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Gender and Loneliness in Contemporary Irish Short Stories

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE



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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. The Lonely Voice in the Irish Short Story

In his influential essay on short fiction published in 1962, *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O'Connor claims that "there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not find often in the novel – an intense awareness of human loneliness"¹ and even more than sixty years after its original publication, this view is still frequently considered as a prominent one and gets regularly mentioned in many critical works on the Irish short story (see *The Irish Short Story: Traditions and Trends* [2015], a collection of essays edited by Elke D'hoker and Stephanie Eggermont on various topics including works on Irish female writers and cosmopolitanism, or *Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years 1990-2008* [2011] by Susan Cahill focussing on gender and the attention on the corporeal and material). Despite O'Connor's claim that a short story never has a hero and the characters are creatures who failed to fit into the society and constantly keep roaming around the outskirts of the civilized society are not true to the current form of Irish short stories, the omnipresence of loneliness remains a typical feature.

In her essay "Complicating the Irish Short Story," Elke D'hoker cites James Kilroy who, similarly to O'Connor, argues that the individual's interconnection with society is "a relationship which is mostly one of alienation, disillusionment and despair."² This outline of feelings is apt for a large number of Irish short fiction, however, loneliness as a common feature of contemporary Irish short stories needs to be redefined with all the social, cultural and economic changes in Ireland since the start of 1990's. This thesis sets out to explore the extent to which loneliness and the feeling of abandonment is related to the turbulent

¹ Frank O'Connor, "The Lonely Voice," *Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976) 87.

² Elke D'hoker, "Complicating the Irish Short Story," *The Irish Short Story: Traditions and Trends*, ed. Elke D'hoker and Stephanie Eggermont (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2015) 6.

transformation of Irish society brought on by the Celtic Tiger and how contemporary Irish short stories treat the intertwining of loneliness and the societal development of this era. All the stories discussed in this thesis were written between 1991 and 2012 and are concerned with or were influenced by the contemporary affairs in Irish society. The thesis is divided into three chapters: the first will discuss the deconstruction of Mother Ireland archetype sacrificing herself for others in Claire Keegan's "Men and Women" (1999) and Dermot Bolger's "Winter"(2003); the second describes the mainly male take on emotional numbness, fulfilment of social and gender roles, desire for social approval and fitting into the community using Kevin Barry's "Beer Trip to Llandudno" (2012), Billy O'Callaghan's "The Body on the Boat" (2008) as well as Philip Ó Ceallaigh's "Walking Away" (2009). The focal point of the third chapter will be the contemporary themes and critical issues in Ireland in Roddy Doyle's "The Pram" (2007), Joseph O'Connor's "Mothers Were All the Same" (1991) in addition to Colm Tóibín's "A Priest in the Family" (2006).

1.2. Celtic Tiger Literature: Socio-historical Context

Irish literature was until fairly recently dominated by men writing about male-related themes, but the drastic changes in terms of economy and socio-cultural matters since the start of 1990's had a great impact on cultural and literary life. This influenced the lives of not only men, it had an even greater effect on women who in larger numbers and louder started to "explore and question the dominant narratives that served to support the Irish state."³ Important moments and matters in modern Irish history such as sexual abuse scandals within the Catholic clergy, the Celtic Tiger financial changes, election of Mary Robinson in 1990 as the first Irish female president, decriminalization of homosexuality, referenda on gay marriage

³ Susan Cahill, *Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years 1990-2008: Gender, Bodies, Memory* (London: Continuum, 2011) 19.

and abortion and the lifting of the ban on divorce projected on the themes that were openly and often loudly discussed in public and in literature. The topics and themes in contemporary Irish literature have naturally reacted to these major social changes, more female writers have emerged and the effect this has on the characters in the stories is prominent. Female characters openly express themselves, their wishes, needs and complaints more frequently now instead of previously being often quiet in their suffering, rather passive in their actions or outright static in their existence and almost invisible creatures, especially in the form of short stories. Another of the defining features of contemporary Irish short fiction is that the authors are not afraid to openly discuss critical issues such as domestic abuse, abortion and dysfunctional families full of emotional distance. The lack of empathy and care in relationships does not mean here only male ignorance of their family's wishes, but is also related to the number of females caring for others by choice (be it purely their choice or a choice based on a lack of interest in considering and finding other options they have) instead of just trying to conform to the ideal motherly figure almost breathing for everyone around herself. This results in the emergence of distrust towards the whole society and thus the deconstruction of an Irish family as a basis of the State, a functioning unit essential to one's very being and something to be desired by females in particular becomes a recurring theme. The notion of a family as a perfect and unquestionable place of peace and unconditional love is destroyed, with the stories often taking the dysfunctionality to an extreme, making the life in such a setting even worse and emotionally lonelier than being simply alone.

1.3. The Celtic Tiger and the Transformation of Society

At the start of the 20th century Ireland was a largely rural and agricultural society with widespread industrialization arriving fairly late in 1950's with the economy only taking off in a quick and steady way around the year 1987 and going well until the recession that began in

2008. GNP went through a 216% increase between 1987 and 2005⁴ rapidly improving the living standards of the citizens and introducing the highest levels of consumerism in the history of Ireland. Peadar Kirby claims that this “unfortunate tendency during the Celtic Tiger period to consider economic growth as an end in itself rather than consider it as a means to the end,”⁵ skipping the slow process of modernization, diving in head first into the until then little-known new capitalism, individualism and the necessity of increased self-dependence in order to survive the new challenges, came with a twist. Despite the newly found self-confidence of people and the nation herself, this speedy transition did not leave the people with enough time to revise their values, getting used to them and adjusting one’s social self-definition to the new order, resulting in difficulties in relationships with family, friends, the church and even the person herself/himself. In his book *Reinventing Ireland* (2002) Peadar Kirby describes this change of contemporary Irish culture as “an eloquent expression of new-found confidence where the liberalisation of internal markets is matched by the celebration of individual rights and liberties,”⁶ however, he also reasons that “values such as individualism, materialism, intolerance of dissent, lack of concern for the environment and a failure to value caring”⁷ are typical for the Celtic Tiger Ireland, juxtaposing the good and the bad in these profound changes. The positive features of this extraordinary development could have not come to existence without the negative ones, giving rise to progress resulting in a social rupture and consequently dissolving the myth of romantic Ireland shaped by the family as its fundamental unit.

Family as a fundamental unit of Irish society and one’s existence is among the topics frequently deconstructed in contemporary Irish short fiction – it is dysfunctional in its extreme

⁴ Peadar Kirby, *Celtic Tiger in Collapse* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 33.

⁵ Kirby, 50.

⁶ Peadar Kirby et. al., “Introduction: The Reinvention of Ireland: A Critical Perspective,” *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, ed. Peadar Kirby et. al. (London: Pluto Press, 2002) 7.

⁷ Kirby et al., 13.

patriarchy and power games as in Claire Keegan's "Men and Women" where Keegan "takes the clichés of Irish rural life and sets them ablaze"⁸ in her portrayal of psychological domestic abuse, it may be completely missing such as in O'Callaghan's "The Body on the Boat" or simply different. The very concept of a family meets challenges in the new society where divorce, single mothers and alternative sexualities are starting to come to surface and new questions have risen: what is a family, how is it meant to function, is the traditional definition applicable to the current society? Elizabeth M. Schneider claims that individuals growing up in defective and unsupportive families where they witnessed instances of domestic violence are prone to repeating the cycle since they may consider the violence something "inevitable."⁹ What Keegan and others draw attention to is the rigidity of the traditional family model as well as gender roles and the necessity of daring to make a difference and breaking the cycle with focus on cases where it likely would do more harm than good letting the children grow up in a "stable" and "traditional" format of a family so eagerly supported by the State and the Church, blindly accepting the patterns of behaviour practiced in the family instead of questioning them. This attempt at re-defining family actively undermines the authority of canonical texts such as the Constitution and the dogmas sustained by the Catholic Church aimed at giving clear and firm boundaries to people, especially women. Anyway, there is no clear suggestion about the extent to which a modern version of a family can help individuals shield themselves from experiencing the feeling of loneliness despite all the social changes and opportunities people in Ireland have these days, since these may often lead to loneliness, albeit established by different causes and on different bases. The stories discussed in the thesis introduce how some of these new freedoms have a negative impact on one's feeling of belonging instead of allowing people to gain new ways of turning their lives over.

⁸ Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt, "Claire Keegan's New Rural Ireland: Torching the Thatched Cottage," *The Irish Short Story: Traditions and Trends*, ed. Elke D'hoker and Stephanie Eggermont (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2015) 280.

⁹ Elizabeth M. Schneider, *Battered Women & Feminist Lawmaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 18.

The social construct of womanhood is structured as ideally and naturally equalling to motherhood and in the past its enforcement was relying on the rules set out by the Church and the State even going as far as including the woman's right to not having to leave the house "to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home"¹⁰ in the 1937 Irish Free State Constitution. Emphasis on domesticity openly mentioned in both the Bible and the legal system are used to constrict women: Irish constitution places women at home, suggesting that preventing them from paid labour is utterly desirable for a greater good, deliberately stripping them of making choices. This, however, definitely does not mean women were saved from copious amounts of unpaid work at home, on the farm or on top of it both doing extra work for the community, it is even demanded from them unlike from men, be they the breadwinners or not. With the late 20th century changes in Irish economy and the transition from a relatively poor country to a reasonably wealthy one, a massive increase in the disposable income of individuals and families and the steady increase in the level of female employment, the clash between individual selfhood and duties towards one's family and the society became more prominent and brought about more tension. Despite the shift in gender roles that was vastly supported by the economic changes during the Celtic Tiger and the personal wealth of women, the moral discourses not only in Ireland still tend to be more forgiving with males, frequently even choosing to ignore their improper or substandard behaviour, something which would not be tolerated in women (e.g. single parenthood, selfishness, pursuance of own hobbies at all costs, idleness), consequently resulting in many females drowning in loneliness and succumbing to the feeling of being cast out of the community.

¹⁰ Bunreacht na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland, enacted in 1937), *Electronic Irish Statute Book*, Article 41, Paragraph 2, Dec 2018 <<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/cons/en/html#article41>> 10 Mar 2019.

1.4. Redefining Loneliness in the Celtic Tiger Era

Loneliness as experienced by the characters in the stories takes on many different forms brought on by variable experiences and life situations. In his study “The Effect of Gender and Culture on Loneliness: A Mini Review” published in 2018, Ami Rokach defines loneliness as not only “being alone, feeling alone, but also perceiving oneself as unloved, unimportant, and uncared for.”¹¹ As the term encompasses a wide range of negative feelings with each one expressing itself differently, these differences or sameness of the above described feelings, their expression in the characters in the short stories, how they relate to their gender and family situation and what influences they have on the character’s actions will be used for comparison. One must also take into account the fact that loneliness is not just an internal feeling or a mental state of a person, it also has an immense effect on the whole society as it disintegrates the coherence of a community and loneliness within marriage is one of the reasons a relationship and whole families will eventually fall apart. Causes of loneliness can be modern day (individualistic society, virtual world) or timeless (living in a stereotype and stuck in one’s willingly or unwillingly accepted gender role) and this will be discussed in relation to the themes and style of modern day Irish short story.

The late 20th century shift of Ireland from a collective culture to an individualistic one as described in the stories fits well into the description of a paradox of collectivistic cultures:

People tend to emphasize and expect strong ties within the family and community. Such culture may prevent loneliness by promoting social integration. However, those very same high expectations may increase feeling of loneliness if those expectations are not met.¹²

¹¹ Ami Rokach, “The Effect of Gender and Culture on Loneliness: A Mini Review”, *Emerging Science Journal*, 2. 2 (April 2018) < <http://ijournalse.org/index.php/ESJ/article/view/68> > 20 Feb. 2019.

¹² Rokach, 61.

Social approval and fitting well into a community that would value and respect them is something most of the characters in the discussed stories eagerly yearn for and this desire either remains unfulfilled in the foreseeable future or until the characters reach the breaking point and decide to go against the flow be what may be. The importance of gender in socialization, the structure and means of socialization (or lack of thereof) has been related to the levels of perceived isolation as loneliness frequently is an outcome of an absence of social approval and the prevalent cause of this perceived failure for women as compared to men (who tend to see failure as a lack of success at work, hoarding money and little sexual attention gained from women) is still greatly related to having a family. The description of such social outcasts and emotional numbness in an individual society will be the heart of Chapter 3 discussing Kevin Barry's "Beer Trip to Llandudno," Billy O'Callaghan's "The Body on the Boat" and Philip Ó Ceallaigh's "Walking Away."

Female characters in Irish fiction still frequently tend to be the creations of male writers and a male-oriented society, however, the shift in themes since the 1990's is obvious: even though women are often stuck in the dichotomy of being portrayed as an embodiment of virtues (often equals to "proper" femininity) or the fallen ones rebelling against the regime. In my study a larger number of stories by male authors than female ones will be used as the gender ratio of authors is still not even and I used the stories depending on their topics, not on the author. Despite the fact that the Irish literary canon is still male-dominated, more contemporary male authors discuss topics touching upon the female empowerment bringing the marginalized female experience characterized by loneliness and disillusionment into larger consciousness bringing to life a figure of a woman who, as Ángela Rivera Izquierdo puts it, is "the antithesis of both Catholic and 'feminine' values, representing the emergence of a 'new Irish woman;' a woman who was no longer voice-less but who rebelled against the

Catholic patriarchal society she lived in.”¹³ The pattern in these female-oriented stories frequently follows the pattern of “the female quest” – “a transformative inner journey of self-discovery which leads them towards emotional independence and individuality”¹⁴ and consequently frequently (but not always) finding their new ability to express themselves and take actions that may change their lives. This development and to what extent it takes place will be discussed using the stories “Men and Women” by Claire Keegan and Dermot Bolger’s “Winter.” To what extent do the stories denounce the passive images of femininity and actively deconstruct them instead of just commenting on them? Is the emergence of “new Irish woman” really so prominent or are these just tiny moments that have little or no impact on the whole? Related to the contemporary themes and the authors commenting on current issues of modern Irish society like immigration, sexual abuse scandals and abortion are stories like Roddy Doyle’s “The Pram”, Colm Tóibín’s “A Priest in the Family”, Joseph O’Connor’s “Mothers are all the Same” which despite the new themes and topics contain an amount of alienation and loneliness equal to those of authors commenting on the changes in the old orders.

¹³ Ángela Rivera Izquierdo, “A New Irish Woman Emerges: Subverting Femininity in Maeve Kelly’s *A Life of her Own*,” *Estudios Irlandeses* 12.9 (2017) <<https://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/2017/02/a-new-irish-woman-emerges-subverting-femininity-in-maeve-kellys-a-life-of-her-own/>> 106, 5. 3. 2019.

¹⁴ Izquierdo, 109.

Chapter 2: The “New Irish Woman” and the Female Quest

2. 1. Betrayed by the Mother Ireland Myth

Most societies are formed on a basis of structures defined by rules that are enforced by laws, rules within communities and patterns of behaviour passed on as a person grows up in the given social setting. Sometimes these rules give some structure to the society still providing the subjects with relative freedom, at other times they are aimed at completely moulding them into shape desired by those in power. As a strongly patriarchal nation, Ireland had a number of legal, social, moral and economic restrictions forced upon people them to keep them in place with special attention on the role of women. The legal restrictions were established, as was previously mentioned, by the Constitution, defining women by motherhood and housekeeping while the moral ones were forced upon women by the Catholic Church, with an equal focus on motherhood, servitude to the family and obedience.

Economic restrictions had a massive influence on the lives of women, especially where they had little or no possibility of making a living, and went hand in hand with the limitations drawn by the Constitution. This complete economic dependence on husbands had a strong impact on women's feeling of autonomy and their life options, especially in regards to leaving a dysfunctional relationship or a family, choosing not to be married at all or simply finding balance in their lives and their feeling of self-worth. Ireland had a good use of social limitations with the community functioning as an invigilator making sure the rules set out by the male-oriented community are followed by all and people were not too eager to rebel knowing the repercussions they are to face should they dare to be too innovative, threatening the coherence of the order. As such women either had to follow the rules or face not fitting into the community and consequently being outcasts; considering the aforementioned context,

women were often prisoners of the system, unable to leave dysfunctional or violent relationships, having to give up on their right to self-determination and happiness.

These limitations and options changed during the Celtic Tiger and became one of the key themes of contemporary Irish short fiction. This new female awareness and the adjustment of the new position women had in society and within family lead to the questioning of previously fixed and rigid gender roles. This is presented in stories in various ways, one of them being the “female quest” undertaken mainly (but not only) by middle-aged or older women. The two short stories that will be used to illustrate this quest are “Men and Women” by Claire Keegan and “Winter” by Dermot Bolger.

2. 2. Patriarchy in Claire Keegan’s “Men and Women” and Dermot Bolger’s “Winter”

Claire Keegan’s short story “Men and Women” (1999) was included in her first book *Antarctica* and narrates the tale of a girl losing her childhood innocence and her moving into adolescence reflected by her noticing that the relationship of her parents is nowhere near what she thought it was like. The unnamed girl lives on a farm with her brother Seamus and her parents (unnamed as well) who are stuck in an emotionally sterile marriage with the women seeming to be more of an inventory and passive assets than appreciated family members. Through the girl’s eyes the story deals with the themes of patriarchy, emotional distance, adultery, a badly broken relationship between the parents and the difference in the way girls and boys are brought up with the main focus on the mother’s quest for fulfilment and her emergence from her husband’s tyranny.

Claire Keegan was raised on a farm in Wicklow¹⁵ experiencing the atmosphere of a small town from the first hand. In her essay “The Old and the New in Claire Keegan’s Short Fiction,” Claudia Luppino suggests that the exploration of family relations in contemporary Irish short fiction is usually concerned with two themes – gender and generations focussing on the fact that “the patriarchal structure and the often troubled dynamics of the traditional Irish family have allowed it to serve as a backdrop and a privileged site for the investigation of wider political, generational and cultural issues of identity formation and power distribution.”¹⁶ Luppino also suggests that the physical and emotional battles of the family members “act simultaneously as symptoms and as metaphors of the political and socio-cultural structures”¹⁷ of Irish society which aptly describes the themes examined in “Men and Women.”

The second short story dealing with a female quest for happiness, albeit a quest of a different kind, is “Winter” (2003) by Dermot Bolger. “Winter” narrates the life story of Eva Fitzgerald, an old woman living a lonely life in her mobile home in a field in Mayo, only accompanied by her beloved cats. After having surrendered her happiness in order to raise her children (and eventually even looking after her dying ill-tempered husband who had disowned her), she embarks on her personal quest, following her dreams and wishes she had suppressed and ignored for so long.

Dermot Bolger is a poet, playwright and novelist originating from Finglas, Co. Dublin. Bolger’s short story “Winter” is a postscript to his own novel *The Family on Paradise Pier* (2006) which chronicles the life of the protagonist, Eva Fitzgerald, and her Anglo-Protestant family over the span of three decades, starting with World War I, throughout the Irish War of Independence up to the events during World War II. The novel ends in 1948 and “Winter” can

¹⁵Claire Keegan, *Aosdana*, <<http://aosdana.arts council.ie/Members/Literature/Keegan.aspx> > 27 Mar 2019.

¹⁶ Claudia Luppino, “The Old and the New in Claire Keegan’s Short Fiction,” *Journal of the Short Story in English* (online), 63I (Autumn 2014) 1 Dec 2016, <<http://jsse.revues.org/1507>> 22 Mar 2019, Sec 4.

¹⁷ Luppino, 4.

be seen as not only a stand-alone story but also as a follow up telling the readers the further fate of Eva. *The Family on Paradise Pier* was later on followed by *An Ark of Light* (2018) which describes in detail the happenings in “Winter.” The novels are not pure fiction: Bolger was only 18 when he met the 73-year old Sheila Fitzgerald, the real life Eva on whom the chronicles are based, as she was living in her caravan in a Mayo field and he published his first book depicting her life much later, five years after her death.¹⁸ As summed up in terms of events in the dense short story “Winter,” Sheila’s life was not an ordinary one. Originating from a Protestant landed gentry family in Donegal, she was living in an unhappy marriage with her husband Freddie and their children Francis and Hazel, haunted by misfortune in the shape of financial troubles, deaths of all her family members and loneliness.

In his essay “‘A River Runs Through It’: Irish History in Contemporary Fiction, Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle,” Damien Short claims that Bolger’s work “presents discussions of social issues”¹⁹ mentioning Bolger’s epilogue to *The Family on Paradise Pier* where the author argues that he knows that “fiction can never tell the full truth,”²⁰ however, “it is better suited to telling ‘altered but equally important truths.’”²¹ This is the case of not only the two previously mentioned Bolger’s novels, but also of “Winter” which illustrates what effect on people it may have to live in a country (and time) where homosexuality is illegal and obtaining a divorce is impossible no matter what the state of the marriage is.

¹⁸ John Boland, “An Ark of Light by Dermot Bolger – Vivid portraits from a life filled with tragedy,” *Independent*, 16 Sep 2018, <<https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/book-reviews/an-ark-of-light-by-dermot-bolger-vivid-portraits-from-a-life-filled-with-tragedy-37314670.html>> 10 Mar 2019.

¹⁹ Damien Short, “‘A River Runs Through It’: Irish History in Contemporary Fiction, Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle,” *No Country for Old Men: Fresh Perspectives on Irish Literature*, ed. Paddy Lyons and Alison O’Malley-Younger (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009) 123.

²⁰ Short, 135.

²¹ Short, 135.

2. 3. Gender Roles: Fitting into the Pattern

Both stories describe the events in the lives of women imprisoned in the stereotypes of their gender roles that were imposed on them and neither of them is even remotely happy with her position in the family; both women are feeling unfulfilled, lonely and abandoned. From the distance one may see the family in “Men and Women” as an average one, however, when having a bit closer look it is obvious that the members are under strong patriarchal command without even a grain of equality present. As the girl mentions at the very start of the story, her father has artificial hips which is why he never gets out of the car to open the fence and always has other people do it for him, mainly the girl or her mother. The narrator sees herself as “handy”²² and “a girl of a thousand uses”²³ opening gates for her father when they go on business together. Seamus is the privileged child in the family who does not do any work at all, he “is going to be somebody, so he doesn’t open gates or clean up shite or carry buckets”²⁴ as he “is the brains in the family.”²⁵ The girl’s mother is not described much in the story, all we know is that “the skin on her hands is hard”²⁶ from physical work on the farm and the narrator wonders if she is going to “become part man, part woman”²⁷ from all the drudgery just like the local lady farmer Bridie. Both the daughter and mother are unnamed, they are simply a generic daughter and mother. This may be understandable since the girl is the narrator, yet we do not hear the husband call the mother by her name; he does not use any term of endearment to address the mother either.

The women in the story are those who are constantly on duty, they are there to serve the men without questioning it which is best demonstrated in the Christmas morning’s scene where the women get up early to look after everything ranging from cooking to looking after

²² Claire Keegan, “Men and Women,” *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*, ed. Anne Enright (London: Granta, 2011) 388.

²³ Keegan, 389.

²⁴ Keegan, 389.

²⁵ Keegan, 389.

²⁶ Keegan, 392.

²⁷ Keegan, 392.

the yard animals while the men get to sleep in and have fun. When the narrator asks the mother why the men do nothing, the only answer she gets from her is “‘They’re men,’ she says, as if this explains everything.”²⁸ At this point the mother seems rather indifferent to her fate but the girl is definitely not content with such an answer. However, she decides not to comment on such an explanation of female servitude “because it is Christmas morning”²⁹ showing that undeterred by growing up in a patriarchal surrounding, she has despite her age developed enough critical thinking to question these stubborn dogmas and the given position of women in a family. She is well aware of the inequality and tired of being inferior to her brother; what she really wants is to “sit beside the fire and be called up to dinner [...] sit behind the wheel of a car and have someone open gates,”³⁰ in other words she wants the life of her brother reading magazines instead of studying and her father being in charge of things. On the very same night the whole family goes out to a local Christmas gathering and the girl openly expresses her not being happy with the father’s lack of gentlemanly behaviour: he cares little about his wife and not even on this occasion when she is dressed well offers her to open the gate which is deeply regretted by the girl who gradually comes to realize how emotionally distant the relationship is. As she says: “My parents do not kiss. In all my life, back as far as I remember, I have never seen them touch.”³¹ There is no love and no respect in their relationship, they are caught in a loveless marriage of two people living next to each other with no physical or emotional connection, the only thing that connects them for now are their children – had there not been them it would have been an enormously lonely existence for the mother locked up at home for most of the time.

On the other hand, in Dermot Bolger’s “Winter” the reader is quickly and with no tiptoeing around introduced to the fact that Eva’s marriage was doomed from the very start:

²⁸ Keegan, 391.

²⁹ Keegan, 391.

³⁰ Keegan, 392.

³¹ Keegan, 394-395.

she married into “the haughty Fitzgerald family who then still owned half the local village and had once owned half of Castlebar”³² used to treating locals with disrespect expecting them “to lift their caps and step off the road whenever a Fitzgerald motor passed,”³³ consequently being feared and disliked by everyone who even remotely knew them, robbing Eva of her opportunities for social interaction that was so needed in her defective marriage. After entering into the marriage Eva was an obedient wife and handed all her money to her vain husband Freddie who spent it all on converting the house into a shooting lodge, something only he cared about, hoping it would bring in other people sharing his passion for hunting, oblivious to the financial consequences his decision may have on his family. This was the start of a long line of disasters that followed Eva throughout the years. The whole shooting lodge plan failed miserably as Freddie forgot to consider “a depression, an economic war and how drink would take possession of him in almost equal proportion to how loneliness took possession of her, with no money, few guests and two small children.”³⁴

Just like the mother in “Men and Women,” Eva was the perfect product of a patriarchal society – putting everyone’s needs before hers, doing as her husband said and tolerating his excesses. She was the perfect wife: before she got married she had artistic aspirations painting and writing poetry, however, “during her marriage she had tried to simply survive”³⁵ keeping the family together. She gave up on her dreams and desires, accepting her fate and “the requirement that women should conform to the idealized, asexualized, pure model of Mother Ireland”³⁶ in a very similar way to the mother in Keegan’s “Men and Women.” Nevertheless, Eva got to use Freddie’s enlistment to her advantage, left London where they had to move because of Freddie’s debts, only to come back with her children to

³² Dermot Bolger, “Winter,” *New Irish Short Stories*, ed. Joseph O’Connor (London: Faber and Faber, 2011) 24.

³³ Bolger, 24.

³⁴ Bolger, 24.

³⁵ Bolger, 25.

³⁶ Mireia Aragay, “Reading Dermot Bolger’s *The Holy Ground*: National Identity, Gender and Sexuality in Post-Colonial Ireland,” *Links&Letters* 4, 1997. 53-64. Core <<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/38997766.pdf>> 12 Mar 2019.

their home in Glanmire Wood, befriending Maureen, a young maid from the village. During her married life Eva was not brave enough to deconstruct the socially imposed maternal norm that was keeping her on a short leash; not only she did not seem to question it at all, she actually embraced it. She had a strong need to care for others, to make them happy, but she took a long time to do anything for her own happiness.

2.4. Gaining the Strength to Break Free

It was only after the children fled the nest that Eva finally got the strength to leave Freddie, starting her quest for happiness and moving closer to Francis in London. As an epitome of a good mother, Eva was enormously protective towards her son, a sensitive soul, living her life through him “intoxicated by his radiance when he was happy and felt a desperate foreboding when forced to witness his despair.”³⁷ His suicide struck Eva and she tried to cure her despair and loneliness by working as a caretaker in a hostel, doing hard work despite her health starting to deteriorate. Her daughter Hazel, having married into a wealthy farming family in Kenya, ended up in “a world of servants and heavy drinking”³⁸ that eventually claimed her life – she committed suicide while intoxicated with alcohol only four years after her brother leaving behind her daughter Alex who, unfortunately, died in Kenya after an insect bite got infected. Afterwards Eva pursued her dream to become an artist and a writer, moving around looking to get rid of her lonesomeness, still she always goes back to her old ways finding someone to look after even though this never brought her happiness or often even any sort of appreciation from those she cared about so much.

As compared to Eva, the mother in Keegan’s “Men and Women” starts taking matters into her own hands much faster, not waiting until old age. A figurative and physical symbol of her independence and a chance for an escape from her loneliness and wretchedness of her

³⁷ Bolger, 28.

³⁸ Bolger, 30.

situation is the family car. As the narrator mentions, there are only two women she knows of who can drive – one being a Protestant and the other one is “rough,”³⁹ neither being the prototype of a lovely Catholic wife and mother. In her essay “Claire Keegan’s New Rural Ireland: Torching the Thatched Cottage,” Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt comments on the female characters in Keegan’s short stories as follows:

Keegan steadfastly refuses to consign her characters to type or to end their stories in predictable fashion. The female protagonists in all of these stories may inhabit recognizable predicaments, but they sidestep categorization, elude easy definition. Fiercely independent, resolutely un-selfpitying, they refuse to submit and thus become agents of their own survival.⁴⁰

On the one hand, the mother puts up with her husband’s tyranny and adultery devoutly making the family happy suppressing her desires, on the other hand, she does something very unusual for a woman in her town – she starts learning to drive, even has a spare key to the car, and thus starts embarking on her private quest for her happiness and sovereignty.

The mother’s quest is only starting with her television driving lessons, in many matters she still is passive and does not seem to confront her husband openly. It is so until the breaking point that takes place at the ball where her husband lets her sit alone and despite his apparent physical disability dances with various women, mainly with the woman he is having an affair with. The girl sees her mother utterly devastated at this sight and even though she is not completely sure what was going on, she knows it has a lot to do with her father intimately dancing. The dance is not only the breaking point of the mother but also start of the girl’s quest – she sees something is wrong and instead of accepting it passively, she decides to take the matters into her own hands (albeit only after her brother refuses to step in, not knowing or

³⁹ Keegan, 390.

⁴⁰ Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt, “Claire Keegan’s New Rural Ireland: Torching the Thatched Cottage,” *The Irish Short Story: Traditions and Trends*, ed. Elke D’hoker and Stephanie Eggermont (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2015) 279-297.

perhaps not caring as to why he should do anything about his father's dance with his lover, consequently being scolded by his sister for not being the one with the brains). The girl stops relying on a man, takes action and asks the mistress to let her dance with her father, coming out of this battle victorious with a strong feeling of sudden strength, a novel sensation for her. Her description of the moment is that "there's a feeling like hatred all around Da. I get the feeling he's helpless, but I don't care. For the first time in my life I have some power. I can butt in and take over, rescue and be rescued."⁴¹ With her first taste of power she sees it is possible to change things she does not like or at least give it a try and express her dissatisfaction with the situation. Here Keegan praises the girl's behaviour, she encourages her in "misbehaving" and going against the tradition of a passive woman, letting her embrace her own self.

The events at the ball help the mother to stop being so passive and resigned, refusing to open the gate which angers him. Off he is to open the gate, not thinking or perhaps in his anger not caring about the broken hand brake; suddenly the car starts moving backwards when the mother hops into the driver's seat and saves the situation. Not only does she stop the car, but she keeps driving through the open gate, past her husband and "all he can do is stand there, clutching his hat."⁴² Just like the daughter had previously had her moment of power, now it is the mother's turn to experience her moment of empowerment saving the situation and her children's health. The girl's intervention at the ball and the mother's driving skills, their mutual willingness and even eagerness to change the habits they are stuck in opens up "the possibility of a female strategic empowerment through coalition."⁴³ Both the ladies actively get their quest for happiness under way, the mother secretly learns to drive which becomes not only a symbol of her independence but also give a strong signal to her daughter

⁴¹ Keegan, 394.

⁴² Keegan, 398.

⁴³ Luppino, 6.

that there is no need to hold onto dogmas and one can perhaps escape them or at least try to make a change.

This willingness to make a change is much less present in the actions of Eva; she is a perfect case of the female selflessness, wanting and needing to be a mother to her children, hostel dwellers, simply anyone. It is the only thing she defines herself by and the only thing that can save her from loneliness or at least help her feel some fulfilment. This internal need of hers forces her to constantly fit herself into a mothering role and making other people happy despite her being free at this point and being able to go follow her dreams as she had previously wanted. She is even there for her thankless husband after long years of separation unable to leave the maternal role behind. Eva is stuck in her self-imposed role of servitude as it has filled her completely and it is all she knows, fearing to leave her old ways as the loneliness could take over her soul again. At the end of the story, finally after so many years so full of despair and being on the go, she is back in Mayo where she had started so many years ago, living in her caravan with only a mother cat and her kittens for company. After all the events in her life Eva is emotionally empty and “the responsibility for their care was the only thing that kept her going.”⁴⁴ At this point in her life she cares little about the occasional company she gets from locals worried about her, feeling void until Maureen, her former maid having come back from America all alone after her husband’s death, shows up at her door. In her presence Eva “felt an infinitesimal stir inside her, a foretaste of human warmth,”⁴⁵ finally having found a soulmate in a friend, feeling a little relief from her loneliness she has been haunted by throughout her whole life.

⁴⁴ Bolger, 33.

⁴⁵ Bolger, 38.

2. 5. Completing the Quest and its Outcomes

Quest as a motif is very common in literature, however, it mainly concerns male heroes who go through a number of tests in order to prove their worth and reach their goals and fame. This quest often takes a physical form and is strongly encouraged, in some communities demanded as a rite of passage and even (if successful) worshipped by the community, hailing the man as a hero. Traditional female quests, on the other hand, tend to help become the heroine a “proper” woman, a poster girl for old-fashioned feminine stereotype who instead of finding herself only ended up losing her sense of identity, fully assimilating into the patriarchal standards. This is not the case in the “Winter” and “Men and Women;” both heroines abandon the need to accommodate the norms and needs of others and by undertaking their quest end up enlightened, recovering from their imprisonment and loneliness, acquiring the will to start the transformation of themselves, their lives and also the lives of those close to them, whether they like it or not. Nevertheless, the journeys that take place in “Winter” and “Men and Women” are of a different kind and with a different outcome: Eva’s quest in “Winter” is already over while the mother’s in “Men and Women” has only just started. Keegan’s tone of the story embraces the new individualism of a woman more relevant to modern Ireland; compared to the first waves of feminism it does not place the reader at one side or another, it simply takes the woman’s possibility of choice as something which is simple there for the taking should she want it.

Both women were prisoners of the system, with their existence permeated by unhappiness and loneliness, however, they managed to dare to rebel against their destiny and make alterations to their lives that had a chance at liberating them from their lonely fate of generic housewives defined by their husbands, their names and jobs. Eva says herself tired of her fate that “My sleepless nights are over because there is nothing left for life to snatch away

from me”⁴⁶ while the mother in “Men and Women” gives hopes to the reader that she will go on with her little personal crusade and unlike Eva she will be more willing to try and step out of her comfort zone, changing things, not suppressing this evolution of self for fear of change, showing her daughter that even a woman in a man’s world has the right and means for self-determination, following with the development in her personal life the progress of Ireland that took place at the end of the 20th century, using all the possibilities available to her.

⁴⁶ Bolger, 42.

Chapter 3: The Male Take on Emotional Numbness in an Individualistic Society

3.1. Displacement in the Post Celtic Tiger Age

In his book *The Modern Irish Novel* Rüdiger Imhof claims that the world as described by John McGahern in his stories and novels is “peopled with characters who are suffering from an urgent sense of loss – loss of health or loss of human love and affection.”⁴⁷ This intense feeling of loss is present not only in the work of McGahern, but in most examples of contemporary short fiction and is usually coupled with various levels of a sense of displacement. As Imhof mentions, this sense of loss mostly leads to a loss of faith and trust and “as a consequence, often a heightened awareness of emptiness and futility of human existence makes itself felt which forces the characters into emotional and intellectual isolation, into inner exile.”⁴⁸ This sense of loss is not necessarily specific to a certain time period; however, with the onset of the new individualistic society and the lessening of the family and community ties during the Celtic Tiger, it became even more prominent and defining to the modern Irish society.

The participation of women in the workforce was steadily increasing in the second half of the 20th century and reached its peak during the Celtic Tiger. Consequently, it initiated a massive change in gender roles and men were as much influenced by this as women; however, unlike the significant and often positive alterations these shifts brought to women, they also introduced issues that were disturbing to the notion of masculinity as defined by a patriarchal society. The fact that men were no longer the sole breadwinners brought on the crisis of self-definition for some men as they ceased to be the head of the family with more and more women striving for their share of rights and equality in the relationship, leaving

⁴⁷Rüdiger Imhof, *The Modern Irish Novel* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2002) 213.

⁴⁸ Imhof, 213.

some feeling robbed of a part of their identity. The decreased social and economic pressure on people to marry and the possibility to obtain a divorce also triggered an increase in single person households (a 36% increase in the amount of single people over the age of 15 in the population between 1996 and 2016 and the number of divorced people almost tripling between 2002 and 2016).⁴⁹ When combined with a greater mobility due to the car ownership becoming more common during the Celtic Tiger and new job opportunities in pharmacology and IT in cities like Dublin and Cork, this meant more people leaving their social circles and living at a distance from their relatives, advancing their feeling of loneliness as well.

3.2. Coping with the Disintegration of Traditional Masculinity in the Modern

Society

As Will H. Courtenay examines in his essay “Constructions of Masculinity and their Influence on Men’s Well-being: A Theory of Gender and Health,” “research indicated that men and boys experience comparatively greater social pressure than women and girls to endorse gendered societal prescriptions,”⁵⁰ mainly the beliefs that men ought to be independent, self-reliant and tough.⁵¹ Men not only tend to accept these notions of masculinity as they are presented by the culture they live in, they also frequently are “active agents in constructing and reconstructing dominant norms of masculinity.”⁵² Kevin Barry’s “Beer Trip to Llandudno, Philip Ó Ceallaigh’s “Walking Away” and Billy O’Callaghan’s “The Body on the Boat” offer a closer look at these stereotypes, how they shape the protagonists in the

⁴⁹ “Census of Population 2016 - Profile 4 Households and Families,” *Central Statistics Office* <<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp4hf/cp4hf/ms/>> 2 Apr. 2019.

⁵⁰ Will H. Courtenay, “Constructions of Masculinity and their Influence on Men’s Well-being: A Theory of Gender and Health,” *Social Science & Medicine* 50 (May 2000) <<http://menshealth.org/code/SSM.PDF>>, 5 Apr. 2019: 1387.

⁵¹ Courtenay, 1387.

⁵² Courtenay, 1388.

stories, ultimately taking a fundamental part in the gloomy state of the minds of the characters.

All the three aforementioned authors have made their names with short story collections: among other awards, the first two of them have been awarded with The Rooney Prize for Irish Literature – Philip Ó Ceallaigh in 2006 while Kevin Barry in 2007 and Billy O’Callaghan got the Irish Book Award in 2013. Despite their success in the field of literature and the representation of their stories in single-author collections as well as various anthologies, there is very little existing criticism on their works apart from short reviews of their collections or a commentary on a singled out story of theirs. Most literary critics still like to focus on the authors who gained their fame before the Celtic Tiger and although there has been an optimistic amount of attention recently paid to a good few contemporary authors both male and female alike, there are still many who have not yet been provided with sufficient recognition and are trapped in a “critical vacuum”⁵³ as D’hoker calls it.

Isolation and weak social connections are the shared theme of the above mentioned short stories with the protagonists reaching different levels of alienation and solitude. The mainly male characters in the stories have long been lost in their loneliness and have adopted diverse means of coping with their situation with various degrees of success. Some of them have a tendency to present it as their own choice, a choice which suits their desires and fits into their opinions on how they wish to live their life such as the unnamed male protagonist of Ó Ceallaigh’s “Walking Away.” Barry’s characters in “Beer Trip to Llandudno” decided to follow the route of ignorance and oblivion drowning their sorrows in beer as well as pretending they were content with their lives and Luke, the young boy in O’Callaghan’s “The Body on the Boat” desperate to belong and be like the rest of the guys, tries so hard to fit into the men’s club that he ends up with blood on his hands.

⁵³ D’hoker, 2.

The characters in the stories are largely influenced by the stereotype of masculine attributes, which incidentally happens to be very much the source of male vulnerability, especially in the times of great changes such as the Celtic Tiger when the gender roles changed while the stereotypes remained to a large extent unchallenged. Showing affection and yearning for emotional closeness are associated with weakness and femininity and as such are seen as something undesirable in the world of manly men. In her essay “Sex-Role Stereotypes: A Current Appraisal,” Inge K. Broverman claims that as these sex roles are uncritically accepted to the extent that “they are incorporated into the self-concepts” of individuals, with their positive value rarely questioned.⁵⁴ Hiding emotions, independence, acting as a leader and knowing the way of the world are characteristics desirable for men to be in possession of⁵⁵ and as such are the defining features of the male characters in the stories, becoming the source of mishaps and even the doom, like in case of Luke, the protagonist of Callaghan’s “The Body on the Boat.”

3.3. Hyper Urbanisation and the Decay of Traditional Communities

All the characters in the discussed stories struggle to express deep feelings and this deficiency goes hand in hand with their failure to form and maintain meaningful relationships that would help them not only fit into the community, but create a functional and coherent community as well. As a result, people live next to each other rather than being part of something, getting to the point that this type of solitude becomes the new normal to them, especially in urban areas. This vanishing of the old models of community that were considered the heart of one’s life has become the norm in contemporary Ireland and the restructuring of a modern community means that people frequently end up trapped in isolation with not too many options of getting

⁵⁴ Inge K. Broverman, “Sex-Role Stereotypes: A Current Appraisal,” *The Psychology of Gender, Volume II*, ed. Carol Nagy Jacklyn (Hants: Edward Elgar, 1992) 85.

⁵⁵ Broverman, 87.

out of it. The Celtic Tiger started the Irish version of the American Dream with the demands of work taking over and long commuting becoming common, leaving people to fend for themselves living in their own miniature universes.

Philip Ó Ceallaigh is a short story writer and translator living in Romania who was the first Irish writer to be shortlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award for his collections *Notes from a Turkish Whorehouse* and *The Pleasant Light of Day*. "Walking Away," his story from the latter short story collection, sums up this new way of living: it is a poignant portrayal of a moment in the life of a middle-aged man so absorbed by his self-inflicted alienation that his main concern when having a one-night stand is not expressing, or even worse, succumbing to any sort of positive feelings for the woman he decided to spend the night with, going as far as not even politely participating in the conversation she is trying to have with him. Having met her at his friend's funeral, an event since which "he had been frozen"⁵⁶ and even more detached from reality, he has been looking for any sort of relief in his reclusiveness. Not that he likes the woman very much, he keeps criticizing everything about her constantly instead of enjoying the evening with her, but he wishes to be in her company since "he felt like holding something solid and imperfect, pulling himself back to earth from those sleepwalking days."⁵⁷ As the narrator describes her, "her way of speaking lacked solemnity"⁵⁸ while he is there just sitting with her on the couch, mindlessly listening to her talking; "She had opened herself to him. He would have liked to participate, to open himself in return, but he was unable."⁵⁹ He only cares about himself, does not try to compromise at all and participate in the conversation.

⁵⁶ Ó Ceallaigh, "Walking Away" *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*, ed. Anne Enright (London: Granta, 2011) 177.

⁵⁷ Ó Ceallaigh, 175.

⁵⁸ Ó Ceallaigh, 175.

⁵⁹ Ó Ceallaigh, 176.

The protagonist is not able to and above all does not want to, he wants to keep his distance instantly convinced that “she was not a person he would grow attached to.”⁶⁰ As he leaves her he says “it was good to be moving, walking away,”⁶¹ walking from everyone and everything, including himself, anytime and every time; it was “a simple solution to a complex problem, that was how someone had defined it, he remembered, feeling the beauty of walking away.”⁶² His attitude towards human relationships in general expresses the current mood in the new individualistic society: as Ruth Barton sums it up, “through that marginalized male figure, the audience is invited to read a wider critique of the new society with its solipsistic concerns and focus on material gain.”⁶³ The new society discarded the old values, the good ones and the stony questionable dogmas alike, without deciding which new values it should adopt and what effect they might potentially have on the society in both the short and the long term. Mindless walking away from everything, friendships, relationships, and marriages became somehow the norm, something way easier to do than reconciling or dealing with problems, focussing only on oneself without a thought of what a person’s decisions might do to others or even to themselves.

The male character in “Walking Away” is looking for the meaning of life and pretends to be finding redemption in fleeing everything and everyone over and over as many of the common reference points and values shared by his community died away, leaving him lost. He tries to find redemption and renew the purpose in his life, however, his one-night affair barely helps him feel alive, instead keeping him locked up in his oblivion and pretence, functioning the same way as beer does for the characters in Kevin Barry’s “Beer Trip to Llandudno.” Kevin Barry is the author of the short story collection *There Are Little Kingdoms*

⁶⁰ Ó Ceallaigh, 176.

⁶¹ Ó Ceallaigh, 177.

⁶² Ó Ceallaigh, 178.

⁶³Ruth Baron, “Between Modernity and Marginality: Celtic Tiger Cinema,” *From Prosperity to Austerity*, ed. Eamon Maher and Eugene O’Brian (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014) 227.

for which he received the Rooney Prize for Irish literature and also got a lot of praise for his first novel *City of Bohane*. “Beer Trip to Llandudno” is a story set in a small coast town in Wales where a group of Real Ale enthusiasts goes for a male-only trip to taste different beers. The outing takes a very unexpected turn when the men run into the ex-girlfriend of one of them and the sadness and regrets over past choices carefully hidden underneath the banter unravel quickly, making the participants give a thought to all the issues they constantly keep drowning in alcohol.

“Beer Trip to Llandudno” starts with a description of a group of men bound by their camaraderie: it “was a sight to behold – we were all of us biggish lads.”⁶⁴ At first, the sense of powerful heroic-like masculinity almost takes over the scene, however, the fact that it was “Real Ale’s Club’s July outing”⁶⁵ suggests that the club’s members were biggish from beer, not exercise, with their camaraderie based on the consumption of alcohol, immediately turning the image of manliness into a comical one; after all they are “shaped like those chaps in the warning illustrations on cardiac charts.”⁶⁶ They take pride in their self-assessed superior knowledge of beer which seems to be everything to them – the drink functions as means of cohesion, building and maintaining their little club, their community. As the narrator says “love is a strong word, but. We were family.”⁶⁷ They are family to each other, family that they do not have, some never had, some used to have and some might never have, just like the men in Billy O’Callaghan’s “The Body on the Boat.”

⁶⁴ Kevin Barry, “Beer Trip to Llandudno,” *Irish Short Stories*, ed. Joseph O’Connor (London: Faber and Faber, 2011) 1.

⁶⁵ Barry, 1.

⁶⁶ Barry, 4.

⁶⁷ Barry, 4.

3.4. “Toxic Masculinity”

Brian Singleton claims that masculinity “is representative of man’s emplacement in social relations”⁶⁸ and “constructed in interaction”⁶⁹ and as has already been mentioned, there are so called right and wrong ways to fit into the set gender roles with rewards for obeying and strengthening them and penalties for breaking the rules. As compared to women where the rules were set by the law, the male roles are more often self-inflicted (and consequently inflicted on others) and in many cases vastly damaging since they demand the rejection of one’s need for human connection, expression of feelings or one’s desires. Not obeying the desired patterns of behaviour means that the man will most likely fail in climbing up the social hierarchy and will never enforce his social position to a level deemed desirable or at least reasonably sufficient. The consequences may be anything from not finding his place in the boy’s club, lacking the interest of women, to getting a good job and progressing with his career. These norms with negative consequences, the “toxic masculinity” as have these harmful features of masculinity been called, create “impoverished minds” who do not know how to function outside of these templates⁷⁰ and are especially prominent in O’Callaghan’s story “The Body on the Boat.”

Billy O’Callaghan is a short story writer and novelist from Cork who won most acclaim for the short story collection *The Things We Lose, The Things We Leave Behind*. “The Body on the Boat” is a dark tale of a group of four fishermen who brought home from the fishing trip more than just a catch of seafood. Despite dealing with similar themes and topics, the tone of the story is considerably different from “Beer Trip to Llandudno”; no humour, no messing around. Obviously, there will not be much joking when a leg of a corpse shows up

⁶⁸ Brian Singleton, *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 71.

⁶⁹ Singleton, 71.

⁷⁰ Samuel Veissière, “The Real Problem with “Toxic Masculinity,” *Psychology Today*, 16 Feb 2018 <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/culture-mind-and-brain/201802/the-real-problem-toxic-masculinity>> 5 Apr 2019.

underneath a pile of fresh fish; however, the group is a perfect example of “toxic masculinity” bringing out the worst in everyone involved. Compared to Barry’s “Beer Trip in Llandudno,” there is not much democracy in the group, the pecking order is clearly set and it is evident who makes the final call when the crew starts deciding on how to solve their sticky situation. Finnegan, the ship captain, is the typical alpha-male making sure he holds onto his position in the pack, hiding his brief moments of weakness: “the others were frightened, and it wouldn’t do to let them see that he was frightened too.”⁷¹ The other two men have known him for ages and Luke, a sixteen year old boy who eventually confesses to the murder of the prostitute, would do anything to be one of them, to belong. Luke is a young lonely boy who seems to have nothing and no one in his life, which is precisely why the crew’s “usual schedule: go ashore, get drunk”⁷² seems so appealing to him. This way of spending the night on the land is a rite of passage for him, just like paying for the services of the prostitute he killed by accident: he “was curious, you know, about what it was like.”⁷³ He would do anything to fit in and be just like the rest, following their patterns of behaviour without questioning them.

The whole story reeks with despair and loneliness, Luke’s attempt to find his place to escape from his separateness and displacement ends with a horrible tragedy, while Finnegan has found his place in the world, but all he has is his boat, his little kingdom, “a world he governed in a manner right or wrong,”⁷⁴ pretending it is all he needs. This attitude of oblivion is very similar to that of the characters in Barry’s “Beer Trip to Llandudno.” The characters love meeting up for beers many “as five nights of the week, more often six” claiming that it is better “than to be stuck in the garden listening to a missus.”⁷⁵ Nevertheless, there is no missus, at least in the case of the narrator and most of the other men actually as well. There used to be

⁷¹ Billy O’Callaghan, “The Body on the Boat,” *In Exile* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2008) 12.

⁷² O’Callaghan, 15.

⁷³ O’Callaghan, 24.

⁷⁴ O’Callaghan, 24.

⁷⁵ Barry, 3.

one up in the narrator's life up to the point where she told him he was "an idle lardarse who had made her life hell,"⁷⁶ ultimately finding herself an "emotionally spectacular"⁷⁷ new man; the rest of the group does not seem to be any luckier.

Throughout the story the characters try to do their best pretending they have no sorrows other than the moments when their beer is not good enough. The moment Mo sees his ex-girlfriend in the pub is the breaking point for them – they are not sure how to act, what to say to Mo, how to talk to the lady in question, they appear to be completely perplexed by the situation. They are all lost souls - "Tom dragged through the courts, Everett half mad, Mo all scratched up and one-balled, Big John jobless for eighteen months. Billy Stroud was content, I suppose, in Billy's own way."⁷⁸ They have nothing left in their lives but despair and beer. While Luke in "The Body on the Boat" failed completely at his attempt to fit in, the beer lovers at least managed to create a little community of their own, however, it does not do much to ease their loneliness. It only fills their lives on a superficial level, they still yearn for more than just alcohol to sort out "the black hole"⁷⁹ that needs filling. They are able to function on their own, not condemned by the new society as ship wrecks and outcasts for not having families, still they do not give an impression of belonging. The only thing they seem to identify themselves by is the Ale Club membership which is nowhere near enough and is only a little consolation for their emptiness.

3.5. Walking Away while Going Nowhere

All the characters in the discussed stories exhibit a strong feeling of loneliness and emptiness, albeit built on different bases. The narrator in "Walking Away" refuses the inherited

⁷⁶ Barry, 17.

⁷⁷ Barry, 19.

⁷⁸ Barry, 21.

⁷⁹ Barry, 21.

definition of the meaningful and immersed into the new Irish individualism look for his own version of substance of life only to always flee from it in the end. “We hardly know what we have here, on this earth, right before our eyes”⁸⁰ he claims and most likely he will never find out if he keeps walking away from everything before giving it a chance, confounded in his ways, unable to free himself. The main protagonist in “Beer Trip to Llandudno” at least has some sort of an epiphany, his friend’s brief moment of happiness and the sight of happy families in Llandudno, “cook-outs on the patios, tiny pockets of glassy laughter”⁸¹ makes him realize that he does not want to be like some of the devout former members of the club who “had passed on at forty-four, at forty-six”⁸² with little more to live for than beer and being joint with the other members in their unhappiness, pretending all is in perfect order. As for “The Body on the Boat,” Luke is so desperate to fit in that he ruins his life when trying too hard to conform to what he sees as the prime example of masculine behaviour as presented by the fishermen. Clay J. Darcy claims that Irish gender constructs “have been influenced by recent shift in Irish religiosity and economic climate, a more heterogeneous society and the growth of media influence”⁸³ consequently leaving “the gender landscape in Ireland saturated with paradoxes and contradictions”⁸⁴ leaving the men often feeling misplaced, not fully knowing which stereotypes to follow and how to define one’s masculinity, as it all depends on the place, time, company and the identity on the subjects as it frequently depends on being “constructed in interaction.”

Unlike women, men tend to force the rules and standards on themselves and these rules are often as rigid as those imposed on women and as seen in the stories, it does nobody any good. They try to flee from their loneliness through ignoring their feelings and pushing

⁸⁰ Ó Ceallaigh, 178.

⁸¹ Barry, 21.

⁸² Barry, 21.

⁸³ Clay J. Darcy, “‘We Don’t Really Give a Fiddlers About Anything’: The Ambiguity, Contradiction and Fluidity of Irish Masculinities,” *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies* 19.1. (2019), 19 Feb 2019 <<https://arrow.dit.ie/ijass/vol19/iss1/3/>> 28. Apr 2019, 16.

⁸⁴ Darcy, 16.

them aside, consequently only deepening their despair. When attempting to escape their situation, the male characters take different paths but there is no easy redemption for any of them. Keegan's and Bolger's female characters undergo a quest, take matters into their own hands and show they mean it. There is a light at the end of the tunnel for the women in "Men and Women" and "Winter," but with the men's flabbiness and lack of devotion to change their fate, at this point there seems to be mostly darkness here.

Chapter 4 – Breaking the Old Orders

4.1. Taboo Topics Making their Way into Wider Awareness

Ireland of today has come a long way from the Irish Free State that set up a Committee on Evil Literature in 1926. This committee made sure that anything with “indecent” content such as the details of crimes, sexual relationships, planned parenting and divorces, as well as the publication of advertisement relating to sexual diseases and female disorders published “in the guise of warning articles”⁸⁵ were not made public. It consisted of male only members, including a high number of clergymen, having a strong effect on what could be published, thus marginalizing the unwanted themes that would not allow those in power to enforce their position in society and to follow their aims and targets. The Catholic Church worked closely with Irish authorities and as Lionel Pilkington claims:

until recently the Catholic Church in Ireland has been involved in a high level of partnership with the state, so much so that by the mid-1960’s it had the highest proportion of clergy and religious to laity as any country in the Catholic world and was the country’s main provider of social services.⁸⁶

This close bond provided the Church with a high degree of influence on not only the media, but also with control over education and the lives of people on the whole, enabling the authorities to remove individuals who failed to conform, resulting in forced adoptions of the children born to single mothers or the incarceration of the “fallen” women in the Magdalene Laundries. Such a level of power made it easy to shape people’s opinions with subtle coercion as well as threats, preaching the Church’s views and ingraining the dogmas into their minds,

⁸⁵ Robert Donovan, “Report of the Committee on Evil Literature,” Oireachtas Library & Research Service, published 1927 <<http://opac.oireachtas.ie/AWData/Library3/Library2/DL068551.pdf>>, 18. 4. 2019, 5.

⁸⁶ Lionel Pilkington, “Religion and the Celtic Tiger: The Cultural Legacies of Anti-Catholicism in Ireland, *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, ed. Peadar Kirby et. Al. (London: Pluto Press, 2002) 135.

leaving all those people who failed to conform to the Church's moral ideals (be it by their fault or by the fault of someone else such as in the cases of victims of sexual abuse or domestic violence) feeling or in some cases even being left out of the community and displaced.

Despite the emancipation of women and the increased openness of Irish society to the formerly taboo topics, there were still issues that were to be touched upon gently and took a lot of time to be discussed more openly. The critical issues that have gained a lot of attention in literature during the Celtic Tiger while being described in a new light are most prominently abortion, sexual abuse by the Catholic clergy and the high numbers of people immigrating from the continental Europe as well as from the rest of the world. It was only in 1991 when Father Brendan Smyth was charged with sexual abuse of minors after years of those in charge sweeping various cases of molestation under the rug and it was in 1992 when the Supreme Court made a decision in the "X Case" which established the right to abortion where the mother's life was under threat.⁸⁷ These were breakthrough changes and as such became greatly publicized as well as the topics of short stories with various often novel focal points and attitudes towards the issue.

4.2. Confessing to the Existence of Abortion in Ireland

Up to the appearance of the "X Case" cases of abortion in Ireland did not exist, at least not officially. With the new ruling there was the option, albeit frequently only theoretical, to obtain abortion should the life of the mother be in danger. This meant that abortion was still unavailable for all other women, even for the victims of rape or in cases of serious foetal abnormalities, leaving women who had decided to undergo this medical treatment to their devices. Despite not allowing the treatment as such, there was a progress with national

⁸⁷ Cahill, ix.

referenda on the right to travel for an abortion and the right to acquire information on abortion being passed in 1992.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, there is little mental support network for the women who decided to have an abortion, leaving them all alone with their difficult decision if they have no family or friends to confide in. Not surprisingly, the most common destination to get an abortion became the United Kingdom, just like the story “Mothers Were All the Same” by Joseph O’Connor portrays. Joseph O’Connor is a former journalist and a prolific short story author, novelist and playwright whose story “Mothers Were All the Same” relates the tale of a young man, Freddie, who encounters his friend Catriona by chance as they both arrive in London, her for a short trip as she calls it and him for a new experience. Their short-lived romance blooms and becomes physical; however, when Catriona comes back the next day with a sick stomach, Freddie has no suspicions over the reason for her short trip to London despite all the hints she had dropped. The story is narrated from Freddie’s point of view who is too immersed in his freshly acquired infatuation and his mindless carelessness (he does not even tell his aunt the truth and instead claims he got stuck in Dublin airport) to be able to read between the lines when her mood swings and her talks about her presumed boyfriend give her away. He does not even get the hints after they get intimate and upon him asking if it was safe “She said yes. Her voice sounded weird. Like she was about to shout.”⁸⁹

The story aptly describes the withdrawal and despair of someone left to their own devices after going abroad to legally do what at home would mean committing a felony. Bound by her shame “she couldn’t let anyone find out. If her parents discovered, they would kill her.”⁹⁰ Catriona only allowed herself to confide in the hotel owners, anonymous people she never had to see again as telling her closest family members was off limits, possibly leaving her tainted in their eyes. Freddie does not fare much better after the circumstances of

⁸⁸ Cahill, x.

⁸⁹ O’Connor, 407.

⁹⁰ O’Connor, 409.

Catriona's trip are revealed to him by the hotel owner. He feels enormously upset with his brief moment of happiness being taken from him, hiding in bed wrapped in blankets tightly so "the whole world was shut out now, on the other side of the darkness."⁹¹ "Mothers Are All the Same" skilfully describes the effect abortion tourism has on not only the woman, but on other involved people as well without explicitly judging the woman's decision, rather focussing on her struggle when there is a total lack of support leaving her all alone. Joseph O'Connor's story explores contemporary issues and how they affect people in post Celtic Tiger Ireland, pushing boundaries of what topics can be discussed, to what extent and above all how. There is no more the need to deliver a strong moral at the end of the tale which would teach the readers a valuable lesson and would help them form the "right" opinion; instead it provides a commentary on the event with the readers having to come to their own reading of the story, proving that limits are no more firmly set and ready to be pushed even further.

4.3. The Church Stripped of its Power and Indefeasibility

The weakening power of the Catholic Church in Ireland has been the topic of many essays, social commentaries and works of fiction during and after the Celtic Tiger era. There are many ways in which this fading influence of the Church has been portrayed but according to Eugene O'Brien the token of this vanishing from the spotlight is the television series *Father Ted*. O'Brien claims that "what is groundbreaking about this programme, however, is the placing of the institutional church as a target of satire, however gentle that satire may be."⁹² Needless to say, the satire in the story is generally everything but gentle, portraying the inhabitants of the pastorate as fools, nevertheless its success is a clear marker of how times have changed. O'Brien argues that "the church is now seen as just another organisation, as part of the way in which society and culture are ordered, and which is subject to the same

⁹¹ O'Connor, 410.

⁹² Eugene O'Brien, *'Kicking Bishop Brennan up the Arse': Negotiating Texts and Contexts in Contemporary Irish Studies* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2009), 116.

rules, regulations and expectations as the other societal structures,”⁹³ stripping the clergy of their inviolability, allowing for the sexual abuse scandals that were coming to light over the past thirty years to be openly examined.

Colm Tóibín is an award-winning author of novels such as *Brooklyn* and *The Master*, whose story “A Priest in the Family” from the collection *Mothers and Sons* depicts the fate of a priest named Frank accused of sexual abuse who is getting ready for the criminal trial with the focus put on the clergyman’s mother Molly and how she deals with the situation when nobody, not even her family, know how to tell her the truth. Molly lives in oblivion claiming “I’ve to be careful what I say in front of Frank, he’s very holy”⁹⁴ while the whole town seems to know more about her family than herself. Everyone seems to be far too well informed about Frank’s indiscretions and the impending trial and all of them, including her children, keep tiptoeing around the topic with nobody really brave enough to tell her the truth. Molly does not live the life of a hermit, she socializes, has visits from her children and grandchildren, yet she seems to live in a private bubble, willingly detached from most of the local events living in her private solitude. She does not show much interest in the church and religion apart from being in the possession of a traditional symbol of honourableness, “a priest in the family.” On the one hand, Molly does not seem too unhappy, on the other hand, her social interactions are a bit like her enjoyment of bridge – “I enjoy it, and then I enjoy when it’s over.”⁹⁵ The mother is for most of the time in the story referred to as “she,” seemingly being yet another generic mother figure like the mother in “Men and Women.”

She seems rather content with her level of solitude, just like the male character in Ó Ceallaigh’s “Walking Away.” Upon finding out the truth about her son she is rather stoic in

⁹³ O’Brien, 116.

⁹⁴ Colm Tóibín, “A Priest in the Family,” *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*, ed. Anne Enright (London: Granta, 2011) 274.

⁹⁵ Tóibín, 278.

her reaction to the news; mainly she is very angry that “the whole town knows”⁹⁶ apart from her. However, there is no usual fainting, crying and the “typical” reactions of an upset woman, only anger leading to her decision to hold her head up high, deciding not to leave, telling her son that “none of us will be going away. I’ll be here.”⁹⁷ She could have left like Ó Ceallaigh’s protagonist, she could have walked away from it all, yet she decided to face her fate. She is powerful, trying not letting it get to her and even though she knows her life will not be easy from now on, she intends on lasting out, being strong unlike her weak son.

The abuse scandals are not something Tóibín primarily focuses on, it is more of a background to the story of a woman whose child did something unspeakable, banishing himself from the community; not only himself, his whole family is facing the ultimate disgrace, especially his mother who already lives a somewhat secluded life. Not that long ago her troublesome son could have been sent off without a trial to another parish where he would hopefully not do it again and the accusations remaining nothing more but accusations, yet with the number of cases that came to the surface in the 1990’s and the legislative reform from 2000 that started the “Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act, 2000” this is no longer possible, at least not so easily. Tóibín’s decision of not letting the protagonist give into her fate while indifferently commenting on the scandal is refreshing. She does not collapse like a stereotypical female, she does not turn to religion in her situation like a good Catholic Irishwoman. She was not too religious to start with and it seems her scepticism towards the faith is not going to change at that point. Just like Joseph O’Connor, Tóibín is not there to teach anyone a lesson creating a binary opposition between the hypocritical Church represented by the evil clergyman and his poor mother, whose life is seriously damaged by her son’s criminal behaviour, instead he is there to comment on one family that disintegrated but remained strong. At the same time, the mother’s lack of interest in religion and Tóibín’s

⁹⁶ Tóibín, 281.

⁹⁷ Tóibín, 287.

description of a paedophile priest as something not too shocking means that the description of the Catholic Church as an institution that no longer is the bearer of moral standards has slowly become acceptable during the Celtic Tiger period, leaving many people sitting on the fence. On the one hand, the Catholic Church is involved various scandals, on the other hand, people keep going to masses which shows the mixed feelings people are likely to have about the current critical issues. Some moral dilemmas are extremely hard to face and abortion and church sexual and abuse scandals are the perfect example of those: women have the right to information about abortion and the existence of abortion tourism is not considered that shocking anymore, but you cannot get the same medical treatment in Ireland yet. The Catholic Church was drowning in immoral and unethical behaviour; still many people find it hard to dismiss it completely.

4.4. The Celtic Tiger and Immigration

Throughout the course of the 1990's and early 2000's Ireland transformed from a relatively mono-ethnic nation into a multicultural one which was caused by the economic growth and the need of the labour market for new workers. After failing to attract a sufficient number of Irish expatriates, people from the continental Europe and even outside started to have a greater access to work permits, should they need them. Between 1995 and 2000 slightly under a quarter of a million people immigrated to Ireland and only half of those were returning Irish emigrants.⁹⁸ The number of immigrants swiftly increased in 2004 when the citizens of the new EU member countries were allowed to start working in Ireland resulting in 85 114 workers from the new EU-10 registering for work in Ireland between May 2004 and April 2005.⁹⁹ Fanning claims:

⁹⁸ Bryan Fanning, "Immigration and the Celtic Tiger," *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, ed. Peadar Kirby et. al. (London: Pluto Press, 2002) 120.

⁹⁹ Fanning, 121.

A neo-liberal approach to immigration, which welcomed migrants able to participate in the labour market and which rejected asylum seeker who were not permitted to work, somehow co-existed with citizenship policies that deepened distinctions between ‘nationals’ and ‘non-nationals.’¹⁰⁰

This attitude towards foreigners as described by Fanning was further supported by the referendum that resulted in the cancellation of automatic granting of the Irish citizenship to the newborn children of non-Irish citizens. According to Fanning, this referendum pitted the Irish nationals against the immigrants by “fostering the cognitive distinctions between an Irish ‘us’ and a non-national ‘them’”¹⁰¹ and even though immigrants became a well-established part of modern day Ireland, the rapidity of the social and economic changes from 1990’s onwards created a lot of inter-cultural clashes.

Such a case of a clash based on the abuse of a position of power of an employer is described in Roddy Doyle’s story “The Pram.” Roddy Doyle is a novelist, screenwriter and dramatist as well as an author of children’s books who was awarded with the Booker Prize in 1993 for his novel *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*. “The Pram” is a horror story introducing a Polish childminder Alina who loses her mind due to her isolation and the mistreatment by her Irish employer. Alina works for the embodiment of the alpha-female, Ms O’Reilly, who treats her with haughtiness, total disrespect and xenophobia based on Alina’s foreign roots. O’Reilly seems to be the head of the house with her main objectives being having as much power over everyone in her life as possible, terrorizing everyone, making people call her by her surname as “it terrified her clients.”¹⁰² The dynamic between Alina and O’Reilly is very similar to that of the mother and the father in Keegan’s “Men and Women;” it is an abusive relationship based on financial as well as social control of the subordinate person with O’Reilly so vile she

¹⁰⁰ Fanning, 122.

¹⁰¹ Fanning, 122.

¹⁰² Roddy Doyle, “The Pram,” *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*, ed. Anne Enright (London: Granta, 2011) 14.

seems to be almost a parody on the Irish motherly figure with her crudeness and obscene vocabulary; she would fit more into the fishing crew in O'Callaghan's "The Body on the Boat." Alina is not allowed to meet up with a man she met who was the only highlight in her life, the only pleasant companion she had as she is all alone in the country. After losing his company thanks to the overly talkative children she babysits, she decides to embark on a private quest to regain authority by telling the children a horror tale. She feels empowered by terrorizing them with fear, however, the story points out that at this time she is already losing her sanity due to her loneliness and mistreatment by her boss, eventually becoming a murderer.

The atmosphere of the story is dense from the very start as Alina has a feeling of suspicion and mistrust as "sometimes, she thought she was being watched."¹⁰³ She lives in constant fear, afraid of her bullying employer, with Mr O'Reilly making unwelcome advances towards her, unable to lock her room to keep her privacy as Ms O'Reilly never gave her the key and not too fond of the spoilt twins she looks after, needing a horror story with a mythical child devouring witch to grasp their attention and to give them at least some limits. Ms O'Reilly is a sinister representative of the new Irish woman born out of the Celtic Tiger era. She is the exact opposite of the tender Irish mother who would sacrifice it all for others, she only cares about power, money and her own objectives – just like the men in Bolger's "Winter" and Keegan's "Men and Women." Labelled as a "Polish cailín"¹⁰⁴ "bloody childminder"¹⁰⁵ and "Polish peasant"¹⁰⁶ she becomes an outcast in her new home, displaced not by her own choice, thus drawing attention to the challenging situation of a migrant in a foreign culture, unable to find safe living and working environment for herself in Ireland. Nevertheless, Doyle does not criticize the Irish society on the whole possibly claiming that the

¹⁰³ Doyle, 13.

¹⁰⁴ Doyle, 24.

¹⁰⁵ Doyle, 22.

¹⁰⁶ Doyle, 30.

newly rich country exploits immigrants without hesitation, shifting from a colonized nation to a colonizer in their behaviour, he merely gives an example of what the racism and mistreatment of a person due to their origin can do to an immigrant without social ties who has nowhere else to go. Doyle draws attention to the challenges multi-culturalism brings to a society that might not be completely ready for it yet. In her essay “Cosmopolitanism in the Contemporary Irish Short Story” Anne Fogarty claims that the theme of “the painful limitations of lonely subjects and submerged communities”¹⁰⁷ so typical for Irish short story is further extended in contemporary texts “by foregrounding awkward, unfinished, non-cosmopolitan subjects,”¹⁰⁸ lost in the Celtic Tiger and post Celtic Tiger Ireland.

¹⁰⁷ Anne Fogarty, “A World of Strangers? Cosmopolitanism in the Contemporary Irish Short Story,” *The Irish Short Story: Traditions and Trends*, ed. Elke D’hoker and Stephanie Eggermont (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2015) 300.

¹⁰⁸ Fogarty, 312.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

As this thesis discussed, loneliness is still a common theme in the Irish short story, however, it is no more related to mostly individuals on the outskirts of society. Literature naturally reacts to new themes and topics in the society, which is even more typical for compact formats like short fiction. Irish society experienced massive economic and social changes during the Celtic Tiger which resulted in a considerable change of gender roles, giving people more opportunities to express themselves, to follow the way they felt about their identity, but on the other hand this fluidity of gender roles left many displaced, mainly men.

Chapter 1 discussed the loneliness women felt in their lifeless marriages and how the social changes allowed them to reject the fates of their mother's generation and leave the life of servitude, dismantling the traditional patriarchal view of women in Irish society. These changes came to being with the waves of feminism, but until the Celtic Tiger women had a considerable lower chance of making a living for themselves and their children should they leave their husband. The economic boom and the legalization of a divorce allowed many women (and men as well) to leave the dysfunctional marriages they were trapped in and to go searching for their happiness and a possible companionship of a new spouse.

Chapter 2 analyzed the new individualism in the post Celtic Tiger society and the struggle of men to find their space in the new Ireland. As Brian Singleton mentions, "history presents masculine identity in Ireland with a succession of martyrs, heroic, defiant,"¹⁰⁹ the representatives of the powerful masculinity, alpha-males leading the way. The female quest, the new individualism and the conflict between the old and the new structures, be it large structures such as the Catholic Church or the smaller structures such as patriarchy, left many men alone and lonely, striving to form a new identity that would allow them to fit into the

¹⁰⁹ Singleton, 8.

new orders while conforming to the desired hard-man masculinity at the same time. Instead they often became the victims of “toxic” masculinity that in the end disabled them from either of those two goals, hopelessly looking for happiness.

The relationship between the social changes during the Celtic Tiger and the depiction of critical issues was dealt with in Chapter 3. Church abuse, reproductive rights and racism in the era of multiculturalism became topics that are not only openly discussed, but they are also analyzed from all points of view without necessarily forcing the official opinion on the reader. These formerly “indecent” themes became so common that they are no longer necessarily the main topic of the story there to shock the readers, but at this time they even serve as a background to another theme, without providing the reader with passionate reaction to the critical issue itself.

Formerly, as claimed by Frank O’Connor, was loneliness stemming from the experience of tramps and artists living as outsiders, nevertheless, in the discussed stories the characters are people who do belong more or less, but at the same time struggle with complex feelings while trying to find their place and happiness in a society full of changes. The mothers in “Men and Women” and “Winter” conform almost perfectly, which is the source of their grief as this mould they have successfully been shaped by becomes their prison. The men in “Walking Away,” “Beer Trip to Llandudno” and “The Body on the Boat” have somewhat found their place in society, but become displaced by the shape of the new Ireland. The characters in “The Pram,” “A Priest in the Family” and “Mothers Are All the Same” are the mementoes of the new Ireland, trapped in situations they and the society are not fully ready for, reminding the reader that the transformation has not been finished yet.

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Summary

This thesis sets out to explore the theme of loneliness and self-determination in contemporary Irish short stories in relation to the gender of the main protagonists, how the major shift in gender roles and especially the position of women in Irish society changed in relation to the Celtic Tiger. As society in Ireland is traditionally patriarchal and family-oriented, there are many social expectations attached to one's gender that often get to play a crucial part in the person's life. The situation the characters in the stories is further complicated by their placement – rural areas versus towns, marginalization of some individuals due to their difference from the majority and one's social standing. Attention will be paid as well to the stereotypes and the struggle to define oneself due to the present outer circumstances shattering the protagonists' identities and therefore leaving them feeling displaced and isolated, left out of the community, consequently affecting their happiness and enforcing their feeling of loneliness.

Frank O'Connor claims that the genre of short story is defined by "an intense awareness of human loneliness" mainly affecting the "outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society," yet contemporary Irish short story focuses more on the self-realization and the feeling of failure and displacement of often seemingly successful individuals. Loneliness as a common feature of contemporary Irish short stories needs to be redefined with all the social, cultural and economic changes in Ireland since the 1990's. This thesis analyzes the extent to which loneliness and the feeling of abandonment is related to the turbulent transformation of Irish society brought on by the Celtic Tiger and how contemporary Irish short stories treat the intertwining of loneliness and the societal development of this era. All the stories discussed in this thesis were written between 1991 and 2012 and are concerned with or were influenced by the contemporary affairs in Irish society. The thesis is divided into

three chapters: the first will discuss the deconstruction of Mother Ireland archetype sacrificing herself for others in Claire Keegan's "Men and Women" (1999) and Dermot Bolger's "Winter"(2003); the second describes the mainly male take on emotional numbness, fulfilment of social and gender roles, desire for social approval and fitting into the community using Kevin Barry's "Beer Trip to Llandudno" (2012), Billy O'Callaghan's "The Body on the Boat" (2008) as well as Philip Ó Ceallaigh's "Walking Away" (2009). The focal point of the third chapter will be the contemporary themes and critical issues in Ireland in Roddy Doyle's "The Pram" (2007), Joseph O'Connor's "Mothers Were All the Same" (1991) in addition to Colm Tóibín's "A Priest in the Family" (2006).

Key Words

Irish Short Story

Celtic Tiger

Loneliness

Self-determination

Gender

Social Changes

Family

Resumé

Cílem této práce je zhodnotit téma osamocení a sebeurčení v současných irských povídkách ve vztahu k pohlaví hlavních protagonistů a analyzovat výrazné změny v mužských a ženských rolích, které se odehrály v období Keltského tygra a jejich následky, zejména týkajících se postavení žen v irské společnosti. Jelikož je společnost v Irsku tradičně patriarchální a orientovaná na rodinu, existuje mnoho očekávání spojených se společenskými rolemi na základě pohlaví, které často hrají klíčovou roli v životě člověka. Osobní i společenskou situaci postav v příbězích dále komplikuje jejich umístění - venkovské oblasti versus města, marginalizace některých jednotlivců vzhledem k jejich odlišnosti od většiny a také společenské postavení jedince. Pozornost bude věnována také stereotypům a snaze postavy sám si určit svou identitu vzhledem k současným vnějším okolnostem, které narušují osobnost protagonistů, kteří se následně cítí odsunuti na okraj společnosti a izolovaně, nezapadající do komunity, což následně ovlivňuje jejich štěstí a spokojenost a upevní pocit osamělosti.

Známý irský spisovatel Frank O'Connor napsal, že žánr povídky je definován „intenzivním povědomím o lidské osamělosti“, které ovlivňuje především „postavy postavené mimo zákon putující po okrajích společnosti“, nicméně současná irská povídka se více zaměřuje na seberealizaci a pocit selhání a osamělosti často zdánlivě úspěšných jedinců. Osamělost jako společný rys současných irských povídek musí být předefinována se všemi sociálními, kulturními a ekonomickými změnami v Irsku od 90. let. Tato práce analyzuje, do jaké míry osamělost a pocit opuštění souvisí s podstatnou změnou irské společnosti, která nastala v období devadesátých let dvacátého století, a jak současné irské povídky pojednávají o prolnutí osamělosti a společenského vývoje této doby. Všechny povídky použité v této práci byly napsány v letech 1991 až 2012 a týkají se nebo byly ovlivněny současnými i nedávnými

změnami v Irsku. Práce je rozdělena do tří kapitol: první zabývá dekonstrukcí archetypu „Mother Ireland“ obětující se pro druhé v povídkách „Men and Women“ od Claire Keegan (1999) a „Winter“ (2003) od Dermot Bolger. Druhá kapitola popisuje hlavně mužské pojetí citového otupění, naplňování společenských a genderových rolí a touhu začlenit se do komunity a mužských společenství za využití povídek „Beer Trip to Llandudno“ (2012) od Kevin Barry, „The Body on the Boat“ (2008) od Billy O’Callaghan a „Walking Away“ (2009) od Philip Ó Ceallaigh. Ústředním bodem třetí kapitoly jsou současná závažná témata v Irsku zmiňovaná v povídkách „The Pram“ (2007) od Roddy Doyle, „Mothers Were All the Same“ (1991) od Joseph O’Connor a „A Priest in the Family“ (2006) od Colm Tóibín.

Klíčová slova

Irská povídka

Keltský Tygr

Osamělost

Sebeurčení

Gender

Změny ve společnosti

Rodina