughter to the wolf to save herself. (Weekes 299)

When the time finally comes for the protagonist to leave, she "makes some animal sound in her throat. You turn to look at her. She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. She'd never made any allowance for tears" (4). The question arising is whether these are tears of a mother who is sad to lose her daughter and only female companion in the house, or tears of a wife who is left alone with her husband and is reminded of her dreadful life. It could also be an outlet for her sense of guilt as, ultimately, she herself forced her daughter to leave by sending her in the father's room in the first place. The girl has the same thoughts and doubts about her mother's feelings. In one way, "[y]ou wonder what it will be like for her when you leave. Part of you doesn't care" (3). As she knows of her mother's inner feelings, she wonders whether her mother "will ever forgive [her] for leaving her there with her husband" (10).

The girl's brother, Eugene, wanted to protect his sister and acknowledges in the car that he stayed in the house for her, but he knows he failed at protecting her

as he could not always be there. Her reaction to this is: “It is the first time anyone has ever mentioned it. It feels like a terrible thing, being said” (11). It surely must have felt terrible before, but the protagonist was caught in denial and suppressed feelings. Her brother will probably stay forever in this house although he asks her: “Could you see me living there with them until the end of their days? Could you see me bringing a woman in? What woman could stand it? I'd have no life” (11).⁹ The girl made the decision to leave everything she knows behind, but, as Hadley claims, she is “torn by her love for the place and her rooted knowledge of it, and by her brother's decency and kindness, his dutiful subjection to the rhythms of farm life” (Hadley 3). She failed her exams, sold her horse and has found someone who will – hopefully – meet her in New York at the airport.

Once the nameless girl finds herself alone at the airport she directly aims for the toilets: “Someone asks are you all right – *such a stupid question* – but you do not cry until you have opened and closed another door, until you have safely locked yourself inside your stall” (14). Hadley points out that “[a]ll along she has only been moving towards finding herself alone at last – in the ladies at the airport – with her loss and her own story” (Hadley 3). Only now she can start to overcome what has been done to her although it is unlikely that the traumas caused by such an upbringing can ever be overcome.

As a final note to the story, the importance of the title should be pointed out. The 'parting gift' is merely another disappointment. Firstly, it is linked to a visit in the room she has not been in for a long time: “You haven't gone through this door since the blood started, since you were twelve” (8). Secondly, the girl completely depends on her father's goodwill: “You wait for him to get the wallet out or to tell you where it is, to fetch it. Instead, he puts his hand out. [...] He draws you towards him. He wants to kiss you” (8). Instead of giving her a proper

⁹ This again shows how difficult it is for Irish men to find a woman. For further discussion of this topic see chapters 2.3 and 3.3.

'parting gift' for a daughter, he tries to give her what lovers usually exchange when leaving each other – a kiss. He calls her back, suddenly willing to give it to her, but she runs away as all bad memories of the last years seem to surface in one short moment. The girl lies to her mother in a last attempt to spare her the real face of her husband. Still, she is devastated: "His own daughter, the last of ye, and he wouldn't even get out of the bed [...] Wasn't it a black bastard I married" (9). When they part, mother and daughter hug for what seems like the first time: "You put your arms around your mother. You don't know why. She changes when you do this. You can feel her getting soft in your arms" (9). There is a chance the girl might remember her mother in some good light after having been separated for a while. For her father, the girl will probably only feel hatred as he could not even behave himself during their last meeting. The 'parting gift' was just another disappointment and a confirmation for the girl to start her new life.

4.2 The Forester's Daughter

"The Forester's Daughter" has a very different father figure than the one in the previous story, but it also deals with unhappiness and suppressed conflicts. Here, it is the mother, Martha Dunne, who wishes to escape from the life she is leading, but never manages to get away. As will be discussed later, she finds a different way to escape her husband's touch and the misery of her life. The daughter is too young to run away. However, it crosses her mind in the course of the story although it is not suggested that she will never do so. The main theme, which is also the main reason for unhappiness in this narrative, is the inability to communicate and thus family dysfunction. This failure is the result of unspoken desires, dreams and hopes, as well as wrong decisions and hard burdens which are borne alone although they would be easier to shoulder when shared between partners.

This sad tale is set in Aghowle. Although this is an actual town in County Wexford, the forester refers to his own house as Aghowle. The town is never mentioned, only the house is described in terms of a rundown country house. For Deegan the house means everything and he hates to see it mortgaged: to own it again is his greatest wish and the reason for his hard work. He describes it beautifully to Martha when courting her, but she “found Aghowle to be a warren of dim, unlive-in rooms and unsteady furniture. Dirty nylon curtains clung to the panes. The wooden floors were bare of rugs, the ceiling full of woodworm [...]” (53). Deegan installs a milking parlour and works as a forester. He feels a strong bond to the land and dreams of the future and likes “to know his work was not for nothing. Before he retired, the bank would give back the deed and Aghowle would, at last, belong to him” (57). After his parents’ deaths Deegan paid his brothers their share of the legacy and now the bank owns the place until he can pay back the mortgage. Also, he is very sentimental about the place: “The fact that it stood in a hollow, that the walls within it were not thicker than cardboard didn’t matter. [...] The line of oaks on Aghowle’s lane were planted by his great-grandfather” (57).

The reader is never told specifically the actual size of the house. There is talk of its age and grandeur, but is it one of those big houses which are at the centre of so many British and Irish novels, usually associated with old Protestant wealth? It has quite a large kitchen which can hold many visiting neighbours. It also has a parlour which is big enough, and obviously vacant, so the simpleton is free to play in there without disturbing anyone. Thus, the existence of an unused room in spite of three teenagers living in the house with their parents suggests that Aghowle is bigger than other houses and was once quite grand. It probably had its prime before Deegan’s parents were alive, which could account for his wish to renovate the house and restore its previous grandeur. Another question surrounding the house is why there is no farmland belonging to it. It was Deegan who installed the milking parlour around it, but still chose forestry as his occupation.

The closest village to Aghowle is Parkbridge, where Martha cycles from time to time although it has “just a post office and a public house cum shop” (54). Another town in the area is Coolattin, beyond which Deegan works on the fateful night of Martha’s first affair. It is close enough to go there for work, but it takes quite some time to go there and back again. A more important place for the narrative than the two mentioned above is Courtown Harbour. This is the town Deegan chooses for finding a wife; and he indeed finds what he is looking for, Martha Dunne, who worked there for one summer. Courtown Harbour is a seaside resort in North County Wexford, which tourists have frequented since the mid 19th century. The town, as described in the story, has many attractions for visitors as, for example, Martha looks at slot machines, shelves of copper and a van of candy floss. Its Tara Ballroom was opened in 1946¹⁰ and was chosen by the author as the meeting place of the couple.

The year in which the ballroom was opened gives a hint at the time the narrative is set in. In the short story, neither cars nor electric devices are mentioned which makes it harder to identify the historical background. The only indications are given by the opening date of the Tara Ballroom in 1946, and the fact that Deegan dreams of “twenty-pound notes” (67) in his pockets, not Euro notes. The first of these is the more reliable indicator as Deegan could simply be sentimental and still count his money in pound notes. When sticking to the few time references, it can be argued that the narrative is set between 1947 and 2002, when the Euro was introduced in Ireland¹¹.

4.2.1 Narrative, Style and Structure

“The Forester’s Daughter” has a sophisticated structure. The first paragraph of the narrative introduces the reader to Victor Deegan’s character and his family situation, before he actually appears in person. Then, the narration shifts to a

¹⁰ http://www.irish-showbands.com/Stories/just_one_last_dance_in_tara_ball.htm

¹¹ <http://www.ecb.int/euro/intro/html/map.en.html>

flashback rendered in past tense when the most important stages of his and his wife's lives are recalled. Then, the narrative shifts to the present with "Deegan is now middle aged [...]" (57). On the next page a caesura marks the definite end of the flashback and the tense shifts to the present. The first incident in the 'present' is the finding of the dog: "One wet day while he is working beyond Coolattin pruning a line of Douglas fir, Deegan stumbles across a gun dog" (58). This event also marks the beginning of a happier time in the household and an improving relationship with his daughter. The passing of time is then indicated by the changes of the seasons: "It is autumn. Brown oak leaves are twisting in dry spasms around the yard" (59); "During this mild winter, Christmas comes. The frost is brittle, the birds confused" (67). Sometimes the narrator remarks on something else than the weather as the story progresses: "With bills, school uniforms and a wife's unspoken desire to leave, another year begins" (72). It remains unclear how much time exactly passes or the exact age of the children. Victoria, the youngest, turns twelve when she receives the dog and the fateful night of revelations is approximately nine months or one year later, on Deegan's birthday. After the night of the story-telling, an unspecified period passes: "Now that so much has been said there is nothing left to say. [...] He works later, eats, milks the cows and throws money on the table every Thursday" (87). At this stage the eldest boy no longer lives with them, which does not come as a surprise as his flight to the city was only a matter of time. Then, on one fateful night, their life changes forever.

The narrative is told by a third person omniscient narrator who has access to all the characters' minds, even including Judge, the dog. The shift between the perspectives is generally rather abrupt, yet it always remains clear to the reader from whose point of view the events or memories are presented. The perspective sometimes shifts within a scene, presenting the same incident from more than one perspective. Narrative presentation dominates over dramatic (scenic) presentation. However, as the reluctance or inability to speak openly is a central theme of the short story, the dramatised scenes are of special importance. Firstly, they show how little and how unsuccessfully the couple

communicates with each other. Their dissatisfaction is either uttered too late, or not at all:

'You spent my money on roses?'
 'Your money?'
 'What kind of fool did I marry at all?'
 'Is it a fool I am?'
 'What else?'
 'I suppose I was fool enough to marry you.'
 [...]
 'And a working man needs more than dried-out spud for his dinner.'
 'You don't look any worse for it.' (54f)

Secondly, the speech acts show what the neighbours say out loud about Deegan – “There's a great man, a great worker. You'll not find the grass growing under his feet,” (54) – while the narrator describes how they see the whole family – “They would leave remembering not the fine old house that always impressed them or the man with the worried look that owned it or the strange flock of teenagers but the woman with the dark brown hair which got looser as the night went on [...]" (56). Lastly, and most importantly, Martha's last great story is not told in reported speech, but her actual words with the addition of her thoughts are presented: “Before she can begin she must find a scent; every story has its own, particular scent. She settles on the roses. [...] ‘There was this woman one time who got a live-in job in a guest house by the sea [...]“ (79f).

A rather unusual device is presenting parts of the narrative through the perspective of Judge, the dog: “The retriever has sheltered for the night under the trees and the forester has, in fact, roused him from a dream of ponies chasing him through a bog. Puzzled at first by the presence of a stranger, the retriever looks around and then remembers yesterday” (58). In addition to the sentimental touch it gives to the story, it also adds an important viewpoint. Judge describes the house, the yard and the members of the family: “His urge to roll in the cow-dung is almost irresistible but this is the type of house where they might let a dog sleep inside. [...] This is a different sort of house but

Deegan will sell him just as soon as he finds the opportunity" (60f). Also, the dog is a good judge of character, which is supported by his name and his love for Victoria.

Introducing Judge as a thinking and feeling character gives further depth to the story and is yet another feature of the author's use of postmodernist features. The reader is given plenty of information to envision the characters and the scenery vividly. Two examples of these details are: "He'd stoop and find the big enamel plate with fried potatoes and a pair of eggs dried out in the oven" (53); "[Judge's] mother was champion retriever at the Tinahely Show" (62). However, there is still enough vital information which is left out and has to be filled by the reader's imagination and power of deduction. For example, the circumstances of the children's conception remain rather unclear, although they are recounted twice by Martha. In the first mentioning of the salesman, he is described as "a big blade of a man with a thick moustache" (54), while Martha refers to him as "a good-looking fellow, tall and cleanshaven" (84). Is this her way of disguising the truth in case someone had met the salesman, or it could even suggest that there were two men. The first option is suggested by the simpleton who shouts out "Mammy had a boyfriend!" (86) which suggests that the affair did not stop after their first meeting, but has lasted several years. This is also assumed by Deegan: Martha says in her story that there were no children in the marriage for six years, which means that the salesman is the father of the first son. Deegan, on the other hand, immediately associates his daughter with the stranger: "She was too strange and lovely to be his" (86). Also Martha links the salesman and her favourite child to each other: "Martha waited for the blood but on the ninth day after it was due she gave up and asked the neighbours in and told a story, knowing how the night would end. That part wasn't easy. But that's all in the past. Now her daughter is sitting on the autumn ground" (60). This shows that inverted chronology and the many gaps in the narrative invite the reader to participate and fill in the gaps. Other features of Keegan's style are her original use of metaphors - "[...] her pale hands plucking unlikely stories like green plums that ripened with the telling at her hearth," (56) - and colourful

descriptions of the scenery: “That summer her roses bloomed scarlet...” (55); “But in that household as in any other, Mondays came. Whether the dawn was blood red or a damp, ash grey [...]” (56).

4.2.2 Victor Deegan and Martha Dunne

In order to analyse the characters of Victor Deegan and Martha Dunne it is helpful to look at them as a couple. The reader only gets hints of what their life was like before they met as the narrative centres mainly on their life together in Aghowle. Victor Deegan is one of the bachelors who decide to marry later in their lives, after the death of their parents¹². After his parents' death he decides to buy out his brothers and mortgage the house. Thus, his life's ambition from the age of about 30 is to work hard enough to own Aghowle again. He also buys Frisians and installs a milking parlour as an additional source of income. This is the first sign of his stamina and will to work hard for his goals. He never misses a morning or evening to milk the cows, no matter how tired he is or how much his muscles ache. After the first steps were taken at home he sets out to find a wife and goes quite far to find her. “He found Martha Dunne on a Sunday afternoon in the Tara Ballroom” (51) in Courtown Harbour, which is an especially suitable place due to its speaking name. He does not hide his obsession with Aghowle in their conversations. Only when Martha tells her story it becomes clear that his romanticised view of Aghowle only exists in his mind or memory. Led by false expectations and having no other suitor with serious intentions, Martha agrees to marry Deegan. Starting with these far from ideal circumstances, their marriage is not a happy one and their relationship does not improve in the years they spend together, rather on the contrary, they seem to be drifting further apart.

Deegan spends most of the time out of the house working, driven by the conviction that “his work was not for nothing. Before he retired, the bank would

¹² For a detailed analysis on courting habits see chapter 3.3.

give back the deed and Aghowle would, at last, belong to him" (57). He goes as far as to say that "[s]ecretly, he knew that the place gave him more satisfaction than his wife and children ever would" (57). He has lovely dreams of the future where he would get up late and repair the house and take his wife to the seaside where she can eat whatever she craves: "Without Aghowle to worry about, his future will be an open hand. Martha, the mother of his children, will be happy, for there will be nights in B&Bs and brand-new clothes. [...] They will walk again on a warm strand and Deegan won't care about the sand under his feet" (70f). With this dream, he, in a way, wishes back the time of their courtship when they walked on the beach of Courtown. Then, he did not enjoy it as much as he dreams he would in the future. Until then, every penny he has to spare will be put into the refurnishing of the house, not his family. Sadly, he does not share these dreams with Martha, so she has no prospect of happiness in her life. What also characterises Deegan, apart from his diligent nature, is his fear of the neighbours. He obeys to the rules and does not want to stand out, except with his achievements:

Deegan is not a religious man. He knows that beyond this world there is nothing. God is an invention created by one man to keep another at a safe distance from his wife and land. But always he goes to Mass. He knows the power of a neighbour's opinion and will not have it said that he's ever missed a Sunday. (59)

The fears he has are manifested in the dreams he has at night. Some dreams are about money: "In sleep he dreams he is standing under the oaks. [...] Leaves begin to fall. It all seems wrong but when Deegan looks down there, all around his feet are twenty-pound notes. [...] He fills it to the rim" (67). Other dreams are about the fear of losing his hard earned money: "Deegan is uneasy. He keeps having the same dream: every night he puts his hand in his pocket and there, his wallet, bulging with all the money he's ever earned, is cut in two. All the notes are in halves and he can convince neither shopkeeper nor bank clerks that they are genuine. Towards the end all the neighbours stand there laughing" (70). Deegan left all this behind when he courted Martha and was

charming and would not let her escape his courting. How wrong she was to believe it would always be like this.

The way in which their courting phase is described reveals much about their character and how little they actually understand each other: they met „through nothing stronger than habit“ (52); “Martha was the type of woman who is content in her body but slow to speak. Deegan mistook her silence for modesty and, before a year of courtship ended, he proposed” (52). What follows then is the first indication that Victor and Martha are unable to communicate with each other, although they had been chatting and flirting for almost a year: “So Martha, with her own logic, concluded that Victor Deegan must love her, and accepted. In all the years that followed Deegan never thought but he did love her, never thought but he showed his love” (53). Their life would have been completely different, had they pronounced firstly their love or doubts and then their reasons for unhappiness. They both expected different things, but failed to communicate them to their partners. Victor wanted a housewife to care for Aghowle and to turn it into a home again. Martha, “like every woman, [...] wanted something of her own. [...] She could see herself out under the trees sitting on a bench in the shade, reading the newspaper of a Sunday after Mass” (81). “[B]eing no housekeeper, [she] didn’t really care” (53) about the house or making dinner. She wanted a comfortable life with a loving partner. They both wish for intimacy, but are unable to express their wishes. For example, Victor thinks: “Dreaming has become the closest thing to having someone to talk to. He looks at Martha. [...] He would like sometimes to carry her away from this place and tell her what is on his mind and start all over again” (67). Still, he does not act upon his dream. Maybe it is too late at this point. Almost in mockery of their inability, Judge comments that he “is glad he cannot speak. He has never understood the human compulsion for conversation: people, when they speak, say useless things that seldom if ever improve their lives. Their words make them sad. Why can’t they stop talking and embrace each other?” (64f). Martha and Victor not only fail in their communication, but also in their tenderness, which leads to Martha’s strategy to overcome her loneliness.

Martha “felt lonelier now than she’d ever felt when she was single” (54) and has no one in town she can talk to as she is far from her home and the amusements of a bigger dwelling like Courtown. “In her despair, she bought two dozen Rhode Island Red pullets and a cock. She sometimes found herself standing in the barn watching the fowl pecking the seed, feeling happy until she realised she wasn’t” (53). In the narrative it feels like a short while later, but in the story Martha tells it becomes clear that much time has passed since their wedding: “One Thursday [...] a stranger appeared with a trailer. A big blade of a man with a thick moustache, he parked in the centre of her yard and strode up to the door” (54). As the affair she then has with him is the only affection she received in all the years she longs for the stranger and cannot forget him. Also, already discussed above, this seems to have been an affair which went on for many years and from which at least two of her children originate. Maybe it was even more than sex for the woman - maybe it was love: “Some things she will never understand. [...] Why hadn’t the girl’s father ever written? She has waited for so long. She shakes her head at the absurd part of her that hasn’t given up” (64). Martha also thinks a lot about running away and hoards money in her coat: “No longer is it a question of if or why. She must now decide when, exactly, she will leave” (66). Yet, she is unable to leave, the prospects of where to go after her flight are too insecure and scare her. Deegan starts to fear her flight after one night’s dream:

He dreams a strange dream also; of coming home through a blue evening feeling anxious because no smoke is rising, of walking inside and his house being empty. [...] After this dream he wakes and, in an attempt at intimacy, tells his wife. Martha, still half asleep, says, ‘Why would I leave you?’ and turns over. Deegan straightens himself. Such a strange thing to say. He never thought she’d leave him, never thought such a thing had crossed her mind. (70)

A happier time in the life of the Deegan family seems to begin when Victor finds and brings home Judge: “[w]aves of white gold run down the retriever’s back. His snout is cold, his eyes brown and ready” (58). Victoria is thrilled and loves

her new companion. The dog, in a way, brings father and daughter closer together, although his intentions are not as pure as the daughter's probably are: "He has become more than a little afraid of his wife and, to feel some kind of tenderness, often sits his daughter on his knee" (72). At the heart of this happy time is the parents' knowledge that it started with Deegan's carelessness and a lucky misunderstanding - "Exhausted, Deegan gives the dog to the first child he sees. It happens to be his youngest and it happens to be the girl's birthday," (59) – and ends because of Deegan's carelessness and bad luck:

He tells himself it doesn't matter, that there is nothing he could have done. [...] Martha is standing at their bedroom window in her nightdress, watching. She raises her hand and Deegan, feeling surprised, raises his. Maybe some part of her is glad the dog is gone. While he stands there watching, his wife's hand closes into a fist and her fist shakes. So, it is all out in the open. (74)

In a way, Deegan regrets his actions, but "[t]he consequences, not their origin, strain him most for his wife no longer speaks to him, no longer sleeps at his side" (76). After this happy interlude, Martha decides not only to distance herself completely from her husband, but also to lay open her heart's desire and to no longer keep the hurtful truth from Deegan. "So much of her life has evolved around things that never happened" (76), so now Martha's time to act has come. It is not unusual for her to invite the neighbours and to tell stories. It is a delight for the neighbours, as she seems to be very talented. Furthermore, it is helpful as "[a]fter such nights, [Deegan] always took his woman to bed to make not only her but himself sure that she was nobody's but his. Sometimes he believed that was why she told a story well" (56). During her final story he learned how close to the truth his apprehension has always been. Many fears of his, and theories of the reader, are confirmed in her narrative. She speaks out boldly what hurts Deegan most. At first, she plans on disguising the truth so the neighbours will hardly realize what they hear. Then, she does not care and tells it as it really was. This is her way of freeing herself from the burden and maybe even her way of taking revenge on her husband. Although she does not care how much it hurts him after what Deegan has done to her favourite child, "she

needs a drink" (79). Their relationship cannot get any worse and even her plans of flight seem to be empty thoughts as she does not act upon them.

What makes the story telling scene special is, firstly, the play she stages for the neighbours: "She puts a warm plate in front of him. [...] Her voice is strange. Her voice is not the one she uses. [...] Martha seems genuinely amused. [...] She's acting. Deegan realises. She's acting well. Nobody couldn't believe this didn't happen every day" (77f). Secondly, the whole evening is well planned and she has a strategy to postpone the beginning of the story and to wait until she has everyone's undivided attention. Thirdly, she puts an emphasis on 'Mona's' unhappiness and the difference between her suitor and her husband: "They were married six years with no sign of a babby [sic] and then one day when Mona was on her own who comes up the front door with rosebushes only a stranger. [...] He was a good-looking fellow, tall and cleanshaven. He didn't have that dirty beard Nowlan had and Mona was able to get a good look at his chin" (85). Lastly, the presence of her son under the table makes the scene more interesting as he is the one person in the family who is not afraid of telling the truth. His memories also underline the story and confirm that it was actually the girl that was conceived that night or that the affair went on for a longer period of time: "Under the table the boy is concentrating on his mother's words. This is a different kind of story. This story is what really happened for he remembers the man, and the hydrangea" (85). Also, when Deegan has to leave as he cannot bear to listen any longer, he and the reader hear his son's voice driving away any last trace of doubt about the length of the affair: "Finally, he hears his son, the simpleton, shout, 'Mammy had a boyfriend!'" (86). After this fateful evening, ending the climaxing action of the narrative, is the first true conversation the couple has in their life together:

'Are you happy now?' he says.

'After twenty years of marriage, you're finally asking.'

'Was that all you wanted?'

Martha raises a glass of whiskey and stares at her husband.

'Happy birthday, Victor,' she says. 'Many happy returns.' (87)

The first birthday present Deegan ever receives is one he could have lived without and which is the first life changing event in a short time: “Now that so much has been said there is nothing left to say. The neighbours stay away these times. Deegan gives up going to mass; he no longer sees the point in going” (87).

The second life-changing event is of course when the house catches fire. Victor almost has not got the will to get up. When he does, “Deegan still believes he can save his home. The minute passes. [...] Deegan, in his bare feet, goes over to his wife. There are no tears. [...] ‘Are you sorry now you strayed?’ ‘I’m sorry you took it out on the girl’ [...] ‘I didn’t know what I was doing.’ It’s the first admission he’s ever made” (89).” With these confessions the story ends and the outlook into the future is not as grim as expected. Martha thinks of her money and her roses and Deegan of the work that has not yet begun. It seems that the past events have changed him deeply. Now that his prospects of a tender relationship are seemingly destroyed forever, the loss of his house, the one thing he truly loves, is the icing on the crumbling cake that is his life: “‘Who cares?’ he keeps whispering as he goes along. ‘Who cares?’” (90).

4.2.3 Victoria Deegan and her Brothers

Martha’s children experience this night in a completely different light. The oldest boy is already far away in Dublin, probably leading a happier life than he would have lead at home. The simpleton, who started the fire, suffers the most: “It is hardest for the boy whose farm is gone. All his work, through his own fault, is wasted. Nonetheless he is intrigued. He looks back at his creation. It is the biggest fire anyone has ever built” (90). When Judge comes back, the boy invites him into ‘his’ home and only on a second thought the reader grasps that he does not light the fire in the actual hearth, but in the parlour, where he built his farm:

Now the stray follows him into his home. The boy is the man of the house now. He closes the door and tries to remember how to light a fire. [...] Hasn't his sister taught him how to do this. He places the papers on the hearth of his house, where the carpet meets the plywood. It takes a long time but finally he manages to strike one of the matches. [...] Intrigued, the boy watches the flames. [...] This is the loveliest thing he has built. [...] Some small part of the boy is upset yet he stands back, and laughs. (88)

His reaction is yet another reminder that he is mentally unstable and that it takes a while for the consequences of his actions to sink in. Another one who does not yet grasp what has actually led to this fire is the girl. She is thrilled and happy that her dog is back and does not care about anything else. For her, this is not a loss as her life has taken a dreadful turn when Judge was taken away: "The girl has never known such happiness; Judge is back, that's all she cares, for now. It hasn't yet occurred to her that she's the one who taught her brother how to light a fire. The guilt of that will surface later" (90). This statement is especially intriguing, because of its phrasing. Keegan repeatedly employs a kind of boldness in phrasing in this story, but this example is especially moving considering how much the girl had to endure.

Victoria Deegan is the youngest of Martha's children and carries her father's name, which fills him with pride. She is the smartest of the children and the one with the biggest dreams and a vivid imagination: "She climbs down from the school bus and tells them she solved a word problem in mathematics, that long ago Christina Columbus discovered the earth was round. She says she'll let the Taoiseach marry her and then she changes her mind. She will not marry at all but become the captain of a ship" (66). The mistakes she makes show that although she is the smartest of the family, she is by no means the best in comparison to the other students. Very important to the story is also the liking she took to her elder brother, the simpleton: "Always she was urging him to do the things nobody else believed him capable. She'd taught him how to know and cast the hook, how to strike a match and write his name" (56). Such vital information, especially important for the ending of the story, is at this stage

mentioned in passing and its relevance becomes evident only at the very end. The middle boy is described as “a beautiful, pale boy with a pair of green eyes staring from a shell of dark brown hair. He did not attend school but lived in a world of his own and had a frightening aptitude for speaking the truth” (56). The last quality is especially troubling in the company of a family, incapable of speaking out their innermost wishes, let alone the truth. Only the ‘simpleton’ and the girl sometimes speak their minds. For example, Victoria confronts and shocks her mother with the observation: “‘What would you know about love? [...] You don’t even love Daddy. All ye care about is money’” (76). Another incident is when Martha speaks ill of Judge as she does not want her daughter to get too close to him in case she will be disappointed: “‘He’s my birthday present. At least Daddy bought me a dog. You bought me nothing.’ ‘Are you jealous?’ asks the boy. ‘What did you say?’ asks Martha. ‘Who cares?’” (63).

The eldest boy is hardly mentioned in the narrative. The function of this character is to show the fate of many men working in the rural areas: “The boy, a shrill young fellow, grew tall but it soon became apparent that he had no grá¹³ for farming [...] He looked up to his uncles whom he visited every now and then in Dublin and it was hardship to make him do a hand’s turn. He would get away just as soon as he saw the opportunity” (55). He is not part of the most important scenes and one is only reminded of him when Martha reveals that her first child was conceived by the salesman. It is interesting to quote that the middle child is never mentioned in connection with the salesman. Could it be that he is the only real child of Victor Deegan and by being ‘a simpleton’ yet another failure in his life? Victor himself states that “[t]he boy, like so much else in life, has been a disappointment” (71f). Very unique, on the other hand, is Judge’s estimation of the boy: “The middle boy’s scent is unlike any he has ever encountered. It is something close to ragweed, closer to plant than animal like the roots you’d bury something under” (61f).

¹³ Grá (or grádh, grágh) means ‘love’ in Irish (MacLennan 189)

Important as the mentally challenged boy is for the story, it is actually the girl who is the central figure of the narrative. Mother and father may be the main protagonists of this story, the girl and especially her happiness, however, lie at the heart of the narrative. She is her mother's favourite child, bears her father's name and is the smartest of the family. Also, her happiness elates the whole house and her unhappiness motivates her mother to tell her story. Her life takes a happy turn when she receives the dog: "And so the girl, whose father has never given her so much as a tender word, embraces the retriever and with it the possibility that Deegan loves her, after all. [...] For some reason it almost breaks the forester's heart to hear her say the words" (59). Sadly, "Martha [...] knows better. Victor Deegan would never put his hand in his pocket for the child's birthday. [...] But because her favourite child seems happy, she says nothing" (59). She will be proven right. While Judge is in the house and Victor sits his daughter on his knee he even gives her a nickname, which is a sign of their growing closeness. When Judge is gone, Victoria's heart is broken: "She searches until the knowledge that he is gone sinks in and changes her state of mind. Her father never loved her, after all. [...] By the time a week has passed she has stopped talking. [...] Deegan knows the girl has gone a bit mad but the girl will get over it. It is only a matter of time" (75). She will not be the same again and will not dream of a happy, adventurous future until Judge comes back to her in the fateful night of the fire. So Victoria Deegan, who is sadly "too strange and lovely to be his" (86), is at the heart of the story and also most important in the hearts of her Mother and Victor Deegan. After Judge's disappearance it is unclear whether she thinks of running away or forges plans to do so in the future. After the destruction of the house and the return of the dog, her one true friend, the future is unsure and might take a happy turn for the forester's daughter.

4.3 Close to the Water's Edge

At a first glance this story seems to be the odd one out: it is set in Texas, the protagonist is a 21-year-old Harvard student and Irish rural life could not be any

further away than in this story. At a closer look it becomes clear that the themes of the story are more persuasively linked to the USA than Ireland. Had the story been set in Ireland, a journey to the sea would not strike one as difficult as from the middle of the United States where the distance is much bigger. The main setting of "Close to the Water's Edge" is a seaside town or city in Texas, where the Harvard student visits his mother and stepfather. The extravagant and luxurious surroundings of the housing complex, which is owned by the rich stepfather, are the first items described in the story: "the plastic leaved of the tall, potted plants [...] the penthouse with its open-mouthed swordfish on the walls, the blue tiles and all the mirrors that make it impossible to do even the simplest thing without it being reflected" (93). The tone referring to the luxury is almost sarcastic, pointing out how unnecessary many items as well as customs are. The same applies to the sparsely dressed guests bathing in the sun as well as the embarrassing scene in the restaurant later in the story.

The title, "Close to the Water's Edge", appears once as a phrase in the story, on the very first page: "A jogger stays on the hard sand close to the water's edge, his shadow at his side" (93). The title mirrors the setting as well as the grandmother's journey to the sea, where she only stays close to the water's edge but never swims in the sea. Her grandson does swim in the sea. After almost drowning in it, obviously the most intense experience after having enjoyed swimming on the day before, he sees his goals more clearly. He might even be able to take another 'plunge' into the big sea that is life with its currents and difficulties lying ahead. Before the incidents of the story start, the tanned student standing on the balcony has already spent five days on the Texas coast. He sees other students living in cheaper motels, which might suggest that he wishes to be there with them and that he is not part of their group. Due to the wealth of his stepfather he is separated from the crowd. On the night of his birthday they visit Leonardo's, a luxurious seafood restaurant with a marvellous view of the sea. The mother and the millionaire are most likely regular customers in this extravagant place, with a palm tree in the middle of the

terrace and a fancy chandelier. On their arrival, expensive seafood like oysters and shrimps await them on the table and the cake for the student had been pre-ordered. While the couple probably spends a lot of time on the Texas coast, the student is on vacation from Harvard University. It is not revealed what he studies there. The time of year in which the narrative is set is not explicitly mentioned, but in accordance to his desire to be back at college playing chess on his computer and the masses of students that are on vacation it could be argued that it is spring break. At the beginning of summer vacation the dorm rooms would probably have to be vacated by the students, and he would not be able to return to his room.

The narrative gives some hints as to when it is set: firstly, the student remarks that “[i]t's ten years since the ban on DDT came into place and the brown pelicans are back” (93). DDT, a synthetic pesticide, was banned in 1972 in the United States “because it contributed to the near extinction of birds, including the bald eagle and the peregrine falcon” (EDF¹⁴). Later, Richard the millionaire refers to the former American President Bill Clinton: “Did you hear about this guy Clinton?” (97). Since this question suggests that Clinton is not very well known yet, it might be before or during his presidential campaign. He further addresses Clinton's announcement to put an end to the gay-ban in the US military. As Bill Clinton's presidential campaign was held in 1992¹⁵ and DDT had been banned for ten years in the US in 1982 this leaves a ten year span in which the story could be set. The dates are not in full accordance but the references are sufficient to define the historical background.

¹⁴ See further: <http://www.edf.org/article.cfm?ContentID=4407>

¹⁵ Bill Clinton was in office as the 42nd President of the United States of America from 1993-2001. His first official campaign was held in 1992. Cf. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/williamjclinton>

4.3.1 Narrative, Style and Structure

"Close to the Water's Edge" has a covert third person omniscient narrator with the protagonist functioning as a reflector figure. The narrative has an etic beginning, providing the initial image of the student: "Tonight he is out on the balcony, his dark tan stunning against the white of his shirt" (93). After this view from above, the reader is taken into the student's mind, achieving the closest possible immediacy. Spoken discourse is used repeatedly throughout the story and allows the reader to grasp the mother's and stepfather's personalities in an almost unbiased way. However, their personalities cannot be perceived in an entirely unbiased way as the comments and descriptions of the main character are ironic and undermine the characters' self-presentation. While nearly all conversations are presented in direct speech, narrative presentation still outweighs the dramatic presentation. It is rather obvious that the reader is meant to grasp the student's view of his mother: "'I'm so proud of you,' she says now, staring at his throat" (96). Although she is a loving and certainly extremely proud mother, she still does not manage to look at his face. The stepfather's comments and opinions stand for themselves - "I could eat a small child," (97) - but his business relation is further enhanced by the vocabulary used in connection to him: "The millionaire takes the knife and carves the cake into uneven pieces, *like a pie chart* [emphasis added]" (99). The surroundings are also described in order to give a good impression of what the apartment and the beach look like and to convey the atmosphere as to the reader. Furthermore, the narrative has an ironic or even sarcastic tone which correlates to the student's aversion against the stepfather and his life. A few examples are: "The plastic leaves of the tall, potted plants beat against the sliding glass" (93) and "Smells of horseradish and dill spill out of the kitchen. A lobster has got loose in the tank [...]" (98).

The narrative is written in present tense with the exception of the flashback reporting the grandmother's story, which is actually a 'story within the story'. It

is not part of the main action, but vital for understanding the student's story. In general, the young man has very strong emotions, which only surface after his near death experience. The way in which these emotions are voiced by the narrator is quite interesting. Before dinner, he sees pelicans on the water and describes them in the following way: "They look pre-historic gliding over the water, scooping their prey with their huge bills, their high plummeting dives" (93). Another connection to a pre-historic era is introduced after his rescue to the shore: "He imagines the first species that crawled out of the sea, the amount of courage it took" (101). It is not enough to describe his panting and his exhaustion. The strength it took to crawl onto the safe beach is intensified by this image.

4.3.2 The Harvard Student

The protagonist and focalizer of "Close to the Water's Edge" is an unnamed twenty-one year old Harvard student, who visits his mother and stepfather at a fashionable spa on the coastline of Texas. The first thing we see of him is his image out on the balcony, "his dark tan stunning against the white of his dress shirt" (93). His character and the relationship to his mother slowly unfold as the story takes its course. Early suggestions as to his homosexual orientation almost go unnoticed, but are repeated throughout. An early example would be him, watching "the procession of young men with washboard bellies walking the strand" (93). The absence of girls in bikinis in his observation of the beach is another indication that is hard to notice. What is striking is that he feels detached from the crowd of other students, who stay in motels and spend their days, doing whatever they wish.

On the night depicted in the narrative, he has dinner with his mother and stepfather in a fancy restaurant. His mother is a "small woman with a hot temper, [who] likes to go marketing. She drinks a glass of fresh grapefruit juice with vodka before she goes and makes a list on the counter. [...] All the things

she could never afford.” (96). She has put on extravagant jewellery and wears a fashionable white suit. It soon becomes obvious how proud she is of her son, but how difficult it is for her to show her affection and to come to terms with his homosexuality. The mother praises him and says: “You wonder why I married him but I was thinking of you, all along” (96). However, in the following pages of the story it is suggested by her manners and behaviour that she highly enjoys the lifestyle and the benefits they hold for her son are probably more likely to be an additional bonus, but not the main appeal of her relationship with Richard. His stepfather is introduced as “the Republican who owns this complex. He is a man of humble origins who made his money out of exports and real estate. After his parents divorced, his mother said people have no control over who they fall in love with, and a few months later she married the millionaire” (94). He is furthermore described as “a plain man with an Italian suit and the whitest teeth money can buy” (97). This gives the reader not only a very good idea about what this man looks like, but also about what the protagonist thinks of him. The student seems to have no ambition to share the flamboyant and luxurious lifestyle his mother came to love.

During the scene at the restaurant the main reason for the difficult relationship between student and millionaire is revealed. It all starts with Richard's comment: “‘Did you hear about this guy Clinton? Says if he's elected President he's gonna let queers into the military,’ he says. ‘What do you think of that, Harvard?’” (97). Although he is asked a highly controversial question in a rather blunt and insensitive way, the student tries to answer but is instantly interrupted: “What kind of defence would that be? A bunch of queers! We didn't win two World Wars that way” (97). At this point his mother gets upset, but it soon becomes obvious that she has no real power in this relationship due to her remark: “No, I won't be hushed up this time!” (98). While she wants her son to be the centre of attention on his birthday and is truly proud, the millionaire can do nothing but provoke and humiliate the student: “Here's to the brightest young man in the whole state of Texas” (98). The mother has to realise that this is mockery, but

she tries her best to keep the evening peaceful. She also stops her son from finally addressing the sensitive topic of his probable homosexuality: "How come you never bring a girl down?' At this point, he could say something. He composes a retort, decides to speak, then looks at his mother and hesitates. His mother's eyes are pleading for his silence" (99). The disaster is complete with the final mockery of the millionaire – "the pinkest cake he has ever seen, like a cake you'd have at the christening party for twin girls. The millionaire is grinning. [...] It is the unhappiest moment of the day so far but he blows hard, extinguishing the candles" (99). The Republican millionaire from Texas is obviously homophobic and finds it amusing to mock the son of his wife. It is difficult to imagine a stepfather more mean, and that he probably pays for his tuition only adds to the humiliation.

Without a warning the student stands up and escapes the terrible scene and dreadful company. Now, the polite and detached relationship to his mother is fully tangible for the reader. The student lived with his maternal grandmother while his parents got divorced and got very close to her: "His grandmother, with whom he lived while his parents broke up, is dead now. Not a day has passed when he has not felt her absence" (100). He would rather be alone in his dormitory in Harvard playing chess and drinking beer than spend his birthday with his mother. This fact speaks for itself.

In addition to the well portrayed characters in the story, the student's near death experience and his grandmother's trip to the sea are interesting aspects to be compared. The experiences both mirror and contrast each other, while, on the whole, complementing each other: the student, without thinking much about it, goes for a late swim trying to cope with and forget the night's embarrassing events, maybe encouraged by his grandmother's story: "His grandmother is dead but he is twenty-one years old, inhabiting space on the earth, getting A's at Harvard, walking on a beach without any time constriction in the moonlight"

(100). He gets exhausted faster than expected and is surprised by a big wave: “Panic strikes him and then time passes and the panic changes into something peaceful. [...] He gives up and feels himself coming to the surface” (101). He does not fully realise what happens and how lucky he is until he stands under the shower back in the apartment.

His grandmother experienced something different: she married a pig farmer in Tennessee who refused to take her to the sea although she repeatedly asked for it. In a way she felt she could settle down if only she could see the ocean only once. When she had already given up, her husband surprised her and took her to the ocean:

‘One hour, Marcie. I’ll give you one hour, [...] She walked for half an hour with her bare feet in the frothy edge of the sea, then turned back along the cliff path and watched her husband, at give minutes past the appointed hour, slam the door and turn the ignition. [...] Then she climbed in and spent the rest of her life with a man who would have gone home without her. (95)

This episode influences the student greatly as she told him much later that “if she’s had her life to live again, she would never have climbed back into that car. [...] I thought I didn’t have a choice” (100). The story is not so much about swimming or dying, but about taking chances. The grandmother had no chance as at that time it was probably unthinkable for a woman to survive without her husband, or a man taking care of her. After plunging into the sea, the Harvard student feels the full intensity of his suffering in this family and realises that he must leave. He is not obliged to stay. While he calls the airline to book a flight back the only thing holding him back is his mother and the question whether he really has the strength to leave. remains unanswered:

His mother had walked into the room and is standing there with a glass in her hand. He thinks about her mother who, after coming all that way, and with only an hour to spend, would not get into the water, even though she was a strong river swimmer. When he’d asked her why, she’d said she

had no idea how deep it was. 'May I help you?' the voice asks again.
(103)

Water or the sea is a symbol in the story representing hardship and difficulties in life. No one can say how 'deep' the water is, meaning how much energy has to be put into living. It is all about the question of what one wants to achieve and is prepared to do for it. The student does not want his stepfather's help any more. How could he stand up to himself when he takes the money of someone who despises him and radically rejects homosexuals. Maybe this near death experience and his grandmother's example give him the strength to leave the place 'Close to the Water's Edge' and instead of plunging right into the 'water' that is life.

4.4 Silence, Power Relations and Emigration

One major theme which "The Parting Gift", "The Forester's Daughter" and "Close to the Water's Edge" share is family dysfunction. This topic is rather complex, not only because of its many different causes but also because of the diversity of its consequences. The characters act differently, as the causes and responses to family dysfunction are different. The girl in the first story is desperate because of her father's abuse and her mother's heartlessness. The family is first and foremost not harmonious because of the unhappy and unloving marriage of the parents. The number of children that were born in this terrible union are predestined to be harmed in some way. Daily life is hardly described, but the house is hardly ever filled with laughter or merry conversations. Misguided conversations or unspoken thoughts are the main reason of Martha Dunne's and Victor Deegan's unhappiness. From the beginning of the relationship they talk about the wrong things, always assuming, wishing and dreaming, but never actually saying what is on their minds. Already the first paragraph of the story shows well how little his mind is set on the happiness of his family:

Deegan, the forester, is not the type of man to remember his children's birthdays, least likely that of his youngest, who bears a strong, witch-like resemblance to her mother. If occasional doubts about his daughter cross his mind he does not dwell on things. In Aghowle there are three teenagers, the milking and the mortgage. (51)

It is not suggested that he is heartless, which is not the case, but his way of caring for his family is rather detached. When he craves intimacy he wonders why he does not receive it. This continues through the years and thus true love cannot develop between the spouses. This does not go unnoticed by the children and the daughter finds and loses happiness with her only friend, the dog Judge. The dog, whose species is traditionally associated with fidelity (see e.g. Ferber 59), becomes the girl's companion and through his disappearance she realises even more what has always been missing in her life: intimacy, love and fidelity. The dog certainly did not talk to her literally, but it must have spoken in a silent way that was more honest than any conversation of Victoria's parents. In the last story the reason for the family dysfunction is probably the fact that the family broke apart, that the millionaire is now the protagonist's stepfather and that Richard constantly mocks and discriminates the student for his sexual orientation. The mother is too weak to stand up for her son as she depends on the man's money and, consequently, his good humour.

The character of the 'weak mother' within a patriarchal family unit seems to be employed repeatedly in the stories. However, it should not be forgotten that women do not always have the choice to be strong and speak their minds. If they do, they might suffer even more and make their living worse. In "The Parting Gift", the family lives on a farm. Certain rules apply to living in such conditions and although the Deegans live off forestry, this can also be applied to them:

Irish agriculture, now as in the past, is dominated by the family farm, i.e. the family which lives and works on the land operates as the basic unit of production. Typically this means that the land is controlled by the male farmer (husband and father) but with the labour of the other family members being used on a regular and ongoing basis. (Duggan, 55)

Deegan controls his house in terms of finances and provides Martha with household money every Thursday. On the unnamed girl's farm in "The Parting Gift" the father is certainly the unquestioned authority. Most of his children are well educated, probably because the boarding house kept them far away from home most of the time. Only the eldest boy has to stop school to help on the fields and the youngest girl has to go to a school nearby so she can help in the household as well. Thus, "the weight of culture, tradition and family ideology in rural Ireland clearly identifies the farm family as a patriarchal structure where the interests of men (fathers and sons) supersede those of women and daughters" (Tovey 245). The Harvard student's mother grew up on a pig farm in Tennessee and her mother felt the pressure of the patriarchal society. The student's mother has risen in society but she is no less in an inferior position to her husband than her mother was before.

Martha Deegan is the one woman in these narratives that possesses some kind of power over the relationship to her husband. When he is gone during the day, she can invite neighbours around and 'surprise' him with that. Her nights of storytelling show that she does not lack the ability of fluent and colourful speech. She might just lack the will or a reason to communicate with her husband. Her nights of stories go back to an old tradition in Ireland: "On winter nights *seanachai* (storytellers) recounted the old tales and legends [...] Little of that folk civilization today survives in daily usage; life has become more comfortable, if less picturesque" (Ardagh 105). Ardagh refers here to the comforts of modern life like a television set. In "The Forester's Daughter" this commodity is not available, so Martha's storytelling nights were most certainly greeted with joy by the family and neighbours.

What unites the characters in the three stories is not - as is clear from the demonstration above - the cause of their sorrows, but the consequences, or rather the responses or after-effects that follow their suffering: thoughts of escape, plans about leaving, and actual flight. In "The Forester's Daughter" Martha Dunne hoards money as she plans to leave, first her husband, then, her family. At one point in the story Martha knows: "No longer is it a question of if or why. She must now decide when, exactly, she will leave" (66). Caught in this loveless marriage and family she is unable to escape. She is held back by doubts about her possible future occupation and accommodation. Her plan goes no further than her flight to Dublin, so she stays. In the end, the fire takes away not only the house, but also her money. Flight is no option any more. The second character for whom it is possible to go away is her daughter: she is quite content in the beginning, then exhilarated when she finds a friend in Judge, but then is devastated when she is alone again. Her effort in school decreases just like her dreams. Only the return of the dog marks the beginning of happier times. She does not care where she lives as long as her only friend is with her.

The student in "Close to the Water's Edge" is separated from his mother throughout the year as he studies in Harvard. During the divorce of his parents he was also far away from her, staying with his grandmother. The flight he is about to book at the end of the story is the first he takes consciously. All other separations were not his active decisions. This action of his, to call the airlines and leave, simply because he wants to escape, seems to be more final than all other departures before. He does not want to endure the mockery and open discriminations of homosexuals any longer. The question that is open in the end is whether he will be able to take the crucial step. His mother, who only wants the best for him, seems to enjoy her son's company and does not want to be left alone again, although she might have expected it.

“The Parting Gift” introduces another character who is in distress and has decided to leave the family. The girl wonders what her mother thinks of her leaving and whether she will ever forgive her. This first story is the only one of the three where the character leaving actually proceeds with her plan. The girl pays for her own passage and leaves mother and brother behind with the tyrant who controls and has regulated their lives. All her other siblings have already left the house, but as she has stayed there the longest and was closest to the members of the household, it comes as a shock to the others. Maybe they thought she would stay forever. However, her decision is not unreasonable or unusual at all. “In traditional Ireland, only one son out of what was often a large bunch of children could inherit the family farm. The other children had either to become nuns and priests or go abroad” (Eagleton [2002] 70). As she obviously has no intention to become a nun, her only way out of the house is by emigrating to America. The Irish have a long history of emigration, which dates back to Irish labourers sailing to the Caribbean or Britain. In the 18th century the Irish predominantly left the country for political and economic reasons (cf. Kirkham 81ff). However, it is primarily only inhabitants of the Republic of Ireland who tend to leave the country, whereas “Northern Ireland has about double the population density of the Republic” (Lee 37). Mass emigration started with the big famine in the 1880ies and has continued in waves until today:

In the twentieth century, outward migration continued; but it was marked by two periods of very heavy out-migration, the 1950s and the second half of the 1980s [...] These patterns reached a point in Ireland such that, for all but the eldest son and sometimes daughter, emigration was a life event as ‘normal’ as leaving school or getting married. (Hickman 117)

In “The Parting Gift” the girl is the only one who actually pursues her dreams by emigrating. Some of her reasons for leaving are persuasive: having been abused at home she seeks a better life somewhere else. Any place in Ireland would have been too close to home, so emigration to America seems the most reasonable thing to do. Secondly, she fails her leaving certificate, which, according to Terry Eagleton, has become “a kind of national mania [...] and a

number of near-nervous breakdowns” (Eagleton [2002] 75). Many modern Irish youths see their trip to America more as an “enterprise rather than exile” (Eagleton [2002] 71) and are also very likely to return back home after a short while. Another quote by Eagleton is suitable here, as the time period in which the narrative is set is so hard to define it could match his claim that “[h]undreds of thousands of young people are estimated to have emigrated between 1982 and 1992” (Eagleton [2002] 74).

As a last point of this analysis, and a kind of afterthought, some affinities between the protagonist in “The Parting Gift” and James Joyce’s short story “Eveline” should be referred to. Hadley also points out the similarities and puts forward the argument that: “Perhaps the hidden subtext of Joyce’s emigration story is opened up here; in *Dubliners*, what is the truth of Eveline’s incapacitating relationship with her father, which prevents her from leaving?” (Hadley 3). ‘Eveline’ is the story of a young girl who sits at home on the night before she is supposed to leave Dublin with her lover, who is a sailor. She is meant to accompany him to Buenos Aires where they can marry and live together happily ever after. In Dublin she lives alone with her abusive father after her mother had passed away. Her only other relative is her brother. On the day of the trip she stands at the dock site and is pulled by the sailor to follow him up on to the ship. Eveline, paralysed by her doubts and feelings of responsibility, fails to mount the ship and stays behind probably doomed to live a rather unhappy life, like her mother was before her. The girl in “The Parting Gift” also has an abusive father whom she tries to ‘take care of’, but wants to escape now. Unlike Eveline’s, her mother is not dead, but unable or unwilling to protect her child. Her only help and protector is her brother Eugene who is the only one she will miss. The girl also speaks of a person who will wait for her at the airport in New York. This might be a modern translation of Eveline’s sailor who promises her a brighter future. While Eveline is filled with doubt and is unsure whether she should neglect her duties by pursuing her own dreams, the girl in Keegan’s story one is eager to get away, but as soon as she does so is

likewise overwhelmed by despair and sorrow. They both want to lead a life of their own, but only the modern counterpart manages to achieve it. Escaping from their dysfunctional families and finally finding freedom and happiness is the most important thing to achieve by the two women.

5. Conclusion

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. (Thoreau 7)

Although this aphorism would seem to be the most appropriate and concise conclusion, to refer to Keegan's characters in *Walk the Blue Fields* this would not entirely do justice to Keegan's achievements. This thesis has looked at the characters Claire Keegan created in *Walk the Blue Fields* and the themes of the individual short stories. All that is left now is to pull the strings of thoughts together and summarize the insights gained. The analysis of the stories' themes and protagonists has led the way to answering the question whether the characters' misery and suffering is self-induced, brought to them by fate or both. Claire Keegan has created characters that are realistic and suffer from 'real' problems as well as fateful blows. To the watchful observer of Irish literature the old and sad tales were followed by a new generation of narratives and novels that give hope to a young generation. Keegan's writing does not belong to any of those groups: she presents characters and their surroundings, facing the difficulties life brings to them. However, the topics she chooses go beyond the common love story which knows thousands of variations. As harsh and saddening as it may sound, Keegan's focus is more on the miseries of life, rather than its joys, but not without seeing a light at the end of the tunnel, as the author says: "I do think lots of my stories are hopeful – people are coping." (Keegan 2007-2)

While keeping this in mind it is best to recapitulate by looking again at the individual stories and the way of suffering that lies at their respective centres: in the first group, two priests and two women struggle with the consequences of their affairs. In "Walk the Blue Fields" the priest is struggling with doubts about his faith as he conducts the wedding of the woman he has had an affair with for several years. Doubts about his profession are mingled with memories of his

affair full of worldly desire. Only in the end, the Chinaman shows him that he, too, can be happy: "Here is a man living happily in a clean place on his own. A man who believes in what he does and takes pleasure in the work" (37). After this he goes into the world, freed of his doubts and regrets. In the second story, "Night of the Quicken Trees", it is not as easy for the protagonist: Margaret Flusk once had intercourse with a priest under the quicken trees and has since then tried to escape from her memories: "If she believed in the forces of nature she was yet determined to avoid bad luck" (126). Still, leading a restless life she cannot achieve this and although she bears a son, she is again too much afraid to stay with Stack and flees even further into the West.

The second group is concerned with the fate of two bachelors: in „Dark Horses“ Brady is left by his woman and utterly consumed by his grief. His days go by, one sadder than the other and always end the same. Alone in his bedroom he cannot even complete the simplest tasks: "He wants to take his boots off but he is afraid. If he takes his boots off he knows he will never get them back on in the morning" (48). Without the strength to either overcome his grief or to get his woman back, all his days follow the same pattern. The sergeant in "Surrender" by contrast is reluctant to give up his bachelorhood. He is reluctant to open his fiancée's letter: "It was as he suspected: she was calling him in" (117). He sees marriage as a mere duty or social obligation and surrenders in the end.

The third and last group of stories deal with other manifestations of suffering. In "The Parting Gift" the young girl had enough of her abusive father and careless mother and decides to flee to America. As she is about to leave she stands there reminiscing her past: "Now you stand on the landing trying to remember happiness, a good day, an evening, a kind word. It seems apt to search for something happy to make the parting harder but nothing comes to mind" (7). The life of the characters in "The Forester's Daughter" is not as dismal and void of happiness as that of the unnamed girl. Mother and father love their children,

but not each other. As the years go by nothing personal develops between them: "He has become more than a little afraid of his wife and, to feel some kind of tenderness, often sits his daughter on his knee" (72). The wife hoards money with which she plans to leave but the fire in the end destroys her hopes and the only thing the forester ever truly loved. The last story, "Close to the Water's Edge", deals with the sorrow of a young homosexual Harvard student who becomes determined not to let past events repeat itself. His grandmother was suppressed by her husband, but he wants to be the one deciding the direction his life goes: "His grandmother is dead but he is twenty-one years old, inhabiting space on the earth, getting A's at Harvard, walking on a beach without any time constriction in the moonlight" (100).

What all these stories show is that there are many different reasons for sorrow and unhappiness, and many different ways of suffering. The conclusion that can be drawn in a way opposes the questions asked in the beginning of this thesis: the main concern is not the description of human suffering, but rather the characters' attempts of coping with suffering. Thus, the original goal of this thesis was to find out whether the characters' pain was self-induced or not, it turned out that this is not the central issue in the stories. It does not matter whether it is fate or an act of free will that is the primary cause of suffering and misery. The thing that matters and makes the characters unique is the way in which they react to their hardships. The priests in the first two stories lead fairly happy lives and overcome their crises in time. The women, however are the ones suffering most: the red-haired woman has to endure a marriage of convenience with a man she does not love and Margaret Flusk cannot find peace, but flees from people who might again cause her pain in some way. Brady is then too lazy and prefers the easy way by drowning his sorrow in alcohol, while the sergeant actively faces his anxieties and reacts to his fiancée's wishes. The girl in "The Parting Gift" is also active and manages to escape the heartless household she was born into. Martha Dunne, on the other hand, stays where she is, maybe in fear of an uncertain future or maybe

because of her inability to leave her children. The homosexual student realises how to overcome discrimination and humiliation and then turns into a grown man.

Summing up, the determining factor whether a character is simply coping with or actively changing their fate in *Walk the Blue Fields* is different with men and women, as well as depending on the time in which the character lives. In these seven stories women tend to be more restricted in their actions, even more so the older they get. Furthermore, the place in which the story is set in makes a great difference. Trying to draw just one conclusion from the stories' analyses, I want to close with a quotation by Terry Eagleton about the happiness of the Irish: "The Irish have a tendency to put a good face on things, smirking cheerily while being savaged by a moongoose [...] Being a Paddy is clearly better than Prozac" (Eagleton [2002] 93f).

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Index

A

alcohol · 74
 Ardagh, John · 65, 71, 109
 Arensberg, Conrad · 41

B

Bachelorhood · 47, 71
 Balik, Rachel · 3
 blue · 16, 49
 Brady · 58, 70
 Brosch, Renate · 5, 64, 65

C

Catholic Church · 6, 41, 43, 71
 celibacy · 5
 chick-lit · 3
 Chinaman · 7, 10, 11, 16, 17
 Close to the Water's Edge · 107, 110
 Close to the Water's Edge · 4, 77, 99, 117
 colloquialism · 10, 57
 Curtin, Chris · 47, 48, 71

D

D'hoker, Elke · 82
 Danaher, Kevin · 21, 35, 52
 Dark Horses · 4, 55, 116
 de Vries, Ad · 30, 31, 45, 46, 49, 50, 53
 Deegan · 90
 Deegan children · 96
 dramatic discourse · 23
 dramatic presentation · 10
 dreams · 45
 Duggan, Carmel · 109

E

Eagleton, Terry · 21, 22, 65, 72, 73, 74, 111, 112,
 118

F

family dysfunction · 107
 Ferber, Michael · 52
 flashback · 8, 9, 24, 87
 Fludernik, Monika · 78, 79
 Flusk, Margaret · 26
 focalizer · 7, 9, 24, 57, 65, 79
 foreshadowing · 8, 9
 free indirect discourse · 10, 57

G

Garai, Jana · 45, 49, 52
 green · 11, 50

H

Hadley, Tessa · 5, 6, 7, 19, 51, 66, 112
 Hickman, Mary · 111
 Humphreys, Margaret · 72, 74

I

Inglis, Tom · 41, 42, 47
 interior monologue · 10
 Ireland · 3
 Irish gaelic · 26, 65

J

Joyce, James · 112

K

Keegan, Claire · 3, 4, 5, 115
 Kilfeather, Siobhan · 72
 Kirkham, Graeme · 111

M

Margaret Flusk · 43
 McGahern · 61, 62, 63, 66

Memoir · *Siehe* McGahern

N

narrative discourse · 23
 Narrative Technique · 3, 7, 23, 57, 64, 78, 86, 102
 narrator · 9, 10, 24, 57, 87, 102
 Night of the Quicken Trees · 4, 5, 20, 40, 43, 52, 116
 Northern Ireland · 7

O

Ó hÓgáin, Dáithi · 33, 51
 OED · 26, 65

P

priest · 4, 5, 9, 12, 16, 17, 42

R

red · 9, 11, 49, 50
 Religion · 40
 Republic of Ireland · 7

S

second-person narration · 78
 Seigneuret, Jean-Charles · 44, 45
 Sergeant · 66, 70
 setting · 6, 11, 25, 56, 63, 77, 85, 99

 sexual abuse · 81

Stack · 35
 Stanzel, Franz · 9
 structure · 7
 Style · 3
 suffering · 4, 115, 117
 Superstition · 4
 Surrender · 4, 55, 61, 116
 Symbols · 3, 48

T

The Feet Water · 21
 The Forester's Daughter · 4, 77, 84, 107, 110, 116
 The Horned Women · 21
 The Parting Gift · 4, 77, 107, 111, 116
 themes · 3, 40
 Thoreau, David · 115
 title · 16, 55, 83, 100
 Tovey, Hilary · 47, 74, 75, 109

U

unnamed characters · 43, 80, 103

V

Van Dusen, Kate · 4

W

Walk the Blue Fields · 4, 5, 6, 40, 42, 115
 white · 9, 49, 50
 Woolf, Virginia · 3

German Abstract

Diese Diplomarbeit analysiert Claire Keegans Kurzgeschichtensammlung „Walk the Blue Fields“. Die sieben Kurzgeschichten haben zwar unterschiedliche Inhalte, werden aber durch die komplexe Charaktergestaltung und Behandlung der Themen verbunden. Der Stil von Claire Keegan ist einerseits sehr poetisch, andererseits sehr bodenständig, da sie viele problematische Situationen nicht umschreibt, sondern erschreckend schnell zum Punkt kommt. Dennoch erklärt sie nie wie unglücklich ein Charakter ihrer Geschichten ist, da sich dies aus dem Zusammenhang ergibt.

Diese Analyse der Geschichten basiert auf der Frage, warum die Charaktere der Geschichten so leiden müssen: Ist ihr Leid selbst verschuldet oder war es Schicksal/Zufall, dass ihr Leben die falsche Richtung eingeschlagen hat? Zusätzlich dazu wird die Erzählweise, Thematik und Symbolik der Geschichten genauer betrachtet, da dies zum besseren Verständnis des Szenarios, der Schauplätze und der Charaktereigenschaften führt.

Jedes Kapitel beschäftigt sich mit einer Gruppe von Geschichten, die anhand ihrer Thematik gebildet wurden. Die erste Gruppe beinhaltet die Geschichten „Walk the Blue Fields“ und „Night of the Quicken Trees“. Beide Kurzgeschichten handeln von den Folgen einer Affäre eines Priesters, einmal aus der Perspektive des Priesters und einmal aus der Perspektive der verlassenen Frau. Beide Priester entscheiden sich für ihren Glauben und ihr Amt, wobei immer die Frauen am Schluss mehr leiden und benachteiligt sind. Die zweite Gruppe beschäftigt sich mit „Dark Horses“ und „Surrender“. Der Fokus dieser Geschichten liegt bei Männern, die entweder von der Frau verlassen wurden, oder sich noch nicht dazu durchgerungen haben ihrer Auserwählten einen Antrag zu machen. Hier spielt das Thema Alkoholismus eine große Rolle, sowie der Roman, der Claire Keegan zu „Surrender“ inspiriert hat. Die letzte Gruppe beinhaltet drei Geschichten: „The Parting Gift“, „The Forster's Daughter“ und „Close to the Water's Edge“. Obwohl diese Geschichten grundverschieden sind, haben sie ein gemeinsames Thema: Flucht. In jeder Geschichte gibt es einen Charakter der seinem jämmerlichen Leben entfliehen will. In der ersten ist es ein vom

Vater misshandeltes Mädchen, das sein Glück in Amerika sucht. In der zweiten Kurzgeschichte ist es eine Mutter, die in einer unerfüllten Ehe immer unglücklicher wird, ihre Entscheidungen bereut und Geld für ihre Flucht hortet. In der letzten Geschichte will sich ein Student von der Gesellschaft seiner Mutter und den gehässigen Bemerkungen seines reichen Stiefvaters lösen.

All diese Geschichten zeigen, dass es viele Arten zu Leiden gibt. Alle Charaktere leiden auf andere Art, aber wenige Handeln, um ihrem miserablen Leben zu entkommen. Die Charaktere der letzten Gruppe wollen alle flüchten, aber nur das misshandelte Mädchen schafft es. Muss ein Leid so groß sein, damit man dementsprechend handelt? Den anderen Charakteren genügt es anscheinend nur von einer Flucht zu träumen. Auch die Hauptfigur aus „Night of the Quicken Trees“ flüchtet: Sie geht immer weiter nach Westen, ihre Erinnerungen und Fehlentscheidungen lassen sie jedoch nicht los. Wie die meisten anderen Charaktere muss sie sich mit ihrem Leben begnügen. Der Priester in „Walk the Blue Fields“ findet seinen Frieden und wird geheilt. Auch der Sergeant in „Surrender“ wird sozusagen 'geheilt' da er nicht nur nachdenkt, sondern handelt. Andere, wie Brady in „Dark Horses“ bleiben stecken und geben sich ganz ihrem Leiden hin.

So lässt sich zusammenfassen, dass ganz egal wieso einem Charakter Leid widerfährt, das Entscheidende ist wie man damit umgeht. Das Glück oder einfache zurechtkommen im Leben hängt von den eigenen Taten ab und dem Mut und die Möglichkeit diese auch umzusetzen. Claire Keegans Geschichten beflügeln die eigenen Gedanken und man stellt sich die Frage, wie man selbst reagierte wenn das Leben so viele Hürden aufweist, wie es in diesen sieben Geschichten dargestellt wird.

Curriculum Vitae

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