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1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to explore how the female body is represented in selected contemporary Irish short stories. As women's roles have changed considerably over the past decades in Ireland and this is also reflected in the short stories analysed in this thesis, first a socio-historical overview of this development will be provided. Section 2.1 focuses on the role of the Irish State in creating an idealised image of the Irish woman as housewife and mother by officially defining it in the Irish Constitution. Section 2.2 describes the influence of the Catholic Church with regard to creating and maintaining this image of Irish womanhood, which consisted mainly in vilifying female sexuality as sinful and immoral. Aspects of Irish legislation, such as the ban on divorce, contraception and abortion, are discussed as well as some of the social and religious strategies employed in order to control and curtail female behaviour, for example the stigmatisation and institutionalisation of sexually transgressive women. Section 2.3 outlines the changes in sexual morality which occurred from the 1950s onwards and specifies the most important reasons for these changes, namely the declining influence of the Catholic Church, changes in Irish politics and legislation, economic developments and the increasing influence of modern media on Irish society.

Section 3 provides a contextualised close reading of selected short stories, which focuses on representations of the female body. The short stories are ordered according to the time in which they are set, starting with "Sinners", which is set in the mid-twentieth century. The second short story discussed, "Wuff Wuff Wuff for De Valera", is set around the year 2000 but the main events of the story, which are presented in flashbacks, take place between the 1960s and 1970s. "Night of the Quicken Trees" and "Nomads Seek the Pavilions of Bliss on the Slopes of Middle Age" are set in the late twentieth century and the last two short stories discussed, "A Good Turn" and "Shaft", are set at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The analysis of these short stories explores if and to what extent literary representations of the female body are based on traditional conceptions of Irish womanhood. It also discusses how changes in sexual morality are reflected in the selected short stories. Furthermore, the analysis illustrates that while the female body is often described as being subject to severe restrictions, it is at the same time attributed great subversive potential.

2 Socio-Historical Development of Women's Roles in the Republic of Ireland

The role of women in Irish society has changed considerably over the past decades. This chapter provides a concise summary of the nature of these changes and outlines some of the most important factors contributing to them. First, however, it will be illustrated how women in Ireland¹ have been put at a disadvantage as a result of both specific pieces of legislation, which assigned women the roles of housewife and mother, and the strong influence of the Catholic Church with its teachings on sexual morality. As Sarah O'Connor phrases it: "In the Irish situation, Church and State contributed to the construction of Irish womanhood as chaste, good and above all, domestic" (11).

2.1 The Irish State²

After Ireland gained independence from Britain,³ several laws aiming to control various spheres of women's lives were introduced, most notably in the Constitution of Ireland of 1937.⁴ Article 41 of the Constitution emphasises the importance of the family and the need to protect it and at the same time defines women's roles as being most strongly linked to the private, domestic sphere as housewives and mothers. This is particularly evident in Articles 41.1 and 41.2, which read as follows:

1. 1° The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.

¹ This thesis focuses on the Republic of Ireland. For an introduction to the historical, political and social development of Northern Ireland in connection with the partition of the island of Ireland and its aftermath, see Coogan's comprehensive historical study *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*.

If only a brief overview is required, see Doherty, especially pages 114-115, 122-123 and 128-129.

A concise and accessible introduction, which focuses exclusively on the history and development of the conflict in Northern Ireland commonly referred to as 'the Troubles', is provided by Edwards and McGrattan.

² Unless otherwise specified, all information in this section is derived from S. O'Connor, Meaney and Connelly.

³ For a concise overview of Irish history from prehistoric times to the twentieth century, see the *Atlas of Irish History*, edited by Seán Duffy. A detailed survey of Irish history is provided in *The Course of Irish History*, edited by T. W. Moody and F. X. Martin. A very recent and up-to-date account of Irish history is given by Campbell (published in 2014).

⁴ Mary E. Daly notes that Irish independence was not the starting point for patriarchal structures in Ireland; she argues that these were also in practice under British rule (Cf. Daly 104). However, as will be illustrated in this thesis, the laws enacted after the partition of Ireland, along with the growing influence of the Catholic Church, played a central role in shaping the way women were (and are) represented in literature and on women's lives in Ireland. For a historical overview of women's position in Irish society before independence, see MacCurtain and Ó Corráin 1-57.

2° The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.

2. 1° In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2° The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. (qtd. in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* 5: 330)

By defining women's lives as being "within the home" and by equating 'woman' with 'mother', the Constitution envisages women as refraining from participating in public life, a sphere which is reserved for the male members of society. When examining Article 41.2 in connection with other laws about women implemented at around the same time, it becomes evident that the aim of these laws was not primarily to protect women so that they are not "obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour" but rather, to prevent them from working outside the home and thus 'neglecting' their domestic 'duties'. One example of this was

[...] the 'marriage bar' which required most women to resign their positions upon marriage. Although legislated initially for the teaching profession in 1933, 'marriage bars' were subsequently implemented by the civil service, local authorities, health boards, and most businesses. (Shannon 259)

However, finding a job was not easy for unmarried women either, as they were usually expected to engage primarily in domestic work until they, ideally, marry a man who is able to provide for them. As a result, women were mostly dependent on either their fathers or their husbands, especially with regard to financial issues. There were a number of other legal restrictions for Irish women, for example "a woman could not open a bank account, contract a loan or hire-purchase agreement, or buy insurance without her husband's signature" (Shannon 261). Moreover, women were not permitted to do jury service, censorship boards consisted of male censors only, and local dances could be restricted by public officials if they were perceived as being too permissive (Hussey 418).

It can be argued that in part, these patriarchal structures developed due to the long history of colonisation in Ireland.⁵ According to Carol Coulter, in colonised countries, the private sphere becomes more important to the colonised than the public sphere, as this is the

⁵ For more information on British Rule in Ireland, see Duffy 32-115 and Campbell 63-272.

sphere of their lives which remains least affected by the coloniser's regulations and assertions of power and thus male supremacy can only be claimed in this private sphere by men otherwise belonging to the group of the colonised and suppressed.⁶ Gerardine Meaney argues that these power relations are also apparent in postcolonial societies: "Postcolonial states sometimes go through long and painful periods of adjustment where the insecurities of the state are visited upon its more vulnerable citizens in the form of native oppressions replacing imperial ones" (Meaney, introduction xvi).

Meaney also points out that this has in fact been true of postcolonial Ireland (introduction xv). The aforementioned group of "more vulnerable citizens" included women as well as children, as was exposed by the Ryan Report, which was published in 2009 and included information on "the systemic nature of the physical, emotional and sexual abuse and economic exploitation of children in 'care' and of women unfortunate enough to be caught in the Magdalene laundry⁷ system [...]" (Meaney, introduction xv). As a large number of the institutions in question were organised and administered by religious orders, the issue of abuse of power by Church officials will be explored further in the following section on the influence of the Catholic Church on the social construction of women's roles in Ireland.

2.2 The Catholic Church⁸

For a long time the Catholic Church had, and in some areas of life still has, considerable influence on Irish society, an influence which has started to decline over the past years.⁹ As Tom Inglis notes, despite the existence of other religious institutions, the Catholic Church is still the most dominant in the Republic of Ireland ("Catholic Church" 49): "This dominant, or monopoly, position was attained towards the end of the nineteenth century after a long struggle over a number of centuries with the Protestant Churches, mainly the Anglican Church and an English Protestant state" ("Catholic Church" 49).

⁶ Cf. Coulter, qtd. in S. O'Connor 12.

⁷ Magdalen(e) laundries or asylums were institutions dedicated to 'reforming' women who were deemed to live 'sinful lives', for example as prostitutes or unmarried mothers (Luddy 736-737). Some more detailed information on these institutions is to be found in section 2.2, which explores the role of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

⁸ For an overview of the history of the Catholic Church from the arrival of Christianity in Ireland to Protestant Ascendancy and Catholic Emancipation, see Duffy 16-23, 28-35, 50-59 and 76-87. An extensive history of Catholicism in Ireland from its beginnings in the fifth century to the late twentieth century is provided by Corish.

⁹ Cf. Tovey and Share 391 and 399-401.

Evelyn Mahon points out that one important factor in the Catholic Church becoming so influential was its involvement in the education system at all levels, from primary to tertiary education, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. As the national schools were only partly financed by the Irish State, priests engaged in obtaining funds from the community; consequently, they were often appointed school managers who again appointed teachers. Thus it could easily be ensured that nothing contrary to Catholic values was taught in schools, especially with regard to sexual morality. Due to the early age at which this religious education started, the many years of exposure to it and the large number of pupils taught, Catholic values and teachings on morality were soon internalised by many people; extended 'religious education' for people of all ages was provided through mass and confession. Soon Catholic values were thus strongly rooted in Irish society.¹⁰

Consequently, the influence of the Catholic Church gradually also extended to public and legal issues, especially to those related to policing sexual behaviour and morality:

The groundwork laid down in the nineteenth century was the basis for the Church's triumph in independent Ireland. Once there was an Irish state, it became the effective arbiter of social legislation, having a ban on divorce inserted into the Constitution, encouraging the introduction of draconian censorship of books and films, delaying the legalisation of artificial contraception until 1979, retaining largely unquestioned control over schools and hospitals funded by the taxpayer, resisting the slow development of a welfare state. (O'Toole, qtd. in Tovey and Share 391)

The importance placed on the family and on women's roles as mothers and housewives in the 1937 Constitution of Ireland is consistent with Catholic values. An ideal family was imagined to consist of a married couple, mother and father, and their children; as the ideal father is expected to earn money in order to provide for the family, the ideal mother is devoted to caring for her children, her husband and the family home.¹¹ Any behaviour considered deviant from Catholic teachings on sexual morality such as extramarital sexual relationships, the use of contraceptives or the breakup of a marriage was deemed unacceptable.¹²

¹⁰ Cf. Mahon, "Women's Rights" 185-186.

¹¹ Cf. Connelly 320.

¹² Cf. Connelly 320.

The moral restrictions imposed by the Catholic Church as well as the Irish State were predominantly concerned with women, the female body and female sexuality:

The prevailing gender ideology was given religious endorsement by the Roman Catholic Church, which emphasised the ‘natural’ female virtues of obedience, servility and self-sacrifice for women and repressed the reality of female sexuality. At the same time, there was an undercurrent of obsession with women’s bodies as a source of sin, by which was meant sexual misconduct. (McCarthy, qtd. in Coogan 169)

In this context Tovey and Share argue that the excessive attempts made by the Catholic Church at controlling and restricting female sexuality derive from the cult of the Virgin Mary, “which idealised motherhood while abjuring all manifestations of female sexuality [...]” (397-398). This again ties in with the importance of the family which has a woman as mother at its heart: In order for women to stay in this position, all behaviour which might cause a longing for (sexual) liberty needs to be discouraged. Transgressive female behaviour has thus been sanctioned in various ways, for example through social stigmatisation.¹³

As Maria Luddy points out, from the mid-eighteenth to the late twentieth century confinement to institutions commonly known as Magdalene asylums or Magdalene laundries was another way of sanctioning transgressive sexual behaviour in women. Named after “Mary Magdalen as the model of repentance and also spiritual regeneration” (Luddy 736) and run mostly by nuns, the Magdalene laundries were intended as institutions “to reform ‘fallen women’” (Luddy 736). Originally, they aimed at receiving women working as prostitutes so as to separate them from public life, ‘reform’ them and release them again after an ‘appropriate’ amount of time had been devoted to repentance. At first, the women who entered the Magdalene laundries did so voluntarily; however, in the twentieth century, women perceived to be socially or sexually transgressive, for example unmarried mothers, were sent there by family members, employers, priests, nuns, or by the police. Additionally,

[the Magdalene asylums] became increasingly used by the public to shield their families from the shame it was believed non-conformist daughters or female relatives were likely to inflict on them. Both the Catholic public and the religious communities colluded in removing these ‘shameful objects’ from public view. (Luddy 737)

¹³ Cf. Inglis and MacKeogh 74-75 and 77.

The women thus could not choose whether they wanted to go there or not, neither could they leave of their own accord. While at the Magdalene laundries, the women's lives were controlled and very much restricted by the nuns: they were prevented from keeping contact with people from their 'old lives', using their real names and showing any signs of personality. Apart from learning how to be submissive and obedient, their daily routines consisted mainly of praying and working.¹⁴

As MacCurtain points out, the role of nuns in connection with such institutions and, consequently, also in Irish society in general was complicated and complex:

The image of the nun in midcentury Ireland (and elsewhere) was that of a docile and submissive figure clad in a black or white or blue sweep of garment with a medieval headdress who rarely raised her voice or eyes. Yet these same women were major players in church-state relations below the official level of the Catholic hierarchy. Owners and matrons of the main hospital systems in the country, they were entrusted by the state with the state's industrial schools and orphanages and with the responsibility of implementing the state's fragile and largely underdeveloped welfare policy. (qtd. in Tovey and Share 398)

On the one hand, nuns were considered to epitomise the Catholic ideal of chastity, submissiveness and obedience; on the other hand, they did have considerable power in certain settings, such as the Magdalene laundries, schools or hospitals.¹⁵ It is likely though that powerful positions were assigned only to those nuns who conformed to the patriarchal system of the Catholic Church and its teachings and in doing so supported the oppression of those who were less conformist. Thus, despite being women themselves, nuns played a central role in sustaining and perpetuating patriarchal structures.

Until recently, the workings of the system of power the Irish Catholic Church had built upon its involvement in education, health care and welfare were widely accepted.¹⁶ However, the influence of the Church has gradually started to decrease for a number of reasons, such as economic growth and modernisation, access to and influence of mass media and the exposure of child abuse scandals in connection with religious institutions.¹⁷ Déborah Vandewoude argues that the abuse scandals in particular caused many people in Ireland to turn away from the Catholic Church.¹⁸ As was exposed by the Ryan Report as

¹⁴ Cf. Luddy 736-737.

¹⁵ Cf. Tovey and Share 398.

¹⁶ Cf. Tovey and Share 401.

¹⁷ Cf. Tovey and Share 391 and 409. For a detailed discussion of changes in attitudes on religion in modern Ireland, see Tovey and Share 402-412.

¹⁸ Cf. Vandewoude 232-233.

well as some earlier official reports, large numbers of pupils had been emotionally and physically abused in schools run by religious orders; moreover, several Church officials repeatedly tried to prevent the publication of information on people involved in the abusive system.¹⁹ It also transpired that, despite numerous reports filed with state institutions, no enquiries were made into the case.²⁰ Vandewoude asserts that the Catholic Church and the Irish State colluded in creating obedient Irish citizens who accepted authorities without questioning their methods or decisions.²¹ The consequence of these revelations for the Irish public was a general “disillusionment in relation to the former pillars of Irish society, Church and State” (Maher 211).

The prominent position of the Catholic Church has generally been supported by the Irish State, especially around the time Ireland became independent from Britain and the Irish Free State was established in 1922.²² Eamon Maher argues that

[t]his became particularly evident during the long period during which Eamon de Valera was Taoiseach,²³ beginning in 1932. De Valera cultivated an idyllic image of a self-sufficient, mainly rural Ireland that would be respectful of religion and in which the family would have pride of place. (214)

This idyllic image of Ireland is evident, for example, in the following passage from Éamon de Valera’s St. Patrick’s Day speech in 1943, in which he described an ideal Ireland as

[...] the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be the forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live. (qtd. in S. O’Connor 38)

What is more, in the 1937 Constitution of Ireland devised by de Valera, the Catholic Church was officially granted a “special position” within the Irish State.²⁴ Catholic values are evident as being the underlying principles in numerous sections of the Constitution, a fact which may *inter alia* be due to de Valera’s consultation with church officials, most

¹⁹ Cf. Vandewoude 230-231 and Maher 211.

²⁰ Cf. Vandewoude 228-229.

²¹ Cf. Vandewoude 230-231.

²² Cf. Maher 214.

²³ Taoiseach is the term for the Irish prime minister (“Taoiseach”).

²⁴ Cf. Corish 246-247.

notably John Charles McQuaid who later became Archbishop of Dublin.²⁵ The collaboration of State and Church institutions in shaping social values is apparent also in those sections of the Constitution containing regulations about women's rights and the female body and the respective pieces of legislation on divorce, contraception and abortion, matters which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

2.2.1 Divorce

The importance attributed to the family in Irish society was continually emphasised by the Catholic Church and also inscribed in the Irish Constitution. Divorce was therefore prohibited by the Constitution, as it was deemed a threat to the ideal of the family consisting of a married couple and their children.²⁶ Around the time of the first and second divorce referendum in 1986 and 1995, respectively, there were heated public debates between the two opposing groups: pro-divorce organisations and women's rights groups on one side and the Catholic Church and anti-divorce campaigners on the other.²⁷ In the first referendum the proposal to legalise divorce was rejected; the anti-divorce campaigns had successfully instilled fears in most people that the number of failed marriages would escalate and that, if divorce was legalised, men would abandon their wives and children, unable to support them as soon as they remarry and have a new family.²⁸

Similar arguments against the introduction of divorce were voiced during the campaigns before the second referendum: It was claimed that a change in legislation would weaken the institution of marriage and invariably cause marriage breakdowns on a large scale.²⁹ This attitude was propagated by emotional slogans such as the widely used "Hello Divorce, Goodbye Daddy" (qtd. in Coulter 287), which invoked the allegedly large numbers of prospective abandoned wives and children. Whereas the official position of the Church was opposed to the introduction of divorce, the government argued for it on the grounds that "the growth in the number of people separating was the basis for the need to change the Constitution" (qtd. in Coulter 284). However, a passage about the

²⁵ Cf. Corish 246-247.

²⁶ Cf. Coulter 275-276.

²⁷ Cf. Mahon, "Women's Rights" 196-197 and Coulter 279-281 and 285-286.

²⁸ Cf. Fuller 182 and Mahon, "Women's Rights" 196-197.

²⁹ Cf. Coulter 280-281.

importance of the family was included in the official government document on this matter titled *The Right to Remarry* in an attempt to appease the worried public:

The Government is strongly committed to protecting the Family and the institution of marriage. A considerable number of legislative and administrative measures are now in place to help protect the Family, to prevent marriage breakdown as far as possible and to minimise the trauma of marital conflict [...] Central to the Government's position on divorce is the need to protect the Family and the institution of marriage, while at the same time providing remedies for the increasing number of cases of irretrievable breakdown.
(qtd. in Coulter 284)

Strong emphasis is thus placed on the fact that the traditional family is to be protected as an ideal and that divorce is not generally desirable; however, it is also argued that *if* there is no chance of reconciliation, there should be ways to alleviate the suffering inflicted by marriage breakdown.

During the divorce debates the arguments, especially those produced by anti-divorce campaigners, were often emotionally loaded, informed by conservative values and at times also openly misogynistic.³⁰ As Carol Coulter points out, women, or rather two very specific representations of women, were at the core of the argument: In the discourse about men potentially abandoning their families, women were portrayed as being either helpless and destitute wives left behind with the children or selfish lascivious seductresses luring men away from their families.³¹ The ideal image of a woman as housewife and mother is thus equated with that of a passive and helpless person who has to be protected and provided for by her husband, or, if he intends to leave, by the law, which in such cases has to prevent the husband from leaving. The 'seductress', on the other hand, is based on images of women not complying with this ideal of womanhood by being, for example, single mothers, working mothers or (allegedly) sexually active single women.³² The 'seductress' is perceived to be sexually and socially transgressive, as she is portrayed as a "sexually active predatory working woman, whose priorities are self-gratification through career, money, and sex" (Coulter 286), all of which stands in stark contrast to the passive, caring housewife and mother ideal.

The line of argument presented centres on a system in which women are expected to work fulltime in the home and thus have no regular income, which in turn leads to dependence

³⁰ Cf. Coulter 285-287.

³¹ Cf. Coulter 286.

³² Cf. Coulter 286.

on a husband as the family provider.³³ This resonated with many people for decades because a majority of women did not work outside the home at that time.³⁴ Nevertheless, social and demographic changes occurring during the time between the first and the second divorce referendum eventually led to a change in attitudes towards divorce: By the time the second referendum was held in 1995 there were more women engaging in paid work, more single parents, more births outside marriage and more cohabiting couples.³⁵ These changes, along with a more general trend of modernisation and urbanisation, account for the developing of more liberal attitudes towards the family and marriage.³⁶

Divorce was eventually legalised in Ireland after the proposal of the 1995 referendum to change the existing legislation had been approved by a narrow majority of 50.28 per cent, and the first divorces were granted in 1997.³⁷ Betty Hilliard points out, though, that

[...] divorce in Ireland can only be applied for under certain conditions: these include the stipulation that the couple should have been living apart for four out of the five years previous to applying for divorce, that there is no reasonable prospect of reconciliation, and that arrangements are made for the maintenance and welfare of the spouse and dependent children. (89)

These regulations seem to be an attempt at accommodating the introduction of divorce to traditional values about the importance of the family and is reminiscent of the arguments produced in the government document *The Right to Remarry*. Although a change in divorce legislation as a response to social and demographic developments is deemed necessary, divorce is not to be made too easily available in order to protect the institutions of family and marriage, if at all possible.

2.2.2 Contraception

In accordance with Catholic values, contraception was disapproved of by the newly established Irish State for several decades. The 1935 Criminal Law Amendment Act, section 17.1, prohibited advertising, selling and importing contraceptives; although using them was not officially prohibited, obtaining them was difficult, as their sale and

³³ Cf. Coulter 288.

³⁴ Cf. O'Connor, qtd. in Tovey and Share 249.

³⁵ Cf. Coulter 293, Tovey and Share 242-247 and 249 and Garvin 161.

³⁶ Cf. Hilliard 91-94.

³⁷ Cf. Fuller 184 and Hilliard 89.

importation were illegal.³⁸ Moreover, the Censorship of Publications Act passed in 1929 proscribed the publication, distribution and selling of information on contraceptives as well as books and magazines believed to promote contraceptive methods.³⁹ For a considerable time, thus, it seems to have been very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain contraceptives in Ireland, however, as Tovey and Share point out, despite the ban on contraceptives, “[d]emographic patterns indicate that the practice of contraception was developing in Irish society from the early 1960s. People smuggled contraceptives into the country and doctors were able to prescribe the contraceptive pill as a ‘cycle regulator’” (267).

Campaigns for the legalisation of contraceptives, in which the women’s movement was particularly active, were initiated in the 1970s; one of these campaigns, for example, included a group of women who took the train to Belfast in order to buy contraceptives, which they then openly displayed to customs officials and the journalists present upon their arrival in Dublin and still managed to pass unimpeded.⁴⁰ As any propositions to legalise contraceptives, however, were vigorously opposed by the Catholic clergy, political support for the cause remained to be scarce throughout most of the contraception debate.⁴¹ Nevertheless, those in favour of reforming the existing legislation continued to challenge and gradually also to increasingly ignore the ban on contraceptives. In 1969 the first family-planning clinic was instituted, albeit illegally, and managed to circumvent the ban on selling contraceptives: “Because of a loophole in the law, the clinic could dispense contraceptives freely, at the same time requesting ‘donations’ from its clients” (Mahon, “Women’s Rights” 194). Over the course of the 1970s several other family-planning clinics were established throughout the country.⁴²

An important turning point in the 1970s was the case of Mary McGee, a married woman and mother of four children, who due to a medical condition was advised by her doctor not to become pregnant again, as this might have been fatal for her. The contraceptives she ordered from abroad were, however, confiscated at the customs due to the ban on importation. McGee decided to file a lawsuit and was represented in court by Mary

³⁸ Cf. S. O’Connor 20 and Mahon, “Women’s Rights” 193.

³⁹ Cf. Fuller 178, Hussey 418 and Connelly 321-322.

⁴⁰ Cf. Fuller 178 and Campbell 334. For more information on the history of feminism and the different women’s movements in Ireland, see Kilfeather.

⁴¹ Cf. Fuller 178-179.

⁴² Cf. Mahon, “Women’s Rights” 194.

Robinson.⁴³ She was eventually granted the right to import contraceptives for private marital use by the Supreme Court.⁴⁴

A few years later, in 1978, an activist group called the Contraception Action Programme established a shop selling contraceptives; due to their immediate success, the Health (Family Planning) Act, which permitted the vending of contraceptives to married couples, provided that they had a doctor's prescription, was introduced in 1979. Still, the Act contained a clause granting doctors and nurses whose moral sense was offended by this the right to act accordingly and refuse to facilitate the obtaining of prescriptions.⁴⁵ Family-planning clinics continued to illegally sell contraceptives to those unable to buy them under the existent legislation and it was not until 1985 that the sale of contraceptives to everyone aged eighteen and over was eventually legalised.⁴⁶

The legalisation of contraceptives had of course major implications for Irish people in general and women in particular because they could now decide if they wanted to have children or not. Previously, sexuality and procreation had been conjoined, and due to the ban on contraceptives as well as abortion, "for most women sexual intercourse led to pregnancy and the birth of children" (Connelly 321). Depending on a woman's marital status, this could result in severe consequences, as Alpha Connelly points out: "Shame, humiliation, ejection from the parental home and the loss of her child to adoptive parents were frequent consequences for the woman who had a child outside marriage" (320). Unmarried mothers were also frequently institutionalised in Magdalene laundries by family members so as to spare the family the experience of being socially stigmatised.⁴⁷ Making contraceptives widely available thus enabled women to experience sexuality without having to confine themselves to the roles of either married housewife or scorned single mother. Sexual relations were now no longer intertwined with marriage or procreation. Moreover, there is also a symbolic level to women having control over their own fertility instead of State and Church officials, almost exclusively male at that time, imposing laws aimed at governing women's bodies.⁴⁸

⁴³ Mary Robinson was elected the first female President of Ireland in 1990. As well as her successor, Mary McAleese, Robinson had been a successful lawyer and law professor at Trinity College Dublin before she commenced her political career (Campbell 335).

⁴⁴ Cf. Campbell 334.

⁴⁵ Cf. S. O'Connor 21.

⁴⁶ Cf. Mahon, "Women's Rights" 194.

⁴⁷ Cf. Luddy 737.

⁴⁸ Cf. Campbell 334.

2.2.3 Abortion

Despite the legalisation of contraceptives another aspect of women's control over their own bodies remains a contentious issue in Ireland: There have been numerous debates about the legislation of abortion, which remains to be illegal in Ireland.⁴⁹ Abortion was first prohibited by the Offences against the Person Act in 1861; however, anti-abortion activists demanded more rigorous arrangements about a century later, after some liberalisation of sexual and reproductive rights had been achieved:⁵⁰

The legalization of contraception prompted conservative Catholics to establish the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC) in June 1980. SPUC sought to prevent any further escalation of liberalism, particularly with respect to women's reproductive rights. (Mahon, "Abortion Debates" 160)

They managed to induce the introduction of a constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion, thereby ensuring that neither the Supreme Court nor the European Court of Justice could overrule the Irish ban on abortion.⁵¹ The wording originally proposed by the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC),⁵² which was intended not to permit abortion in any circumstances, was perceived as being too strict, though, and was changed to include the right to life of the mother as well as the unborn child.⁵³ The final version of Article 40.3.3 stated that "[t]he State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right" (qtd. in Mahon, "Abortion Debates 161). In response to the Constitutional Amendment various pro-choice activist groups formed an umbrella organisation called the Anti-Amendment Campaign; the first of these to be established was the Women's Right to Choose group, which set up a Pregnancy Counselling Centre providing information on how to organise having an abortion abroad.⁵⁴

Interestingly, the role attributed to women during the multiple fierce abortion debates is strikingly different from the representations used in the divorce debates because abortion in Ireland was not generally perceived to be an issue related to women's rights and the

⁴⁹ Cf. Campbell 358. Campbell's thorough and up-to-date account of Irish history was published in 2014.

⁵⁰ Cf. Mahon, "Women's Rights" 195 and Mahon, "Abortion Debates" 160.

⁵¹ Cf. Mahon, "Abortion Debates" 160. As Mahon points out, "[t]he constitution is amended through public referendums [...]" ("Abortion Debates" 159).

⁵² The PLAC was an association consisting of several different organisations opposed to abortion, including the SPUC (Mahon, "Abortion Debates" 160).

⁵³ Cf. Mahon, "Abortion Debates" 165.

⁵⁴ Cf. Mahon "Abortion Debates" 163 and S. O'Connor 23.

campaigns of the women's movement.⁵⁵ Whereas women had been at the centre of the arguments on both sides in the divorce debate, they were mostly removed from the abortion debate, as the following two quotes exemplify:

The dominant image of the campaign was of middle-aged men arguing with each other, using words like 'zygote', 'implantation' and 'foetus' with little or no reference to the women's bodies to which they were related. The arguments about medical terminology and constitutional law were remote from the realities of women's lives and especially remote from the complex emotions involved in unwanted pregnancies and the decision to have an abortion. (Beale, qtd. in S. O'Connor 24)

Similarly, the tendency to discuss the matter of abortion as if it was completely unrelated to women and their bodies was criticised by journalist Nell McCafferty:

The PLAC poster, advocating support for the amendment, shows a baby. The mother of the baby is not shown. The PLAC tee-shirt shows a foetus in the womb. The woman has been removed. Separation of woman and womb has now been achieved. The womb's the thing. We have been wiped out. We are the disappeared. We are not to be trusted. Our wombs have been kicked right out of us. No woman can be trusted with a womb of her own. (qtd. in S. O'Connor 24)

Abortion was mainly discussed in terms of the life of the unborn child and its rights but at the same time ignoring the rights of the women affected by unwanted pregnancies in the debate.⁵⁶

Several of the public debates about the issue in Ireland were caused by controversial cases of 'ordinary' girls and women, as Ursula Barry and Clair Wills phrase it (qtd. in S. O'Connor 29-30). One of these was the so-called 'X Case' which involved a teenage rape victim usually referred to as 'Miss X' who wanted to travel to Britain in order to have an abortion but was prevented from leaving the country by a court injunction. After her parents had appealed to the Supreme Court arguing that their daughter's life was at risk because she showed suicidal tendencies, the injunction was lifted.⁵⁷ Despite granting Miss X the right to travel in order to have an abortion, the Supreme Court made sure not to give general permission to women who wished to travel for the same reason by including a passage in the verdict stating "that there was no absolute right to leave Ireland if the intention was to get an abortion" (Mercereau 152).

⁵⁵ Cf. S. O'Connor 22-24.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ferriter 194-195.

⁵⁷ Cf. S. O'Connor 29 and Mercereau 152.

As Jean Mercereau points out, the subsequent public commotion, as the Catholic Church and the anti-abortion lobby wanted a ban on abortion regardless of the circumstances and those in favour of a liberalisation of the abortion legislation vehemently opposed the restrictions on the right to travel, led to a referendum. The proposed regulations included the right to travel abroad in order to have an abortion, the right to obtain information on abortion and major restrictions on the circumstances in which having or performing an abortion would be permitted.⁵⁸ The latter was particularly controversial due to the wording of the proposed amendment, which read as follows:

It will be unlawful to terminate the life of the unborn unless such termination is necessary to save the life, as distinct from the health, of the mother where there is an illness or disorder of the mother giving rise to a real and substantial risk to her life, not being a risk of self-destruction. (qtd. in Mahon "Abortion Debates" 169)

Not only did this proposal state that a suicidal tendency of the mother was no just cause for granting the right to terminate a pregnancy, it also implied that a threat to the mother's health was not sufficiently severe in order to be considered in such decisions.⁵⁹ In contrast to the first two proposed amendments, the right to travel, and the right to information, the third amendment was rejected in the referendum.⁶⁰ Another referendum was held in 2002 proposing that the right to terminate a pregnancy should not be granted to women who threaten to commit suicide; the proposal was rejected by a very narrow majority of 50.4 per cent.⁶¹

The issue of abortion again caused a heated debate in 2012 in connection with the case of a 31-year-old woman called Savita Halappanavar. The pregnant woman was treated in hospital because she was suffering from symptoms of miscarriage. Even though her condition was deteriorating for days, the doctors refused to perform an abortion on the grounds that they could still hear the heartbeat of the unborn child. As a result, Savita Halappanavar died of septicaemia.⁶²

As is noted by Kenneth L. Campbell, the Irish government was reprimanded by the UN Committee on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights in 2002 and 2009, respectively, because Irish laws on abortion were sparse and ambiguous and there was no

⁵⁸ Cf. Mercereau 152.

⁵⁹ Cf. Hussey 437.

⁶⁰ Cf. Hussey 438.

⁶¹ Cf. Mercereau 157.

⁶² Cf. Campbell 358.

access to legal abortions in Ireland. The proposal, which was consequently issued by the government, reopened the public debate on this controversial topic: The Catholic Church and pro-life activists criticised the fact that suicidal tendencies of the mother were included as life-threatening and thus making it a just cause for terminating a pregnancy; pro-choice activists, on the other hand, were dissatisfied because rape or incest were not included as reasons allowing for a lawful abortion. The issue thus continues to be highly contentious and unresolved.⁶³

2.3 Changes in Sexual Morality⁶⁴

The changes in legislation relating to female autonomy and women's bodies outlined above were accompanied by changes in sexual morality.⁶⁵ As Tom Inglis notes, "[...] we have moved in Ireland from a Catholic culture of self-abnegation in which sexual pleasure and desire were repressed, to a culture of consumption and self-indulgence in which the fulfillment of pleasures and desires is emphasized" ("Origins and Legacies" 11). As will be discussed in this section, the rapid changes in attitudes towards sexuality in Ireland occurred as a result of several factors.

2.3.1 Origins of Ireland's Strict Sexual Morals

Laws implemented by the Irish State and restrictions imposed by the Catholic Church were not the only aspects contributing to the emergence of strict sexual morals in Ireland: Inglis argues that another important factor was that "[...] ordinary individuals were supervised and controlled in families, schools, and communities" (Inglis, "Origins and Legacies" 11). He traces the development of Irish sexual morality back to the Victorian era, in which sexuality was regarded as primitive, savage and a potential threat to civilised society, unless it was kept under surveillance and severely restricted.⁶⁶ As Inglis puts it, "[f]or most Victorian women marriage was the only form of sexual salvation. Unmarried

⁶³ Cf. Campbell 358.

⁶⁴ This section is largely based on publications by Tom Inglis, as he is among the few scholars researching sexuality in the Irish context and has published a substantial amount of work on this issue (cf. Tovey and Share 259-263).

⁶⁵ Cf. S. O'Connor 21-22 and Inglis, "Origins and Legacies" 10-11.

⁶⁶ Cf. Inglis, "Origins and Legacies" 13.

women who did not remain celibate became stigmatized as adulterers or were drawn into prostitution” (Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 13).

Inglis further explains that Victorian sexual morality was successfully adopted and sustained in Ireland due to two reasons: economic necessity and the influence of the Catholic Church.⁶⁷ It was difficult for Irish tenant farmers to maintain their families and farms and thus “[t]he economic strategy of a farmer intent on improving his standard of living could be ruined by the transgressive actions of his daughters” (Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 17). As the only effective way of limiting reproduction was abstinence, and as sexuality, or at least female sexuality, was entirely restricted to marriage, preventing young people from getting married too early or from getting married at all was the most reliable means of birth control available.⁶⁸ As J. J. Lee phrases it,

It was therefore crucial [...] that all thoughts of marriage in Ireland should be banished from the minds of the majority of Irish youth. Temptation must not be placed in their way. Sex, therefore, must be denounced as a satanic snare [...]. Sex posed a far more severe threat than the landlord to the security and status of the family. Boys and girls must be kept apart at all costs. (qtd. in Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 17)

Several strategies of social control were employed in order to ensure that adolescents adhered to these strict sexual morals: These strategies included, for example, circumventing any conversation about sex, denying sexual desires and ostracising those who did not comply with the sexual norm.⁶⁹

The norm of sexual purity promoted by Victorian society in general and the Irish tenant farmers in particular was in accord with Catholic teachings on sexual morality.⁷⁰ The Church vilified all instances of potential temptation and thus opposed revealing clothes, dance events and alcohol, as well as educating boys and girls in the same schools.⁷¹ Inglis asserts that the norm of sexual purity was also advocated by the Church and adopted by many Catholics in order to “attain a symbolic victory over their Protestant English colonizers by demonstrating their moral superiority” (“Origins and Legacies” 23).

⁶⁷ Cf. Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 16-24.

⁶⁸ Cf. Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 16-17.

⁶⁹ Cf. Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 17.

⁷⁰ Cf. Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 18.

⁷¹ Cf. Hussey 418, Innes 38 and Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 21-22.

Inglis further explains that there were similar attitudes to sexuality in other countries during the Victorian era but Ireland nevertheless was an exception:

Catholic Ireland was not unique when it came to sexual prudery. It was part of a Victorian mentality that had also spread through Protestant Britain and America. What made Ireland unique was how deeply Victorian attitudes and practices penetrated into the Irish body and soul. Also distinctive, in comparison to Britain and America, were how long these attitudes and practices lasted, and how this antisexual regime was linked to the absence of discourses and conduct that challenged or resisted the dominant obsession with purity. (“Origins and Legacies” 23)

According to Inglis, it was the intense involvement of the Catholic Church in devising sexual restrictions as well as the excessive controlling and supervising of sexual behaviour, which accounted for the extent to which the ideal of sexual purity was maintained in Irish society.⁷² Therefore, in the next subsection the declining influence of the Catholic Church will be explored as having contributed significantly to the change in attitudes to sexual morality in Irish society.

2.3.2 Declining Influence of the Catholic Church

Inglis argues that the decline of the Catholic Church’s influence on Irish society is a very important factor with regard to the change in Irish sexual morality.⁷³ For a long time the Church was the arbiter of morality, especially in issues pertaining to sexuality, as “[...] it had a monopoly over the socialisation of each new generation [...]” (Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 67) due to its involvement in the education system.⁷⁴ Inglis further asserts that

Ireland may never have come close to being a theocratic state, but the Church’s influence over education, health and social welfare meant that it came very close to being a theocratic society. In such a society being a good Catholic was central to maintaining and developing social position and influence. (“Individualisation and Secularisation” 69)

This dominant position of the Catholic Church had a considerable influence on moral restrictions of sexuality, especially female sexuality; teachings on sexual morality centred on impeding expressions of female sexuality and vilifying sexual intercourse outside

⁷² Cf. Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 30.

⁷³ Cf. Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 70 and 77.

⁷⁴ Cf. Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 67.

marriage.⁷⁵ The focus was on women's chastity because it was deemed to be the foundation for a virtuous society in which mothers would hold the family, and in a wider sense also the nation, together.⁷⁶ In order for women to feel the need to comply with this image, the Church had to continually assert control over women's moral code, their sexual behaviour and their bodies:

The church imposed a strict discipline of sexual morality. Women were encouraged to feel ashamed of their bodies. The discourse of the church penetrated their everyday lives as the Catholic confessional became a site for the interrogation of women about their sexual feelings, desires and activities. (Tovey and Share 261)

Furthermore, as Inglis and MacKeogh point out, responsibility of preventing sexual transgression and thus maintaining Catholic sexual morals has exclusively been assigned to women.⁷⁷ This is evident, for example, from the fact that unmarried mothers and other women considered to be sexually transgressive were frequently ostracised by the community or hidden from public sight in the Magdalene laundries, whereas no such institutions existed for sexually transgressive men.

Changes in this area were slow and only began to occur in the mid-twentieth century when economic development became more important than religion and the Church.⁷⁸ Economic growth led to greater individual wealth and changing lifestyles, information became more readily available as the media rose to an influential position, and diverse influences came to Ireland through immigration.⁷⁹ Moreover, as was discussed in section 2.2, the exposure of Church-related scandals caused many people to turn away from the institution of the Catholic Church. Inglis concisely summarises these developments: "[...T]he Catholic Church has suffered significant intrusions from the market promoting a secular, liberal-individualist, hedonistic lifestyle, the state regulating and controlling its activities and the media making it accountable for its actions." ("Individualisation and Secularisation" 70).

Inglis cites several studies conducted at the beginning of the twenty-first century which revealed that the influence of the Catholic Church on the Irish public had started to decline

⁷⁵ Cf. Inglis and MacKeogh 74-75.

⁷⁶ Cf. Inglis and MacKeogh 74-75.

⁷⁷ Cf. Inglis and MacKeogh 76.

⁷⁸ Cf. Inglis, "Individualisation and Secularisation" 68.

⁷⁹ Cf. Inglis, "Individualisation and Secularisation" 68-70.

in comparison to surveys from previous decades. Catholic teachings were no longer accepted unconditionally and less people engaged in religious practice such as attending mass and going to confession. Additionally, less people believed in the existence of the devil or hell, which may be interpreted as “a sign that the institutionalised culture of fear of eternal damnation was beginning to wane and, with it, control over the hearts and minds of the laity” (Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 71).⁸⁰

Other studies carried out in the 1970s, 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century showed that these changes in attitudes towards Catholic teachings were also evident with regard to sexual morality.⁸¹ Attitudes towards sexual relations before marriage, the use of contraceptives and having children outside marriage became increasingly liberal over time, and especially young people and students proved to be in favour of the abandoning of traditional sexual morality.⁸² In 1973, for example, a majority of 71 per cent asserted that sexual intercourse should be restricted to marriage, whereas in 1999 only 26 per cent were of this opinion.⁸³ In 2005, however, the majority of people asked, opined that cohabitation and sexual intercourse as well as having children outside marriage were perfectly acceptable.⁸⁴

Despite its declining influence, however, the Church continues to be of importance in Ireland.⁸⁵ For one, a substantial majority of all people living in Ireland are Catholics, even though various other religious groups, for example Protestants, Muslims or Hindus, are present now as well, mainly due to immigration of people with different religious denominations.⁸⁶ Besides, Catholic religious orders still administer a large number of Irish schools and hospitals:

An Irish person was, and is, likely to be born in a Catholic hospital, educated at Catholic schools, married in a Catholic church, have children named by a priest, be counselled by Catholic marriage advisors if the marriage runs into trouble, be dried out in Catholic clinics for the treatment of alcoholism if he or she develops a drink problem, be operated on in Catholic hospitals, and be buried by Catholic rites. (O’Toole, qtd. in Tovey and Share 400)

⁸⁰ Cf. Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 71.

⁸¹ Cf. Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 71-76.

⁸² Cf. Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 71-74.

⁸³ Cf. Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 73.

⁸⁴ Cf. Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 74.

⁸⁵ Cf. Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 77 and Tovey and Share 402.

⁸⁶ Cf. Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 70.

2.3.3 Politics and Legislation

As well as the Catholic Church, the Irish State also engaged in maintaining public decency and protecting strict sexual morals by introducing laws such as the 1923 Censorship of Films Act and the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act.⁸⁷ Film censors were granted the right to either delete scenes which they deemed indecent, or prohibit the screening of certain films altogether; similarly, the board in charge of the Censorship of Publications could proscribe any print publication considered to be sexually objectionable, so as to prevent obscene thoughts from being instilled into Irish minds.⁸⁸ When “customs officers were granted the power to seize books and forward them to the censorship board for banning” (Coogan 730), the Censorship Board was no longer the only authority involved in selecting print publications deemed unsuitable for the Irish public and it thus became much easier to ban large numbers of books in a short time.⁸⁹

As Tim Pat Coogan points out, numerous renowned authors were affected by the banning of books under the Censorship of Publications Act:

The list of banned publications read like a guide to contemporary English literature. It included names like Faulkner, Hemingway, Sartre, Ehrenburg, Tennessee Williams, Scott Fitzgerald, Beckett, Joyce, Graham Greene, Dylan Thomas, Orwell, C. P. Snow, Muriel Spark, Joseph Heller, Danilo Dolci, Frank O’Connor, John McGahern, Seán O’Faolain, Edna O’Brien, Kate O’Brien, Liam O’Flaherty and Brendan Behan. (Coogan 729)

John Ardagh notes that Irish writers were particularly affected by the strict censorship laws and many famous Irish authors emigrated because their books were banned in Ireland.⁹⁰ One of them was John McGahern, who lost his job as a teacher in a Catholic school after his second novel was banned.⁹¹ Edna O’Brien, another celebrated Irish author, recalls the hostility she encountered in her hometown after the banning of several of her novels: “I was made to feel a leper in my native Clare village, where the parish priest burned some of the books” (qtd. in Ardagh 239).

Censorship laws were liberalised to some extent when an Appeal Board was established in 1946, enabling writers to file a complaint against the proscription of a book; moreover,

⁸⁷ Cf. Coogan 170.

⁸⁸ Cf. Coogan 170.

⁸⁹ Cf. Coogan 730.

⁹⁰ Cf. Ardagh 237-240.

⁹¹ Cf. Ardagh 238-239.

in 1967 the ban on numerous books was lifted due to a newly introduced act, which stated that bans on books were only effective for twelve years.⁹² Although the Censorship Board now focuses mainly on pornographic magazines rather than books, educational books which feature descriptions of issues related to sexuality deemed to be too explicit, have also been banned under the Censorship of Publications Act.⁹³ Whereas literary depictions of homosexuality or contraception, previously common reasons for books being banned, are no longer regarded as indecent by the Censorship Board, literature judged as blasphemous may be banned due to “a clause in the 1937 Constitution that makes blasphemy a punishable offence” (Ardagh 240).⁹⁴

The changes in Irish legislation on divorce, contraception and abortion, as was outlined above in sections 2.2.1, 2.2.2 and 2.2.3, also account for changes in sexual morality. The legalisation of contraceptives, for example, enabled people, especially women, to engage in sexual relations without necessarily having children as a result.⁹⁵ Premarital sexual intercourse thus became an option also for women who previously had been obliged to continually make sure not to become pregnant outside marriage and thus bring disgrace upon themselves and their families. Sarah O’Connor also asserts that there is a connection between access to contraception, women’s roles in Irish society and attitudes towards sexuality:

The demand for contraceptives, made predominantly by women, is just one aspect of their changing position and their renegotiation of the boundaries between the private and public domains. It reflects the fact that from the 1960s onwards women were actively questioning their roles in society and wanted to make their own choices regarding marriage, employment and children. This in turn transformed attitudes towards marriage and sexual relationships, ultimately resulting in a more open and frank discussion of sexuality. (21-22)

Church teachings on sexual morality became less readily accepted because of the new possibilities for women’s self-determination with regard to their bodies and their sexual lives; the emergence of new discourses about female sexuality in campaigns led by the women’s movement also caused many women to question traditional attitudes to female sexuality as passive and virtually non-existent.⁹⁶

⁹² Cf. Carlson 105.

⁹³ Cf. Ardagh 239.

⁹⁴ Cf. Ardagh 240.

⁹⁵ Cf. S. O’Connor 21-22 and Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 19.

⁹⁶ Cf. Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 77, Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 25 and Fuller 177.

A turning point in Irish politics generally cited in relation to women's rights is the election of Mary Robinson as the first female President of Ireland in 1990.⁹⁷ Before she became President, Mary Robinson had pursued a successful career as a lawyer and law professor, during which she had mostly been associated with human rights causes in general and women's rights in particular.⁹⁸ She had, for example, been involved in campaigns and lawsuits concerned with the legalisation of contraception as well as the decriminalisation of homosexuality.⁹⁹ Evelyn Mahon points out that Mary Robinson was widely popular and that "[f]eminists recognized her as a feminist but she also won the respect of others who might have been slightly scared of feminism" ("Women's Rights" 207). Mary Robinson thus managed to convey the importance of women's rights not only to Irish women but also to Irish men.¹⁰⁰

During the 1990s there were several other significant changes in Irish legislation and politics. In 1997 another woman was elected President: Mary McAleese had also been a successful lawyer, who was concerned mainly with human rights and feminist causes.¹⁰¹ Moreover, important additional laws concerning violence against women were passed: Marital rape became a criminal offence, and more effective legislation against domestic violence was introduced.¹⁰²

2.3.4 Economic Boom During the Celtic Tiger Years

Another central aspect pertaining to the substantial changes, which occurred in Ireland in the 1990s, was a period of rapid economic growth generally referred to as the 'Celtic Tiger'.¹⁰³ A century prior to this economic boom Irish society had been mainly rural and agricultural but a trend towards modernisation and urbanisation developed from the 1950s onward.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ Cf. Mahon, "Women's Rights" 207, Campbell 335 and S. O'Connor 30.

⁹⁸ Cf. S. O'Connor 30 and Campbell 335.

⁹⁹ Cf. Mahon, "Women's Rights" 189, Campbell 334 and Kilfeather 111. Homosexuality was a criminal offence in Ireland until 1993 (cf. Campbell 335-336).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Mahon, "Women's Rights" 207.

¹⁰¹ Cf. S. O'Connor 31.

¹⁰² Cf. Mahon, "Women's Rights" 212.

¹⁰³ Cf. Tovey and Share 51, Allen 231 and Keogh 24.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Tovey and Share 52-53, Garvin 165 and Inglis, "Individualisation and Secularisation 70.

After Ireland had joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, it benefited greatly from agricultural subsidies and foreign investments and thus large-scale manufacturing became possible; especially successful were the construction industry as well as the banking and finance sector.¹⁰⁵ Celtic Tiger Ireland was characterised mainly by an increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), growing number of exports and high employment; these developments in turn led to a higher standard of living and growing wealth.¹⁰⁶ Dermot Keogh points out that there was also increased immigration to Ireland and “[w]idespread recruitment of skilled and general labour from abroad to meet the demands of an expanding economy” (Keogh 321). During this time Ireland also became particularly popular with the information technology sector and numerous international companies decided to establish branches and factories in Ireland.¹⁰⁷ Michael Parker enumerates the most important reasons for this development: “Multinational corporations and investors from Europe and the USA found the Republic highly attractive because of its exceptionally low corporation tax, its stability in industrial relations, and its highly skilled, well-educated, English-speaking workforce” (Parker 7).¹⁰⁸

Inglis argues that the trend of modernisation and increasing prosperity which culminated in the boom of the Celtic Tiger years had developed throughout the second half of the twentieth century and had led to a change in public morality because “the market [had promoted] a secular, liberal-individualist, hedonistic lifestyle [...]” (“Individualisation and Secularisation 70”).¹⁰⁹ Other aspects relevant to the development of an increasingly modernised society included improved access to secondary and tertiary education and the fact that, due to growing wealth, more people could afford to travel abroad and to have a television at home.¹¹⁰ These increasingly diverse influences also had an effect on attitudes to gender, sexuality and the body.¹¹¹ As for increased travel opportunities, for example, “Irish people travelling abroad encountered different nationalities in hotter climates and were exposed to the previously covered body in all its various shapes and forms” (S. O’Connor 16). In this context, Sarah O’Connor also emphasises the considerable

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Campbell 330-331 and Allen 247.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Kirby 29 and Keogh 321.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Keogh 323-324 and Parker 7.

¹⁰⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the changes occurring in Celtic Tiger Ireland, see Kirby 29-46.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Inglis, “Individualisation and Secularisation” 68-70.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Fuller 172-173 and 177, Tovey and Share 51 and Ardagh 221.

¹¹¹ Cf. Parker 3 and S. O’Connor 15.

influence of television on attitudes to the body and to sexuality (16), an issue which is explored further in the next section.

2.3.5 Television and the Media

The media, and particularly the greater availability of television from the 1960s onwards, are generally believed to be a major aspect of the modernisation and secularisation of Irish society.¹¹² Inglis argues that television has fundamentally transformed Irish public morality by undermining Catholic teachings and providing alternative values:

Quietly, but quickly and effectively, the messages within British and American programmes, as well as advertising, began to shake the foundations of the Church's power. It was not just that people spent more time watching television than practising religion, but the content of the message meant that adults and children were being swamped with secular messages and role-models which led to new forms of personal identity and alternative conceptions of what was right and wrong. In particular, listeners and viewers were stimulated to discover and pursue their pleasures and desires. ("Individualisation and Secularisation" 77)

Thus, as previously silenced "pleasures and desires" were foregrounded, Catholic morality was gradually replaced by media representations of the quest for happiness and individual fulfilment. Additionally, television changed the existing discourse on the body and sexuality because "[a] wide range of advertisements and programmes showed different types of self-expression, with the body portrayed in varying postures and positions. Different modes of sexual communication, interaction and diverse relationships were brought directly to the Irish [...] hearth" (S. O'Connor 16).

Keeping this in mind, it is not surprising that the Catholic Church was dissatisfied with the growing influence of television on the Irish public and suspected a decline in public morals.¹¹³ In an official statement made by several Irish bishops, they claimed that television had the potential to "do great harm, not merely in the diffusion of the erroneous ideas of those who are lacking in deep or accurate knowledge of religious truth, but also in the broadcasting of programmes which offend all reasonable standards of morals and decency." (qtd. in Fuller 174). After a long time of strict censorship imposed by the Catholic Church and the Irish State in order to shield the Irish people from immoral tendencies and indecent subjects, television provided all this and yet evaded

¹¹² Cf. S. O'Connor 16-18, Tovey and Share 427 and Inglis, "Individualisation and Secularisation" 76-77.

¹¹³ Cf. Fuller 174.

ensorship.¹¹⁴ An Irish politician summarised this development by contending that there was “no sex in Ireland before television” (qtd. in S. O’Connor 18).

Sarah O’Connor emphasises the influence of the Late Late Show, a talk show which frequently caused debates about public decency due to its frank discussions about private matters. She describes one of numerous incidents in which the Late Late Show “shifted the boundaries of social taboos” (18): During an interview with a married couple the host asked about the colour of the nightdress the wife had worn on their wedding night and “[h]er coy reply that she ‘might not have worn anything at all’ caused uproar” (17). The show was subsequently criticised by the Bishop of Clonfert and several politicians for its low standards of morality; as far as Irish traditionalists were concerned, bodily pleasures and sexuality were not to be talked about, least of all publicly.¹¹⁵

The media also played an important role in revealing a series of public scandals such as the ‘X Case’ or Church-related abuse scandals.¹¹⁶ This was an important step in breaking the silence which had surrounded issues like these for decades; similarly, attempts to address and thereby gradually overcome some of the tragic issues exposed were made by actively engaging with them.¹¹⁷ As Kenneth L. Campbell notes, for example,

[...] 2002 [...] saw the release of Peter Mullan’s *The Magdalene Sisters*, which deals with the harsh conditions in institutions known as Magdalene Asylums and the despair experienced by the disgraced girls sent to them because of their sexual indiscretions. This dark secret of Irish society [...] was also brought to the attention of a wide audience through a BBC film called *Sinners* broadcast on Irish television in 2002. There was no attempt in either film to downplay the abject horror associated with these institutions [...]. These films dovetail with the numerous documentaries on the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church that have appeared in the past decade. In each instance, Ireland continues to confront the dark aspects of its past in an attempt to move past them. (Campbell 354)

The public discussion of these scandals undermined the credibility of the Catholic Church, as it exposed that the Catholic clergy frequently had not adhered to its own teachings.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Cf. S. O’Connor 16.

¹¹⁵ Cf. S. O’Connor 17-18.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Kilfeather 110-112 and S. O’Connor 25-30.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Campbell 354.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Fuller 175 and Garvin 163.

However, Inglis and MacKeogh argue that the media, despite revealing the double standard of the Catholic Church and having a liberalising effect on public sexual morality, have created a new double standard with regard to sexual morality. They point out that the media “operate within a discourse and habitus that constitute women as being sexually sophisticated and alluring but, at the same time, run stories that blame over-sexed women for the breakdown in sexual moral order” (70). They exemplify this by examining media reports about (allegedly) sexually transgressive women, who are portrayed as subverting the natural order of things and bringing about moral corruption.¹¹⁹ Women are thus granted the right to decide over their own lives, bodies and sexuality, but only within certain boundaries. Inglis and MacKeogh further argue that also nowadays, “[i]t is only women who can lose sexual honour and disgrace a family, community or nation. If women pursue sexual longings and desires in the same way as men, they are in danger [...] of being designated and labelled ‘sluts’” (75). Thus, female transgressive behaviour is still penalised, though the punishment has changed over time; sexually transgressive women are no longer institutionalised but they may still be subject to gossip or publicly scorned by the media.¹²⁰

As was illustrated in this outline of the socio-historical development of women’s roles and the changes in Irish sexual morality, the female body has been viewed mostly in terms of reproduction or indecency, sin and transgression. Reproduction was regarded as the main purpose for the female body to fulfil, though restricted to the marital context. Sexuality outside marriage or sexuality for the sake of pleasure rather than reproduction was impeded as far as possible, in order for public morality not to be corrupted. The Irish State and the Catholic Church cooperated in devising specific pieces of legislation, instilling fears of punishment and actually imposing punishment on sexually transgressive women. Among the strategies implemented to prevent indecent female behaviour were defining women’s place as being in the home, prohibiting contraception, subjecting women to close scrutiny, imposing punishment such as institutionalisation in the Magdalene laundries, and strict censorship intended to keep immoral thoughts out of Irish minds.

¹¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of these media reports, see Inglis and MacKeogh 68-78.

¹²⁰ Cf. Inglis and MacKeogh 68-80.

3 Analysis of Selected Short Stories

This section provides an analysis of selected contemporary Irish short stories. In this analysis it will be examined how the female body is represented. Furthermore, it will be discussed if and to what extent modern representations of the female body are based on traditional Irish conceptions of womanhood as outlined in sections 2.1 and 2.2 of this thesis.

3.1 “Sinners” by Edna O’Brien (2011)

3.1.1 Plot

Delia, an elderly widow, lives alone in her house, which she has converted into a bed and breakfast establishment. She leads a frugal life and all her earnings are invested to make much-needed improvements around the house. One day a married couple and their teenage daughter arrive at the bed and breakfast, and Delia dislikes them from the beginning without knowing exactly why. At night Delia hears the girl enter her parents’ room and gets out of bed in order to investigate what is going on. Standing in the hallway she hears noises emanating from the room; at first only a hushed giggling and whispering, the noises soon become louder and more explicit, and suddenly Delia realises that the girl is not the couple’s daughter, but rather she is their lover. The next morning, Delia does not want to talk to the family, as she deems their behaviour utterly immoral. When the family wants to check out and leave, Delia makes sure they know she heard them by telling them they only have to pay for one room because they only used one of the two rooms they had booked. They hand her the money for both rooms and turn around to leave but Delia throws the money on the ground. After they are gone, Delia lies down in the grass and cries.

3.1.2 Delia

Delia is the protagonist of “Sinners”, and the story, which is set in the mid-twentieth century, is narrated from her point of view. She lives alone and, apart from occasional paying guests in summer, does not seem to have much company, as her husband is dead and she does not have a close relationship to her children. She feels lonely and thus has a

rule of not accommodating guests for more than a couple of days because “[s]he was afraid she might grow attached to them and ask them to stay longer, for the company” (41). When she lies awake in bed at night she mostly thinks about improvements she could make to the house, and about her children: “Her things had become her faithfuls, what with all else gone or scattered. She knew, yes, she knew, that the love from children became fainter and more intermittent with time, not unlike a garment washed and rewashed, until it is only a suggestion of its original colour” (40). The children rarely come to see her, but rather “[t]he girls remembered when they remembered, they sent gifts [...]” (40). Besides, the names of the children are never mentioned, which suggests that Delia does not have a very close relationship with them; for example, when thinking about them, she enumerates, “Four scattered, one dead, and a daughter-in-law who had made her son, her only son, the essence of graspingness” (40) and generally thinks about them as “[t]he girls”, “the youngest daughter” or “her son” (40).

There are some other worries in Delia’s life as well. For one, she has financial problems. This is indicated, for example, by the description of Delia rarely taking sleeping pills, despite the fact that “sleep eluded her more and more as the years went on” (37), because she “dreaded being at the mercy of any drug and had a secondary dread of one day not being able to afford them” (37). Moreover, she only takes on guests during the summer months because “[...] to heat the whole house in winter would be extravagant, as oil was so expensive” (41). All the money she receives from accommodating summer guests is invested again in the maintenance of the house “and her only luxury was a large tin of raspberry and custard biscuits [...]” (41). Secondly, Delia is worried because her faith is not as strong as it used to be:

In her wide-awake vigils, she prayed or tried to pray, but prayer, like sleep, was on the wane now, at the very time when she should be drawing closer to her blessed Maker. The prayers came only from her lips and not from deep within anymore. She had lost that most heartfelt rapport that she once had with God. (37)

Although she used to have a “most heartfelt rapport” with God, she feels that this relationship has changed. She is convinced that she should become more religious as she grows older and realises that her life will end at some point, yet her prayers do not seem to come “from deep within anymore”.

3.1.3 The Family

The alleged family consists of a middle-aged married couple and a younger woman called Samantha, whom Delia at first mistakes to be the couple's teenage daughter. From the beginning, Delia is convinced that something about the family is suspicious: "She had some peculiar reservation about them, how over-friendly they were with each other and blowing about what a brilliant hol they were having, yes, something unnerved her" (42). She also notices several things about the family she finds unusual, for example the fact that the mother and the daughter wear the same perfume but do not seem to have anything else in common (38), or that the mother "made a habit of touching the daughter whenever she jumped up in one of her fits of exuberance" (39).

Delia's resentment towards the family increases as the story progresses and eventually culminates in her outrage after witnessing the act of sexual intercourse between the three. The first incident, albeit only a minor misunderstanding, occurs shortly after the family's arrival. They ask Delia for a picnic basket so that they can have dinner on their boating expedition and Delia has to explain "that they must make their own arrangements for dinner, as she was really just bed and breakfast" (39). They return after midnight and despite their efforts to be quiet, Delia can hear them walk up the stairs and use the bathroom. Suddenly she hears something crash in the bathroom and assumes it is the china tooth mug she loved; at first, Delia wants to "get up and tackle them" (40) but she does not dare to do so.

After some time she wants to go into the bathroom to look for the tooth mug but again, "something prevented her. She was ashamed of being heard by them and it was as if the house had become theirs" (42). For Delia, the family become more and more like intruders into her house and 'her world', as she feels she has to "[pace] in her room" because she does not dare to "go into the hall and pace, as was her habit, and put her hand on the cold plaster statue of the Virgin, asking for protection" (42). This notion of intrusion is reinforced by a short reference that the family is from England (42), which hints at the complicated history of Ireland and Britain as well as the period of British Rule in Ireland.

The father and the mother are hardly mentioned or described in any detail. As for the wife, it is only stated that “[t]he mother was dark and plump [...]” (39) and also the husband is described very briefly: “The father smoked a pipe. He was a handsome man, tall and distant, and who seemed like a professor of something” (39). Apart from another reference to them as “professorial man and plump wife” (41), they do not occupy an eminent position in the story. The daughter, on the other hand, has a more prominent role in Delia’s thoughts and thus also in the story. She is described as a spoiled, vain teenager who is rather childlike but at the same time aware of her own attractiveness.

There are no clues in the story as to Samantha’s age or her actual relationship to the married couple. When Delia finds out about the sexual liaison between the three, she suspects that Samantha “was a hitchhiker to whom they had given a lift, or perhaps they had placed an advertisement, the words cunningly couched, in their local paper [...]” (44). As Samantha is mostly depicted in the role of seductress, her character will be explored further in the next subsection, which explores representations of the female body in “Sinners”.

3.1.4 Representations of the Female Body

The female body in “Sinners” is portrayed in terms of either pregnancy and motherhood or sexuality. The procreative aspect and repressed sexuality are illustrated by Delia’s character, whereas the three members of the alleged family, and especially Samantha, represent aspects of sexuality in relation to pleasure, seduction and moral transgression.

Delia’s memories of married life are rather gloomy; they centre on marital sexuality as a duty, which has to be fulfilled from time to time and, as a consequence, on bearing children. When she lies awake in bed at night and thinks about the paying guests who arrived earlier that day, she remembers what her life used to be like when her husband was still alive:

The parents had the blue room, which had been her and her husband’s bridal room, the one where her children were born and where, as the years went on, she slept as little as possible, visiting her husband only when she was compelled to and afterwards washing and rinsing herself thoroughly. Five children were enough for any woman. (40)

The first thing she remembers about her bridal room is that it is the room where her children were born, and her next thought is that she tried to avoid spending too much time there with her husband, “visiting [him] only when she was compelled to”. There are no affectionate memories of either her husband or her children which are connected with her bridal room, but rather it seems to have been to her a place where female marital duties are to be performed: satisfying her husband’s sexual needs, if absolutely necessary, and bearing children. Besides, sexuality for her is closely linked to procreation and, due to the lack of availability of contraceptives at that time, she attempts to prevent conception by remaining abstinent and “washing and rinsing herself thoroughly” (40).

Delia’s body fulfils the ‘natural role’ allocated to women in general by the Irish State and the Catholic Church. Moreover, Delia does not experience pleasure in the sexual relations with her husband and plays a passive part in this respect; she thus also embodies the ideal of female ‘purity’, which is imagined as the non-existence of female sexuality, as she only has sexual intercourse with her husband and only “when she [is] compelled to” (40).

This is also evident in the following passage:

Yes, the couple were in her marriage bed, a wide bed with an oak headboard that rattled, and a rose-coloured quilt that she had made during her betrothal, stitching all her dreams into it. She imagined them, professorial man and plump wife, lying side by side, the square pouches of the quilt rising and sinking with their breathing, and she remembered the clutching of it as her husband made wrathful and unloving love to her. (41)

Here again Delia’s passivity and lack of interest in sexual relations with her husband is emphasised. The husband is the active part as he is the one who actually does something, whereas Delia is passive and something is done to her: “her husband *made* wrathful and unloving love *to her*” [emphasis added]. Moreover, this is a situation Delia cannot escape, which is illustrated by the “clutching” of the quilt. At first it is the “quilt that she had made during her betrothal, stitching all her dreams into it” but the main aspect she remembers is the “clutching of it”; Delia cannot simply get up and leave the marriage bed, and neither can she escape her unhappy marriage, as divorce was not legal in Ireland at that time.

A completely different image of the female body is conveyed by the character of Samantha, who is described from Delia’s point of view, as is the rest of the story. The first impression Delia has of Samantha is described as follows:

The daughter, Samantha, was cocksure, with toffee-coloured hair, narrowing her eyes as if she were thinking something mathematical, when all she was thinking was, 'Look at me, spoil me.' Her long hair was her chief weapon, which she swept along the table as she scrutinised the wallpaper, or a picture [...]. (38-39)

In this passage Samantha is presented as a self-confident, vain and fastidious teenager, who enjoys to attract attention with her appearance. According to Delia, Samantha's hair is "her chief weapon"; Delia is convinced that Samantha knows how to use her beauty as a weapon, *id est* she knows how to seduce someone. This seductive aspect is developed further in the subsequent passages of the story dedicated to her. For one, Delia points out that after the family's arrival at the bed and breakfast, Samantha attempts to persuade her parents to indulge in luxurious food: "She kept insisting that her parents have a bite of the iced cake, because it was yummy" (39). Moreover, Samantha is described to dress seductively, and again there is a reference to luxurious food: "Samantha's short skirt drew attention to her thighs, which were like pillars of solid nougat inside her cream lace stockings" (39).

When the guests are on their boating expedition, Delia enters their rooms and spots Samantha's nightdress on the bed: "The diaphanous pink nightie was laid out on her pillow and looked life-like, or as if there were a doll inside it" (42). The transparent nightdress, which looks "as if there were a doll inside it", creates an image of Samantha as an adult and a child at once by linking her to a seductive nightdress as well as something which looks like there is a doll lying on her bed. Additionally, the imagined doll is associated with Samantha because the nightdress "[looks] life-like, or as if there were a doll inside it" and so the image created shifts from Samantha wearing the nightdress to the doll; thus, Samantha is likened to a sexualised doll or toy, something which can be played with and which is supposed to give somebody else pleasure.

It turns out that Samantha takes on the role of seductress in initiating the sexual encounter at the bed and breakfast, as she gets out of bed, knocks on the parents' door and enters their room. However, in the more detailed description of the sexual act as imagined by Delia, Samantha does not occupy a very active role. She is the one who is touched by her two lovers and there is no reference to her touching them: "The girl was probably naked and yielding, allowing them to fondle her, the man fondling her in one way, the woman in another [...]" (43). In Delia's mind it is the man who is in control and the two women are there in order to pleasure him: "[...] the man, lord of his harem, straddled over a girl

who was in no way his daughter, and the woman ministering, because that was the surest way she could hold onto a husband” (43). Samantha again occupies a rather passive role, as the man is “straddled over” her; the woman, on the other hand, is active but only “ministering” for fear of otherwise losing her husband. The man is presented as being the “lord of his harem” and thus as being in control. The explicit sounds eventually emanating from the room are described as “three pitches of sound so different – the woman’s loud and gloating, the girl’s, helpless, as if she were almost crying, and the man, like a jackass down in the woods with his lady loves” (44). Again, the man is portrayed as being at the centre of this sexual liaison and the two women are described as “his lady loves”; they are his and they are to pleasure him.

These events are represented as Delia imagines them but she cannot actually see anything because she is standing in the hallway. Interestingly, Delia pictures what is going to happen as soon as she hears Samantha enter the parents’ room. She hears “[...] a tap, a series of taps, light and playful [...]” (43) and before anything else has happened, Delia is suddenly convinced that something immoral is going on, as it is “not the tapping of a sick or over-wrought child, not the tapping of a child frightened by the dark, or disturbed by a crow in the chimney, not at all, and in seconds, Delia twigged. Her whole body stiffened in revulsion” (43). She is determined to find out what Samantha is doing in the other room and walks to their door to listen.

At first she only hears them whispering and giggling, which seems to be evidence enough for her that “something appalling [is] transpiring in there” (43). As Delia stands in the hallway, she imagines the activities inside the room in considerable detail:

[...] she pictured them, their hands, their mouths, their limbs, all seeking one another out. They had not dared to put on a light. The girl was probably naked and yielding, allowing them to fondle her, the man fondling her in one way, the woman in another, and before long she knew that it would reach the vileness of an orgy. (43)

Delia is horrified, yet at the same time fascinated and stays to listen, telling herself that “[s]he would have to go in there and catch them out [...]” (43). She actually pictures punishing the three for their “vileness”:

There was a poker in that room, laid into the coal scuttle, left there since her last confinement thirty years previous, and she was already picking it up and breaking it on their bare, romping bodies. What detained her she could not say. Everything determined that she could go in and yet she faltered. (44)

Again, she is disgusted by the incident but she is also too intrigued to walk away or to enter the room and “catch them out”; rather, she pictures all the details of the act of sexual intercourse and listens to the sounds emanating from the room.

Eventually, Delia returns to her room and takes a sleeping tablet because she is still agitated due to the discovery she just made about the paying guests. She falls asleep and starts to dream:

She was with a group of women who were about to be photographed by two men, obvious rivals who bickered and elbowed each other out of the way. For the actual photograph all were ordered to undress, but she could not, she would not. Stoutly she refused to remove her camisole, which was of coarse, unbleached linen. The woman next to her, whom she recognised as Ellie, the local dressmaker, did undress and waddled about as would a hussy. (44-45)

In this dream again the male characters are in control of the situation. They are the ones who are active and look, whereas the women are passive and being looked at. Moreover, the men want to take a picture of the women, who are “ordered to undress”; the women are expected to expose their bodies and present themselves to the men in order to pose for them. The women are not asked, but rather the two men decide what is to happen with their bodies and command them what to do. Apart from Delia and Ellie, the reaction of the women is not described. Delia disapproves of the fact that Ellie undresses, which is evident from her opinion that Ellie walks around naked “as would a hussy”.

After this judgement about Ellie the first dream ends abruptly and Delia has another dream:

She was alone in a big church that was regal, but very profane. The saints, Joseph and Jude and Anthony and Theresa the little flower, were all stripped of their robes and if that was not sacrilege enough, the priest sang lustily, as if he were in a beer garden. Then a little altar boy in cardinal red started to prance about and help himself to wine from the chalice. (45)

Similar to the first dream, Delia finds herself in a setting which indicates immorality, indecency and sin. But this time the people involved are not any women and men, but rather they are those who should uphold faith, religion and virtue; however, the saints are “stripped of their robes”, the priest “[sings] lustily” and the altar boy “[starts] to prance about and help himself to wine from the chalice”. In both dreams Delia is the only one who is troubled by the occurrences. She also seems to be the only one regarding the others’ behaviour as immoral in a world in which impiousness, profanity and moral transgression are progressing. What is more, in her dream “[s]he kept believing that she

was not dreaming, except that she was” (45); Delia feels that the world is changing and that something is ‘wrong’ with the society she lives in, as it becomes increasingly secular and thus removed from Catholic virtue and morality.

However, Delia also apprehends that she, too, loses her faith, which worries her because at this age she thinks “she should be drawing closer to her blessed Maker” (37). But even though “[s]he had lost that most heartfelt rapport that she once had with God” (37), her own view of the world is still informed by Catholic values. She prays regularly and has a habit of “[putting] her hand on the cold plaster statue of the Virgin, asking for protection” (42) when she is anxious or agitated. Moreover, she condemns the three paying guests because they do not comply with Catholic teachings on sexual morality, which assert that sexual intercourse should be restricted to marriage and should be practised exclusively for the purpose of procreation, not pleasure. She refers to their actions as “vile happenings” (45), imagines to punish them (44) and is disgusted at the thought of having to prepare “their loathsome breakfasts” (45) the next morning.

Delia herself has fulfilled the traditionally advocated role of housewife and mother. She has thus conformed to the idea that the female body’s natural purpose is to bear children. She disapproves of Samantha’s appearance and behaviour from the beginning because Samantha represents a type of woman that is not in line with the Catholic teachings Delia has internalised for years. Samantha wears revealing clothes, acts seductively and, as Delia finds out later, has two lovers and an active sexual life. However, when Delia imagines the scene in the paying guests’ room, she allocates Samantha a very passive role in the sexual act, even though Samantha is otherwise presented as being the most prominent character among the three guests; for Delia, who has never been able to enjoy sexual relations, female sexuality connotes passivity, and thus this image is to some extent also transferred onto Samantha.

Nevertheless, Delia is not completely indifferent to sexuality and sexual urges. Despite her contempt for the “vile happenings” (45) between the three paying guests at her bed and breakfast, she is intrigued and cannot avoid thinking about every detail of the sexual act. And even though she tells herself twice to put an end to the alleged family’s immoral behaviour (43-44), she does not, but “[w]hat detained her she could not say” (44). Besides, she already pictures them kissing and caressing each other before she can hear

any explicit sounds from the room. Although Delia disapproves of immoral behaviour, she repeatedly imagines other people to engage in such activities. For example, she describes Samantha mostly in sexual terms, imagining her to aim at seducing men; moreover, she thinks about the sexual liaison of her three paying guests in a very graphic way, and in her dreams she refuses to behave immorally but she pictures others who do engage in immoral activities. Delia deals with issues of sexuality but she has found a way of censoring her own mind by transferring her ‘indecent’ thoughts onto other people; this enables her to distance herself from these issues by condemning the imagined indecent behaviour of others.

These thoughts about sexuality create the potential for Delia’s character to challenge traditional images of Irish womanhood, even though she seems to completely fulfil the role of Irish woman as mother and asexual being. However, as discussed above, she is concerned with issues of sexuality, even though her occupation with these issues only occurs secretly and is curtailed by self-imposed censorship. As Iris Lindahl-Raittila points out, Edna O’Brien frequently employs similar strategies in her work in order to add a subversive element to seemingly compliant female characters.¹²¹ Similarly, Eileen Morgan argues that, “[...] simply by representing women from rural Ireland as desiring subjects with sexual fantasies and habits, O’Brien challenged the nationalist image of Irish women as chaste ethereal beings” (qtd. in Lindahl-Raittila 185). In “Sinners”, this subversive aspect of Delia’s character is emphasised also by her losing her faith, as the Catholic Church was one of the principal advocates of strict sexual morality.

Interestingly, apart from Ellie, who only appears very briefly in one of Delia’s dreams, Delia and Samantha are the only characters in the story that are given names. The reader does not know the names of Delia’s children or husband, nor those of Samantha’s alleged parents. Delia and Samantha are representing two types of women: a rather traditional and a more modern type, which are also distinguished by their native countries Ireland and England, respectively. The traditional image of the Irish woman is, at least on the surface level, represented by Delia, an elderly lady, who adheres to Catholic values and thus disapproves of women openly displaying pleasure in sexuality. Samantha, on the other hand, is young, English and decides over her own body and sexuality.

¹²¹ Cf. Lindahl-Raittila 188-189.

The elderly lady represents traditional Irish Catholic values, which are gradually being replaced by more secular values. This is indicated by Delia losing her faith as well as various images of decay and transience, especially with regard to the house: For example, the “wallpaper in the good room [...] is] stained around the window frames, brown smears from repeated damp” (37-38), Delia’s favourite tooth mug breaks (39-40), and “[t]he dishcloths [smell] of milk, no matter how thoroughly she [soaks] or [boils] them. They [have] that sour, gone-off smell” (38). Delia realises that the world she has lived in for so long is changing and traditional values are not as important anymore as they used to be. After the paying guests have left the bed and breakfast, Delia lies down on the lawn and cries:

She cried from the pit of her being. Why was she crying? Why am I crying, she asked aloud. It was not over them or the unsavouriness of the night. It was to do with herself. Her heart had walled up a long time ago, she had forgotten the little things, the little pleasures, the give and take that is life. She had even forgotten her own sins. (47)

Delia realises that the events of the night have prompted her to think about and question her own life. In doing so, she recognises that her life has been far from ideal because “[h]er heart had walled up a long time ago, she had forgotten the little things, the little pleasures, the give and take that is life” and, what is more, “[s]he had even forgotten her own sins”. Not only does she realise that her life has not been happy or fulfilled, it suddenly also occurs to her that, even though she has been harshly critical of other people’s immoral behaviour, she has neglected to think about “her own sins”.

3.2 “Wuff Wuff Wuff for De Valera” by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne (2001)

3.2.1 Plot

The middle-aged twin sisters Bernie and Pauline go on holiday to Lanzarote together. As they are relaxing in the sun, Bernie starts to think about their childhood and how their lives at some point started to take different directions. Originally from a working-class family in Dublin, the sisters went to secondary school and then university together. There, Bernie met her future husband Conor, who came from a wealthy family and after receiving his degree became a successful accountant and established his own business. Bernie and Conor married, had two children, Matthew and Emma, and due to Conor’s

high income can now easily afford to go on several holidays each year, to pay for their children's university education and to live in an expensive area in Dublin. Pauline, on the other hand, became pregnant out of marriage during her second year at university. At first she wanted to travel to England to have an abortion but as it turned out, she could not afford to pay for the journey and the medical procedure, so she decided to give the baby up for adoption. However, after the baby was born nobody wanted to adopt it because it had a mental disability and thus Pauline kept her son, Sebastian, and raised him on her own. As Bernie contemplates these events she attributes Pauline's lack of success in life to her being an unmarried mother. For a moment she wonders if she should have asked Conor for the money for the abortion but then determines that in this case he probably would not have married her and that it would not have been worth the risk.

3.2.2 Bernie and Pauline

As the story is narrated from Bernie's point of view, who is in fact the first person narrator-protagonist, and Bernie is very judgmental of Pauline, she does not only describe her sister but mostly also implicitly characterises herself. When thinking about their holiday trip, for example, Bernie ponders possible reasons for Pauline not travelling abroad regularly: "Pauline has hardly been abroad on holidays at all. That's more to do with Sebastian and his needs than money, I mean anyone can afford Ryanair, [...] so money is hardly an excuse, isn't it true?" (1-2). Bernie has grown so accustomed to her new wealth and her expensive lifestyle that she cannot imagine there are people who cannot afford to travel; for her, "money is hardly an excuse" in this respect, even though she grew up in a working class family and remembers that she went on her first trip abroad when she was "over twenty" (2). This rather condescending attitude is evident also in the following quote: "It almost made me cry, to think that she didn't know the way to the departure gates, a walk I make about forty times a year, at least" (2). Although Bernie knows that Pauline has never had the chance to travel as much as she has herself, she expects her to know about airport procedures; moreover, her assertion of flying "forty times a year, at least" is probably exaggerated, as Emma still lives with her parents and Conor spends a lot of time at work.

Bernie is greatly influenced by the affluent lifestyle she enjoys due to her husband's wealth and she has become rather fastidious. She requires a certain degree of luxury and

extravagance in order to be happy: “My sister and I were going down to Lanzarote, on a cheapie little week away from the February rain. My real holidays will be later with Conor and Emma [...]. We’re doing a safari in Zimbabwe [...].” (1). When she thinks about the holiday with her sister, she does not consider it her “real holidays” because it is only “a cheapie little week away from the February rain”. She is also slightly annoyed with Pauline for spoiling the holiday she had envisaged: “The Lanzarote thing was to be my treat but Pauline wouldn’t hear of it, so we were going Dutch. It took the fun out of it. She always seems to be so hard-pressed for cash [...].” (1). Bernie is dissatisfied with having to adapt to Pauline’s limited budget because she is used to going on more expensive and luxurious journeys.

Bernie stopped to work when “Conor branched out on his own” (6) because he earned enough money to provide for her and the children, but she is highly critical of Pauline’s job, which she considers to be unfashionable and tedious:

She always seems to be so hard-pressed for cash, being something in the corporation, one of those 1950s sort of jobs nobody has nowadays that is steady and offers you a pension when you retire, but no fun in the meantime. And I’ve never understood why she stayed in it for so long, but I suppose that’s history. When she was at an age to move on there was nowhere to move on to. By the time the change in the economy came Pauline was too old to take advantage of it. You get into a rut, I guess. I didn’t but everything was different for me – marriage can be a safety net, let’s face facts. (1)

She concedes that Pauline’s job “is steady and offers you a pension when you retire” but she also asserts that there is “no fun in the meantime”. She is of the opinion that Pauline should have attempted to pursue a more distinguished career before she “[got] into a rut”. Bernie also admits that she has not experienced any problems of this sort because marrying Conor was a “safety net” for her. In fact, it has been more than just a “safety net”, as Conor earns so much that Bernie does not work at all anymore and can still afford to have an affluent lifestyle. In her criticism Bernie does not consider the fact that Pauline as a single mother may not have been in a position to risk losing a job which provides a regular, though low income.

Bernie, who attaches great importance to people’s appearance and to style in general, also disapproves of Pauline’s looks. She contends that

[h]er face is a wreck. Too much worry. And she’s let her figure go. It is my honest opinion that if she had her teeth fixed up, or even whitened, and lost about two stone, she’d be doing a lot better in that job of hers. But there you go. If she won’t

let me give her a week on the Canaries she's not going to accept a voucher for the orthodontist, and weight loss is a question of willpower. (2)

Bernie criticises Pauline for neglecting to attend to her appearance and asserts that this is the reason for her lack of success at her job. Moreover, she is of the opinion that Pauline does not have the necessary willpower to lose weight. Interestingly, however, Bernie remembers that Pauline was different when she was younger: “She used to be better-looking than me, and her willpower was stronger” (2). It is implied in this statement that Bernie thinks their roles have been reversed and that now she is better-looking than Pauline and has more willpower.

According to Bernie, when the twins were younger, Pauline, who “was the first born” (2), was more dominant, active and popular. When they played with other children from their neighbourhood, “Pauline was always the one who stage managed the games – decided what we'd play, who was ‘on it’, who got to pick the sides” (3). Pauline mostly decided what the sisters should do and then persuaded Bernie to participate in whatever she had planned: “Once Pauline went on hunger strike, made me go on it too, because our mother wouldn't take us to the park” (3). It is also Pauline who decides they should go to university: “In 1971 when we were seventeen [...] she decided we were going to university, which was the equivalent of staging the October Revolution in Mozart Road; nobody on Mozart Road had ever gone to university” (3). Bernie also remembers that Pauline was very ambitious and determined to obtain a degree, pursue a successful career and travel the world (4).

For Bernie, according to herself, “in a way [...] it has all worked out” (4), although she concedes, “I never travelled in the sense we had intended to – you see I met Conor in second year and we got married three years later and that sort of ended the wanderlust bit, since he decided to make his career here [...]” (4). Her relationship and marriage with Conor are characterised by a traditional allocation of gender roles, which is indicated by the fact that, since Conor “decided to make his career” in Ireland, it is also decided that they both stay in Ireland; besides he works and provides for the family, whereas Bernie looks after the children. Still, she emphasises the advantages this situation has for her: She has the chance to “[see] practically everything I want to see, on holidays [...]” (4), she lives in an expensive neighbourhood (8) and she and Conor are planning “to buy a cottage somewhere in Umbria” (1).

Pauline's life, however, turned out to be entirely different from what she had pictured it to be, although she always had great plans for her future and she seemed to be more 'successful' in life than Bernie when they were growing up. The role reversal of Bernie and Pauline is reflected in the skipping rhyme which is cited twice in the story. The first time it is mentioned Bernie remembers skipping rhymes they used to sing as children: "Vote vote vote for de Valera', in goes Pauline and [sic] the door I O, Pauline is the one that can have a bit of fun and we don't want Bernie any more I O" (3). The second time it is Pauline who sings a version of the skipping rhyme when they are on holiday in Lanzarote together: 'Wuff wuff wuff for de Valera! In comes Bernie at the door I O. Bernie is the one that can have a bit of fun and we don't want Pauline any more I O" (7). In the first version, "Pauline is the one that can have a bit of fun", whereas in the second version it is Bernie.

Both sisters seem to be convinced that their role reversal has occurred due to Pauline's pregnancy and motherhood out of marriage. The connection is made explicit from Bernie's point of view: "In second year she got pregnant. That's what happened to her. That's why she sort of didn't make it. I think so" (4). Pauline does not explicitly say so, but seems to be of the same opinion. When Bernie asks her, "Do you ever wish you'd had the money, for that abortion?", Pauline does not answer the question but sings the second version of the skipping rhyme quoted above, stating that now "Bernie is the one that can have a bit of fun".

3.2.3 Representations of the Female Body

Bernie and Pauline are born in the 1950s, and Pauline becomes pregnant in the early 1970s (3), a time at which contraceptives were not legally available in Ireland and having children out of marriage was still considered unacceptable by many people. Thus, when Pauline finds out that she is pregnant, she wants to obtain information on abortion services, which turns out to be far from easy:

There was a family-planning clinic in Dublin then, to which people went for contraceptives, which were still illegal, even for married people, but if you were brave and in the know you could go to one of these clinics and get the pill or condoms. So we sneaked off to it, looking over our shoulders in case anyone we knew would spot us. (5)

Visiting the family-planning clinic is risky and only an option “if you [are] brave” and the girls have to “[sneak] off to it”, so that nobody sees them entering an establishment in which contraceptives are distributed, as people might assume that they are engaging in immoral behaviour such as having premarital sexual relations. Bodily issues linked to sexuality are confined to secrecy and shame, and the sisters thus have to be careful not to become the subject of gossip.

When they arrive at the clinic, there are yet more obstacles to overcome. The employees are reluctant to provide information about abortion and try to find other options for Pauline to cope with the situation:

They were very slow to give us information about abortion – they tried everything else: to persuade Pauline to get married, to consider adoption, to keep the baby. All impossible for her – the boy wouldn’t marry her and she didn’t want to anyway. If she went through with the pregnancy she’d miss her exams and then wouldn’t get her grant next year. And keeping the baby ... where would she keep it? On what? Nobody did that. Nobody would talk to you, if you did. You’d be a leper. (5)

Power over Pauline’s body is exercised on several levels, namely by the law, which prevents her from having control over her own fertility, by social norms, which force her to deal with bodily issues clandestinely, and by the staff at the family-planning clinic. The family-planning clinic is the only establishment able to grant Pauline access to information about abortion, but the employees there exercise power over Pauline by trying to prevent her from finding out about abortion services available abroad and thus from having an abortion.

Rather, they attempt to persuade Pauline to change the circumstances and thus to render her pregnancy socially acceptable. The first option is to marry and thus let the perceived problem, the pregnancy out of marriage, disappear; the fact that Pauline does not want to have a baby is ignored completely in this suggestion. The second solution proposed to Pauline, having the baby and then giving it up for adoption, is not an option for her either, because “she’d miss her exams and then wouldn’t get her grant next year”. The staff at the clinic also attempt to persuade her “to keep the baby”, ignoring again the fact that Pauline does not want to be a mother and thus denying her the right to decide over her own life and body. This recommendation made by the clinic staff also disregards the social stigma Pauline would face if she let herself be persuaded to raise the child on her own: “Nobody did that. Nobody would talk to you, if you did. You’d be a leper”.

When Pauline and Bernie finally receive the contact details of an abortion clinic in London, they call from a payphone at the post office, constantly fearing that somebody might find out what they are planning. Again, dealing with the issue clandestinely is far from easy: “We had to go through an operator and we were terrified that she would find out who we were phoning: maybe someone would answer ‘Central Abortion Clinic’ or something. But that didn’t happen. They were very discreet on the phone” (5). The sisters are so terrified of potential consequences for their transgression of social norms that they are afraid of the operator finding out whom they are calling, even though the operator probably would not be able to do so, since they are calling from the post office. However, the staff of the abortion clinic is “very discreet on the phone”, which again contributes to the sense of secrecy, prohibition and indecency surrounding the female body in this short story. Issues related to the female body, reproduction and sexuality such as contraception, pregnancy or abortion are to be treated in a “discreet” way because they are perceived to be indecent issues, inappropriate for the general public to talk or even think about.

Pauline’s attempts to gain control over her body and obtain a termination of the unwanted pregnancy are also complicated by financial constraints: “They told us, discreetly, that the cost of the procedure plus a night in the clinic would be £300. “Three hundred pounds. And travel on top of that. It might as well have been three million pounds” (5-6). Ultimately, this causes Pauline to decide to have the baby and give it up for adoption, a decision which has profound consequences for her life:

She missed the exams. One of the Catholic agencies for unmarried mothers organized everything for her – home, hospital, adoption. But it misfired. When she had the baby, at one of those homes, it was mentally retarded, so the couple who had it earmarked backed off and nobody else wanted it. Pauline could have left the baby – Sebastian – in the home but she wouldn’t. She hated institutions.
(6)

Pauline has to leave the university as well as her parents’ home. She moves into a Catholic “home” for unmarried mothers, which is not further specified. The short and unspecific references to these events as well as the mention of the Catholic “home” suggest that the initial intention is to keep Pauline’s pregnancy a secret and hide her from public sight until the displeasing situation is resolved as soon as the baby is adopted and everything is back to normal. Thus, as a result of her transgression of having had premarital sexual relations and given birth to a child out of wedlock, her body is again presented as a site of shame, which has to be concealed.

The repeated references to Éamon de Valera in the skipping rhyme indicate the lack of control Pauline has over her body. As was discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2, the Irish Constitution of 1937, which was devised by de Valera, was one of several factors contributing to the image of female purity, domesticity and dependence. Bernie remembers that one of the skipping rhymes of their childhood was “Vote vote vote for de Valera” and that she heard a similar skipping rhyme not too long ago: “I heard children singing that rhyme a few years ago, on a road not far from my neighbourhood. ‘Wuff Wuff Wuff for de Valera!’ they sang. They obviously didn’t know who de Valera was, but the rhyme endures, to my astonishment” (3). The words may have changed over time from “vote” to “wuff” and children may not know his name anymore but the enduring of the rhyme containing de Valera’s name indicates the legacy of de Valera and his Constitution and the ongoing influence of traditional Irish values on Irish women’s lives. It is also this second version of the skipping rhyme, which is sung by Pauline when Bernie asks her if she regrets not having had the abortion; instead of answering the question, Pauline “[starts] to sing. ‘Wuff wuff wuff for de Valera! [...]’”. Pauline does not sing the ‘old’ version but the ‘new’ one and thereby implies that she is aware of the fact that the ideals of de Valera’s era continue to be of importance and to complicate the process of women attempting to gain control over their bodies, their sexuality and reproduction.

Bernie represents the double standard that, on the one hand, it has been maintained in Ireland “that the natural vocation of women is motherhood” (Ingman, qtd. in Lindahl-Raittila 185), yet on the other hand, unmarried mothers were socially stigmatised. Bernie’s own life, as opposed to Pauline’s, is represented as having “worked out” (4) because she has conformed to the social norm that women should marry, have children and stay at home, if possible, while the husband goes to work to earn money. Even though Bernie knows that Pauline loves Sebastian and has managed to provide for him, she regards her sister’s life as a failure and is harshly critical of her:

She’s everything to him. And vice versa. I know her main worry is what will happen to him if anything goes wrong. She did get a degree in the end – she did one of those night modules [...] in philosophy and Greek and Roman Civilization. She owns her own house, even – she bought a privatized corporation house [...] ages ago, so she’s fine from that point of view. I don’t know why she’s never got a lot of promotion, maybe she’s a bit too forthright about her atheism, her dislike of the Catholic Church, that sort of thing. And she probably should have done something on marketing or business studies instead of philosophy. I mean she works in the sewerage section, I can’t imagine philosophy is very relevant. Plus

she's overweight and sloppy looking and she goes on and on about being a single parent. Even today it's wiser to be discreet about that but Pauline has made a huge issue out of it, being Pauline. (6-7)

Despite the fact that Pauline has succeeded in raising her son on her own as well as obtaining a degree, buying a house and finding a steady job, Bernie asserts that she “sort of didn't make it” (4). She concedes that Pauline is “fine from that point of view” when thinking about the house she owns, but then immediately continues to criticise that Pauline “never got a lot of promotion”, again focusing on the negative aspects and affirming that Pauline has not been successful ever since she became pregnant. Other reasons for this, as identified by Bernie, are Pauline's “atheism, her dislike of the Catholic Church”, the ‘wrong’ choice of studying philosophy instead of “something on marketing or business studies” and her “sloppy” appearance. She also criticises Pauline because “she goes on and on about being a single parent” and contends that “[e]ven today it's wiser to be discreet about that”. Being “discreet” and hiding from public sight would be the socially preferred strategy of dealing with pregnancy and childbirth out of marriage and Bernie in her statement implies that everything would have turned out better for Pauline, if she had at least tried to conceal her transgression and thus conformed to the social norm by ashamedly keeping quiet about her situation and not openly talking about it. Her failure to comply with the social norms with regard to the female body, sexuality and women's roles has, according to Bernie, brought about her failure in life.

Pauline, however, appears to have accepted her fate and not to regret her decision to keep Sebastian; in fact, ever since Sebastian was born, she has been content with her life and has found fulfilment in being a mother and caring for her mentally disabled son. As Bernie recalls, “Pauline could have left the baby – Sebastian – in the home but she wouldn't. She hated institutions” (6). Although Pauline had not wanted to be a mother, she loved her son from the moment he was born and suddenly could not bear the thought of giving him up for adoption: “I wouldn't have let them adopt him either, after I'd had it [...]. It was like he was... part of me. Giving him up for adoption would have been like cutting off my arm and giving it to someone who hadn't got an arm of their own, sort of. Do you know what I mean? It would've been worse than that” (6). Bernie also points out that Pauline and Sebastian are a small but happy family: “He's old now, thirty, but he still lives with her. She's everything to him. And vice versa. I know her main worry is what will happen to him if anything goes wrong” (6). Pauline loves Sebastian, just as he loves

her, and she does not regret anything that happened, as Sebastian now is “everything” for her and she cannot imagine her life without him.

3.3 “Night of the Quicken Trees” by Claire Keegan (2002)

3.3.1 Plot

Margaret Flusk moves into a house on the seaside in the rural west of Ireland. She inherited the house, which is located in the small village of Dunagore, when the local priest died. Margaret lives alone, rarely leaves the house and attempts to avoid keeping company with others, which causes the villagers to speculate about her life and her relationship to the priest. In the course of the story it is revealed that the priest was Margaret’s cousin and that they had a son together, who died shortly after he was born. Margaret is traumatised by the loss of her son and the fact that she was excluded from the family when they found out about her pregnancy. Besides, she continues to think about the priest, who did not support her either but abandoned her after they had spent one night together. When a fortune-teller tells Margaret that she will have another child and her life will finally be fulfilled and happy, she decides to have sexual intercourse with Stack, her neighbour. She becomes pregnant and decides to tear down the wall which separates the two houses from each other so that they become one; for several years Margaret, Stack and their son Michael live there together. In the meantime, the villagers have found out that Margaret can cure all sorts of ailments and start to frequent her house. After seven years, however, Margaret does not want to cure people anymore because it affects her mental health; as a result, the villagers become very hostile towards her. Fearing for the safety of her child she leaves Dunagore and goes to an island off the west coast of Ireland in a boat with several men. Stack stays and watches her and Michael leave.

3.3.2 Margaret

Margaret is described as being a superstitious, lonely recluse who is “not yet forty” (145). Moreover, her life has been far from easy. In her house

[...] smoke was always rising. Neither was she gone nor did she sleep long enough to let the fire die. In fact, she liked getting up while the stars were still in the sky. It gave her satisfaction to see a star falling. If she believed in the forces of nature she was yet determined to avoid bad luck. She’d had her share of bad luck so now

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. (146)

She does not leave the house unless she has to and she never stays out "long enough to let the fire die". Her wish "to avoid bad luck" is so strong that she gets up at night to search the sky for falling stars and tries to avoid any behaviour which is said to cause bad luck. She also intends not to interact too much with others but "[...] to keep people at arm's length for people [are] nothing but a nuisance" (147), and thus has no friends or acquaintances: "The postman hardly ever stopped at Margaret's except to deliver a bill for the electricity" (149) and at Christmas time, "[t]he postman was run off his feet but Margaret didn't even get a card" (152). The only 'visitor' she has for weeks after she moves into the priest's house is a man who "[comes] up to her door and [asks] her to sign a petition to get the potholes filled on the road" (149). Margaret has not kept in touch with her family either: "She had written a few lines to her mother without reply. Her mother could be dead and she wouldn't know" (152).

In several passages in "Night of the Quicken Trees", Margaret is attributed witch-like qualities. A few months after she has moved to Dunagore, the villagers find out that she can cure a variety of mental and physical afflictions. She cures a man's toothache, for example, by handing him a frog and giving him the following instructions: "Put her back legs in your mouth without harming her and the pain will go [...]. If you harm her the pain will double" (171). When curing people she can also sense their emotions: "Margaret placed her hands on these strangers and felt their fears [...]" (172), which is why she eventually decides not to cure people anymore. Similarly, when she moves in with Stack, he notices that she "could tell what [he] was thinking [...]" (176).

Since Margaret lives alone and does not usually go out or talk to other people, the villagers as well as her neighbour Stack are especially curious about her. When she moves into the priest's house the villagers quickly form an opinion about her: "She was a bold spear of a woman who clearly wasn't used to living on the coast: not five minutes after she'd hung the wash out on the line, her clothes were blown halfway up the bog. Margaret Flusk had neither hat nor rubber boots nor a man" (145). Their verdict is clear: The "bold spear of a woman" lacks even the most basic things deemed necessary for women living in the area: a hat, rubber boots, and above all, a husband. Her living alone gives rise to gossip, as the villagers attempt to find possible explanations for her lifestyle:

No doubt she was the subject of curiosity. Some said her people were all dead and that the priest was her uncle, that he'd taken pity on her and left her the house. Others swore she was a wealthy woman whose husband had run off with a teenager and that her heart was broken. When it got late down in the pub it was common knowledge that the priest had been in love with her, that she'd had his child and lost it, that he hadn't gone off to the mission at all that time he'd gone off to the mission. (151)

Apparently, there has to be a reason for a woman living on her own in a cottage in the Irish countryside. The villagers' speculations range from her occupying the socially acceptable role of a victim to that of a sexually transgressive sinner: Either all her relations are dead and she has nobody to live with, she was wronged and left by her husband, or she had an illegitimate child with the priest. However, the latter version is believed to be most plausible, as it is "common knowledge" as soon as "it [gets] late down in the pub".

As it turns out, Margaret and the priest did have a child, and Margaret is still severely traumatised by the consequences this has had for her life. Even though "Margaret [tries] not to think of the priest" (150), she cannot forget what happened and continually contemplates the tragic events of her past. She remembers that "[t]he priest [...] used to come to their house every summer to make the hay" (149). At that time Margaret's life was still mostly carefree and happy: "Margaret was a teenager. Skies were blue back then. As a young man, he said they would marry, that they would get the bishop's permission, rear Shorthorns and have two children [...]" (149). However, Margaret's romance with the "young man", who is "ten years older than her" (174), ended abruptly when he decided to become a priest. She remembers that, "[e]ven though he came back every summer to make the hay, he never again sat on the ditches combing knots out of her hair, talking about the children they would have" (150).

One day, as Margaret was going for a walk in the woods, she met the priest "in the clearing where the quickens¹²² grew" (153):

The only reason she made her presence known was to ask the simple question of why he never looked her in the eye or asked how she was? Could the man who'd promised her marriage not even ask her how she was? And then she caught up on him and he showed her why. They lay down without a word on the wet grass and she knew while he was planting his seed in her that she would pay for it.

¹²² In the notes appended to the story, Claire Keegan explains that "[...] quicken tree is another name for the mountain ash or the rowan tree. It is believed to be a tree of formidable magical and protective powers. It is mentioned in mythology as having the power of enchantment" (181).

Afterwards, he got up and paced between the trees and smoked a cigarette. Then he turned his back and went off without a word.

Margaret felt betrayed because the man she had expected to be her future husband suddenly did “not even ask her how she was”; but she did not know that the priest was still attracted to her and ignored her in order not to be tempted by her. When they met in the wood they could not control themselves anymore. Nevertheless, Margaret knew immediately “that she would pay for it” and already expected some sort of punishment for her premarital sexual relations with the priest. After they had had intercourse, the priest left “without a word”, thereby destroying Margaret’s hopes that he would stand by her and that they might still have a future together: “By breaking his vows of celibacy it felt possible that he might, somehow, make others”.

Margaret is still seriously affected by the past; she has become very cautious about her decisions and actions and attempts to suppress the painful memories that haunt her:

Now she sometimes imagined where she’d be, what she might be doing if she had not made her presence known. She was constantly afraid to take the smallest step in any direction. The greatest lesson the priest had taught her was the lesson of where one step can lead. She stared at the clock above the fire’s mantel and came to her senses [...]. She [...] cursed a little so she would not cry, and fell asleep in the chair. (154)

She dwells on the question “where she’d be, what she might be doing if she had not made her presence known” and laments the opportunities she has missed due to the night she spent with the priest. The events ensuing this encounter have caused her to be “constantly afraid to take the smallest step in any direction” because she now knows “where one step can lead”: She lost the love and respect of her family, she irrevocably lost her beloved, the priest, and eventually she also lost the child she loved so dearly after she had been disowned by everybody else. When she thinks again about these events she still has to cry but tries to repress the painful emotions and memories: “She [...] cursed a little so she would not cry [...]”. However, the memories return and haunt Margaret as soon as she hears or sees anything which reminds her of the priest or of something she associates with him. When Margaret banters with Stack and he says, “Oh, your tongue is quick” (160), she immediately thinks about the quicken trees and the night she spent with the priest:

When he said the word she was back again under the quicken trees. Neither she nor the priest could help themselves. She felt him on top of her, panting, rolling over onto his stomach, zipping himself up, ashamed. And the thrill of it: the thrill

after a decade of sitting on ricks of hay, eating scallions, him leaving the first primrose on the saddle of her bike. (160)

At the mention of the word ‘quick’ Margaret is suddenly “back again under the quicken trees”; she remembers the sexual act and the priest afterwards “zipping himself up, ashamed”. But she also remembers “the thrill of it”, of finally giving in to her desire after so many years, and that “[n]either she nor the priest could help themselves”. Margaret has not yet managed to overcome the tragic events following this night and devotes a considerable amount of time to cogitating about them.

3.3.3 Stack

Stack is a “forty-nine-year-old bachelor” (147) who lives with his goat Josephine in the house next to Margaret’s and cuts and sells turf for a living. Until he was thirty-eight, Stack “lived and worked the land with his father” (147) but then his father died and Stack has been feeling very lonely ever since so that he started to “[crave] the company of another human being [...]” (155). Like Margaret, he does not have any friends or relations and spends most days alone in his house or outside cutting turf: “He believed he would die alone and not be found until Josephine ate the door down and somebody recognised her on the road [...]” (156).

Stack is also rather conservative and clings to the past. He “[cannot] bear to part with anything” (148) and keeps all his parents’ belongings, even though they both died long ago. When Margaret visits him for the first time, she is surprised by all “[...] the things he kept: seashells, a calendar from 1985, bottle tops, dead batteries, pictures of dead popes” (159). He wants to keep every item from his past, even if it is just an old calendar or a bottle top. Moreover, Stack idealises the past and is suspicious of change:

Stack did not like to think he would ever become like the new generation. Young people couldn’t catch a fish or skim cream off milk. They went around in cars they couldn’t afford, with small children who’d never tasted their mother’s milk, committing adultery at the drop of a hat. In fact, hats didn’t drop fast enough for them. (148)

He generalises about people belonging to “the new generation” and is convinced of their incompetence with regard to essential issues, such as “[catching] a fish or [skimming] cream off milk”, and their moral corruption, as they “[commit] adultery at the drop of a hat”. By criticising young people’s behaviour Stack implies that ‘his generation’ has been

more capable and virtuous. Besides, when he thinks about his past he remembers the happy times he shared with his parents and is convinced that “[n]othing [will] ever compare to the past” (156).

Stack, “who has never known a woman [...]” (151), would like to have a girlfriend or wife but he keeps telling himself that living with his goat is much easier and more pleasant than living with a woman could ever be:

A woman would be a terrible disadvantage: she’d make him match his clothes and take baths. She’d make him drive her to the seaside every fine day with a picnic basket full of bananas and tuna fish sandwiches and ask him where he had gone when he had gone nowhere but into Doolin or down to Ennis for a drop of oil. (151-152)

He attempts to convince himself that living with “[a] woman would be a terrible disadvantage” because she would monitor his behaviour and expect him to “match his clothes and take baths”, which he apparently does not want to do. He also imagines being compelled to have picnics with her at the seaside “every fine day” but seems to be secretly desiring such day trips “with a picnic basket full of bananas and tuna fish sandwiches”.

Moreover, despite his apparent reluctance to live with a woman, he frequents the match-making festival at Lisdoonvarna (151; 181) and devotes a lot of time to contemplating a potential relationship with Margaret:

‘Wouldn’t it be terrible,’ he said, ‘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’ All she’d need was reason to knock on his door. If she had reason to knock, he felt sure he’d let her in. If he let her in once she’d be in again and then he’d be in to her and there the trouble would start. (151)

He imagines Margaret to fall in love with him and to intrude into his house and life, and pretends to himself this would be “terrible”, since there would be no “peace for ever more” for him and Josephine. Margaret, however, has expressed no interest in him so far, but rather it is Stack who continually thinks about her and pictures her knocking on his door, though he immediately tells himself again that “there the trouble would start”.

Stack’s only company is Josephine, who “[has] the run of the house” (148): “By day she stared into the fire and at night she took up more than half of the bed. Stack milked her every day, rubbed Palmolive on her teats and always remembered to bring her fig rolls from the town” (148). He has an unusually close relationship with the goat, “whom [he]

treats like an indulged and cherished wife” (M. O’Connor 148). Josephine lives in the house with Stack, sleeps in his bed and is fed with fig rolls. When he takes her somewhere in his car, Josephine sits in the passenger seat (151), they watch television together and when they lie in bed, Stack “[covers] Josephine with his coat” (155-156) so that she does not feel cold. Moreover, the goat is “his favourite subject” (161) to talk about and Stack is convinced that “Josephine is minded better nor any woman in Ireland” (161).

3.3.4 Representations of the Female Body

The first reference to Margaret’s body as a distinctively female body centres on potential pregnancy and motherhood: “When she moved to Dunagore she was not yet forty but it was past the time when she could bear a child. That power had left her years ago and always she blamed it on that night of the quicken trees” (145). The female body is represented first of all in relation to its reproductive qualities. Margaret regards the ability to bear children as a “power” which she has lost too early and she “[blames] it on that night of the quicken trees”. Margaret connects the loss of her fertility with the magical powers of the quicken trees as well as her transgression of having extramarital sexual relations and giving birth to a child out of wedlock. For one, she repeatedly thinks about the quicken trees when she thinks about the night she spent with the priest (153; 160; 161), she dreams about them (178) and she is convinced that the “night of the quicken trees” (145) is the reason for her losing her fertility even though she is “not yet forty” (145). However, she is also aware of the Catholic ideology of sin with regard to premarital sexual relations: During the night she spent with the priest she already “knew while he was planting his seed in her that she would pay for it” (154). She knew she would “pay” for transgressing the sexual moral code by having to face punishment for her immoral behaviour. Margaret thus acknowledges both Celtic mythology and Catholic teachings on (sexual) morality as influencing her life.

The ability to bear children is an important aspect of Margaret’s identity and the fact that she lost her fertility after the “night of the quicken trees” grieves her. When she suddenly and unexpectedly regains her fertility, she is thus exhilarated and delighted: After dreaming that she is a man, “Margaret [...] felt herself to make sure she wasn’t turning into a man. When she saw her hand she got a lovely shock, for she saw blood. She’d thought all that was over” (155). Margaret is in a state of bliss for days, and she even

accepts Stack's invitation for dinner, although she never talked to him before and usually attempts to avoid the company of others; but she is so thrilled that Stack's company does not bother her: "Margaret, in nothing only her nightdress and her coat, felt lovelier than the raven. I'm producing eggs, she thought. I'm bleeding. I'm past nothing. Let this day bring what it will" (159). The gloomy atmosphere surrounding Margaret has given way to hope and happiness; she spends the day at Stack's place and enjoys herself.

For the first time in years Margaret thinks about having another child; still, she is afraid of losing the "power" of fertility again: "She went to the toilet and made sure she was still bleeding. It was strange to be producing eggs again. Wouldn't it be lovely to lay out? she thought, like a hen" (158). However, her longing for having a child does not entail desire for a relationship: "If only I could cut out the man, Margaret thought, I might have a child. A man was a nuisance and a necessity" (158). The only thing preventing her from actually trying to have a child is the "nuisance and necessity" of needing a man in order to conceive. However, she does not abandon her plan to have a second child but continually "kept track of her eggs and the changing moon" (164). For the following months she mostly stays in her house and ruminates about her relationship with the priest and the death of her first child, and, consequently, becomes depressed again.

Eventually, Margaret consults Madame Nowlan, a fortune teller, who predicts that Margaret will have another child and that this "will make [her] life worth living" (168). After some time Margaret decides to follow Madame Nowlan's advice, has sexual intercourse with Stack and becomes pregnant. When the child is born and grows older, however, Stack notices that his son does not resemble him at all: "As for the child, he was nothing like Stack. For years he waited to see some mark of himself in his own son but none came. It mystified without surprising him. It was as though Margaret had spit the child or laid him" (178). The child seems to be entirely Margaret's, as if she "had spit the child or laid him", which is reminiscent of her previous wish to have a child but "[cutting] out the man" (158). Thus, her ability to bear children is depicted as having a powerful, magical aspect as well as defining her identity as a woman.

Margaret is also described as having a strong connection to nature. The first passage about her appearance, for example, includes references to her hair, which is "flowing in loose strands *like seaweed* down her back" [emphasis added] (145), and to the one item of

clothing she always wears when she leaves the house, namely “a big sheepskin coat that fitted her to perfection” (145). Apart from the sheepskin coat, she does not like to wear clothes and when she leaves the house she frequently does so “[...] naked but for the big sheepskin and her leather boots [...]” (169). One night, Stack “[dreams] of Margaret wearing a bearskin, riding Josephine across the bogs of Clare” (157). Margaret is mostly depicted as not wearing clothes under her sheepskin coat or not wearing anything at all, especially when she is at home, or as wearing garments and shoes made from animals’ skins, like a kind of ‘second skin’ that “[fits] her to perfection” (145).

Besides, if Margaret leaves the house, she hardly ever goes into town but prefers to go walking in deserted areas in the woods or along the cliffs. Especially when she is unable to cope with a situation, she feels the need to connect with nature and the landscape surrounding her home. She remembers, for example, that she “went out in the rain to the wood” (153) when her parents were arguing, because “[s]he always felt marginally safer when she was outside” (153). Similarly, when she found her first son lying dead in the crib, she “ran up the wood with him in her arms” and “stayed there all night but in the end came home to face it all” (165). Nature is like a refuge for her when she is distressed, and being in the wood helps her to calm down. Margaret also has a habit of urinating in the grass outside her house: “When it got dark at five o’clock, she went outside and lifted her skirt and squatted in the grass. She wanted to pass water on every blade of grass around her house, she could not say why” (147). This ritual also seems to have a calming effect on her when she feels anxious: “Margaret grew frightened of her own death and passed water all around the house after dark. This still gave her satisfaction” (172). Although she usually waits until it is dark outside, she does not mind if anybody sees her; when Stack asks her, “Tell me this: what sort of woman pisses outside?”, she laughs but does not seem to be embarrassed or to feel the need to explain her behaviour to Stack.

In her connection with nature Margaret is also linked to animal qualities. For one, as was mentioned above, her favourite garments are made from animal skins, which she often wears directly on her skin. Moreover, she mainly eats foods of animal origin, especially fish: “Margaret [...] ate two tins of red salmon, skin, bones and all and washed it down with a pint of buttermilk” (173). The emphasis on her eating the fish, including “skin, bones and all”, also suggests that there is a certain animal quality to Margaret. Stack’s initial impression of Margaret, too, reads like the description of a being which is partly

human and partly animal: “Margaret Flusk is wild, he thought. Hadn’t he seen her bare breast under the fur? Sure didn’t she piss outside?” (157).

In two passages of the text Margaret is more explicitly compared to an animal. When Margaret finds out that she has regained her fertility and thinks about having another child, she imagines herself “to lay out [...] like a hen” (158). Whereas in this passage Margaret compares herself to an animal, in the second example Stack does. When Margaret is pregnant with Michael, she has a craving for chocolate, which reminds Stack of Josephine: “Margaret churned butter, baked bread, made cheese out of Josephine’s milk and spent the rest of her days eating chocolate. He couldn’t keep her in chocolate. It was like throwing biscuits to Josephine” (176). He explicitly compares Margaret to the goat by contending that providing Margaret with chocolate is “like throwing biscuits to Josephine”.

As Maureen O’Connor points out, linking women to nature and comparing them to animals has been a common strategy in order to legitimate women’s inferior role for centuries.¹²³ She argues that “[...] women’s inferiority has traditionally been alleged and justified by appropriating them to nature, an appropriation that colonialism has also practiced on its racial and cultural others, including the Irish” (M. O’Connor 1). By equating others with nature, dominant social groups constitute themselves as having risen above the savageness of nature and as being cultivated, civilised and thus superior. However, this concept has also been employed by female writers in order to subvert the dominant ideology of female inferiority: Maureen O’Connor asserts that

[...] the works of contemporary Irish writers, including Edna O’Brien, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Haverty, Claire Keegan, and Marina Carr are [...] engaged in interrogating gendered concepts of the nation through natural imagery and an alignment of women and animals, categories that yet denote denigration well into the twenty-first century. (27)

Similarly, in “Night of the Quicken Trees” Margaret’s connection to natural and animal aspects indicates strength rather than weakness. Although she is traumatised as a result of past events, she is depicted as a strong character who determines her own life without feeling the need to please others. She does not attempt to be popular with the villagers and decides to leave the village as soon as she does not feel comfortable there anymore:

¹²³ Cf. M. O’Connor 1-9.

[... S]he decided she would stay in that house for as long as she could without harming anybody or letting anybody harm her. If either one of these things happened, she would move on. She would keep her course, get in a boat and cross over to the Aran Islands, go as far west as she could without leaving Ireland. (147)

She does not require the approval of others but nevertheless refuses to accept abuse and mistreatment and is determined to “keep her course” and not to permit anybody to prevent her from going her own way.

In the relationship with Stack it is also Margaret who is in control. In the early stages of the relationship Margaret decides when she wants to spend time with Stack and when she prefers to be on her own. One day they walk home from the cliffs together: “Stack, not wanting the walk to end, slowed down on the hill but Margaret did not alter her pace to suit him. [...] When she reached Dunagore she didn’t even bid him goodnight but walked into her own house and shut the door” (170). Margaret does not try to be polite or to accommodate to Stack’s wishes, but rather she decides according to her own wishes; as soon as she is tired of Stack’s company, she leaves. After talking to the fortune teller, Margaret is determined to have another child and informs Stack, whom she barely knows, of her decision: “My eggs are right. [...] Come to bed for an hour” (173). She does not conceal her intention to become pregnant and is not at all embarrassed to propose sexual intercourse to Stack. Moreover, she decides to have another child out of wedlock, despite the hostile reactions to her first pregnancy.

The conditions of the ensuing relationship between the two are also established by Margaret: “She threw out the television, wouldn’t let him have holly in the house at Christmas, and watched him when he ate. And at night she kept herself well clear of him [...]” (176). Moreover, when Margaret moves into Stack’s house, she demands that Josephine be kept “in the shed” (175) and burns anything she deems useless (176). The relationship ends as Margaret leaves Dunagore:

[Stack] stood at the water’s edge and stared west. The day was calm. Soon a fishing boat full of Island [sic] men came into Doolin and a boat was lowered into the sea. The strangers rowed slowly to shore, their oars cutting neatly into the salt water. When they reached the land they tipped their caps but did not speak. One man looked familiar. When Stack turned, Margaret was looking him straight in the face then wading out, climbing without a word into the boat. The boy cried but Stack knew he would not cry for long. He held his son in his arms then let him go. (179)

Margaret eventually implements her plan to “keep her course, get in a boat and cross over to the Aran Islands, go as far west as she could without leaving Ireland” (147). She leaves “without a word” and even though she takes Michael with her, Stack does not attempt to stop them because he knows he cannot prevent Margaret from leaving. There is also a sexual dimension to the scene, since Margaret is the only woman in “a fishing boat full of Island men”; she leaves the man she has lived with for seven years and is accompanied to her new home, an island off the west coast of Ireland, by several strangers.

Margaret’s strength, however, does not only derive from her connection with nature. In several passages of the story, her body is described as being rather masculine, which in turn is presented as being the source of great physical strength. For one, Margaret is considerably taller than Stack and her feet are described as being “bigger than shoe-boxes [...]” (172). One of the villagers jokes about their difference in height: “Sure wouldn’t he need a stepladder just to reach her knickers?” (163). Furthermore, Stack has a dream about Margaret in which he notices that “[h]er legs and arms were muscular” (157). When Margaret tears down the wall which divides the two houses, Stack watches her: “He could feel the grief of Margaret Flusk. Her grief was beyond comparison. And her strength; Margaret had the strength of two men. Weren’t her legs and arms the same as in his dream?” (175). Margaret’s physical strength seems to Stack to be almost supernatural, as he thinks that she has “the strength of *two men*” [emphasis added]. Interestingly, Margaret thinks of herself as being rather masculine as well:

She wondered if the priest had gone to Hell. The priest believed in the afterlife, in God and Heaven and Purgatory, in all of that. He said there wasn’t any point believing in Heaven if you didn’t believe in Hell. Margaret wondered if she would join him there but it seemed more likely that she’d be turned into a pucán or a dock leaf. (153)

Claire Keegan explains in her notes to the story that “[a] pucán is a sexually active male goat” (181). In the above passage Margaret is compared to an animal which is not only male but also “sexually active”. Margaret is thus attributed aspects of male sexuality, which is in accord with her adopting the active role in the relationship with Stack and openly demanding sexual intercourse in order to achieve her objective of becoming pregnant, as such (sexually) assertive behaviour has traditionally been ascribed to male characters.

The representation of the female body in “Night of the Quicken Trees” is highly complex. First of all, Margaret’s body is described in terms of fertility and motherhood. These issues seem to be constitutive of her identity as a woman and to have considerable influence on her life. Whereas the loss of her first child and of her fertility grieve her deeply, the regaining of her fertility and the conception and birth of her second child help her to overcome her trauma. Prior to the conception of Michael, Margaret continually ruminates about her unhappy past, even though she “[tries] not to think of the priest” (150): “Sometimes she saw his shadow at the bedside, felt his cold presence shadowing hers and saw again his open collar, the hayseed trapped in his cuffs, but that was only a ghost” (150). At this point, the priest’s “cold presence”, albeit only as a product of Margaret’s imagination, is still “shadowing hers”. After having conceived again, however, she only thinks about the priest one last time, “[wondering] what the priest would think” about her “having conceived another illegitimate child” (174) but then convincing herself that “[...] it was him, not her, who had broken his vows to the Lord” (174). Afterwards, she burns the priest’s bed: “It was slow to burn at first, then blazed and turned into a bed of ash” (174). The bed is “slow to burn at first”, representing Margaret’s difficulty to overcome her grief and trauma, but “then [blazes]” until it is reduced to ash, indicating the cathartic process Margaret is experiencing at that moment.

In contrast to the feminine issues of conception, pregnancy and motherhood, which are explored in terms of transgression and punishment as well as fulfilment, Margaret is also linked to masculine qualities such as great physical strength and assertive sexuality. This, along with her unpredictable and peculiar behaviour, is presented as causing Stack to be “more than half afraid of her” (170). Although Margaret is described as being deeply traumatised by past events, she is also a strong character who pursues her objectives regardless of other people’s opinion of her. Whereas her physical strength is described in terms of masculinity, her emotional strength as well as her aura of wisdom, magic and superstition are presented as relating to her connection with nature and aspects of the animal. Challenging social norms of female sexuality, Margaret decides to have a second illegitimate child but this time she refuses to adapt to the Catholic ideology of shame and sin, which led to her being excluded from her family, but rather, she adopts an active role in determining her own life, leaves the village and boards the boat of the island men in order to start a new life with her son.

3.4 “Nomads Seek the Pavilions of Bliss on the Slopes of Middle Age” by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne (2000)

3.4.1 Plot

Mary, a middle-aged single mother, has an affair with a married man named Michael, whom she dated for some time when they were teenagers. When Mary spends a weekend in Connemara with her friends, Monica and Elena, and they begin to talk about past love affairs, Monica mentions that she met Michael and his wife Penelope some time ago. During this conversation Mary has the impression that Monica knows about the affair and thus feels very uncomfortable. The atmosphere for the rest of the trip is rather tense and the weekend in general is not as entertaining as the three women expected it to be. When they return from their trip, Mary meets Michael and tells him that Monica knows about the affair; however, as Monica has not made any explicit allegations, Michael is not too concerned. As Mary discovers in the course of the conversation that Penelope has cancer, she cannot believe Michael did not tell her and when he asks when they will see each other again, Mary does not answer his question; they kiss and then Mary gets into her car and drives off.

3.4.2 Mary, Monica and Elena

Mary, Monica and Elena were friends at school when they were teenagers and got in touch again some years ago. The three women have children themselves now and are very much aware of the changes occurring in their lives as they grow older:

[A]lthough they'd been best friends at school, a close and dangerous trio, their contact terminated soon after they left. But over the past year or two Monica and Mary have renewed their old acquaintance – one gathers old friends as middle age looms, since the received wisdom suggests that new ones will be harder to find from now on. [...] Latterly, Elena has joined them, escaping from her home to enjoy an hour of humorous, stress-free confidences over spinach quiche or salmon salad. (76)

The friends started to meet again because “one gathers old friends as middle age looms” and “new ones will be harder to find from now on”, suggesting that their relationship is not very close, but rather it is a convenient acquaintance that all three women benefit from to some extent. In order to spend some time “of humorous, stress-free confidences” together and to forget about their daily routines and problems, they arrange to have lunch

together once a week. Though Mary, who is the first person narrator-protagonist, asserts that, “[b]y now they are calling themselves ‘best friends’ again” (76), the topics discussed at their weekly meetings are usually not very personal, and “[t]hey have never visited one another’s houses [...]” (77-78). As Mary puts it, “[...] the relationship is lunch and girls only, the kind of thing that is supposed to be tremendously supportive and undemanding” (78). Their relationship is a ‘friendship of convenience’ rather than a close and intimate one and the women expect it to be “tremendously supportive” but at the same time “undemanding”.

Mary is a schoolteacher and single mother of a teenage daughter called Sonia, and “[t]hey live in a poky house which used to be corporation but which she owns herself” (78). Mary comes from a working class background and although she is far from wealthy, she has managed to obtain a steady job and thus to provide for her daughter. She now owns a small house, which “used to be corporation” and is described by Mary as being “poky”. Sonia’s father does not seem to play a major part in her life, as he only “sends money and takes Sonia on holidays [...] every July” (78). As far as relationships are concerned, Mary “has never married” (78) but “has had several relationships” (78), and currently has an affair with a married man, Michael, whom she repeatedly thinks about in terms of a ‘soulmate’; he is referred to, for example, as “the other side of her, half of her apple” (79).

Mary has not told her friends about the affair and contends that “[t]here is plenty the women never tell one another. Their weekly meetings are never long enough to allow the disclosure of intimate secrets. That is the beauty of lunch” (78). In fact, her reluctance to tell her friends about Michael is not due to time constraints, but rather she fears they might condemn her behaviour: “[...] Monica and Elena obey a rigid, but sensible and compassionate system of rules. Fidelity matters. Do unto others. How would you feel if...? Women should stand by one another at least as soon as they are married” (85). Mary is convinced that Monica and Elena strongly disapprove of extramarital relationships and imagines their moral objections to such liaisons: “Do unto others. How would you feel if...?”. Moreover, she is of the opinion that this moral code of sexual restrictions primarily applies to women, as “[w]omen should stand by one another” and thus prevent extramarital sexual relations; she thereby implies that her two friends allocate women the responsibility of preserving sexual morality and preventing transgressions.

Unlike Mary, Monica and Elena are both married. Monica works as a “radio producer” (76) and is “married to a professor” (76), with whom she has two children. Mary recalls that Monica has always been successful and popular: She was “head girl in school” (77), played “the lead role in the ballet-cum-musical they put on for a whole week in sixth year” (77) and was “the undisputed queen of the class in every field, the most popular girl in the school” (80). According to Mary, Monica still enjoys taking the lead: The weekend trip “was her idea” (77) and she “selected, booked, and then drove them to the hotel” (78). Mary admits that she envied Monica because of her popularity when they were younger (80) and she still describes Monica’s life mostly in positive terms, except for the fact that Monica suspects that her teenage son “may be doing drugs” (76). Apart from this, however, Mary seems to think of Monica as leading an ideal life:

[...S]he’d met [her husband] in her third year at college after dating three others – sixth school year, first college year, second year. [...T]hey married when they were twenty-three and he had already secured a permanent lectureship in Dublin’s prettiest and classiest university, and Monica was on the first rung of the ladder in the national radio station, a research assistant in the media, one of the most sought-after jobs among college arts graduates at that time. (77)

Monica met her husband when they were both still studying at university, “after dating three others”. At that time, they both had promising careers ahead of them already. Mary sums up this account of Monica’s life by explaining that “Monica is the sort of woman who is brave enough to ask for more bread with the soup” (77).

Whereas Monica manages to be successful in her job as well as being a mother, Elena does not work anymore, so that she can take care of her children, while her husband earns money to provide for the family: “She became a civil servant and married a doctor, but now stays at home to look after their six children” (77). She joins the weekly meetings to “[escape] from her home” (76) every once in a while. At school she was “captain of the hockey team” (77) and thus used to be “a bit muscular and thin” (77), and according to Mary, “[s]he is still thin, and silent, but has developed into a smooth, svelte woman, with looks exceptionally natural and youthful for an Irishwoman in her forties” (77). Due to her husband’s high income, Elena’s family can afford to “live in a huge bungalow in Greystones on an acre of garden which Elena tends herself, with exceptional skill” (77). Being a full-time housewife and mother and devoting her life to caring for the children as well as the family home and garden, Elena represents traditional women’s roles; Monica, on the other hand, is described as being successful at reconciling job and family and thus representing a more modern type of woman. However, as will be illustrated in the

following subsection, Monica nevertheless approves of traditional values with regard to gender roles and sexual morality.

3.4.3 Representations of the Female Body

Mary is conscious of her growing older and the changes her body is undergoing: “That beauty would hinder as much as help most women she noticed only much later, long after she realised, aged forty, that almost every girl is beautiful anyway” (81). Even though she did not realise this before, she recognises the beauty of youth when she is forty and not a girl anymore. Mary herself feels beautiful, but this is mostly due to the fact that she feels loved and desired by Michael. On her way to the secret rendezvous with him she is happy and confident and “observes with pleasure her reflection in a rain-starred puddle [...]” (75). She walks to the restaurant, “[...] feeling herself brave and lovely. This is what love does for her. Fills her with self-love, self-admiration. Transports her on heavenly wings from reality to the ideal” (76). Mary is aware that her state of bliss and self-confidence depends on Michael’s love for her. When she drives to Connemara with her friends and realises that it will be difficult to maintain a healthy diet there, she immediately worries about gaining weight:

The plan was to eat a lot. This intention was declared at the hotel where they stopped for their first coffee, with scones, jam and cream. Mary felt a pang of anxiety: she wants to preserve her figure, slimmed down by two stone since she became involved with Michael, love and bliss now her food, not the cream buns and thick broccoli and cheddar soups, the potatoes *au gratin*, the lobster thermidor, which older women are supposed to crave. (78)

Mary has lost “two stone since she became involved with Michael” and “[feels] a pang of anxiety” when her companions reveal their “plan [...] to eat a lot”. She is rather apprehensive at the prospect of not being able to “preserve her figure” and looking like the other “older women” she compares herself to: “Mary lapsed into silence, gloomily acknowledging to herself that weight gain would be unavoidable, and wondering how she could limit the damage” (78). Thus, Mary is not as confident about her body as she seems to be; it is mainly the feeling of being loved and desired by Michael which contributes greatly to her attitude towards her own body.

Her affair with Michael seems to be her main concern, as she spends a lot of time thinking about him. She idealises the relationship, mostly ignoring the fact that he is married and

that their relationship thus is a secret affair nobody is supposed to find out about. When she lies awake in bed one night, her thoughts about Michael actually convey a spiritual and almost religious aspect: “The image of him [...] consoled her for anything, everything that is fleeting, flawed and ephemeral; consoled her for the sins and imperfections of her life, gave her a vision of eternity [...]” (79). She imagines Michael “sleeping in Dublin, a hundred miles away, alone also” (79), though considering that he is married, it is unlikely that he is “alone also”. However, Mary frequently imagines Michael as being her ‘soulmate’, most of the time successfully suppressing any thoughts about his wife Penelope: “Perhaps Michael was awake too, thinking of her, *their minds at one* if their bodies were not?” [emphasis added] (79). Moreover, Mary is convinced that “[h]is body [...] empowers hers utterly, it is her perfect match” (83).

Most of the time Mary pictures their relationship as being perfect and for her, the hours she spends with Michael

[...] are eternity, all the meaning and reality of her existence packed into them. That he is not with her all the time seems after these hours irrelevant: he is with her all the time anyway, in her head, in her body, in her blood. He is hers and she is his. Marriage vows till death do us part are not stronger than what binds them. Love, body and soul and heart, essential, lasting through decades and decades of apartness. (83)

Mary seems to orient her whole life towards Michael, as “all the meaning and reality of her existence [are] packed into” the time she spends with him. She continually attempts to convince herself that she does not mind having a part-time, secret relationship with Michael, whereas Penelope has the advantage of spending most of his spare time with him. She contends that, regardless of the official arrangements, “[h]e is hers and she is his” and that “what binds them” is stronger than “[m]arriage vows till death do us part”. However, she also concedes that sometimes, “[...] the separateness rankles deeply” (83) because “[l]ife is not only lived in a bedroom for two hours a week but in streets and living rooms and school halls and offices. In the structures of society, so-called permanent, the places that house all respectability, normality” (83). She longs for “respectability” and “normality”, which are impossible for her to achieve in this relationship, which according to social norms is deemed immoral.

Mary is convinced that her friends would strongly disapprove of her relationship with a married man; she also begins to suspect that Monica knows about her affair when she passes some remarks during their weekend trip. Even though Monica frequently makes

jokes suggesting that she is sexually permissive, her actual attitude towards extramarital affairs is evident in several of her comments. During their stay in Connemara, Monica jokes about having had sexual relations with a stranger in her room:

Monica, who did her best to keep them cheerful, made jokes about having flings with men. ‘I met a hunk up there!’ she said, when she came down to dinner later than the others. ‘Didn’t you hear the bed creak?’ Elena cracked a funny rejoinder and Mary smiled, unable to think of anything witty to say. The distance between these jokes, which are frequent, and what she believes is Monica’s and Elena’s true attitude to sexual deviance is so unquantifiable. How far from the jokes to the dogma? (85)

Despite jokes like this, “which are frequent”, Mary knows that her friends in fact do not approve of extramarital relationships. What is more, she is convinced that these innuendos serve the purpose of jokingly acting out immoral thoughts in order to prevent the imagined scenarios from happening in real life: “She knows that these women, almost all the married women, joke and dream about deviance in order to keep it at bay, as little children tell jokes about dirty sex and lavatories” (85). Similarly, Elena makes a joke about Monica having had numerous boyfriends, even though Monica actually met her husband “after dating three others” (77); when Monica mentions that she used to date Michael, “before he met Penelope, obviously” (82), Elena jokingly remarks, “Sure you went out with them all, Monica!” (82) and laughs, “giving her a friendly pat” (82). These statements are deemed acceptable by the women, as long as it is made clear that they are not intended to be taken seriously. However, Mary knows that her actual affairs would be frowned upon and thus endeavours to conceal them.

Monica’s attitude is made evident in several passages of the text. For example, she tells Elena and Mary that a man who had been in love with her when they were teenagers contacted her again and arranged to meet with her; when her friends ask her some questions about this meeting, Monica reproachfully replies, “Come on. What do you think I’m doing. Having an *affair*?” [emphasis in original] (80). Besides, Monica indignantly tells a story about a married woman who was unfaithful to her husband:

A woman in their neighbourhood was a well-known tart. She had affairs with several men, anything in trousers was par for the course. Her husband was older than her, a nice man, everyone admired him, but she was a harridan. Everyone knew about the affairs, everyone. Including him. But for some reason he put up with them, he pretended everything was OK. (86)

In Monica’s account of the events the woman is labelled “a well-known tart”, indicating a highly judgmental attitude towards sexually transgressive women; she thereby also

condemns the woman's affairs as immoral and distances herself from such behaviour. The immorality and indecency of this woman's actions are emphasised by asserting that "anything in trousers was par for the course". Furthermore, Monica stresses that the husband was "a nice man" and that "everyone admired him", whereas "she was a harridan", thereby precluding any comments suggesting 'mitigating circumstances' for her having extramarital affairs.

Since Mary is aware of most people's negative attitude to female sexual transgression, she has never talked about her love life with anybody. She already feels uncomfortable when Monica starts to talk about her own past affairs: "What she chose to talk about was the most dangerous subject for Mary: men" (80). Mary remembers that nobody ever expected her to have a boyfriend when she was a teenager because she was not considered to be as beautiful as other girls her age: "The belief among the girls was that men sought only perfection, of personality and physique; that the world was full of elitist predatory men hunting for the flawless [...]" (81). According to Mary's account of her schooldays, the girls' aim was to adapt to men's preferences as to their appearance; they expected to be 'hunted' by "elitist predatory men" and adapted to the role of being passive 'prey' for men, who were imagined to 'choose' their girlfriends according to aesthetic criteria. However, Mary quickly learned "[t]hat the world was full of men who would overlook almost any flaw in their search for kindness, friendship, warmth [...]" (81) and adopted a more active role by 'choosing' herself instead of waiting for being 'chosen', focusing on men who were "shy and frightened, striving, scared, much more anxious than she or any woman could be [...]" (81). As a result of mostly being successful in her attempts to seduce men, "Mary discovered quickly the measure of her sexual power, as girls do, and was surprised at its extent. Her body, squat and square to Monica's fine, willowy tallness, was transmogrified into something energetically female by the time she was seventeen" (81). Mary begins to regard her sexuality as a "power" and her body as "something energetically female", as she discovers that men are attracted to her, despite their alleged obsession with "perfection, of personality and physique" (81).

Despite her newly gained confidence with regard to her body, she does not tell anybody about her affairs: "She is not one to recount her sexual conquests, even those of the past, especially in this company, which never expected her to have any. Old taboos die hard. At school, girls like Monica were supposed to have the boyfriends, girls like Mary to

become nuns” (81). Interestingly, the implicit censoring of Mary’s love life and her body is practised exclusively by other female characters. The above quotation indicates this by emphasising that Mary does not talk about her love life, “especially in this company”, referring to Monica and Elena. A similar sense is conveyed by the following statement: “That men were drawn surprised her at first, but not for long – quickly she learned to expect love, and usually she got it. But in the company of these women she assumed her old schoolgirl role, became shy and plain and subdued.” (81-82). Even though Mary does not feel the need to adopt a passive or inferior role when she gets involved with men and in fact gains confidence from such encounters, she is “shy and plain and subdued” when she spends time with her female friends.

According to Mary, social norms demand that “[w]omen should stand by one another at least as soon as they are married. This is one aspired-for sisterhood much more ancient than feminism, which Mary, like all these women, is supposed to espouse” (85). However, Mary poses a potential threat to what she calls “[t]he freemasonry of matrons” (85), *id est* the imagined “sisterhood” (85) of married women, because she does not respect the sanctity of marriage and has no moral objections to having affairs with married men. Still, Mary is of the opinion that she is put at a disadvantage because people tend to blame her for the affair with Michael: She points out that some people who seem to know about the affair throw “stony glances, occasionally the cut direct. Mary feels she tastes that knife edge more often than Michael, although he is the married one” (87).

Even though Mary is aware of these attempts to curtail sexually permissive behaviour of unmarried women, she enjoys her active sexual life with Michael:

With him she feels bliss from the root to the top of her head, back and front, not the small pointed local orgasms many of her lovers have succeeded in producing. Pleasurable but limited. With Michael, her true love, emotion and mature physique combine to create more earthy and more transforming unions; she has not managed this with others [...]. (83)

Interestingly, in this passage her “mature physique” is described as a positive aspect, whereas in other passages it is mostly depicted as a cause for concern, as was discussed above. In another passage relating to their sexual relationship, age and experience are again identified as an important issue: “Michael meets Mary at her home when he can, which is not often. His lovemaking then is as relaxed as if they did it every night: unhurried, skilled, practised – as is Mary’s. They bring experience to their connecting,

wide experience as well as distilled passion” (83). The emphasis put on their “experience [...], wide experience” also hints at their having reached a certain age and thus having become “skilled” and “practised” with regard to sexual relations. Michael also asserts that Mary “is gifted in her body, in her ability to enjoy sex [...].” (83).

However, despite the fact that Mary’s body provides the potential for pleasure and sexual fulfilment on a personal level, it is an occasion of negative emotions such as “shame, sorrow” or “fear” (83) in the public sphere. Mary contemplates the sexual morality advocated by society in general and married women in particular:

[...W]hen Mary catches a glimpse of that morality, glittering and gleaming at the bottom of a dark sexual pool, she knows she has been outside that club all her life, that according to its dimly grasped standards she is doomed and drowning. Drowning, she can see the bright clean pure empty banks but she can’t pull herself back, back from her life which is, according to the accepted standards, the stuff of sleazy jokes. (85)

She knows that she is excluded from the “club” of respectable, married women not only because she is not married but also because she does not conform to their implicit conventions of appropriate female behaviour. These social norms and rules are violated by Mary on several levels: She is an unmarried mother with an active sexual life, she has had several relationships and currently has an affair with a married man and she does not accommodate to the role of being shy and celibate assigned to her in the hierarchy of the schoolgirls and married women; though only secretly, she finds pleasure in her affairs without ever marrying or settling on one particular man.

3.5 “A Good Turn” by George O’Brien (2005)

3.5.1 Plot

Mr. Flynn, a retired teacher, whom people usually call ‘the Professor’, lives in a small Irish town with his niece, Sally Wallace. The Professor, who used to teach in a Catholic school for boys, has developed a rather despotic way of treating others and constantly feels the need to ‘save’ people by persuading them to adhere to Catholic morality. One day he decides to accommodate young male immigrants, instruct them for some time and then send them to a seminary; however, he does not tell anybody about his plan. Soon the first of the Professor’s disciples arrives: Milo escaped from the Yugoslav wars and spent

several years as a fugitive in Germany, where he worked as a janitor; after having been involuntarily involved in a fight, he left Germany for fear of being caught by the police and came to Ireland. Several weeks after Milo's arrival, Sally and Milo fall in love with each other and start to have a secret affair. When the Professor eventually finds out about the relationship, he is furious at Sally and Milo for betraying his trust; during the ensuing dispute he collapses and has to be taken to hospital. When Sally discovers that her uncle is not likely to recover, she is shocked at first, but then she feels liberated and relieved. Milo, however, again afraid of getting into trouble with the police, decides to leave Ireland.

3.5.2 The Professor

Mr. Flynn is called 'the Professor' in the town due to "the fits of self-importance that periodically overcame him [...]" (159). The years of teaching have in fact left their mark on his character: "This [...] is where I spent my life. Mourne Abbey. The upper storey is the dormitory. My room was in the far corner, there, the last window. I was in the nature of what the English call a housemaster [...]" (183). He recalls that he "spent [his] life" at Mourne Abbey, suggesting that teaching was his main occupation throughout his adult life; he also mentions that, apart from being a teacher there, he was also "housemaster" and thus had greater power over the pupils. Sally is of the opinion "that the lifetime he had spent amidst the priests and pupils of Mourne Abbey would be bound to leave a legacy of swelled-headedness and lording it" (159). In fact, the Professor enjoys giving orders; for example, he continually tells Sally what to do, even though "he became her boarder" (161) when Mourne Abbey closed down three years previously. Not only does he decide to establish a classroom in her house in order to teach young immigrants, he also expects Sally to clean up on her own before the arrival of his first disciple and constantly orders her about: "Make sure you tidy the study, that's going to be the classroom and we'll be starting first thing in the morning. But don't touch anything!" (161).

The Professor also prides himself on being respectable and virtuous. In his opinion, "punctuality [is] the politeness of princes" (156) and "righteousness and doing good" (160) are of paramount importance. However, he is irascible and frequently disrespectful to people he deems to be inferior. According to Sally, "it [is] the Professor's second nature

to lash out [...]” (160); she has already grown accustomed to his temper tantrums and thus attempts to ignore them as far as possible: “He picked up the phone and punched the buttons viciously. He banged the phone down. ‘You won’t be wanting sandwiches, so?’ said Sally. The Professor marched out of the kitchen. The front door slammed” (161). Despite his bad temper, Sally offers to prepare sandwiches for the Professor but he leaves without responding, thanking her or saying goodbye. Most people living in the town try not to upset the Professor but at the same time do not take his temper tantrums seriously; generally, Sally attempts not to do so either but sometimes feels unable to bear his petulance: “The town [...] could afford to laugh him off as all mouth and trousers, like a clown. But when the Professor was puffed up like he was now it put Sally on the defensive” (159).

In accord with his former occupation at the Catholic school, the Professor attaches great importance to religion. He quotes the Bible whenever he finds himself in a situation which reminds him of a certain verse. When Mr. Devanny, “an insurance man” (155) and friend of the Professor, for example, contemplates the Professor’s plan to educate young immigrants, he thinks, “Do unto others and so on and so forth” (169) and is convinced that “the Professor would have chapter and verse for it” (169). Similarly, when the Professor explains to Mr. Devanny why he engages in fighting various local organisations, “[...] he [cites] the gospel on faith without good works [...]” (162). Moreover, in his attempt to ‘save’ others from immorality and impiety, he decides that Milo and Sally should say a “nightly family rosary” (177) with him.

As is revealed towards the end of the story, the Professor devised the plan to prepare young immigrants “for the priesthood [...]” (184) and after some time of religious instruction to “turn [them] over to a seminary [...]” (184) for several reasons:

[...] the salvation of the country, the solution of the Church’s vocation crisis (the least he could do in recompense for his Mourne Abbey career), the alleviation, God willing, of the State’s refugee problem, and above all, the Christian duty to be of use, to help, faith without good works being not enough to save us [...]. (187)

The Professor regards it as his “mission” (174) to save the country as well as the young men he intends to teach and at the same time he hopes to solve Ireland’s “vocation crisis” and “refugee problem”. Moreover, he wants to fulfil his “Christian duty to be of use” in order to save himself from perdition. The desire to save himself indicates that his

behaviour is not as altruistic as he generally portrays it to be; this is also evident in the following passage: “[...A]lthough he tried not to walk with breast expanded, he had the very pleasant feeling that it was, which gave him a sensation not dissimilar to being at prayer, uplifted and significant” (171). On the one hand, he is convinced that his plan is solely informed by “the generosity of his vision” (176) but on the other hand, he admits that attempting to implement this plan gives him the “very pleasant feeling” of being “significant”.

3.5.3 Sally

Sally is thirty years old and spends most of her time taking care of her uncle, which usually turns out to be rather exhausting for her. However, despite his peculiar behaviour and his frequent temper tantrums, Sally attempts to remain calm and not to say anything which might upset the Professor. The following passage is indicative of the attitude of indifference she has developed towards her uncle and her life: “[...] Sally kept mum and stayed where she was, screened off behind the haze of cigarette smoke and newsprint indispensable to yoking herself into another day as her uncle’s nursemaid and cook-general” (159). Even though she has to “[yoke] herself into another day” of caring for her uncle by being his “nursemaid and cook-general”, she does not complain or express her feelings, but rather she silently accepts her fate.

Sally generally “[lives] with being seen but not heard” (160), keeps her thoughts and feelings to herself and usually attempts to placate the Professor whenever he is annoyed by doing what he tells her to do. When he orders her to clean the house she obeys, for example, so as not to upset him: “[...]If the place looked well it would keep her uncle at bay [...]” (165). However, she disapproves of his behaviour and his many plans to save people from themselves. When he is absent, she jokingly refers to him as “His Nibs” (179) and she contends that he is “full of himself” (159) and “too much of a handful for her” (159); and when she finds out about his plan to accommodate and teach Milo, she thinks about it as his “mad idea of hosting an asylum-seeker” (159).

The only time when Sally feels reasonably relaxed and unburdened is when her uncle is not at home: “[...] few sounds were sweeter to Sally than that Sunday slam of the front door. It was the official signal that she could now call her soul her own for a few hours”

(164). These seem to be the only occasions for her to decide what she would like to do instead of incessantly being ordered around. The feeling of relief she has whenever the Professor leaves the house is so strong that she asserts it is only then that she “[can] call her soul her own for a few hours”. As soon as her uncle is gone, she can engage in activities the Professor disapproves of when he is present:

She could luxuriate in a vaguely sluttish surfeit of Silk Cut and Maxwell House, loll in the living room with her dressing gown as loose about her as she pleased, lap up the letters in the agony column, their heartfelt quality an acrid sort of pleasure which oddly put her in mind of bonfires. She could paint her toenails. She could have a bath. (164)

The Professor’s strict regime forces Sally to “loll in the living room”, “paint her toenails” or “have a bath” clandestinely in her own house. Sally adheres to his rules when he is present but rebels against the imposed restrictions, at least to some extent, by flouting the rules whenever she has the chance to do so.

One of the reasons why Sally does not openly question her uncle’s authority is that the Professor is convinced that he saved Sally from a precarious financial situation after she had been deceived by a conman called Wallace. He had married her, tricked her into lending him money and then disappeared. But Sally was not the only one who was deceived by him; Wallace had pretended to be a successful business man intending to invest in local construction projects:

[...]It was somewhere hereabouts, nice and handy for the new road, that that swindler Wallace wanted to build his executive bungalows, the great scheme that had taken everybody in, Sun Life, the Bank of Ireland, Sally...and probably the Professor, too, come to think of it, since for all his brains he wanted a piece of a good thing, the same as everyone else, had no head for business. (162)

However, despite the fact that Wallace conned others too, including the bank and the Professor, the issue is used by the Professor in order to humiliate Sally. When the Professor first mentions his plan of accommodating refugees, a remark made by Sally causes him to have one of his temper tantrums, even though Mr. Devanny is present as well:

She had made some faint demurrals – language difference, something like that. She scarcely remembered, because the memory of how the Professor turned on her was so much sharper. He’d brought up Wallace and everything, carrying on at such a rate about speaking and being spoken to that even deadpan Devanny soon lapsed into what looked like – dammit! – pity. (160)

One remark made by Sally is reason enough for the Professor to mention Wallace again, thus reminding her of the sorrow and shame she experienced years ago; the subject is not

connected in any way to the Professor's plan but he still chooses to bring up the issue in order to clarify once again that Sally has made a mistake so grave that she is not to be trusted or taken seriously anymore. What is more, she has to be reminded of her inferior role in society and in her own home and taught "about speaking and being spoken to".

The Professor's words offend her deeply because for Sally, Wallace is "a subject too shaming to be mentioned in public, or mentioned at all" (160). The Professor does not care about her feelings and deliberately mentions Wallace in order to silence her; his strategy actually works, as Sally is too embarrassed to counter his vituperation:

Had she not, without either planning or preventing it, allowed her uncle to take over her life, to occupy her waking hours, her house, her finances; had she not allowed him to believe that he had saved her and that only for him she'd be [...] out on the street, a charity case; had she not endured his tantrums and tall orders, fixed his hot-water bottles, fed him his pills, all in the unspoken hope of desertion and the bastard Wallace being stricken from the record? (160)

Sally does everything the Professor demands of her, hoping that he will forget about her marriage with Wallace. However, the Professor does not take her seriously and he does not respect her. He has developed a strategy of incessantly commanding Sally what to do and humiliating her in order for her to adopt the inferior role he allocates her. Although Sally is aware of the ways in which he exercises power over her, she does not know how to change her situation, as she has the feeling that she "allowed her uncle to take over her life" and "occupy her waking hours, her house, her finances" so that he has rendered her completely powerless.

3.5.4 Representations of the Female Body

Whenever the Professor is present, Sally's mind may still be her own but her body is not: She does silently criticise and ridicule his behaviour but still, she has to obey his commands so as to avoid punishment. While she contemplates the fact that "he couldn't help taking himself seriously [...]" (159) or that "it was only a matter of time before he, somehow or other, made himself a laughing stock again" (172), she does not dare to rebel against him; it is her uncle who decides when she has to keep silent and when she is allowed to speak, when she is supposed to work, clean or cook for him and how she is to spend her days in general. And whenever she does not obey the Professor, he disciplines her by insulting and humiliating her.

When Sally is alone, however, she regains control over her own body by engaging in all those activities which are frowned upon by the Professor: She tries to relax by drinking coffee, smoking or reading “the letters in the agony column” (164). Her idea of a relaxing afternoon also includes “[painting] her toenails” (164) and “[having] a bath” (164). Moreover, she enjoys “[lolling] in the living room with her dressing gown as loose about her as she [pleases]” (164), thereby expressing a desire for freedom with regard to her body. In another passage Sally is described as looking at her naked body in a mirror: “After the bath she liked to look at herself, not only to hunt for lumps but for other forms of reassurance no less vital. True, she was getting leathery around the neck, but apart from that she liked what she saw well enough” (164). She looks at herself for a long time, contemplates the attractiveness of different parts of her body and comes to the conclusion that she is content with her appearance. When she is at home alone, Sally also experiences her body as a source of pleasure:

Sometimes [...] the thought of what a girl might like occurred to her, and she would throw herself on the bed, then, and was not ashamed that there had been times when she had let herself go entirely, before she got as far as the bed, in front of the mirror, even, there being something irresistibly odd and daft in letting the mirror take your place (or so it felt); in fact, at those times, laughing, moaning, madly shaking her head, she wouldn't have cared where she was, bed, floor, study sofa, or in front of the hurling match on television with the crowd cheering and cheering. (164)

Such experiences of bodily pleasure only occur when the Professor is not at home, as he usually keeps Sally busy all day long. When he is absent, she suddenly gains control over the house as well as her body: She can be in any room of the house, do whatever she wants to do and explore her body as something positive and pleasurable rather than an instrument to be ordered about in order to fulfil her uncle's needs.

When she and Milo start meeting clandestinely, her body again proves to be capable of providing great pleasure. Sally recalls that one day, when the Professor was taking his nap after lunch and Sally and Milo cleaned up the kitchen, “[i]t just happened” (175):

Sally was washing, Milo was drying. Sally turned, for some reason, and at just the same time Milo turned as well, and their eyes met, creating that telltale moment of stillness, that inhalation, from which there is no turning back, and the next thing either of them knew they were kicking up their heels on the sofa in the study, while upstairs the Professor slept the nap of the just. (175)

Starting with this more or less accidental encounter, they begin to meet somewhere in the house whenever the Professor is asleep. Sally enjoys these secret meetings with Milo and

thus decides to make sure their affair is not discovered; she begins to “conceal an extra pill” (175) in the Professor’s servings when they have lunch, “so that her afternoons of love could go undisturbed, and even be, with luck, prolonged” (175). From then on, Sally is the one who takes the initiative in the sexual relationship with Milo: She attempts to facilitate secret meetings as often as possible by drugging her uncle, and she also initiates the sexual encounters with Milo. Whenever there is a chance of their being able to spend some time alone together, Sally takes his willingness to do so for granted. Soon Milo is exhausted by the frequent illicit encounters:

[...] Sally wanted him at night as well as in the afternoon. She wanted them to go into a field on the way home from The Last Post. She came to his bed. She took him to hers. He mimed tiredness, but with closed eyes he looked so deliciously saintly that it would be a sin, as Sally saw it, to leave him be. He mimed soreness, pointing at himself and grimacing. Sally made to kiss it better [...]. (178)

Sally adopts the active role of seducing Milo as often as possible and in doing so ignores his needs and wishes, even though he attempts to communicate them to her by pretending to be tired or to feel unwell. After some time, Milo becomes “[...] afraid of what she might come up with next [...].” (178) and realises he has to talk to Sally and try to overcome the language barrier so as to protect himself: “Soon, he thought, he would fear her. Then hate her. Such was the strength of her need. Such was the power of her powerless life” (178-179). Milo feels unable to cope with Sally’s exuberant sexuality and suspects that he might begin to “fear her” and “hate her”. At the same time he is aware that the active role she adopts when it comes to their sexual encounters is a reaction to “her powerless life”. In her affair with Milo Sally has found a way to occupy a powerful and active role and thus to compensate for her lack of self-determination in other spheres of her life.

At first the affair is only a private form of resistance employed by Sally in order to rebel against her uncle’s strict regime, but after some time it becomes more public when Sally and Milo begin to meet in a local pub sometimes. When an acquaintance of the Professor sees them there, he immediately tells the Professor about it, who is furious:

[...]T]he Professor made sure that he did himself and his principles proud. But since all he had to go on was that she and Milo had been seen at The Last Post [...] Sally was not at all worried. Of course the Professor rained down his customary fire and brimstone. They’d abused his trust. They’d wiped the floor with the good name of Flynn. It pained him to find that his dead sister’s only child was a trollop, a tinker, a tramp. But he was not surprised – and here the trickier Wallace was yet one more time wheeled in for a guest appearance, this time in the

unfamiliar role of being more sinned against than sinning, Sally being such a scarlet woman [...]. (186)

The fact that somebody saw Sally and Milo at the pub together is reason enough for the Professor to call Sally “trollop”, “tinker”, and “tramp”. Not only does he deduce from the information about Sally and Milo meeting in a pub that they have an affair, which at this point he does not know yet, he also implies that it is immoral for a woman to have sexual relations outside marriage and that it is thus perfectly acceptable to insult Sally. Moreover, he accuses her of being unfaithful to Wallace, to whom, officially, she is still married. Usually, the Professor mentions Wallace in order to reproach Sally for having made a wrong choice and thus having brought about her own misery and financial ruin. In this situation, however, Wallace is presented as being Sally’s husband, and she is portrayed as being unfaithful to him, although Wallace has deceived and left her. According to the Professor’s line of argument, Sally is expected to cherish her husband, despite his criminal actions and his absence.

Sally, who usually tends to accept her uncle’s disrespectful behaviour towards her, decides not to keep silent anymore. During his rant she suddenly cannot suppress “a derisive snort of a laugh” (186); and when the Professor starts to verbally attack Milo, Sally confronts her uncle for the first time in years and, “with quiet menace” (187), tells him to “[l]eave Milo out of it” (187). In the course of the ensuing dispute the Professor reveals his plan to educate Milo for some time and then send him to a seminary to become a priest. At this point Sally begins to act defiantly and attempts to deliberately provoke her uncle:

She crossed over to where Milo was attempting to merge with the wallpaper. ‘Come here to me, Father,’ she said, and drew him by the hand out into the light. Then, with Milo behind her, Sally abruptly stuck her backside into his crotch and began wiggling it around, around and around. ‘This is what you believe in, isn’t it, Milo? – isn’t it, my fine diviner?’ She turned and began to eat the face off him in that necessitous, untender way she had, crushing him to her. She said, ‘And I believe it too, so I do. The two of us believe it. Together. See? So you can stick your clergy and your salvation army and all the rest of it in the highest rafter of your bony arse!’ (188)

Sally admits that she has an affair with Milo and attempts to shock her uncle with her behaviour; she tells him that she has an active sexual life and shows him that she does not care about his opinion. At the same time she destroys his hopes that Milo will become a priest and ridicules his plan by including Milo in her ‘performance’ while pointedly calling him “Father”.

Sally has finally managed to rebel against the oppression she has experienced for so many years. It is a rebellion against conservative Catholic values and strict sexual morality as represented by the old Professor, whose worldview is still influenced by his profession as a teacher in a Catholic school. Whereas at first Sally's resistance is confined to the private sphere and thus goes largely unnoticed, she eventually decides to fight for her rights and confront her uncle. When the Professor is taken to hospital and Sally finds out that he is not likely to recover, she is shocked at first but soon feels liberated and relieved. It does grieve her, however, that Milo has left for fear of being caught by the police without telling her where he wanted to stay:

Sally had the notion of cycling up hill and down dale for the rest of the day, and if necessary, night, to see if she might chance upon Milo one last time. But that didn't last long. She was tired, and besides, the days of her daftness were done. So instead she went home and spent the rest of the day smoking and staring, and to her vague surprise, smiling. (194)

At first she intends to look for him “for the rest of the day, and if necessary, night” but eventually accepts the situation, returns to her house, which is now entirely hers again, and “[spends] the rest of the day smoking and staring, and to her vague surprise, smiling”. She is finally calm and content because she has regained full control over her house as well as her life.

3.6 “Shaft” by Anne Enright (2008)

3.6.1 Plot

A pregnant woman and a man meet in a lift and the woman immediately suspects that the man would like to touch her belly. While they are in the lift, waiting for it to move and transport them to their floors, the woman thinks about her body, her pregnancy and her child. The woman and the man have a short conversation but spend most of the time in the lift in silence. Eventually, the man asks her if he may touch her belly but then does so without waiting for her reply. She feels uncomfortable but does not say anything; she simply waits for the lift to stop and the doors to open.

3.6.2 The Woman and the Man

The characters in “Shaft” do not have names. The story is told from the pregnant woman’s point of view, who finds herself in a lift with a stranger and begins to contemplate her life while waiting for the lift to move. After entering the lift she reaches out in order to press the button for the seventh floor; the man moves over and apologises, and she identifies his accent as American: “‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ he said, even though there was no need for it. American. In a suit. Quite tall. ‘Oh. Sorry.’ I said it too. Well, you do, don’t you?” (141). Throughout the story the woman only refers to the man as ‘the American’ or ‘he’. Both of them are trying to be polite, smiling at each other and engaging in small talk. Apart from several references to aspects of his elegant appearance, such as his suit (141), his document case (143) and his hands, which seem to be “slightly too perfect, as though he was wearing fake tan” (146), the man is not described in detail.

The pregnant woman thinks of herself mostly as being “big” (141) and “huge” (145) and feels rather insecure about her body: “I look so strange [...] these days. I misjudge distances and my reflection comes at me too fast. I felt like I was tripping over something, just standing there” (143). This insecurity is also expressed in the following passage: “[...N]o matter what I did these days, no matter what I wore or how I did my hair, I always looked poor” (146). Her insecurity causes her to think that the man in the lift is also of the opinion that she does not look very appealing. When she begins to eat her sandwich in the lift, she is suddenly convinced that the man is laughing at her:

I lifted my chin up to make the journey down my throat that bit longer and sweeter, and maybe it was this made him breathe short, like laughing, almost, made me look at him finally, sideways, with my mouth full. ‘Well, that sure looks good,’ he said. This American laughing at me, because I am helpless with food. And because I look so stupid, and huge [...]. (145)

When she notices that he starts to “breathe short”, she thinks that he deems her being “helpless with food” ridiculous. Besides, she suspects that he thinks she “[looks] so stupid, and huge”.

Generally, the woman seems to worry about many aspects of her life, apart from her appearance. She thinks about her child’s future and whether she and her husband will be able to provide for their family, as they “[don’t] have the money really, for this” (145):

I pick the things off the floor because if I don't *our life will end up in the gutter*. I put the tokens from the supermarket away because if they get lost *our child will not be able to afford to go to college*. My husband, on the other hand, lives in a place where you don't pick things up off the floor and everything will be just fine. Which must be lovely. [emphasis in original] (145)

She is concerned about numerous things but does not feel supported by her husband, and she has the impression that she is the only one who is actually worried about their and their child's future. While she "[picks] the things off the floor" and "[puts] the tokens from the supermarket away" in order to reassure herself at least to some extent, her husband "lives in a place where you don't pick things up off the floor and everything will be just fine". This description of her husband's worldview is sarcastically concluded by her thinking that this way of life "must be lovely", thereby implying that he may be able to be laid-back about these issues but that in order for someone to take care of the more serious issues of their future and their family life, she has to do it herself.

3.6.3 Representations of the Female Body

From the moment the woman enters the lift, she has the impression that the man does not see her as a person but as a thing, consisting only of her belly. This feeling is already expressed in the opening sentence: "As soon as I walked in, I knew he wanted to touch it" (141). It is the first thought and the first impression the woman has upon entering the lift: that the man looks only at her belly and immediately desires "to touch it", as if it were an object and not part of a person. The woman's belly is likened to an object, something outside her body in various passages of the story: "I stood over to give him room – not easy when you are so big. Then, of course, I realised I hadn't pressed the button yet, so I had to swing by him again, almost pivot, my belly like a ball between us" (141). The woman describes her belly as being "like a ball between us"; her belly is compared to an object and it is represented to be "between" the two people, thus creating the image of it not belonging to either of their bodies.

The belly is given a prominent position in the story and it becomes a defining feature of the woman as a person. She is thus mainly presented and perceived with regard to her child-bearing qualities. The woman's belly is the centre of attention and the only topic of conversation: From the moment the man sees her, he stares at her belly, and the first thing he asks her is, "When's the happy day then?" (142). The woman, however, feels

uncomfortable about being asked such a personal question by a stranger: “As if it was any of his business. As if we had even been introduced. When you’re pregnant, you’re public property, you’re fair game. ‘Well, hello,’ they say in shops. ‘How are *you* today?’” [emphasis in original] (142). She feels like “public property” and “fair game” because people tend to disregard her as an individual and fail to acknowledge her need for privacy; her pregnancy causes a shift of attention from her as a person with emotions, desires, and fears, to her belly and thus to her as a generic pregnant woman.

In several passages of the story, however, the woman is described as being concerned about her own and her child’s future, fears which, in her experience, neither the strangers who ask her about her pregnancy nor her husband are interested in. When the man in the lift asks her about the baby’s due date, she thinks about expressing some of her thoughts on questions like this: “‘What do you mean?’ I wanted to say. ‘I am just suffering from bloat.’ Or, ‘Who says it’s going to be happy? It might be the most miserable day of my life. I might be, for example, screaming in agony, or haemorrhaging, I might be dead.’” (142). Eventually, she decides against it and answers his question: “‘Oh.’ I looked down at my belly like I’d just realised it was there – *What, this old thing?* ‘Six weeks,’ I said.” [emphasis in original] (142). The woman also thinks about her husband’s reaction to her worries and the fact that he does not seem to take them seriously:

I had everything on my mind. I had a whole new person on my mind, for a start, and the fact that we didn’t have the money really, for this. I had all this to worry about, a new human being, a whole universe, but of course this is ‘nothing’. *You are worrying about nothing*, my husband says. Everything I think about is too big, for him, or too small. [emphasis in original] (145)

She wishes for somebody to listen to her without dismissing her worries but again, she is not able to communicate this need successfully. As far as strangers are concerned, she only thinks about telling them about her worries rather than actually doing it; her husband, however, who is mentioned as the only person she talks to about these issues, dismisses her worries as being “nothing” and thus as not being of importance. Similarly, when she tells him about health issues she experiences due to her pregnancy, he does not take her seriously either: “‘It’s perfectly natural,’ he says, when I tell him the trouble I am having with the veins in my legs, or the veins – God help us – in my backside. But sometimes I think he means, *We’re just animals, you know*. And sometimes I think he means, *You in particular. You are just an animal*” [emphasis in original] (145). By saying that her problems are “perfectly natural”, he again tells her that they are nothing she should worry

about; moreover, the woman has the impression that he regards her as an animal and thus denies her human feelings, fears and emotions. The woman expects him to listen to her as a person, just as she expects the man in the lift to look at her as a person. However, her husband attributes her worries and health issues solely to her pregnancy and the man in the lift only appreciates her as a generic pregnant woman and not as an individual.

The situation in the lift causes the woman to feel particularly uncomfortable because of the man's stare. In one passage of the short story, the woman contemplates at length the social convention of not looking directly at strangers when being in the lift with them:

[...T]here's mirror made of smoked glass, so that everyone in it looks yellow, or at least tanned. Actually, the light is so dim, people can look quite well, and basically you look at them checking themselves in the glass. Or you look at yourself in the glass, and they look at you, as you check yourself in the glass. Or your eyes meet in the glass. But there is very little real looking. I mean, the mirror is so hard to resist – there is very little looking that goes straight from one person across space to the other person, in the flesh as it were, as opposed to in the glass. Or glasses. One reflection begs another, of course, because it is a mirror box – all three walls of it, apart from the doors. So your eyes can meet in any number of reflections, that fan out like wings on either side of you. (143)

The woman describes that, usually, people in the lift tend to avoid looking directly at each other and that, if their “eyes meet” at all, it is mostly “in the glass”. However, the man in the lift looks directly at the woman, though only at her belly: “The American in the corner was surrounded by all my scattered stomachs, but he was staring straight at the real one” (143). She feels uncomfortable because he looks at her directly, which, according to her, would be unusual if she was not pregnant; moreover, she emphasises that she does not like the way he looks at her: “He was looking at my stomach, but *staring* at it” [emphasis added] (142). She is convinced, however, that she disapproves of his behaviour mainly because he does not seem to regard her as an individual: “I always look people in the eye, you know? That is just the way I am. Even if they have a disability, or a strangeness about them, I look them straight in the eye. And if one of their eyes is damaged, then I look at the good eye, because this is where they *are*, somehow” [emphasis in original] (144). The same feeling of not being treated like a person is also expressed in the following passage: “I would prefer it if he looked at me, that's all – the American. Even if I was sliding down the mirrored wall in front of him, even if I was giving birth on the floor. I would prefer it if he looked at the person that I am, the person you see in my eyes” (144). The repeated references to this issue suggest that it is a matter of importance to the woman and that she continually has the impression that her identity is being equated with her pregnancy.

Judging from the way the man looks at her, the woman also fears that he wants to touch her belly, which clearly she does not want him to do: “[...] *No, you can't*, I thought. *Don't even think about it*” [emphasis in original] (143). When he eventually asks her, she is surprised by “this man I have never met before being able to say to me, ‘Would you mind? May I touch?’” (145). However, she cannot answer his question, as she just began to eat a sandwich: “My mouth was still full of roast beef. But he stretched his hand out towards me, anyway” (145). The woman is so surprised that she is unable to object or to look at him: “I did not look him in the face. I looked sideways a little, and down at the floor” (146). While the man does not seem to think that his behaviour is unusual or that it may be perceived by the woman to be an invasion of her personal space, the woman feels increasingly uncomfortable and thinks, “So we were standing like that, him touching my belly, me looking at the ground, like some sort of slave woman” (146). She feels powerless, which is indicated by the association she has of herself with a “slave woman”, and unable to escape from this situation; the man, on the other hand, does not take notice of her silence or the fact that she averts her eyes and looks at the ground. He is in control of the situation, at first asking her questions she deems too personal, staring at her belly, though this makes her feel uncomfortable, and eventually also touching her belly without her consent.

The woman continually thinks about objecting but then keeps silent; she tolerates his behaviour and observes social conventions of politeness:

He was looking at my stomach, but staring at it. Well, people do. So I blinked a bit and smiled my most pregnant smile, all drifty and overwhelmed, *Isn't nature wonderful?* These days, my skin smells of vegetable soup. I mean quite nice soup, but *soup* – you know? I tell you – reproduction, it's a different world. [emphasis in original] (142)

She is aware of the emotions society deems appropriate for expectant mothers: bliss and fulfilment. She knows people expect her to be happy and so she shows the stranger in the lift her “most pregnant smile” when he looks at her belly. Though there are aspects of her pregnancy which she does not enjoy, for example that her “skin smells of vegetable soup”, the woman does not talk about these issues but pretends to be “all drifty and overwhelmed” whenever somebody looks at her belly or asks her about her pregnancy. Similarly, she plays along when the man in the lift asks her about the due date and touches her belly without her consent. Although she has strong feelings about his behaviour, she

does not dare to say anything. When he asks her about the baby's due date, for example, she thinks "As if it was any of his business. As if we had even been introduced" (142) but then simply answers "Six weeks" (142). When he in turn says, "Well, good luck!" and "[gives] a little 'haha' laugh" (142), the woman wonders and thinks, "Good luck with what? The labour? The next forty years?" (143) but again gives a socially accepted response by saying, "I'll need it" (143). She would like to tell him that she does not want him to touch her belly but she keeps silent, "looking at the ground, like some sort of slave woman" (146), although only moments before she had imagined what she might say to him: "The American in the corner was surrounded by all my scattered stomachs, but he was staring straight at the real one. And, *No, you can't*, I thought. *Don't even think about it*" (143).

The woman's body has become "public property" (142), as she phrases it, due to social conventions. Because she is pregnant, strangers suddenly ask her very personal questions or stare at her, which, as the woman contemplates in several passages of the story, is usually not deemed acceptable behaviour when meeting strangers in the lift, on the street or in a shop, for example. The social conventions which enable others to act like the man in the lift prevent the woman from resisting such behaviour: She thinks about objecting to the actions of the man in the lift she does not feel comfortable with but she does not dare to do so and instead silently accepts his behaviour and utters the expected replies to his questions. She has internalised the rules of politeness, just like she has grown used to adopting the role of a mother-to-be who is always happy and content, even though she worries about the future and experiences health issues caused by her pregnancy. The woman feels that she is not taken seriously and not treated like a person anymore, but rather she has become a generic pregnant body or personified belly, lacking emotion and personality. It is this process of objectification, which enables others to disregard her needs and wishes and to invade her personal space without having to fear reprehension, as this behaviour is deemed to be in accord with social norms and conventions as far as the pregnant body is concerned.

4 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore if and to what extent representations of the female body in contemporary Irish short stories are based on traditional images of femininity as advocated by the Irish State (notably the Irish Constitution of 1937) and the Catholic Church. For this purpose, first an overview of the socio-historical development of women's roles in Ireland was provided in section 2. Subsections 2.1 and 2.2 detailed the influence of the Irish State and the Catholic Church on this process as well as the various strategies employed in order to create and maintain an image of Irish womanhood as virtuous, pure and domestic. These strategies, which mainly aimed at controlling the female body and female sexuality, ranged from officially defining women's role as being that of housewife and mother to prohibiting contraception and stigmatising as well as institutionalising sexually transgressive women. Subsection 2.3 illustrated how sexual morality has changed and become more and more liberal over time. Besides, it detailed some of the reasons for these developments, such as the gradual modernisation and secularisation of Irish society, the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger years and the increasing influence of television and other modern media.

The analysis of selected contemporary Irish short stories provided in section 3 focused on the female characters and on representations of the female body. While all of these short stories deal with social, religious or legal restrictions imposed on the female body or on female (sexual) behaviour, the extent of these restrictions varies. The attempts at curtailing female sexual transgression are most apparent in the first three short stories analysed. In "Sinners", which is set in the mid-twentieth century, Irish female sexuality, as represented by Delia, is contrasted with 'foreign', in this case English, female sexuality, which is represented by Samantha. Whereas Samantha enjoys having an active sexual life without being married, Delia has been a housewife and mother for most of her life and has only experienced sexuality as an unpleasant aspect of her marital duties. As her worldview is informed by Catholic values, she is shocked about Samantha's affair with the married couple, condemns her behaviour and imagines punishing the paying guests for their immorality. "Wuff Wuff Wuff for De Valera" portrays the difficulties Pauline has to face when she becomes pregnant out of wedlock during her second year at university in the 1970s and her attempts to obtain an abortion are unsuccessful due to legal and financial constraints. Her sister Bernie attributes Pauline's lack of success in

life to the fact that she became pregnant outside marriage and thus represents the social stigma single mothers in Ireland had to face for a long time. "Night of the Quicken Trees", which is set in the late twentieth century, explores similar issues, as Margaret is excluded from her family and abandoned by everyone she cares about because she had sexual intercourse with a priest and gave birth to his child. However, in all three short stories there are subversive elements to the female characters, which indicate resistance to the patriarchal structures by which they are oppressed. Delia, for example, has secret sexual fantasies and desires, which she attempts to suppress because she deems them immoral; nevertheless, these thoughts return on a regular basis, which indicates that she is not the asexual being she is supposed to be according to Catholic sexual morality. As for Pauline, she has managed not only to eventually obtain a degree but also to buy a house and to find a steady job which enables her to provide for her son. Moreover, she is content with her life because she loves her illegitimate and disabled son Sebastian and cannot imagine her life without him. And although some people, like Bernie, regard her life as a failure, she has succeeded in acquiring everything she and her son require on her own. Margaret is also depicted as a strong character who has made her own way in life, despite the hostilities she experienced in the past. She is independent, knows what she wants and in the course of the story manages to overcome her trauma and start a new life with the only person she loves: her son Michael.

In the remaining three short stories, the restrictions imposed on the female body are less apparent but still succeed in curtailing the women's behaviour, at least as far as the public sphere is concerned. In "Nomads Seek the Pavilions of Bliss on the Slopes of Middle Age", which is set in the late twentieth century, Mary has experienced her body as a source of great pleasure from an early age but only when being alone with her lovers; in the company of others, she feels that she has to keep silent about her extramarital sexual relationships, as she knows that her behaviour is deemed immoral by most people. In "A Good Turn", which is set at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Sally uses her sexuality to rebel against her uncle's despotic regime, at first only in his absence, but eventually she admits to her affair with Milo and subsequently regains control over her own life and her body. The female protagonist in "Shaft", which is also set at the beginning of the twenty-first century, experiences a feeling of oppression because others tend to disregard her as a person as soon as they see that she is pregnant. There are no immediate restrictions imposed on her body but nonetheless social norms render it

acceptable for the man in the lift to invade her personal space without her consent. She feels unable to object to his behaviour but she does question the underlying social convention of objectifying the (pregnant) female body and has thus taken the first step towards resistance: By questioning these norms, she refuses to accept them as a given reality which cannot be changed.

As was illustrated in the analysis of the short stories, the female body is often represented in terms of restrictions which focus predominantly on female sexuality. Moreover, it was demonstrated that the changes in sexual morality, which have occurred over the past five to six decades in Ireland, are reflected in the contemporary short stories analysed. The short stories set at an earlier stage in Irish history deal with more severe and apparent restrictions, mostly imposed by the Irish State and the Catholic Church, such as the ban on contraception and abortion or the social stigmatisation of sexually transgressive women. On the other hand, “Nomads Seek the Pavilions of Bliss on the Slopes of Middle Age”, which is set in the late twentieth century, and the two short stories set at the beginning of the twenty-first century, feature modern and mostly self-confident women and depict a more liberal attitude towards the female body, sexual morality and women’s roles in general. Nevertheless, they also explore restrictions imposed on the female body; in contrast to the former three short stories, however, the restrictions are presented as having developed on the basis of social norms rather than being dictated by the Church or the State.

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7 English Abstract

This thesis explores how the female body is represented in selected contemporary Irish short stories. Since women's roles have changed considerably over the past five to six decades and this is also reflected in the short stories analysed, the first part of this thesis provides a socio-historical overview of the development of women's roles in Ireland. It outlines the collaboration of the Irish State and the Catholic Church in creating and maintaining an image of Irish womanhood as virtuous and domestic: The Irish Constitution of 1937 defined women's role as being that of housewife and mother and the Catholic Church vilified female sexuality as sinful. Various strategies, such as the prohibition of contraception and abortion and the stigmatisation and institutionalisation of sexually transgressive women, were employed by the State as well as the Church in order to curtail female (sexual) behaviour. From the 1950s onward, however, processes of secularisation and modernisation occurring in Ireland also involved considerable changes in sexual morality. Consequently, attitudes towards the female body, sexual morality and women's roles in general have become increasingly liberal.

The second part of this thesis provides an analysis of six selected contemporary Irish short stories: "Sinners" by Edna O'Brien, "Wuff Wuff Wuff for De Valera" by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, "Night of the Quicken Trees" by Claire Keegan, "Nomads Seek the Pavilions of Bliss on the Slopes of Middle Age" by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, "A Good Turn" by George O'Brien and "Shaft" by Anne Enright. The analysis illustrates that changes in sexual morality are reflected in contemporary Irish short stories. Moreover, while the female body is often represented in terms of social, religious or legal restrictions, which focus mainly on female sexuality, it is also attributed great subversive potential.

8 German Abstract

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit befasst sich mit Darstellungen des weiblichen Körpers in zeitgenössischen irischen Kurzgeschichten. Da sich die Rolle der Frau in Irland in den letzten fünfzig bis sechzig Jahren erheblich verändert hat und sich das auch in den Kurzgeschichten widerspiegelt, die in der vorliegenden Arbeit analysiert werden, erfolgt zunächst eine Zusammenfassung dieser Entwicklungen. Die irische Verfassung aus dem Jahr 1937 entwirft ein Idealbild der Frau als Mutter, die sich ausschließlich um die Familie und den Haushalt kümmert. Dieses Frauenbild wurde auch von der katholischen Kirche gefördert und gelehrt, wobei der weibliche Körper stets eine wichtige Rolle spielte: Zum einen wurde Mutterschaft als die natürliche Aufgabe der Frau betrachtet; zum anderen wurde weibliche Sexualität, sofern sie nicht der Fortpflanzung diene, als Sünde verurteilt. Ab den 1950er Jahren wurden im Zuge der Modernisierung und Säkularisierung der irischen Gesellschaft jedoch sowohl das Frauenbild als auch die Sexualmoral zunehmend liberaler.

Im zweiten Teil der vorliegenden Diplomarbeit werden sechs ausgewählte irische Kurzgeschichten analysiert: "Sinners" von Edna O'Brien, "Wuff Wuff Wuff for De Valera" von Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, "Night of the Quicken Trees" von Claire Keegan, "Nomads Seek the Pavilions of Bliss on the Slopes of Middle Age" von Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, "A Good Turn" von George O'Brien und "Shaft" von Anne Enright. In diesem Teil der Arbeit wird dargelegt, wie sich die im ersten Teil beschriebenen gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen in den ausgewählten Texten widerspiegeln. Außerdem wird anhand der Kurzgeschichten gezeigt, dass die Protagonistinnen trotz der Einschränkungen, die sie in Bezug auf ihre Körper erfahren, dennoch vielfältige Möglichkeiten des Widerstandes finden.

9 Curriculum Vitae

Education and Training:

10/2006 – present	University of Vienna, Austria Teacher training: English and Latin
03/2011 – 02/2014	University of Vienna, Austria Bachelor of Arts (BA): English and American Studies
09/1998 – 06/2006	BG/BRG Rahlgasse, Vienna, Austria

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04/2007	Scuola Germanica Roma / German School Rome, Italy Language assistant for German

Work Experience:

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