



# UNIVERSIDAD DE LA RIOJA

## TESIS DOCTORAL

Título
<b>Unreliability in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Narration, Masculinities, and the Affects of Trauma, Guilt and Shame in Damian McNicholl's <i>A Son Called Gabriel</i> and John Boyne's <i>A History of Loneliness and The Heart's Invisible Furies</i></b>
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Unreliability in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Narration, Masculinities, and the Affects of Trauma, Guilt and Shame in Damian McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel* and John Boyne's *A History of Loneliness and The Heart's Invisible Furies*, tesis doctoral de Alicia Muro Llorente, dirigida por María del Mar Asensio Aróstegui y José Díaz-Cuesta Galián (publicada por la Universidad de La Rioja), se difunde bajo una Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial-SinObraDerivada 3.0 Unported.

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**UNIVERSIDAD  
DE LA RIOJA**

**UNRELIABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH FICTION:**

**Narration, Masculinities, and the Affects of Trauma,  
Guilt and Shame in Damian McNicholl's *A Son Called  
Gabriel*, and John Boyne's *A History of  
Loneliness* and *The Heart's Invisible Furies***

*Tesis Doctoral*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis dissertation looks at unreliable narration and its application to contemporary literature from the Republic and the North of Ireland. Three novels, Damian McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel*, and John Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* and *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, have been selected to discuss (un)reliability and its connection to masculinities and the affects of trauma, guilt, and shame. These narratives show the narrators' need for unreliability and how it is portrayed on the page, as well as the representation of trauma, guilt, and shame brought about by the societies of the Republic and the North of Ireland of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

This study deals first with the exploration of the historical and social background of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland especially since the 1950s to the present day. Taking the selected novels as basis, I show the changes that these societies went through mainly in terms of the secularization of the countries and sexuality. Politics is also relevant to discuss the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, an essential part of my analysis.

Next, chapter three focuses on masculinities. The three protagonists of the novels are all male characters and, since their masculinities are a strong and vital element of their identity and characterization, a study on masculinities is needed, especially regarding what it meant to be a man in the 1950s and what it implies now. I focus on Irish masculinities to understand the characters better, as well as fatherhood to explore the relationship of the protagonists with their fathers and sons in order to understand them as men.

Chapter four deals with narration, given that my analysis is based on how trauma, guilt, shame, and even masculinity affect narration. Thus, I pay attention to the figure of the narrator and then move on to unreliable narration. I here discuss different interpretations of this narratological figure through

examples from contemporary literature written in English. I also tackle other related terms such as focalization, Catholic confession, or life narratives, given the plot of the selected novels.

Chapter five is devoted to an analysis of the affects of trauma, memory, guilt, and shame, since their understanding is essential to comprehend next the ideas present in the narratives. All four of them are discussed regarding their relationship to unreliability, as well as their relationship to gender roles—once again, with a focus on masculinities.

This thesis, then, presents a combination of those four chapters (Irish society, masculinities, narration, and the emotions mentioned) in the three novels chosen. Chapters six to eight are devoted to the analyses of *A Son Called Gabriel*, *A History of Loneliness*, and *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, respectively. Finally, chapter nine deals with the conclusions of this thesis, including a proposal for a new classification of unreliable narration, drawn from the three novels.

**Keywords:** unreliability, Ireland, identity, masculinity, trauma, guilt, shame.



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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

“A popular misconception is that we can’t change the past—everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revisiting it”

*The Diviners*, Margaret Laurence

Irish culture in the second half of the twentieth century went through substantial social changes, mainly in terms of the loss of power of the Catholic Church and the subsequent changes in the repression of sexuality and, consequently, homosexuality. These changes have also had an impact on how life stories are told, especially when trauma, guilt, and shame are involved. This thesis dissertation aims at bringing together issues of literary theory and sociology, as well as psychology and philosophy to explore the relationship between narration, masculine identity, and Irish culture through trauma, guilt, and shame in three examples taken from contemporary Irish fiction.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, this study looks at the combination of trauma, guilt, and shame as influenced by Irish society, and the role of the masculine (un)reliable first-person narrator to see how these narrators use their narratives to heal from their wounds and find themselves, just as the country was doing at the end of the century. Given the importance that the narrators of the selected literary works concede to their masculine identities, the analysis of masculinities in these novels is required.

Thus, I analyse the representation of masculine identity in contemporary Irish literature alongside the evolution of Irish culture throughout the second

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from the analyses of the novels chosen, examples from world literature, television, or film have also been used to illustrate the theoretical framework and show that this approach is not exclusively applicable to Irish fiction.

half of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century, mainly regarding religion and sexuality. This analysis is carried out through an extensive study of Damian McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel* (2004),<sup>2</sup> and of John Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* (2014), and *The Heart's Invisible Furies* (2017) focusing on their narratives, the identity of their protagonists and other relevant male characters, and issues of trauma, guilt and shame. These three novels have been chosen to explore the changes that both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland<sup>3</sup> underwent from the 1950s to the 2010s through the narratives of three different types of (un)reliable narrators and focalizers. Thus, I examine the theory around the (un)reliable narrator and its different categories, applying them to the first-person narrators in the selected novels. Besides, their narratives are all quests for identity—McNicholl's novel is a coming-of-age story in which its protagonist struggles to find himself in the oppressive Northern Irish society of the 1960s and 70s, while Boyne's narrators are ageing males who look back on their lives to explore who they are and how they have reached the present moment. The protagonists of the novels chosen are deeply influenced by social and religious changes and so their narratives echo the evolution of their countries. Through their trauma and guilt, those of the whole country arise and allow these narrators to explore their identities as Irish men, as Catholics and homosexuals in some cases, in the meantime.

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<sup>2</sup> McNicholl's novel was first published in 2004. I have been working with its 2017 edition, though, since the publisher and the author decided to rewrite the ending of the novel. I dwell on all this later on in this same chapter.

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned, this thesis combines the changes undergone in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, as the novels have been selected to provide a thorough examination of the whole island. Given the historical conflict between these two regions, I would like to clarify that, unless referring to either the Republic or Northern Ireland specifically, I make use of the word 'Ireland', or 'Irish', to refer to the whole island, thus englobing both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

## 1.1. Why: interest and relevance

The choice of topic for this thesis comes as a result of two personal interests: unreliable narrators and Ireland. I have always felt especially drawn towards the figure of the unreliable narrator,<sup>4</sup> not only in literature but also in film, even in real life. Besides, much study has been devoted to the theory around this figure along the years, as I explain more extensively in chapter four, but I focus here on the application of this type of narrator and focalizer to the representation of men in Irish societies, and on its relation to issues of trauma, guilt and shame. Moreover, the novels chosen are examples of contemporary Irish fiction that, despite their critical acclaim, have not received much research interest yet.<sup>5</sup>

My interest in Ireland comes from the personal experience of studying and living in the country for a period of my life, which left me wanting to know more about its culture and literature.<sup>6</sup> Both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have experienced a great deal of change during the past decades—a change similar to the one witnessed in other countries such as Spain, mainly in terms of secularization. This change is represented by the narrators of the selected novels, especially Boyne's, through the retrospective narratives of their characters' childhood, adolescence, and adulthood until reaching old age.

The interest of this study, therefore, is threefold. First, it can be of interest to those attracted to the figure of the (un)reliable narrator and who want to know more about its different classifications and its relation to issues of guilt, shame, trauma, and memory, as well as its application in contemporary Irish

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<sup>4</sup> I have analysed this figure before (Muro, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, the only literature I could find on these novels involves literary reviews (Dunmore, 2014; Yacovissi, 2015; Lederman, 2017) or interviews with the authors (*WHSmith Blog*, 2018; Gaines, 2020)—with the exception of a paper by Asier Altuna-García de Salazar on Boyne's *The Heart's Invisible Furies* (2020), which is analysed in further sections.

<sup>6</sup> I have also worked on Irish literature before (see Muro, 2018).

fiction. This study also concerns the unreliable focalizer, which has not been given much attention hitherto. Second, this thesis also deals with masculinities, which have been of great interest lately, applied to the selected novels—therefore, it deals with the relationship between masculinity and the emotions mentioned. Thirdly, this study compiles three excellent examples of contemporary Irish literature, both in the Republic and in the North, which show the interests of Irish authors who are willing to explore the way in which their countries have changed along the last decades and the impact those changes have had on Irish population. The novels have been selected to provide a panoramic view of both the Republic and the North of Ireland, in order to appreciate their similarities and differences.

The close relationship between storytelling and unreliability is undeniable. All of us have at least once told a story in a way that is convenient for us, that makes us look better. Some of us keep doing it every time we recount an anecdote or experience—we all have that exaggerated and melodramatic friend whose stories we know well enough so as to take them with a pinch of salt. After all, is complete objectivity and reliability even possible?<sup>7</sup> All first-person narrators become unreliable at certain moments of their narratives. Daily life swarms with instances reinforcing this argument: two siblings explaining to their mother who is to blame for the sudden breaking of an overpriced vase, the two versions of the protagonists of a dull rumour in national television, or two groups of friends and one shared anecdote.

In this sense, I find a scene from the Hollywood classic *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) highly illustrative. Take the musical number “Summer Nights,” in which a stereotypical teenage boy and girl recount to their respective groups of friends a love affair they have had during the summer. Danny Zuko, a young

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<sup>7</sup> As seen below, Friedrich Nietzsche would reject this idea, since Truth does not exist according to him, only its interpretations. For more on this, see Nietzsche (1873).

John Travolta, brags about the affair and the girl's infatuation with him, suggesting that his connection with her was mainly based on a sexual relationship. Accordingly, his friends are in need of details and more information about the actual affair. Meanwhile, Sandy's (Olivia Newton-John) version of the events is quite different. She emphasises Zuko's cuteness and charm, their strolls along the beach and their drinking lemonade, showing off about the fact that they stayed up until ten o'clock. In a stereotypical depiction of a group of teenage girls, her new-made friends ask about love, the amount of money he spent, or whether he owns a car. His friends, on the other hand, want to know if she was easy to seduce or whether she has friends they could be introduced to.

The unreliability of one or of both versions is clearly exposed in this scene, since the two stories contradict each other and, consequently, the audience is unsure of their credibility. Although the scene takes place early on in the film, the viewer has been given enough information about the characters to make a judgment.

The addressees in this case are of high relevance. Zuko's main objective is to brag in front of his friends, to appear as the dominant and experienced male—an aim clearly seen in the first scene of the movie in which he meets Sandy again in Rydell High. The purpose of his story is not to be faithful to the depiction of events, but rather to provide an appealing image of his summer—he is a teenage boy, after all. In a more romanticised version, Sandy tells the story to her new friends, trying to give a more positive image of herself in accordance with the standards of the moment, emphasising her chastity and naiveté.

This example from *Grease* depicts deliberate unreliability, since it is constructed with a specific purpose, and it shows the importance of paying attention to both the narrator and its point of view and the narratee of the story. Besides, it is also illustrative of the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity

that are to be found in popular culture, especially in the 70s. As we discuss below, masculine and feminine ideals have changed in the last decades, and the male and female characters we encounter in the novels under study are different to the mentioned protagonists of *Grease*.

Another relevant example of the relationship between unreliability and storytelling, among the many we encounter in contemporary culture, is the one presented in the 2014 TV show *The Affair* (Showtime). Here unreliability is at the core of the show, since every episode is presented from at least two perspectives. Hence, each episode (especially in the first season) tells the same story from the point of view of the two protagonists, Alison and Noah, and, most of the time, the two versions are not at all the same. Unreliability here has to do with what they remember of the past and how they remember it—from clothing and dialogues, for example, to actions and events, which differ greatly since they are being interrogated by the police as suspects of murder.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, unreliability does not come in isolation but is deeply related to other aspects that may both cause and motivate it, such as trauma, shame, memory, or guilt. The experience of traumatic events might encourage unreliability precisely because of the impossibility of accurately representing or even understanding the traumatic event. Memory is also acutely involved in unreliability, since the loss of memory at old age provokes the misrepresentation of certain past events. In these two cases, unreliability would not be considered deliberate but fallible, for it is not the purpose of the narrator to be untrustworthy—unreliability is rather a product of its incapacity of recollection. Guilt can also be another factor that triggers unreliability, since guilty individuals may not be able to cope with the mistakes of their pasts and,

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<sup>8</sup> This same technique is followed in the episode titled “How do You Remember Me?” of *Modern Love* (Amazon Studios, 2019), in which a date is presented differently as remembered by the two members of a couple.



as a consequence, they cannot come clean about what still haunts them. Similarly, shame can also affect the narrative of a person who cannot admit certain events or thoughts due to their shameful feelings.

Therefore, in this thesis I explore the role of the narrator, both reliable and unreliable, when looking back at his past at the end—and also at the beginning—of his journey. My main purpose is to analyse how (un)reliable narrators and focalizers differ when fulfilling diverse purposes or when writing/speaking from different perspectives, and whether this has something to do with the fact that, in the corpus, all of them are men. In the process, attention is paid to the way in which twentieth- and twenty-first-century Ireland influences the narrators' reliability and brings about issues of trauma, guilt, and shame, which are central to their narratives. Ireland, then, is certainly another protagonist in their stories and, as such, it is analysed in context, paying attention to both its history and society.

## 1.2. How: methodology and structure

As mentioned above, the analysis is based on a discussion of the existing literature regarding the historical and social evolution of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Ireland, the unreliable narrator, and the theories of guilt, shame, trauma and memory, as well as that of identity and masculinities. Some of the most notorious authors in this regard are Wayne C. Booth (1961), Seymour Chatman (1978), Erik Erikson (1994), Cathy Caruth (1995; 1996), James Phelan (1999; 2007; 2017), Greta Olson (2003), or Michael Kimmel (2005a; 2005b), among many others. The main core of the thesis is devoted to the analysis of the selected novels, since they are prime examples of the representation of the above-mentioned issues.

This study begins with an approach to the historical and social background of twentieth-century Ireland, both in the Republic and in the North, and to the changes it has undergone up to the first decades of the twenty-first century. This first contextualising chapter focuses mainly on sexuality and religion, given that they are the two most important social issues examined in the novels. I explore the situation of religion and sexuality (especially homosexuality) from the 50s and 60s onwards, and how the scandals of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church and the secularization of the country have turned those two social aspects of society upside-down. Furthermore, I also tackle politics in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, since knowledge of the topic is especially useful when dealing with *A Son Called Gabriel*.

Next, the topic of masculinities is discussed in depth, paying attention to key terms such as homophobia, and how it relates to masculinity. The concept of contemporary masculinities is also used to depict a contemporary portrayal of what it means to be a man—something that is very useful in the analysis of the novels. Finally, given the purposes of our analysis, the last section of this chapter focuses on Irish masculinities to shed some light onto the male characters we encounter in the selected narratives. This section also discusses fatherhood, which is also analysed when dealing with the novels.

Another chapter that examines the literary theory on the (un)reliable narrator follows. It starts with an approach to the figure of the narrator itself, before dwelling specifically onto the unreliable narrator. Here I explore the problem of definition, since the unreliable narrator has been linked to other figures such as the implied author, which many scholars disagree with. I also discuss the different classifications of unreliable narrators according to different authors such as Patricia Martin (1999), James Phelan (1999; 2007; 2017), Greta Olson (2003), Theresa Heyd (2006), and many others, as well as the textual evidence that may help the reader identify an unreliable narrator. Besides, given the two main social issues under discussion and the

particularities of the narrators in the selected novels, it is also worthwhile to have a look at confessional narratives, old age narratives, and gay narratives.

The next chapter looks into issues of trauma, memory, and guilt, especially when those are related to unreliability. Given the nature of my analysis, the chapter also focuses on Irish trauma, deriving from historical and social aspects.

The core of this study is the analysis of the novels themselves, each of which is allotted a separate chapter. Each of the three chapters is equally divided into three sections: narration, masculine identity, and a third one for issues related to shame, guilt, and trauma. I also analyse, in chronological order, how these three novels—*A Son Called Gabriel*, *A History of Loneliness* and *The Heart's Invisible Furies*—relate to one another.

### 1.3. What: objectives and corpus of analysis

This thesis dissertation aims at exploring unreliable narration in more depth, paying especial attention to its application in contemporary Irish literature, and contributing to the existing literature in the field by proposing a new classification taken from the selected novels. Given the interest in Irish and Northern Irish fiction, my purpose inevitably implies analysing the influence of the Church in the Republic and the North as seen in the Irish society of the twentieth century and the changes that took place in the whole island, especially with the arrival of the media in the 1960s and the appearance of the scandals of sexual assault within the Irish Catholic Church. Gender roles and sexuality are deeply influenced by these changes, to the extent that previous Catholic doctrines related to the role of women or homosexuality are overturned in the last decades of the twentieth century. Three contemporary Irish novels have been chosen as examples of narratives depicting the Irish

sociocultural ambiance through their narrators and protagonists, who make use of (un)reliable narration to come to terms with their lives. My analysis serves different purposes, attempting to give answers to several related questions—all addressed to the selected novels:

a. *What does being a man in Ireland in the twentieth century imply? And being a homosexual? How does society in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland influence this?* The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have evolved from deeply religious countries where the all-powering Catholic Church controlled all social issues such as schools or neighbourhoods, for instance, to the secularization of these regions. I analyse the changes this implies especially in terms of gender roles and sexuality.

b. *Why do the novels feature (un)reliable narration? How is it reflected in the page?* A study into the mind of the characters, both as narrators and focalizers, serves to determine the choices they make in the narrative itself. Based on an extensive exploration of the existing literature around unreliable narration, the three narrators and focalizers are categorized accordingly—inspiring also a new classification of (un)reliable narration.

c. *How do the protagonists face their quests for identity? What is the connection between identity and manhood?* This study juxtaposes those sociocultural changes with the experience of the narrators of the selected novels, since all three of them position their evolution and finding of their identity alongside that of their own country. The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland are changing, and so are our protagonists. This also serves to explore contemporary masculinities against those found decades ago in order to comprehend the protagonists and other male characters found in the novels. I wonder whether their being men influences their narratives,

and whether they use narration to create new, more modern masculine identities. This helps to explore the relationship between narration and identity, to see whether a quest for identity can also happen in (un)reliable narration.

d. *How do the rest of the male characters face masculinities and how do they influence the narrators' identities? What is the relationship between fatherhood and masculinities?* The focus here is on the rest of the male characters against the protagonists, to analyse how the former influence the latter, paying especial attention to the figure of the father.

e. *How are masculinities and (un)reliability related to issues of trauma, guilt, and shame?* I discern whether the (un)reliability of those narrators and focalizers is necessary to tackle issues of trauma, guilt, and shame, which are affects that the narrators experience due to the pressure of the Irish society of the time. I also wonder whether masculine identities have anything to do with the emotions mentioned.

The underlying and common element to all those questions is unreliable narration. My interest, therefore, is not only to provide answers to questions a to e, but also to explore their connection to unreliable narration. Thus, I look at the potential unreliability of these narrators and focalizers and what it implies in their narratives, especially in terms of identity and the three affects mentioned, taking into account the background of the Irish and Northern Irish societies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This way, the three novels show the beginning, the development, and the outcome of the secularization of the Republic and the North of Ireland and everything that it implies in terms of trauma, guilt, and shame for the protagonists.

To achieve my objectives, my corpus is composed of three novels from contemporary Irish and Northern Irish literature: one written by Damian McNicholl (Northern Ireland), and two by John Boyne (Dublin). The novels

chosen, McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel* (2004), and Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* (2014) and *The Heart's Invisible Furies* (2017), are excellent examples of how contemporary Irish authors (and, therefore, a twenty-first-century audience) explore the recent past of their countries, through characters who have been deeply influenced by Irish society and by the all-powering Catholic Church that ruled the island for most part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moreover, even if they are fictions, the novels also serve as fictional autobiographies for their authors, since both McNicholl and Boyne are homosexual writers who grew up in an oppressive religious region and suffered some of the misfortunes attributed to their protagonists. Damian McNicholl described *A Son Called Gabriel* as "fiction rooted in experience" (Gaines, n.pag.) as shown, for instance, by the fact that he also had to flee from Ireland in order to express himself freely. Similarly, John Boyne writes at the end of *The Heart's Invisible Furies* that "many of [Cyril's] experiences, I'm ashamed to admit, echo my own during my youth" (709), making this novel his most personal.

The novels discuss the history of the countries in retrospect, through the lives of Gabriel, Odran, and Cyril, to examine how the island of Ireland has changed during the last seventy years to become what it is at the present moment. Apart from their suitability for the topic of our research, these novels have also been selected for their literary quality. The three of them have been well-acclaimed by critics and readers alike,<sup>9</sup> and I personally believe they are heart-warming, poignant and yet hilarious at times. The fact that they are examples from both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is also

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<sup>9</sup> *A Son Called Gabriel* was a finalist for a Lambda Award (to LGBTQ literature) in 2005. John Boyne's novels have been translated into over fifty languages, and the author won three Irish Book awards and other international awards (*Penguin Random House*). Moreover, the literary community *Goodreads* has compiled thirty-eight editions of *A History of Loneliness* and over seventy of *The Heart's Invisible Furies* (in both cases including translations into other languages, paperback editions, or audiobooks). John Boyne himself argues that *The Heart's Invisible Furies* is his most popular novel, after *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* ("Las furias invisibles del corazón").

enlightening, since they provide a perspective of the changes undergone by the whole island.

Damian McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel* is a coming-of-age novel set in Northern Ireland during the 1960s and 70s. It tells the story of Gabriel Harkin since his time at school until he is eighteen and leaves for university in London. Gabriel comes from a very Catholic family and grows up under the shadow of a family secret, having to do with his uncle Brendan, a priest, who left for Africa years ago and did not even return for Gabriel's father's funeral. Besides, Gabriel is picked at at school because he is keen on playing with girls instead of playing football, and he shows to be an innocent and sensitive boy from the beginning of the novel. His naiveté results in his introduction to the world of sexuality through games with Noel, an older neighbour, which he enjoys but does not fully understand. When he realizes that what he does with Noel is an abomination, as his mother sees it, Gabriel turns to God and tries to stop his impulses, but it will be only some years until he is involved in the same kind of practices with his cousin Connor. They both hide their homosexuality behind the fact that they are thinking about girls when they are masturbating each other, but it is a matter of time (following his unsuccessful relationships with some girls) until Gabriel finally embraces his identity and understands who he really is.

The background of the novel involves Northern Irish politics, mainly conflicts between Catholics and Protestants and the incursions of some of the characters with the IRA (Irish Republican Army). Consequently, the novel presents the conflict from a personal perspective, one that affects the characters themselves—echoing how it affects the countries involved. Moreover, by the end of the novel, Gabriel learns that his uncle Brendan is actually his father, Gabriel being the outcome of Brendan's involvement with a woman before his joining priesthood. Gabriel also confesses his homosexuality to his family, who take some time to fully accept him but

eventually do, and he starts a relationship with a British soldier. The end of the novel sees Gabriel leaving for London with Richie, estranged by his own family for falling in love with the enemy.

My first encounter with *A Son Called Gabriel* was a 2016 digital version of the novel, which was originally published in 2004. I enjoyed the novel so much that I decided to buy it in paperback so that it would be easier for me to re-read and carry out its analysis in this dissertation. I did not pay any attention to the year of publication of the novel I bought, since I thought there would be no difference between this one and the novel I had previously read. Although my paperback copy included a new afterword by the author, I did not think too much about it. I started reading it and, since I had only read it some months before, I remembered much of what was supposed to happen. The real surprise came when I encountered Richie for the first time. I did not remember this character from the novel I had read, but I thought that perhaps I could not remember him properly (as it often happens to me) because it was a minor character. I did not feel confident about this, however, so I searched for Richie in my digital version of the novel and, to my bewilderment, the search showed no results. I tried looking it up with different spellings, just in case, but nothing came up. Intrigued, I was determined to keep on reading, only to find out that the ending of the novel was completely different from the one I remembered. The original 2004 version of the novel (the one I had read before) had Gabriel revealing to his mother that he was gay, only for her to say that it was just a phase and to send him to the doctor, who claimed the same and prescribed some Valium. Gabriel did not break up with Fiona but left for England with her instead; he also learned in a different way about his real parents and, most importantly, he never had a real relationship with a man. The novel ended thus, with Gabriel believing he would find a new beginning in London, where *perhaps* he could be accepted for who he was as opposed to the oppression he had found in Ireland.



The new version of the novel was much more interesting in my opinion, mainly because it does justice to its characters. As I have mentioned, the 2017 version of the novel I acquired features a needed afterword by the author, since it was essential to explain why there were changes to the original novel. McNicholl's main reason to change the ending of the novel is that he felt he had not been true to Gabriel (388), probably because the novel advances a possible happy future in England, but Gabriel is not accepted by anyone in his hometown. The first version of the novel portrayed Northern Ireland as a homophobic, repressive, and non-understanding community—even if it was—but showed no hope for homosexual people. With the arrival of same-sex marriage in the USA, where McNicholl resides, he decided to rewrite the main idea of the novel, especially its ending, not only for Gabriel but also for all the individuals he represents. As McNicholl puts it:

I felt compelled to acknowledge the silent gay men and women who grew up in the same eras as [Gabriel] did, who were as reconciled and happy with the newly minted adults they'd become as most LGBT people are today, but who also understood they had to escape the homophobia and sectarianism of rural Northern Ireland and live their dignified truth in England's cities and beyond.  
(389)

With the new version of the novel, McNicholl recognizes those who fought against homophobia in Northern Ireland during those decades, and perhaps those who found love in such a dark place but had to move elsewhere to escape from repression. Being the last and hitherto definitive version, this is the edition I analyse in this thesis. Unlike in the first version, Gabriel is able here to find his identity as an Irish Catholic gay man and to achieve approval and understanding from the members of his family.

In *A History of Loneliness*, John Boyne presents the reader with the story of Father Odran Yates, a priest surrounded by the scandal of sexual abuse perpetrated by the Catholic Church in Ireland and its cover-up by its high spheres of power. The novel follows Odran as he examines his past trying to understand his journey up to the present moment. He deals with his childhood, first, and focuses on the traumatic episode he lived in 1964 when his father drowned his little brother Cahal and then killed himself. Odran revisits his adolescence and his time in the seminary next, emphasising his friendship with Tom Cardle. His year abroad in Rome, his duties assisting the Pope in the crucial year of 1978 and his shameful involvement with a waitress follow. His narrative comes to an end with his final years as an English teacher at an Irish school. Throughout the novel, Odran shows his naiveté and innocence regarding important aspects, which drove him to make certain assumptions about the people surrounding him that do not prove to be completely accurate or reliable. He witnesses certain events and comments that should have drawn his attention towards the fact that some people around him are behaving immorally, but he rather turns his head and dismisses those suspicions. The core of the novel, then, maps Tom Cardle (Odran's best friend) and other priests' abuse of young children in parishes and schools, and the way in which the Church covers them up to preserve its reputation and elude justice. At the end of the novel we learn that Odran had had more than mere suspicions to condemn others' (but mainly Tom's) behaviour and still did nothing. It is precisely his passivity that haunts him until the present day, adding to his guilty conscience and provoking the confessional novel.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> It was not until June 2020 that this novel was translated into Spanish with the title *Las huellas del silencio* (Salamandra). This is a suitable title, even if it is not a direct translation of the original one, since it evokes the main theme of the novel, namely the marks or the burden that the silence of the past had on the protagonist. In June 2021, *The Heart's Invisible Furies* was also translated into Spanish under the title *Las furias invisibles del corazón* (Salamandra), a literal translation of the novel's original title. No Spanish translation has been made yet of *A Son Called Gabriel*, however.

In *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, Boyne portrays the life of an elderly man, Cyril Avery, narrating his life and miseries as a homosexual growing up in Ireland during the second half of the twentieth century, up to the year 2015 when same-sex marriage was legalized by popular vote—making Ireland the first country to do so. Some reviews have argued that the novel “tells the story of Ireland through one man’s life” (*WHSmith*, n.pag.). I would argue that this seems slightly ambitious, especially if we take into account that some of the most important events of the history of twentieth-century Ireland are not in the novel (such as the Troubles in Northern Ireland, for instance). *A History of Loneliness* helps cover some of them, though, making both novels almost a set. Much as it was the case with *A History of Loneliness*, the narrator of *The Heart's Invisible Furies* also revisits his life in time spans, in this case periods of seven years.<sup>11</sup> The novel begins in 1945 with Cyril’s mother, Catherine Goggin, being expelled from her community in Goleen, West Cork, due to her being pregnant at sixteen and not being married. She consequently finds herself living in Dublin with Seán MacIntyre and Jack Smoot, who are later revealed to be a couple, and ends up giving her child in adoption when he is born, after witnessing Seán’s father extremely violent attack in which he kills his own son, wanting to “to beat some decency into [him]” (54), and leaves Jack severely injured.

Cyril, Catherine’s son, is then adopted by Charles and Maude Avery, an unusual couple who constantly reminds Cyril that he is not a real Avery and shows no signs of fondness towards him. At a quite early stage in his life, Cyril realizes that what he feels for his best friend Julian Woodbead is not just mere affection but rather an obsession. The novel follows Cyril during his years at a Catholic boarding school, where he does his best to hide his true desires, and

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<sup>11</sup> Boyne claims that the fact that “our bodies change all their cells every seven years and we almost become different people” was an important element to decide to use this time span (*WHSmith*, n.pag.).

into his adulthood, when he is seen engaging in furtive sexual encounters with men in hidden alleys, being these the first and only sexual practices he experiences until his late twenties. Driven by the highly religious Irish society he lives in, Cyril ends up getting married to Alice, Julian's sister, although he just makes it as far as the wedding reception, since he flees Ireland after revealing to Julian his true feelings for him, which marks the end of Part One.

In Part Two, seven years later, Cyril finds himself living in Amsterdam with Bastiaan, his first boyfriend and true love, and Ignac, a teenager they save from living and working in the streets and take in as if he was their own kid. Thus, Boyne juxtaposes the Irish and Danish societies by presenting Cyril's life in Amsterdam with the couple's later life in New York City in 1987, when Cyril volunteers at a hospital assisting victims of AIDS. It is here that he reencounters his friend Julian, who is dying of AIDS and refuses to let his family know for fear of their thinking he is a homosexual. Prejudices against AIDS as an illness primarily affecting homosexuals are clearly exposed here. Boyne also brings to light the violent reaction of a part of US society against same-sex couples, who are even physically attacked—an awful example of which is Bastiaan's murder at the end of Part Two of the novel. After this episode, Cyril, who has just learned from Julian that the former had fathered a son from his first and only sexual encounter with Alice before they were married, moves back to Dublin and tries to reunite with his family, attempting to atone and have a relationship with his son Liam.

During all this time, Cyril has several brief but meaningful encounters with his real mother, Catherine Goggin, even if neither of them knows the real identity of the other. It is in 2001 when mother and son finally recognize one another and try to make up for their time apart. The novel ends in 2015, when Ireland accepts same-sex marriage, and Cyril finally knows happiness after decades of loneliness, exile, shame, and rejection.

The three novels that form the corpus of my analysis are very much related to one another. Just as Odran represents the whole of a population in denial, those people who knew about the hidden abuse of children and did nothing, Cyril and Gabriel are also representative of the previous generations of homosexuals in Ireland who were engaged in real struggles to be themselves. *A History of Loneliness* focuses on the culprits of the scandals, those who pleaded wilful ignorance, whereas *A Son Called Gabriel* and *The Heart's Invisible Furies* leave the deserved spotlight for the victims after decades of hiding in the shadows.



## CHAPTER TWO

### HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND: IRELAND IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

“When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.”

*Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt

*A History of Loneliness* begins with the following statement: “I did not become ashamed of being Irish until I was well into the middle years of my life” (9). Taking into account the main criticism of the novel, the protagonist and narrator is referring here to the scandals of sexual abuse that began to be uncovered during the 90s, as I discuss in chapter seven. But what exactly does being Irish really mean? What does Irishness imply?<sup>12</sup>

I start by shedding some light on what identity means, before dwelling deeper into the notion of Irish identity itself. Identity studies seem to have been in vogue for some decades, which emphasises the importance of this notion (Halperin, 2006). For Manuel Castells, “[i]dentity is people’s source of meaning and experience” (6), and Gershen Kaufman refers to the term as “[reflecting] the history of each *developing* personality” (251, emphasis added). Indeed, ‘developing’ seems to be the key, since authors like Sarah O’Connor and

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<sup>12</sup> Roddy Doyle provides an answer to this question in his short story “57% Irish” (2007), an interesting as well as entertaining approach to what it means to be Irish, namely the kind of feelings or emotions that an Irish person needs to have in order to apply as truly Irish.

Christopher C. Shepard argue that “identity is always fluid and developing, open-ended rather than closed, contradictory rather than consistent” (1). Argentinian philosopher Darío Sztajnszrajber agrees with this view, since he claims that

Frente a esa idea de identidad única está la idea de identificación como identidad múltiple [...]. La idea de que somos identidades múltiples es que no hay una de las identidades que se vuelva central, sino que somos más bien como un plexo de identificaciones que están en permanente pugna entre sí, y que cada tanto una de las cuales se vuelve lo que nos expresa lo que somos. (“La identidad”)<sup>13</sup>

In other words, Sztajnszrajber argues that identity is the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’, “es ese motor que nos impulsa a querer saber quiénes somos, entendiendo que nunca vamos a llegar a buen puerto, [...] a una definición última de quiénes somos” (“La identidad”).<sup>14</sup> Alberto Melucci also alludes to the difficulty of “answering the basic question ‘Who am I?’” since “we hardly recognize ourselves in our memories” (2; in Baillie 7). Along the same lines, Tom Inglis argues that

[o]ur identities and sense of self are formed during childhood and adolescence. These inherited social identities change and develop over time, mainly by becoming interwoven in other webs of meaning and the development of more personal identities, and also by the way we look back and remember the past. Identity is built on memory. (*Meanings of Life* 47)

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<sup>13</sup> “Faced with this idea of a single identity is the idea of identification as multiple identity [...]. The idea that we are multiple identities is that there is not one of the identities that becomes central, but that we are rather like a plexus of identifications that are in permanent conflict with each other, and that from time to time one of these becomes what expresses what we are” (my translation).

<sup>14</sup> “it is the engine that drives us to want to know who we are, understanding that we will never come to fruition, [...] to a final definition of who we are” (my translation).



Indeed, identity, even if extremely difficult to define (Erikson 15), refers to what makes us different and unique, to what gives coherence to our existence and answers to the question “who am I?” Identity is also the relationship of the self with a society, both with one’s family and the community one belongs to. In this regard, it may be said that there are three concepts that form one’s identity: given, chosen, and core identities:

Your given identity consists of the conditions that are outside of your control such as birthplace, gender, certain family roles or physical characteristics. Your chosen identity includes the characteristics that you choose such as occupation, hobbies and political affiliation. Your core identity is made up of the attributes that make you unique as an individual such as behaviors, values, skills, and items from your given and chosen category. (“Social Identity Mapping”, n.pag.)

As shall be seen in the respective chapters, the protagonists of the selected novels are struggling with their three categories: their given identity, namely their nationality as Irish; their chosen identities, that is, their Catholic background (in this case, however, it is chosen not by themselves but by the society they live in); and their core identities—their behaviours, causing guilt and shame, and their sexual orientation.

Other authors emphasise the need of telling to find one’s identity: "Our identity is formed through the story we tell about ourselves and is remade across the course of life in order to preserve a sense of continuity as we encounter these life changes" (Cohler 217).<sup>15</sup> Besides, identity is essential for any individual since, according to Erikson, "in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity" (130).

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<sup>15</sup> As seen later on, Cyril’s identity seems to evolve through time as he travels and matures, eventually coming to terms with his reality.

Childhood and adolescence are also highly important periods for the development of one's sexual identity, since it is here when experimentation with and the exploration of one's own body take place (Freud, 2016). The three narrators and protagonists of the novels chosen explore their identities throughout their narratives, turning their stories into a quest for identity. In these terms, childhood and adolescence are paramount to analyse their sense of identity.

Likewise, defining Irishness is no simple matter either. Critics argue that "defining Irishness is also an increasingly complex issue in contemporary Ireland, poised as it is between tradition and global modernity" (Ní Éigeartaigh, n.pag.). As we see below, Ireland underwent deep changes during the second half of the twentieth century, and since then it has learnt to combine the tradition of its culture and the modernity that the rest of the world required of the country. Religion and sexuality, as we discuss below, are of extreme importance in this regard.

Irishness is also difficult to define because Ireland, despite being a small island in western Europe, has undergone several episodes of migration, the most notorious being the one caused by the Great Famine of the nineteenth century. The economic crisis of 2008 also saw a certain exodus, if not of the same magnitude, with the fall of the Celtic Tiger. In this regard, Stephanie Schwerter argues that this had an impact not only in migration, but also in the "decisive influence on the loosening of family and community ties" (106), which have a deep effect in the selected novels. Besides, María Amor Barros-Del Río aptly adds that these migratory flows disrupted in Ireland "the intimate relation between the land and a constructed sense of identity," since Ireland was first a British colony and then an independent nation (40). Consequently, the result of the Irish diaspora is a deeply globalised country, with Irishness an equally "globalised concept," for it is estimated that "approximately seventy million people worldwide [claim] Irish nationality" (McWilliams and Murray 1-

2).<sup>16</sup> Consequently, being Irish nowadays is no longer reduced to the stereotyped image of the Irish as redheaded people who play the fiddle and believe in following the leprechauns along the rainbow, but rather a mixed, heterogeneous people of different colours, languages, religions, and even nationalities. Paradoxically, the road to Irishness is not a bed of roses, since the Irish resemble a close community to which it is very difficult to gain access. Although Ireland is seen as a warming and welcoming nation, and indeed it is, outsiders claiming an Irish identity seem to have a hard time earning their place as Irish.<sup>17</sup> Terms like ‘plastic Paddy’ denote people born outside of Ireland who proudly display their Irishness (perhaps due to their Irish descendants), but who get rejected by Irish people born in Ireland who feel Irishness as something exclusive to those born and raised in the island (*Collins Dictionary*; Walsh 2016). Therefore, trying to define what Irishness means is quite complex nowadays, given the heterogenous groups it combines.

In any case, Irish identity, especially in the twentieth century, was deeply rooted in and based on three intertwined pillars—religion, sexuality, and politics. Consequently, I deal now with each of them respectively.

## 2.1. Religion

Throughout the nineteenth century and most part of the twentieth century, Ireland was predominantly a Catholic country in which the Church was the ruler, controlling the most significant aspects of Irish society, namely education, morality, health, economy, or politics (Inglis, *Moral Monopoly* 245;

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<sup>16</sup> When, as of September 2021, the estimated population of the Republic of Ireland is of over five million people (“Press Statement Population”).

<sup>17</sup> In 2018, an exhibition called “IAmIrish” showed Irish people from South African or Pakistani origins, for example, sharing their experiences being Irish in a country that did not always accept them as such. For more on this, see Tierney 2018, and <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqWKR7eq-CQ>> (Accessed 5 Sept 2021).

Smyth, 2012; Andersen 17). In other words, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland,

the Catholic Church established a monopoly over religion and the meaning of life. Its teachings and theologies provided a detailed, comprehensive worldview. Its symbols, beliefs, and practices became key ingredients in the webs of meanings into which most Irish people were born and suspended and the webs they spun afresh in their everyday lives. (Inglis, *Meanings of Life* 123)

Consequently, for the most part of the twentieth century studies have “portrayed Irish culture as deeply Catholic, conservative, hierarchical, and patriarchal in which sex, desire, and self were repressed” (Inglis, *Meanings of Life* 8). This is shown in *A History of Loneliness* and in *A Son Called Gabriel*, where the communities Odran or Cyril have grown up in are deeply marked by Catholicism—male children are almost forced to become priests, this being an emblem of honour and pride for their mothers, and where any kind of sexual thought is a sign of sin and shame. Indeed, when discussing the role of the Irish families in America, Mary Gail Frawley-O’Dea argues that the Irish longed for respectability in America, and “the road to respectability most cherished by Irish families, especially by mothers, was to send a son to the priesthood” (13).<sup>18</sup> Besides, women were relegated to the roles of mothers and wives and followed the doctrines of the Church at home. James M. Cahalan argues in this regard that

[s]exism was inscribed directly into the Irish constitution of 1937, which recognized the ‘special status’ of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland, banned divorce, and asserted that a woman’s place was in the home. Although

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<sup>18</sup> This same idea is present in Damian McNicholl’s *A Son Called Gabriel*: “It’s the most wonderful thing for a mother to have a son entering the priesthood. I can think of no greater honor” (232). The same idea is seen in *A History of Loneliness*, as shown in chapter seven.

ensorship and many other conservative aspects of the Free State greatly relaxed beginning in the late 1950s, change regarding issues key to gender relationships—such as divorce or birth control—have been much longer in coming and in some cases have not yet occurred. (20)<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, the post-Famine period in Ireland during the nineteenth-century saw similar attitudes towards women. Alluding to this period and referring to the concepts of ‘devotional revolution’ and ‘familism,’ Melania Terrazas claims that

[t]he presence of the Catholic priest in the homes, surveying the people’s everyday lives and habits, including their sexual and reproductive patterns, became overwhelming. Such a strict scrutiny of family matters and, particularly, of sexual behavior, increased the religions [sic] and moral pressure on women. (135)

Similarly, for most part of the twentieth century being Catholic was something deeply rooted in Irish identity, although “not only because [Irish people] had long identified with the Church, but for the simple reason that it was also a means of political resistance to British rule” (Nault 130). Elizabeth Cullingford shares the same idea: “Irishness has been construed, negatively by imperialists and positively by the Irish themselves, as difference from English capitalist modernity” (159). As a result, Irishness implied Catholicism, and “[m]ost Irishmen accepted as axiomatic the belief that there was one Irish Catholic nation: the corollary was that non-Catholic elements were alien” (J. Murphy 145). In other words, “not only is Catholicism intricately linked with Irish

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<sup>19</sup> It should be noted here that Cahalan’s volume was published in 1999, therefore some of the legislations he mentions have fortunately been changed in Ireland in recent years, such as the legalization of divorce, the use of contraceptives, and even abortion. For instance, he claims that “[f]or many women in the Republic, it remains a long-standing tradition to travel to England to have abortions that are illegal in the twenty-six Irish counties” (20). Fortunately, this is not happening anymore.

national identity, but it is also intertwined with the personal identities of Irish people” (Andersen 16). John Murphy continues his analysis of contemporary Irish identity claiming that

in the sense of *belonging* to a homogenous society, the consciousness of being Catholic is still a prominent part of Irishness. But the *nature* of Irish Catholicism—its devotional and religious nature—is changing as rapidly now as it did, say, in the two decades after the Famine. The origins of the change date to a combination of factors in the early 1960s. [...] The great change now would seem to be the loss of the integration of the devotional life with everyday activity, the loss, in a word, of the sense of the supernatural. [...] The new Catholicism is characterised by a considerable exercising of lay independence in the sphere of sexual morality and correspondingly by a much greater feeling of equality vis-à-vis the clergy. Over the last fifteen years or so, the Irish priest has lost his mystique and much of the prestige that went with social eminence and moral domination. (146-7, emphasis in the original)

Indeed, the secularization of Ireland, which began in the 1960s with the arrival of globalization and the revolutionary messages from foreign media such as the radio and the television (Inglis, *Moral Monopoly* 246; *Meanings of Life* 10), marked the path towards a modern country. Carol Coulter mentions “a drop in religious observance (though it is still very high by international standards), a much more critical attitude toward the Catholic Church among its remaining faithful, and a general secularization of society” (276). Studies show a decrease in Irish people’s belief in God, “from 97% in 1981 and 1990, to 95.5% in 1999, and to 91.8% in 2008” (Breen and Reynolds 4).<sup>20</sup> Besides, the number of religious personnel within the Irish Catholic Church dropped significantly

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<sup>20</sup> As emphasised by Coulter in the previous quotation, these percentages are even so extremely high. If compared with other European countries, in 2008 Ireland was still the first country in Europe in which God was thought to be the most important thing in life (7.22/10), followed by Italy (7.19) and Slovakia (6.97) (Breen and Reynolds 5).

from the 2000s onwards (Andersen 19-20), as happened with church attendance,<sup>21</sup> making it therefore “less effective in transmitting Catholic teachings to and instilling Catholic values in new generations of Irish Catholics” (21).

Religious secularization, however, is not the only reason why Ireland evolved towards a more modern country. For Michael Breen,

As Irish society becomes more urbanized and more educated, this process of social modernization is accelerated. The changes that have taken place, as Ireland moved from a traditional rural economy to a more modern urban economy, have been profound. Such change has been influenced by the provision of education and media availability. Education, along with media exposure, serves to remove the isolation of traditional societies. (2)

Breen agrees with Inglis’s view in the importance of media availability in the evolution of the country. He aptly enhances the significance of education which, I would argue, should also be added to that of Ireland’s membership in the EU (1973) and the increasing internationalization of the country.<sup>22</sup>

Along these lines, Northern Ireland also underwent a change in terms of the impact and power of religion in the last thirty years, but studies show that “it still ranks amongst the most religious societies in western Europe” (Mitchell 22; Fahey *et al.*, 2006). Critics like Tony Fahey *et al.* argue that this remaining strength may be due to “the emergence of the troubles in the 1970s” (30). However, even if other religions such as the Church of Ireland or the Methodist Church in Ireland have some representation in the religious affiliation in Northern Ireland, population is divided mainly between Catholics and

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<sup>21</sup> For further information on church attendance levels in Ireland, North and South, see Fahey *et al.* (2006).

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, it seems that “as a country is absorbed into Europe economically and politically, it gets Euro-secularity along with the package” (Berger 447; qtd. in Breen and Reynolds 3).

Protestants (Mitchell 22-24), the sum of which amounts to almost ninety percent of the population (63). However, although “neither Catholics nor Protestants in the North or in the Republic are as attached to their churches as they once were,” they are still part of religion in a greater extent than most of the rest of European societies, including the rest of the United Kingdom (Fahey *et al.* 219-20). This inevitably implies that “religion continues to greatly influence social and cultural differences in modern-day Northern Ireland,” even if “overshadowed by political tensions in the conflict” (Duggan 16).

The abovementioned secularization of the country finds its peak in the scandals of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. In this regard, stories like that of *A History of Loneliness* show “the new regime [...] orchestrated by the media, [where] the greatest transgressors are those priests and religious brothers who have molested and abused young children” (Inglis “Origins and Legacies” 32). Along these lines, Inglis states that

[n]ot so long ago, the church and its clergy were considered to be sacred. People may have sinned, they may not have followed church teachings, but they did not openly challenge the church or its bishops and priests. However, the profanity of the scandals broke the sacred ring that protected the church. What was once unspoken is now being said. (*Meanings of Life* 138)

Indeed, this loss of power was also represented in the way the issue of Clerical Child Sexual Abuse (CCSA) was covered by the media. As Susie Donnelly and Tom Inglis state,

[w]ithin a short number of years CCSA went from being a story that could not be told to one that had to be reported and, indeed, was covered in significant detail. The Church and many of its priests and religious order brothers quickly



went from being represented as paragons of virtue, as self-sacrificing national heroes, to being depicted as self-serving masters of evil. (3)

Consequently, Catholics in Ireland lost much of the confidence they held in their church. This change in balance is clearly seen in *A History of Loneliness*, paying attention to how Odran is treated by citizens from the 1980s to the 2000s, given that “[i]n moving away from the Catholic Church and thinking morally for themselves, Irish people are no longer as much dependent on priests and politicians and no longer see them as the great heroes in and saviours of their lives” (Inglis, *Moral Monopoly* 254). In this regard, in the study covered in *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland*, Inglis mentions the case of a priest who “had been in Dublin just after the stories about pedophile priests first emerged, and he had been ‘spat upon and insulted.’ He no longer wears his clerical collar when he goes to Dublin” (139).<sup>23</sup> This loss of interest in priesthood is also made evident with the decline in the number of men who choose it as a career: “The priesthood was still a relatively popular career choice in Ireland in 1980; by 2010 Ireland was having to import priests from Africa and other parts of the world” (Smyth 134). Significantly, Tony Fahey *et al.* remark the difference in the loss of confidence in the church between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, claiming that the

low levels of confidence in the church among Catholics in the Republic compared to Protestants and Catholics in the North might seem to indicate that the clerical sex scandals of the 1990s had a particularly severe impact on the standing of the Catholic church in the Republic. (48)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> I deal further with clothing and identity when discussing *A History of Loneliness*.

<sup>24</sup> As seen in their respective chapters, this is a very interesting perspective which is clearly seen in the differences between *A History of Loneliness* and *A Son Called Gabriel*, even if the latter does not cover up to the end of the century as Boyne’s novel does.

Certainly, for even if cases of child sexual abuse have unfortunately been found worldwide,<sup>25</sup> the issue has been of interest in Ireland lately due to the appearance of scandals after decades of silence.<sup>26</sup> Irish Catholic leaders have been accused of protecting and defending priests suspected of sexual abuse by moving them around from parish to parish<sup>27</sup>—something that Boyne condemns in *A History of Loneliness*. In 2009, judge Yvonne Murphy conducted what has been known as the Murphy Report, in which a Commission of Investigation looked into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin and investigated the involvement of a sample of 46 clerics accused of child sexual abuse from 1975 to 2004.<sup>28</sup> For instance, the report shows the confession of a priest who abused close to 100 children, whereas another one admitted to having sexually abused children on a fortnightly basis (Chapter 1). Both the Church and the Gardaí are accused in the report of having covered up the allegations throughout the years (Chapter 58).

Likewise, Amy Berg's heart-breaking and Oscar-nominated documentary *Deliver Us from Evil* (2006) deals with Father Oliver O'Grady's investigation, incarceration, and subsequent life back in Ireland after having been deported and accused of sexual abuse of children in the US. The film tackles mainly O'Grady's confession, alongside the testimony of some of his victims, and his attempt to make amends, but it mainly criticizes the Church's and its high

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<sup>25</sup> The numbers in the United States of America are especially alarming. A 2004 report showed that "more than 4,000 US Roman Catholic priests had faced sexual abuse allegations in the last 50 years, in cases involving more than 10,000 children" (BBC News, 2018). In this regard, Thomas McCarthy's Oscar-winning movie *Spotlight* (2015) tells the story of a group of journalists from *The Boston Globe* uncovering the conspiracy around child abuse and the Catholic Church in the US.

<sup>26</sup> Lynne Segal argues that even if cases of sexual abuse have been discovered lately, it still appears as a shameful secret that should remain hidden: "This secret [child sexual abuse], for so long concealed behind the closed doors of conventional family life, has come to light only through the determined efforts of incest survivors themselves, and of the feminist movement, which helped give women the confidence to speak out. The pressures to keep child sexual abuse hidden, or to deny its extent, persist." (54)

<sup>27</sup> For more on this, see Frawley-O'Dea (2007).

<sup>28</sup> A written version of the report can be read here: <<http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PB09000504>> (Accessed 5 Sept 2021)

spheres' (including Pope Benedict's) inaction at the events taking place within its walls when they were fully conscious of them. Thus, not only in Ireland were there cases of priests being moved from parish to parish, but also in other parts of the world. As a consequence of these revelations and of the "severe physical and sexual abuse in institutions such as the industrial schools and the Magdalene Laundries" (Nault 138), the Catholic Church in Ireland has lost much of the power it held in the twentieth century, to the extent that same-sex marriage was recognized in 2015 and an abortion referendum took place in 2018, overturning the previous law banning abortion.<sup>29</sup>

In a painful but powerful article, the Irish writer John Banville claims that silence on sexual abuse was something shared by the whole nation, not just by a few individuals: "Never tell, never acknowledge, that was the unspoken watchword. Everyone knew, but no one said." As mentioned above, this was due to the all-controlling power of the Catholic Church, which ruled in Ireland from the 1930s to the 1990s. Sadly, he concludes by claiming that "[they] knew, and did not know. That is our shame today" (Banville, "A Century" n.pag.). Along these lines, Gerry Smyth argues that "[t]he existence of religious corruption and exploitation had been an open secret of Irish life for a long time" (134).<sup>30</sup> As I discuss in the chapter devoted to the analysis of *A History of Loneliness*, the theme of silence is of paramount importance in this novel, since the silence the protagonist kept is precisely what still haunts him until his present day.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For more on this, see Ralph (2020).

<sup>30</sup> Despite its many differences, this act of keeping silent could also be compared to the story of Ann Lovett, a 15-year-old girl from Co. Longford who died in 1984 when giving birth (alone, in a grotto) to a child who was conceived outside of marriage. The episode inspired a national debate on whether the community in the small town knew of her pregnancy and still did not help her, letting her die "because of the shame, fear, and hypocrisy surrounding unmarried motherhood" (Maguire 343), and also raised awareness of the situation of teenage girls giving birth outside of marriage. For more information on this case, see Maguire 2001.

<sup>31</sup> The case of Sinéad O'Connor should be noted here. During a live appearance in the American TV show *Saturday Night Live* in 1992, she sang a cover of Bob Marley's "War," with which O'Connor referred to sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. Looking at the camera, she tore to pieces a photo of Pope John Paul II, condemning the Church for decades of silence.

## 2.2. Sexuality

As we examine further in the chapter devoted to the analysis of John Boyne's *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, sexuality and homosexuality in the Republic and in the North of Ireland have undergone deep changes during the twentieth century up to the twenty-first century. For many years, homosexuals have been persecuted and prosecuted, and thus forced to live in the shadows and to find comfort in the darkness.<sup>32</sup> This repression does not only exist from the twentieth century onwards, but it was still present in Victorian times, when convicts of homosexuality could suffer penal servitude consisting of "imprisonment or forced slavery" for the rest of their lives (Pace, n.pag.). Homosexuals in Ireland, then, were prosecuted for more than a century, up to the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993 and the subsequent legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015.<sup>33</sup>

Not only homosexuality but also sex in general was a taboo topic in Ireland for most part of the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> Inglis denounces that sexuality has not been a topic discussed even in academia, and states that "[i]t is as if the sense of shame and embarrassment about sex [...] reached so deeply into the psyches of Irish academics, and particularly historians, that they were

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The performance is available online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSLyEPeWjNk>> (Accessed 5 Sept 2021). For more on this, see D. Clare 2020.

<sup>32</sup> José Carregal-Romero argues that "homosexuality has been very often regarded as an attack against two of the cornerstones of Catholic life: marriage and the (heterosexual) family" ("Sexuality" 74), which would explain the Church's total rejection of homosexuality.

<sup>33</sup> In 2017, Leo Varadkar was elected the first gay Prime Minister in the Republic of Ireland (McDonald, 2017), which shows the involvement of the country and the loss of religious power over politics.

<sup>34</sup> This happened not only in Ireland but also in the rest of the world during several centuries (Foucault, 1978). Foucault also alludes beautifully to the power of Christianity over sex: "by making sex into that which, above all else, had to be confessed, the Christian pastoral always presented it as the disquieting enigma: not a thing which stubbornly shows itself, but one which always hides, the insidious presence that speaks in a voice so muted and often disguised that one risks remaining deaf to it" (35).

unable to raise, let alone deal, with such issues” (“Origins and Legacies” 10).<sup>35</sup> With the arrival of television in the 1960s, new topics of discussion were introduced: “Television programmes rather than Church rituals became the basis of shared experiences about which people communicated and related to each other” (Inglis, *Moral Monopoly* 246). Apropos the death in November 2019 of the host for decades of *The Late Late Show*, Gay Byrne, *The Guardian* recalled that “there was no sex in Ireland until the *The Late Late Show*, and for that a nation owed thanks to Gay Byrne. [...] [He] seemed equally at home interviewing [...] guests with stories about seldom-discussed topics such as divorce, abortion and sexual identity” (Carroll, n.pag.).

Inglis links this to the controlling power of the Catholic Church in Ireland, as has been mentioned above. He claims that

[o]ne of the primary mechanisms of everyday policing was the control of desire and pleasure, especially sexual desire and pleasure. Social order was maintained as long as individuals did not seek to satisfy their pleasures and desires—as long as they practiced self-denial. Over the last fifty years we have moved in Ireland from a Catholic culture of self-abnegation in which sexual pleasure and desire were repressed, to a culture of consumption and self-indulgence in which the fulfilment of pleasures and desires is emphasized. [...] this shift reflects not so much sexual liberation as a transition from one sexual regime to another. (“Origins and Legacies” 11)<sup>36</sup>

Hence, Ireland has evolved from “the silencing, hiding, and denial of sex, the confinement of talk about sex to the confessional, [which] significantly

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<sup>35</sup> Couldn't we therefore speak about unreliability here as well? The Irish society of that time seems to be deliberately hiding some aspects—sex but also, of course, the scandals within the Catholic Church.

<sup>36</sup> As is discussed in chapter eight when dealing with *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, the change in sexual regime Inglis alludes to is remarkably present in the novel. It shows how the Republic of Ireland evolves from a repressive society (the one Cyril grows up in) to a culture which emphasises desire, as seen in the society Cyril's grandson lives in.

influenced the way in which men and women perceived and understood the world” (Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 17) to a society that allows same-sex marriage. Indeed, during the first part of *The Heart’s Invisible Furies*—for “it is not until the second half of the twentieth century that we begin to find traces of a new discourse, a new way of reading, writing, representing, and understanding sexuality that challenges existing Catholic discourse and conventions” (Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 13)—Cyril is constantly hiding his true nature fearing that someone would denounce him. As stated by Senator David Norris in 1981,

[i]t is reasonable therefore to assume without precise quantification the existence of a large and evenly distributed homosexual sub-group in the Irish population. Nevertheless, not until comparatively recent times have individuals and organisations been prepared to identify themselves as belonging to that sub-group and engage in open debate. (32)

Nonetheless, even if Ireland has indeed changed drastically over the last seventy years, studies such as the one carried out by James O’Higgins-Norman show that there is still much to be done to fight homophobia in Irish schools nowadays, especially in those led by the Church,<sup>37</sup> stating that the study “revealed that schools accept homophobic bullying as a normal part of school life and that many teachers do little to address it” (392). In fact, another study showed that between 1999 and 2002 “Ireland was one of the most homophobic countries in the western world, with almost one-third of its people having problems with the idea of living next to gay neighbours” (Ferriter 509). Twenty years later, in 2019, homophobia is still a problem that remains visible in Irish schools. According to Carl O’Brien, “[d]espite rapid social changes in

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<sup>37</sup> Inglis mentions the power that the Church still possesses over education in Ireland, and so “it would be wrong to think that Irish Catholicism is dying” (*Moral Monopoly* 244).

Ireland, [...] many schools are still not welcoming environments and many gay students remain still fearful of coming out.” Consequently, violent attacks such as the one that Cyril and Bastiaan experience in New York in *The Heart’s Invisible Furies* in 1987 were not eradicated in Ireland, and “the level of street violence against gay men in the early twenty-first century was still high,” probably as a result of “the increased visibility and acceptance of gayness” (Ferriter 510).

As to the attitudes towards homosexuality in Northern Ireland, they are similar to those in the South.<sup>38</sup> Fahey *et al.* have carried out surveys (2006) that analyse the attitudes towards both homosexuality and abortion, two widely controversial issues, in the North and South of the island. Even if negative attitudes have dropped significantly from the 1970s to the 1990s and 2000s, they are still present to some degree. According to the above-mentioned study, the Republic presents more opposition to abortion than the North (in 1999, 60 per cent believed it to be never justified in the Republic, as opposed to the 51 per cent of the North), whereas there is greater hostility towards homosexuality in the North (45 per cent believes it to be never justified) than in the South (38 per cent) (Fahey *et al.* 123-5). In fact, as analysed by Marian Duggan (2012), homophobia in Northern Ireland is still a particularly relevant problem. Data from a survey conducted in 1998 in this region shows that, when asked to evaluate sexual relationships between two individuals of the same sex, 58 per cent of participants answered that it was always wrong whilst only 15 per cent chose the ‘not wrong at all’ option (Duggan 26). When the question was repeated in 2004, the first percentage had dropped to 44 per cent—somewhat lower but still significantly high. If these numbers seem to go too far back in time, we should be aware of the fact that homophobic offenses have been

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<sup>38</sup> In the UK, studies show that homophobic bullying is the most common form of bullying, after calling names (*BullyingUK*; BBC 2019).

rising in Northern Ireland between 2017 and 2019, with over 64 per cent of crimes going unreported (King, n.pag.).<sup>39</sup>

Significantly, it should be reminded here that same-sex marriage is legal in Northern Ireland since 2020, five years later than in the Republic and six years later than in England, Wales, and Scotland. Thus, we can agree with Fahey *et al.* that on sexual and family aspects like abortion, divorce, or homosexuality, “Northern Protestants have more in common with the Catholic population on the island of Ireland than they do with the rest of the United Kingdom” (137).

Indeed, much as we have seen in the case of Ireland, in the North religion is also strongly in charge of politics and other social issues.<sup>40</sup> In this regard, Rosemary Sales argues that the “opposition to abortion and gay rights” has been one of the few issues to see accordance between politicians and the church (5). Once again, since the Church was essential in its role as a political ally, “politicians have been reluctant to challenge [its] teachings on these issues” (5), and so matters related to sexuality were deeply silenced for decades.

Moreover, it is interesting to see how diverse denominations of the same religion (Christianism) react differently to homosexuality. Duggan argues that Protestantism separates “the ‘sin’ from the ‘sinner’,” in the sense that they believe that homosexuality can be removed by proper treatment (16). Catholicism, on the other hand, sees “the homosexual element of a person’s identity as being part of their holistic self,” and so they are “to be loved and supported so that they do not succumb to temptation” (Duggan 16). In *A Son*

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<sup>39</sup> In *A Son Called Gabriel*, even if it is set in the 1960s and 70s, the protagonist is teased throughout all his childhood years for being homosexual, although he himself is not conscious of it yet or has not admitted being so.

<sup>40</sup> In McNicholl’s novel there can also be found some criticism of the way religion influences life in the Republic of Ireland, even if the same situation is similar in Northern Ireland: “the Catholic Church controls everything down there. I hate Paisley [Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party] every bit as much as you, but you have to realize that other, decent Protestants can’t accept an Ireland where the Catholic Church pokes its nose into political affairs” (228).



*Called Gabriel*, when the protagonist reveals to his uncle/father Brendan that he is a homosexual, the latter reacts saying that it may be a phase and that God will love him anyway (285)—therefore he identifies more strongly with the Catholic position, as was expected. In the case of *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, on the other hand, Cyril resorts to a doctor to cure him from his homosexuality, therefore identifying more significantly with the Protestant perspective Duggan alludes to, even if he has not had that kind of upbringing.

Religion and homosexuality seem to be linked also because of the high number of homosexual males who decide to turn to religion for forgiveness and comfort.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, Duggan refers to a study in which many male interviewees admitted to “[r]esorting to their faith [as] a common route taken” (80). It may be a decision taken to “avoid dealing with [their] feelings” (80) or, as is analysed when dealing with McNicholl’s novel, “to hide the fact that you’re a poof” (McNicholl 162).

### 2.3. Politics

The history of the twentieth century in Northern Ireland has been very much linked to religion and, consequently, sexuality. In many aspects, the society of Northern Ireland was very similar to that of the rest of the island, in the sense that religion has controlled the region and its history and politics generally. The conflict broadly known as the Troubles arose in its roots as an opposition between Irish and British nationalists, and even if “[c]onflict in Northern Ireland has not been, is not and will never be a holy war” (Mitchell 1), it did take a

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<sup>41</sup> In chapter four I analyse religious confession, together with confessional narratives. The protagonists of the three novels, one way or the other, have a close relationship with religious confession, which is explored in their respective chapters.

religious turn when the Irish largely identified themselves as Catholics and the British as Protestants. To put it another way, “Protestants are fairly homogenous in that they see themselves as not Irish and not nationalist [...], the vast majority of Catholics see themselves as not British and not unionist” (Mitchell 21). As a consequence, even today “religion remains one of the central dimensions of social difference,” both in politics, culture and in the “widespread social segregation” (Mitchell 1-2). This segregation results in religion influencing schools, romantic partners, night outings, neighbourhoods, shopping and leisure centres, and social relationships (Mitchell 60; Sales 6; McKeown 17), to the extent that individuals are able to identify others as Catholic or Protestant by some social indicators such as names, surnames, schools or accents (McKeown 7). This inevitably implies that, among other factors, “residential segregation provides the basis for the promotion of a specific cultural heritage and a common set of values and beliefs” (Sales 6). Thus, despite the Good Friday Agreement of 1998,<sup>42</sup> Northern Ireland is still a highly divided society “where negative group attitudes persist” (McKeown 2).<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, there is a clear connection between religious and national identity that is still present today despite the decline in religious attachment and the end of the conflict. Studies such as the one carried out by Fahey *et al.* (2006) show the differences in terms of identity between the Republic and the North. In the case of the Republic, “Catholics, Protestants and the non-affiliated alike overwhelmingly think of themselves as Irish” (60). In this case,

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<sup>42</sup> It should be remembered here Northern Irish politician John Hume, who was a key figure in the IRA ceasefire of 1994 and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Hume, 1998 Nobel Peace Prize winner, passed away in August 2020, and tributes followed remembering his role in engineering the ending of the Troubles (Carroll, 2020; Ryder, 2020; O’Reilly, 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Segregation is also significantly described in Anna Burns’s *Milkman* (2018), as seen in the list of names from “over the water” (i.e. Britain) that were banned in the region (namely, Northern Ireland). The unnamed narrator also talks about television shows from “this side of the road” or “that side of the road”, or food and drink: “The right butter. The wrong butter. The tea of allegiance. The tea of betrayal. There were ‘our shops’ and ‘their shops’. Placenames. What school you went to. What prayers you said. What hymns you sang. [...] There was a person’s appearance also, because it was believed you could tell ‘their sort from over the road’ from ‘your sort this side of the road’ by the very physical form of a person” (25).

there is no clear relation between religious and national identity, since almost the totality of the population identifies themselves as Irish no matter their religion (Fahey *et al.* 60). Nonetheless, the case of Northern Ireland is, as expected, different. Here, “national identity is strongly differentiated by denominational group” (61), in the sense that while “Catholics lean strongly towards an Irish identity, Protestants lean towards a British identity” (61). As suggested above, the conflict in this region remains between the ones who identify as Irish and see the two parts of the island united, and those who identify as British and are happy with the union with Great Britain (Fahey *et al.* 57). Shelley McKeown summarises this by claiming that national identities in Northern Ireland are normally divided in the dichotomies of “Irish/Catholic/Nationalist and British/Protestant/Unionist” (25). Of late, however, a new national identity as ‘Northern Irish’ has emerged, with which both Catholics and Protestants alike identify since it “does not compromise national and political ideologies” (McKeown 27-8).

In light of what we encounter in the novels in terms of politics in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, especially in *A Son Called Gabriel* and the historical events depicted in that novel, the massacre of Derry in 1972, commonly known as ‘Bloody Sunday,’ should be mentioned here. Thirteen Catholic demonstrators were shot dead by British soldiers during a protest against internment without trial in Northern Ireland, and it became the most shameful event for the British during this conflict. Besides, Derry (Londonderry) had also been the scene where the Troubles are said to have begun, given the inflammatory protest marches in 1968 and 1969, the latter known as the Battle of Bogside (Colin Coulter, n.pag.).

All in all, the situation in Northern Ireland regarding religion, culture and, consequently, sexuality, is pretty similar to that of the Republic of Ireland. In both regions, despite being currently different countries, religion is the controlling influence driving families and communities. Especially in the case

of Northern Ireland, moreover, religion also influences politics and, as a consequence, segregation is found in the cities. Damian McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel* and John Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* and *The Heart's Invisible Furies* are enlightening examples of the impact of religion in Irish culture and its consequences in terms of sexuality. The novels, all set in the second half of the twentieth century, also compare the evolution of the whole island and that of their male protagonists.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MASCULINITIES:

### BEING A MAN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

“Man up!”<sup>44</sup>

The field of masculinities has been especially relevant and thought-provoking in the last decades, mainly thanks to great contributions from sociology scholars such as Raewyn W. Connell (1995), Jeff Hearn (2000) or Michael Kimmel (2005a; 2005b), among many others. From the 1980s onward, academics have proved that ‘gender studies’ do not only refer to women’s studies, but rather that men also had to be involved in the research taking place in several academic fields. Women have historically been seen as the weaker sex, as those needing attention to be taken out of years of unfair silence.<sup>45</sup> As it has been shown in the previous chapter, women have not had an easy road throughout the centuries, and we do not have to go too far back in time (or place) to find examples of oppression and discrimination against women.

Therefore, it would seem unnecessary to deal with men, since, unfortunately, the world we live in has always been patriarchal, male dominated—even if that is slightly beginning to change. Recent decades have

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<sup>44</sup> The Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* (2011) features a song titled “Man up” in which Elder Cunningham, a missionary from the Latter-Day Saint movement, takes the example of Jesus Christ as a real man, singing things like: “What did Jesus do when they put nails in his hands? Did he scream like a girl? Or did he take it like a man? [...] That’s man up. Real man up.” The show presents a satire of religion, therefore we should listen to this song knowing it will be full of stereotyping—like the whole show. Besides, ‘man up’ is also an idiom commonly used in the English language, mainly on films and TV shows, to make the listener behave in a more traditionally manly way—namely by displaying toughness or violence. The idiom, deeply harmful to the image of masculinity, “illustrates the relational aspect of masculinity. When someone instructs another to act like a man, the instruction is meant to alter the behavior of that person to conform to masculine expectations” (Bolen and Collins 755).

<sup>45</sup> In *The Black Prince*, Iris Murdoch writes: “Of course men play roles, but women play roles too, blander ones. They have, in the play of life, fewer good lines” (34).

shown that this is not the case anymore, that men also require study and analysis, for the men we encounter in the street nowadays are, in some cases, quite different from those we found in previous decades. Consequently, those male figures we meet in contemporary literature are also in need of exploration. In this chapter, then, I focus on the research on masculinities that has been carried out by scholars worldwide, in order to find some ground that could be applicable to the narrators and other male characters of the selected novels.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.1. Manhood and masculinities

The concepts of manhood and masculinity are sometimes used as synonyms, but they are not quite. Masculinity refers to what it means to be a man, to what sort of features and traits are representative of men and whether they are inherent or imposed by a specific society.<sup>47 48</sup> However, the dictionary compiles more acceptations for the word ‘manhood’: it is firstly defined as the “state or time of being an adult man rather than a boy,” followed by “the qualities that a man *is supposed to have*, for example *courage, strength and sexual power*” (*Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*, emphasis added). This latter definition highlights those qualities as necessary for men to be men, and the examples it provides are highly enlightening in terms of male stereotyping. Indeed, David

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<sup>46</sup> It should be noted here that, given the nature of the selected novels, the analysis on masculinities is focused on white Caucasian males—paying attention mostly to the case of Ireland. However, for other masculinities such as black masculinities, see Staples, 1982; Jones, 2009 (for Islamic masculinities); Armengol, 2010, 2012 (for black homosexual masculinities), 2014; Amideo, 2018; or Hopson and Petin, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> For a detailed analysis of the evolution of the term ‘masculinity/masculinities,’ see Hearn, 2000.

<sup>48</sup> Masculinity today, however, is not formed by traits that we associate exclusively to men, but to any person despite their gender. Thus, “women can perform masculinity, men can perform femininity, and both sexes can perform any combination and permutation of parts or all of these gender roles” (Levant and Powell 16). There are masculine-identified women who choose to assimilate features classically attributed to men—and the same could be said of feminine men. For more on this, see Nalo Zidan’s TedTalk “It’s time to redefine masculinity” (2019): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmkBH5aig9s&ab\\_channel=TEDxTalks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmkBH5aig9s&ab_channel=TEDxTalks) (Accessed 5 Sept 2021)

Gilmore also associates competitiveness, success, “sexual potency [and] virility” to traditional masculinity (“Cultures of Masculinity” 31). Giuseppe Balirano and Paul Baker agree with this view, since they claim that “men are *socially expected* to be strong, aggressive, confident, and in control of all situations at all times” (3, emphasis added). With this statement, these authors specify that masculinity is a social construct—what it means to be a man is imposed socially. In other words, men learn how to behave by observing other men:

masculine norms are communicated to males when they observe that other males tend not to wear pink, when they are told that “big boys don’t cry,” and when they observe that male movie stars and sports heroes are tough and respond with violence when challenged. (Mahalik *et al.* 3)

As seen below, the impact of culture and society (especially the media) in both men and women is astounding.

Sociologist Michael Kimmel, founder of the journal *Men and Masculinities*, also defines manhood in these terms:

Manhood is neither static nor timeless; it is historical. Manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence; it is socially constructed. Manhood does not bubble up to consciousness from our biological makeup; it is created in culture. Manhood means different things at different times to different people. (*The Gender of Desire* 25)

Kimmel answers the question I was alluding to before clearly and directly: he argues that manhood is created in culture. So does Lynne Segal: “The force and power of the dominant ideals of masculinity, I argue, do not derive from any intrinsic characteristic of individuals, but from the social meanings which

accrue to these ideals from their supposed superiority to that which they are not” (xxxiv). Connell stresses the same idea, that “masculinities come into existence at particular times and places, and are always subject to change. Masculinities are, in a word, historical” (185). In other words, there is not “a single, unvarying, universal standard for masculinity” (Pleck, “The Gender Role Strain Paradigm” 19). Masculinity, therefore, does not mean the same thing now than it did a century ago, and it is not the same for people in Europe than people in Africa, for instance.

Moreover, Segal argues that boys and girls identify with their gender early on, and they act accordingly: “They internalised gender stereotypes from observing the different ways parents and nursery teachers treat girls and boys, through toys, the school curriculum, television, books, comics and countless other sources” (66).<sup>49</sup> Along these lines, Derek Bolen and Devin Collins distinguish three stages of gender stereotype development: children up to four years of age associate toys with each gender, for instance; about four to six-year-olds “begin to learn complex and indirect associations for their own gender and begin self-gender stereotyping;” and by eight years old children comprehend the connotations of both masculinity and femininity (754). In sum, “[t]he older the children get, the more stereotypic judgments they begin to make” (754). In Jennifer Sieben Newsom’s documentary *The Mask You Live In* (2015), it is argued that:

We put [boys] on that trajectory, through our popular culture, through our parenting styles, through our educational styles and through assumptions about

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<sup>49</sup> A case in point can be Disney movies and their evolution throughout the decades. Not-so-young boys and girls all over the world have grown up in the 40s, 50s and 60s with protagonists like Snowwhite or Sleeping Beauty—damsels in distress waiting for a man to save them. Fortunately, Disney princesses have also changed with time, and now young girls watching movies like *Frozen* (2013) or *Moana* (2016) realize a man (a love interest in most cases) is not always needed to save a woman. For more on this, see Towbin *et al.* (2004), England *et al.* (2011), Stokes (2013) or Gray (2019).



natural manhood and maleness that we pass along, that are incredibly insulting and damaging. And then there's a whole social system that polices them through this low level of threat from other men if they're not man enough.

Indeed, even today it is scary how men are depicted in movies, TV shows, commercials, or music videos, and how that representation highly influences the way in which young boys understand masculinity.<sup>50</sup> Although referring to the 1970s, the access to stereotypes Segal mentions is still present nowadays, not only from those sources but also from social media or advertisements. In the above-mentioned documentary, it is stated in this regard that:

The predominant male archetypes that we see in film and television and other forms of popular culture are the strong silent guy who is always in control and is not emotional. And then we have the superhero character, the hero character, engaging in high levels of violence in order to maintain that control, in order to achieve whatever goal he has in front of him. (Newsom, *The Mask*)

Not only boys and men are forced into a set of established features they should embody, but also girls and women have been stereotyped into roles in every cultural representation. Luckily, they seem to be changing albeit slightly, and today it is easier to find ads starring boys playing with dolls or girls building spaceships.<sup>51</sup> The representation of male protagonists in movies is also slowly changing—we have gone from the tough manliness of Humphrey Bogart or

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<sup>50</sup> Once again, the example from *Grease*, “Summer nights”, is enlightening.

<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, advertising continues to be a terrifying source of gender stereotyping, mainly having to do with the oversexualization of women. In the case of men, advertising seems to be encouraging certain traditional male stereotypes, such as male sexual dominance or their lack of participation in childcare. In this last case, a TV commercial was banned in the UK in 2019 for perpetuating “harmful stereotypes” (Sweeney, n.pag.). For more on this, see Royo-Vela *et al.* (2007), or Kumari and Shivani (2012). Jennifer Siebel Newsom’s documentary *Miss Representation* (2011) is also an excellent exploration of the portrayal of women in the media, and how that affects girls and women all over the world.

John Wayne,<sup>52</sup> as George Mosse puts it (182), through action men like Arnold Schwarzenegger<sup>53</sup> or Jean-Claude Van Damme, who taught boys how to behave like men in the 1980s and 90s, to actors like Hugh Jackman. Boys now are seeing that men can, at the same time, be brave like Wolverine (Hood, 2009) and sing and dance (Hooper, 2012; Gracey, 2017).

Related to this, Joseph H. Pleck developed in the early 1980s what he called the “gender role strain” model for masculinity (1981), which argues that “men may experience stress (‘strain’) as a result of violating prescribed gender roles” (Parent and Bradstreet 290). This model involved ten propositions, which included some that are especially relevant for the analysis of the novels chosen. Among those ten, we find that “gender roles are operationally defined by gender role stereotypes and norms,” and that violation of those norms “leads to social condemnation” and “to negative psychological consequences,” especially for men (Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity* 9; qtd. in Pleck, “The Gender Role Strain Paradigm” 12). Thus, Pleck also argues that gender is constructed socially (1981; 1995) and shows how disobeying those stereotypes can develop in social consequences of isolation, with the psychological outcomes that implies. He terms this as ‘masculine ideology,’ referring to “beliefs about the importance of men adhering to culturally defined standards for male behavior” (“The Gender Role Strain Paradigm” 19). Those beliefs are, of course, “socially constructed” (Thompson and Bennett 47), which emphasises once more the importance of society and culture in deciding how a man should behave. In the selected novels, characters like Gabriel or

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<sup>52</sup> Daniel Goleman begins Perry Garfinkel’s volume *In a Man’s World* (1982) by claiming that “[t]hese are challenging times to be a man” also due to, among other things, John Wayne being dead (1). Indeed, after World War II, “[f]ilm emerged as an instruction manual, providing audiences through example a summary of what men should be” (Thompson and Bennett 50).

<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, Sara Martín Alegre analyses Schwarzenegger’s masculinity on screen and out of it, to see how his image of the ideal man is not so easy to grasp fully (1998).

Cyril are rejected from their communities for their lack of adherence to the features attributed to masculinity, namely their homosexuality.<sup>54</sup>

Among the negative effects of not conforming to social stereotypes, Pleck also distinguishes three ideas: the discrepancy-strain, trauma-strain, and dysfunction-strain (1981; 1995). First, this author argues that the discrepancy strain might lead to low self-esteem and impact on psychological well-being (“The Gender Role Strain Paradigm” 13). This is measured, for instance, by the difference between one’s ‘ideal woman’ or ‘ideal man’ and the self-image of oneself (14). Among those most affected by the discrepancy strain are men, especially “boys inadequate in sports, gay male adolescents and adults taught their sexuality is perverse, men unable to support families” (13). In other words, those men who do not display the stereotypical attributes of strength, power, or heterosexuality. Indeed, as Michael Kimmel illustrates, it is still “white, middle-class, early middle-aged heterosexual men” who “[set] the standards for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting” (*The Gender of Desire* 30). So even if, little by little, the stereotypical and traditional image of man has changed in the last years, it is still the same image of masculinity that is seen as normative, as the role model to follow.

Next, Pleck discusses the concept of trauma-strain, “traumas inherent in the male gender role socialization process,” effecting “adult male emotional experience” (“The Gender Role Strain Paradigm” 16). In this regard, Levant and Powell argue that this concept was “originally applied to certain groups of men whose experiences with gender role strain were thought to be particularly harsh,” namely black men, athletes, veterans, victims of child sexual abuse or gay and bisexual men (23). The selected novels exemplify the trauma of this last group.

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<sup>54</sup> This is explored in more depth in the chapters devoted to the analysis of the novels.

Thirdly, we find the male gender role dysfunction. Here, “the fulfillment of gender role standards can have negative consequences because the behaviors and characteristics these standards prescribe can be inherently dysfunctional, in the sense of being associated with negative outcomes either for the male himself or for others” (Pleck, “The Gender Role Strain Paradigm” 16-17). Among these behaviours, I would argue that we could include violence in men, or their difficulty to express emotion, resulting in relational problems.

Moreover, Kimmel also claims that this “hegemonic definition of manhood is a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power. We equate manhood with being strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control” (*The Gender of Desire* 30, emphasis in the original), especially over others (Coston and Kimmel 98). Masculinities are intrinsically related to power and dominance—historically, it has always been the man supporting and providing for his family; the weaker man being rejected by society. Indeed, society helps support this idea, inherent to the idea of masculinity that society and culture present: “Many of our examples of American masculinity, be it in sports, military, law enforcement, the entertainment industry, the men that men look up to, a lot of what they're teaching is domination, aggression. They're these hyper-masculine figures that we try to adhere to” (Newsom *The Mask*). Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim argue in this regard that “[m]ale power is central to any consideration of masculinity; patriarchal order continually attempts to define power and masculinity as practically synonymous” (18). Judith K. Gardiner agrees claiming that “[m]en must work constantly to keep this masculine control and dominance in place” (40), even if that implies sexual violence such as rape. Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell also agree with this view, claiming that “masculinities are both ‘structured’ in dominance and, in turn, help maintain or reproduce that dominance” (98). To this, Segal recalls the view of feminists stating that

[d]ebate and dispute among feminists seeking to understand men's dominance have always revolved around whether it attaches to the inherent nature of males, to the distinctive attributes acquired by men through social conditioning, or to the diverse social structures and ideas through which men are invested with power and cultural pre-eminence. Many feminists simply equate 'masculinity' and 'male dominance.' (61)

This dominance is present in men through several kinds of power: "the power to assert control over women, over other men, over their own bodies, over machines and technology" (Segal 123). As I discuss in the next section, this 'control over other men' is also related to homophobia.

Pornography and prostitution should also be mentioned here, since they have condoned sexual male supremacy with practices which emphasise male dominance and female oppression (Gardiner 39; Segal, 1997). Other studies also show that men with low self-esteem turn to pornography "as a way of over-conforming to and performing certain male role norms" (Borgogna *et al.*, n.pag.). Besides, statistics show that pornography consumption is linked to sexual aggression (De Heer *et al.*, 2020), increasing it by 22 per cent (Newsom, *The Mask*). Thus, both ideas suggest that the masculine figures pornography depicts are powerful, dominant men who even resort to sexual violence to prove their supremacy. In this regard, D. Gilmore even argues that "men need to prove their masculinity before other men and that women are used to the purpose. A man proves his masculinity by acting in some way toward a woman so that she becomes the object of masculine competition" ("Cultures of Masculinity" 34). Along these lines, Connell argues that men who attack or harass women believe "they are entirely justified, that they are exercising a right. They are authorized by an ideology of supremacy" (83). Even if that statement was first published in 1995, there is still much work to

do in this regard—statistics from 1997 show that “[o]ne in five women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime” (*Women’s Aid*).<sup>55</sup>

### 3.2. Homosexuality and homophobia<sup>56</sup>

Masculinity is understood as opposed to ‘others’ such as minorities (racial or sexual), but mainly women and femininity (Herek, “On Heterosexual Masculinity” 568; Ferguson 251; Connell 68, 70; Segal xxxiv; Seidler 165; Coates 69; Kimmel, *The Gender of Desire* 25; Gardiner, 2005; Edwards, “Queering the Pitch?” 64; Martínez and Paterna-Bleda 559; Newsom, *The Mask*; Bolen and Collins 755). This inevitably implies rejection against that which is not masculine enough, which does not embody the characteristics traditionally attached to men of protection, strength and being in control.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, homosexuality has been—and in some cultures it still is—rejected, even prosecuted for its apparent lack of masculinity. Tim Edwards claims in this regard that “[g]ay men are often castigated as the wrong sort of men: too masculine, too promiscuous, too phallic, or too lacking in masculinity,

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<sup>55</sup> In the Republic of Ireland, 230 women have died violently from 1996 to 2019, 56 per cent of which “were murdered by a partner or ex-partner” (*Women’s Aid*). In Spain, 1,078 women were murdered by their current or former partners between 2003 and 2020 (*Gobierno de España*), making it an average of 1.13 women murdered per week during those years.

<sup>56</sup> Given that our main interest in the most part of the thesis is the analysis of masculinity, in this section I focus on gay men and homophobia against men more specifically. This does not mean that discrimination against lesbians does not exist, but my research does not dwell on it. For homophobia against lesbians and gay men, see Raja and Stokes 1998 or Griffin 1998 (for discrimination against lesbian women in sports).

<sup>57</sup> An interesting example in this regard could be the War Paint brand, a series of cosmetics and make-up products for men—all in black design, of course—which draw attention to fragile masculinities, and how this brand believes it would only sell its products if advertised as ‘war paint,’ rather than make-up for men. Men might see their masculinity jeopardized if they were using make-up—something traditionally linked to women. The term ‘war paint,’ moreover, was used to designate the paint Native Americans would put on to mark their going to war (*Merriam-Webster*). The concept is also used as the title of a novel by Lindy Woodhead (2003), a biography of two female founders of beauty industry.

somehow incompetent at it, or simply effeminate” (“Queering the Pitch?” 54).<sup>58</sup> Harry Ferguson agrees with this view, claiming that “[o]ppression positions homosexuality at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men” (251). In our society there seems to be a correct way of behaving as a man, and that which remains outside the box cannot be considered a ‘proper man’.<sup>59</sup>

In this sense, homophobia is linked to misogyny<sup>60</sup> in men’s attempt to repress “the ‘feminine’ in all men,” to separate men from women and keep the latter subordinated to men (Segal 16-17). When it comes to misogyny, Anthony Clare seems to agree with Segal, claiming that perhaps there is more behind men’s hatred of women than meets the eye:

Do men feel contempt for women and, if they do, what is fuelling such contempt? It has been argued that misogyny, the hatred of women, is an inescapable element in the development of men and that, quite simply, there are no good men. Might the fear and contempt be related to a deeper fear, a more profound anxiety about male sexuality itself? (5)<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Richard Dyer’s discussion of the coming-out of Hollywood actor Rock Hudson as homosexual shortly before dying of AIDS in the 1980s is especially interesting in this regard. Dyer points out that “Rock could not be gay because, on the one hand, he was ‘virile’, ‘muscular’, ‘square-jawed’, ‘masculine’, and, on the other, he was ‘nice’, ‘good’, ‘likeable’” (27). The public at that time could not identify gay men with traditionally masculine traits and so they could not conceive someone as masculine as Rock Hudson to be gay.

<sup>59</sup> Not only gay men are categorized as ‘the wrong sort of man’ but, as Kimmel points out, also “[i]mmigrant men [...] and black men were all tainted with the same problem: they were not properly manly” (*The History of Men* 10).

<sup>60</sup> D. Gilmore explains the difference in terminology between ‘misogyny’ and ‘male chauvinism’ as follows: “The ideology of male chauvinism is a political dogma regarding decisions about the proportionality of civil rights and power between the sexes; misogyny, although having political ramifications, is essentially an effective or psychological phenomenon based on passion, not thought” (*Misogyny* 26). Male chauvinism is therefore more associated to “male political dominance,” whereas misogyny refers to the “phobias, terrors, and fantasies, regardless of women’s position in the social structure” (26). For an excellent analysis of misogyny through the ages and cultures, see D. Gilmore (2001).

<sup>61</sup> In *The Heart’s Invisible Furies*, Maude and Julian have a discussion on homosexuality, claiming that a homosexual is “a man who’s afraid of women. [...] Every man is afraid of women as far as I can see [...]. But only because most men are not as smart as women and yet they continue to hold all the power. They fear a change of the world order” (83). This links with the connection between masculinity and power discussed above. In another example from Hitchcock’s *Notorious* (1946), the character played by Clark Gable—who always portrayed in movies powerful, strong, typically male characters—argues at one point: “I’ve always been scared of women, but I’ll get over it”, to which Ingrid Berman’s character answers:

According to this author, men might reject women—and, as we see next, homosexuals—for their threat to male sexuality.

The term 'homophobia', then, was coined by George Weinberg to refer to the fear of homosexuals—although it has developed to include also the hatred of homosexual people. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines the term as a “culturally produced fear or prejudice against homosexuals,” a “disposition ranging from mild dislike to abhorrence of people who are sexually or romantically attracted to individuals of the same sex” (Anderson, *Britannica*). For Gregory Herek, “to be a man in contemporary American society is to be homophobic—that is to be hostile toward homosexual persons in general and gay men in particular” (“On Heterosexual Masculinity” 563). He also adds that homophobia “is manifest at both individual and societal levels” (563). For instance, regarding the latter Connell contributes to the argument by claiming that hostility towards gay men involves “real social practice, ranging from job discrimination through media vilification to imprisonment and sometimes murder” (40). The individual level is present in the particular hatred for homosexuals some people manifest.<sup>62</sup>

Weinberg attributed homophobia to five factors:

The first, generally agreed upon nowadays, connected homophobia with the secret fear of one's own homosexual wishes [...]. The other four concerned the influence of religion, repressed envy, homosexuality's threat to established values, and in particular its threat to ideologies confining sexuality to procreation and the family. As has been noted many times, the frequency with which men seek out homosexuals and engage with them sexually, before murderously

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“Now you're scared of yourself. You're afraid you'll fall in love with me.” This dialogue is not only showing men's fear of women, but also their fear of showing emotion or even having feelings—something seen as a sign of weakness, characteristic of women.

<sup>62</sup> Some episodes in John Boyne's *The Heart's Invisible Furies* will exemplify these practices.



turning against them, makes it appear incontestable that these are men not just attacking other homosexuals—but the homosexual in themselves. (Segal 159)

The other four factors that are alluded to here refer to what I have been mentioning in previous chapters regarding the sexual situation of Ireland for most part of its history, deeply under the influence of religion and its established values. In this sense, they refer to Herek's 'societal levels' of homophobia.

The first factor of rejection of homosexuality, however, refers to the fear of being exposed as lacking manhood, fear of not being man enough. It is no wonder, therefore, that "heterosexual men are more homophobic than heterosexual women" (Herek, "On Heterosexual Masculinity" 564). Eric Anderson refers to this phenomenon as 'homohysteria,' "men's fear of being homosexualized" ("Theorizing Masculinities" 31). For this author, acts of homophobia come from this inner fear of being thought a homosexual. In other words, "[d]efensive attitudes appear to result from insecurities about personal adequacy in meeting gender-role demands" (Herek, "Theorizing Masculinities" 566). Indeed, for Segal, "[n]ot being a gay' [...] is perhaps the most immediate, concrete and consistent proof many men feel they have of their own masculinity" (Segal 134-5). In those same lines, Anderson continues as follows:

In a homohysterical culture men therefore value the most extreme representations of masculinity and they equally maintain highly homophobic attitudes, all in attempt to distance themselves from being thought gay. Essentially in a homohysterical culture, men are attempting to escape social stigma by avoiding being perceived as gay. ("Theorizing Masculinities" 31-2)

Certainly, a recurrent motif of literature or film—drawn from real life—is the image of the bully hating another student in an attempt to hide that they see themselves reflected in the other person.<sup>63</sup> Michael Kimmel agrees with this view, with what he calls “the great secret of American manhood: *We are afraid of other men*” (*The Gender of Desire* 35, emphasis in the original). But for him this fear does not mean only that they might be *seen* as gay, but mostly for Kimmel “[h]omophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. [...] Our fear is the fear of humiliation” (35).

For other authors such as Anne Cossins, homophobia is related to power and dominance, as discussed above, and is seen as the opportunity to differentiate “power between groups of men” (113). In other words, Andrea Waling points out that masculinity “constrains or oppresses men, offers them a set of benefits and privileges, or something to which categorize men” (14). By repressing men, others come up stronger and better, to the detriment of weaker men. Homophobia, then, “creates gender distinctions *between* men” (Cossins 113, emphasis in the original), making women and gay men “legitimate targets for measuring masculinity, in order for a man to sustain a position of dominance within masculine hierarchies” (115).

However, from the late 60s to the 80s, the Gay liberation movement grew strongly in the United States and Europe. As Lynne Segal gathers:

activist gay men [...] insisted that homosexuality—far from being abnormal—was a natural capacity in everyone, suppressed by society and the family. Both men and women could be sensitive, sensual, gentle and caring, emotionally independent, strong and technically skilled. Gay men saw themselves as united

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<sup>63</sup> This is clearly perceived in the American TV show *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019), in which a highly homophobic character—the high school bully—is later revealed to be a homosexual himself, afraid of the judgement of his friends and family.

with feminists in a common struggle against the gender system—a struggle which would transform the whole of society. (147)

As I have hinted at above, the last decades of the twentieth century made clear that men could also embody feminine traits—without necessarily being seen as lacking masculinity. In other words,

It is only with the changes in the self-image of homosexuals themselves over the last two decades that there has been any real challenge to the assumption that to be homosexual is to adopt some of the characteristics of the opposite sex. The links between sexuality and gender have begun to fray, and many men, who were always ‘macho’ rather than ‘sissy,’ have come out and become gay. The fine line between a ‘true’ masculinity (which is heterosexual) and its opposite (which is not) has been increasingly transgressed. (Segal 150)

As can be seen below in this same chapter, contemporary masculinities show that the image of the *macho man* is in decay, and that a new type of man—perhaps closer to women—is gaining some ground.

### 3.3. Contemporary masculinities

When discussing contemporary masculinities, it is worthwhile exploring a documentary series titled “Modern Masculinities.”<sup>64</sup> Compiled as short videos made up of interviews, this series is carried out by Iman Amrani, a journalist for *The Guardian*. She talks to different groups of men about what it means to be a man or what masculinity means for them, illustrating thus what seems to

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<sup>64</sup> Available online: <<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/iman-amrani/2019/aug/14/all>> (Accessed 5 Sept 2021).

be emerging as contemporary masculinities. Broadly speaking, almost every man interviewed in the series agrees with the masculine stereotypes of strength and protection, of caring and providing for one's family, of avoiding and hiding one's feelings. But they also argue that those features are old-fashioned and that modern men are fighting against those stereotypes to show the truth underneath the surface. Of particular interest and relevance here is the conversation Amrani holds with teenagers from Football Beyond Borders, a charity organization helping young people in the UK. Despite their young age, they come up with some statements that shed some light into the worries of young boys trying to become men: "Masculinity is not what you see on TV, not what you see in the magazines. It's not like having the best figure, having all the females, or smelling the greatest. It's about integrity, about being yourself, doing the right thing when no one's there."<sup>65</sup> For this teenager in particular, TV is not providing men with appropriate models, and the characteristics that once made the typical 'alpha male' are now intertwined with others that were left slightly behind before.

Along these lines, other young boys in the association referred to the role of society in the creation of masculine identities. They stated that men are stressed out by "society, and what they think that young boys have to be or what they have to do. I think it's just society that makes people anxious. [...] At the end of the day, it's just about being who you are, and not what people are trying to force you to be." As discussed above, masculinity is still today a social construct, an ideal that men—and women—create from the tools that society around them offers. Even if the concept of masculinities has changed with time, men and women are still nowadays slaves of the images that culture supplies and still shape themselves around them.

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<sup>65</sup> Available online: <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/video/2019/aug/14/masculinity-is-not-what-you-see-on-tv-modern-masculinity-episode-4>> (Accessed 5 Sept 2021). The following quotations will be extracted from this same episode.

Without leaving Britain, Anderson's article "Theorizing Masculinities for a New Generation" also alludes to what has been shown in Amrani's documentary series. Published in 2013, Anderson carries out a study of British heterosexual male teenagers and young adults to discuss the concept of contemporary masculinities and homophobia. His study shows that the values attributed to masculinity in the past are not completely valid anymore. Instead, he claims that: "In Britain today, boys bond not just over talk of cars, girls, and video games, but also over disclosing secrets and building intimacy. They bond over intimacy the way men once used to over a century ago" (27). In other words, "young men are redefining what it means to be masculine" (27), as seen above.

In the previous chapter, it has been discussed that homophobia is still a worrying issue in schools in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. In Britain, however, Anderson argues that "homophobia [is] regarded as a sign of immaturity" (30), something decreasing amongst young men. He claims that terms like 'poof' or 'queer,' that will be present in the novels selected, "were not used, while 'fag' was only used to refer to cigarette. 'Gay' was only used in sensible discussions about gay identity and sexuality" (30).

However, despite this optimistic view of young people, other studies show that homophobic hate crime cases have almost trebled from 2014 to 2019. Ben Hunte reports that "there has been a 20% rise in reports to police of homophobic hate crime" in 2019 in the UK. Another report argues that "[h]omophobic hate crimes in London have increased by 55% in five years" (Francis, n.pag.). Thus, it seems that even if young people are more concerned with homophobia than they were in the past, there is still much work to do to

fight against homophobic hate crimes in the UK. As seen in previous chapters, the same could be applied to other countries such as Ireland.<sup>66</sup>

For all the reasons stated above, some authors argue that masculinity is in crisis nowadays (Horrocks, 1994; A. Clare, 2000; Ashe, 2007; F. Walsh, 2010).<sup>67</sup> In words of Fidelma Ashe, this crisis of masculinity “implies that the old certainties surrounding men’s traditional roles in the family and workplace have been swept away through social changes and increases in women’s equality, leaving the modern man dazed and confused about his roles and place in society” (1). Thus, the features attributed to men for decades are not found fitting anymore, and new figures are emerging. Anthony Clare argues that not only the role of man as provider is jeopardized, but also his role as father (18). As exemplified in the selected narratives, the role of the father in the past was much more central or relevant than it is nowadays. This does not mean that fatherhood has become irrelevant, far from it, but now women do not need a man to help them run the house—they are the ones working and taking care of the economics of the house, as well as of the children. Moreover, thanks to the advances of technology such as assisted reproduction, men are no longer fully needed to procreate, and the number of single mothers is highly growing all over the world.<sup>68</sup>

Consequently, men see that their place in the world may be in danger. They are more insecure than before, suffering from “feelings of emptiness, impotence and rage” (Horrocks 1), to the extent that suicide among men is more common than among women—three or four to one (Clare 12). In the

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<sup>66</sup> Or Spain. Tragically, another homophobic murder took place in July 2021 (see Salgado, 2021). This case was especially controversial in Spain because not all political parties understood the case as a homophobic crime, and demonstrations ensued (Bermeo *et al.*).

<sup>67</sup> For an analysis of the crisis of masculinity in the last decades of the nineteenth century, see Mosse, 1996. This study also provides an excellent analysis of the image of man since Ancient times to the end of the twentieth century.

<sup>68</sup> See Nieuwenhuis (2020) for statistics in the EU.

chapters devoted to the selected narratives, it is shown how (and if) all the above mentioned is present.

### 3.4. Irish masculinities and fatherhood

The focus of this section is Irish masculinities and how Irish culture and society help shape young boys' attitudes towards manhood.<sup>69</sup> Let us start with an example from contemporary Irish literature. Anne Griffin's novel *When All is Said* (2019) perfectly exemplifies the role of men in Irish society, and the way in which Irish culture enhances (or at least enhanced in the 50s and 60s) the stereotypes of the emotionless, silent man:

There was a love but of the Irish kind, reserved and embarrassed by its own humanity. These days people are all for talking. Getting things off their chest. Like it's easy. Men, in particular, get a lot of stick for not pulling their weight in that quarter. And as for Irish men. I've news for you, it's worse as you get older. It's like we tunnel ourselves deeper into our aloneness. Solving our problems on our own. Men, sitting alone at bars going over and over the same old territory in their heads. Sure, if you were sitting right beside me, son, you'd know none of this. I wouldn't know where to start. It's all grand up here in my head but to say it out loud to the world, to a living being? It's not like we were reared to it. Or taught it in school. Or that it was preached from the pulpit. It's no wonder at the age of thirty or forty or eighty no less, we can't just turn our hand to it. (81)

This extract of the novel shows how Maurice, the eighty-four-year-old protagonist of the story, recalls what it meant to be a man in Ireland in the 60s and what it means now, especially in terms of displaying emotion. Precisely,

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<sup>69</sup> For the situation of fatherhood in other countries like Spain, Austria or Japan, among others, see Crespi and Ruspini 2016.

the core of the novel is a chance for the protagonist to tell his story, something he has never been able to do out loud.

Similarly, in his 1995 article, Ferguson alludes to Irish masculinities as “heterosexual, [...] closely linked to the institution of marriage and [upholding] the rule of men in the family” (251). He continues:

It not only values, but glorifies strength, control, and an image of men as self-sufficient, providing well for oneself and one’s family. Heterosexual masculinity is meant to be naturally given and free of crisis [...]. It repudiates the feminine and everything associated with it in men. The feminine is equated with weakness and negative stereotypes of effeminate or gay men, ‘poofs’, wimps, and sissies. This leads to a deep mistrust of public displays of emotion. (251)

This last statement adds to what has been mentioned in Griffin’s novel regarding men’s lack of emotion displays—something left for the women. The rest of stereotypes attributed to Irish men are very similar to those mentioned above, and show the importance of the Church in twentieth-century Ireland, especially with regard to marriage.

Thus far it has been shown that masculinity is a social construct, that boys internalize a series of features traditionally attributed to men as reflected in society—in TV, films, school, the church or at home. Here, fathers are the first role models for their young boys, and how they behave around them can shape what children become in the future as men. Fatherhood is a reflection where young boys see their future, globally. A. Clare points out that:

The early years of development of a boy require him to start to separate from his mother and identify with his father—his same-sex parent—as part of his gender maturation. Like girls, boys start out with a close physical and domestic relationship with their mothers. But at some point every son has to redefine himself and prepare for the extra-domestic role as man and father, in large part



among men. Access to a father's warm, close guidance promotes this growth. A father's support for his son's physical, athletic, intellectual and emotional development facilitates the transition from childhood to adolescence and indeed later enables and encourages him, as a young adult, to turn to his father for advice (175-6)

The father's impact on the child's development is hence clear. Perry Garfinkel also argues that "[d]uring the first impressionable years of life, the boy's father personifies Manhood" (17). However, Victor J. Seidler argues that:

There is a widespread and growing feeling that as men we are living in a radically different world from our fathers. There is a feeling of cultural dislocation as young men can no longer rely upon what their fathers might have taught them. There are no longer the same certainties about what it means for a boy to make a transition to manhood. (2)

Even if written more than twenty years ago, this statement could also be relevant today. As time goes by, the concept of masculinities and what it means to be a man keep changing—what our grandparents understood as manhood cannot be applicable today. Therefore, the figure of the father needs to keep up with time—his role is evolving and changing to be able to transmit those values to his children. In other words, "fathers are the first role models for their son's masculinities and take an active part in shaping their sons' construction of masculinity" (Heward 37).<sup>70</sup> Precisely because of this, in the time when the novels I have analysed are set, a parent might feel like they failed in their role as parents if a son or daughter comes out as gay or lesbian.

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<sup>70</sup> Related to fatherhood and masculinity, it is interesting to point out here the case of Jack Pearson in the TV show *This is Us* (2016). This American character, a loving father of three in the 1980s, is a subversive figure of what it meant to be a father at that time. He is loving and not afraid of showing his emotions and feelings for his family. In fact, in the show he is recurrently mentioned as a highly difficult role model to follow for future parents.

In this regard, Carregal-Romero argues that, in the twentieth century, “[f]amilial homophobia should be understood within a cultural climate in which parents—most frequently, mothers—were blamed for their children’s homosexuality” (“Silence” 395). Indeed, in *A Son Called Gabriel* Gabriel’s mother is blamed by his father for turning Gabriel into “one useless chap. [...] He’s for nothing [...]. He can’t even mix with the other Knockburn lads. All he wants to do is run about with that fancy boy Martin and learn his affected ways” (187).

As argued above, in the past men were those who provided for the family, but they did not really participate in childcare. The mother of the family, due to her being a woman, was supposed to have the necessary emotional qualities as to be able to raise children—something men lacked. In fact, the role that women played in Ireland in previous decades and how they have changed hitherto should be mentioned here, in order to understand that of men.

According to Inglis, “[f]rom the 1970s, particularly with the struggle for the empowerment and emancipation of women, there were major cultural conflicts around fertility control, abortion, and divorce, all of which challenged the dominant Catholic view of women, marriage, and the family” (*Meanings of Life* 11). Remarkably, “[o]ver the last sixty years, women began to distance themselves from the images and roles into which they had been socialized by the Catholic Church” (Inglis, *Meanings of Life* 9) as “the passive, virginal, pious, humble, shy colleen” (Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 26). As seen in *The Heart’s Invisible Furies*, in the past the greatest sign of shame, orchestrated by the Church, was “reserved for the single woman who became pregnant outside of marriage” (Inglis, “Origins and Legacies” 32). Needless to say, this suppressive role of women in Ireland comes as a result of the great impact and power that the Catholic Church held in the country. With the secularization of

Ireland, and little by little, the Irish woman is not passive anymore but in charge of her own destiny.<sup>71</sup>

The role of men, therefore, is both influenced by and influencing that of women. In the case of fatherhood, men left the realm of childcare to mothers while they took refuge in work.<sup>72</sup> Niall Hanlon and Kathleen Lynch report that the image of the Irish man is slowly changing, in the sense that they now balance work and family better than before, but they still leave to women the vast majority of work around the house (45). Along these lines, Hanlon and Lynch argue that “[m]any men fear being seen doing caring because they feel it diminishes them as men” (50).<sup>73</sup> Moreover, for these authors, this is also related to male dominance, since they claim that it “manifests also as an absence of care” (52). It seems men see their masculinity being jeopardised if they get involved in traditional stereotypical female activities, such as children’s upbringing can be. Besides, it would require showing feelings and emotion, something men have traditionally been said to avoid. In other words, “[a]lthough a father is seen as the patriarch and ruler of a family, his function is not in the domestic sphere, but in the marketplace, providing financial rather

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<sup>71</sup> Both in Boyne’s *A History of Loneliness* and *The Heart’s Invisible Furies* there are allusions to the hatred of women within the Church: “Sure the priests ran the country back then and they hated women. Oh my God, they *hated* women and anything that had to do with women and anything to do with women’s bodies or ideas or desires” (*The Heart’s Invisible Furies* 672-3, emphasis in the original).

<sup>72</sup> In *A History of Loneliness*, Odran’s mother claims at one point that “it didn’t matter where [Hannah] worked, for one day she’d be married and starting a family of her own and her husband would never allow her to have a career if he had anything about him at all” (Boyne 250). This quotation shows the roles attributed to both men and women in Ireland in the 60s and 70s—the man is left in charge of providing for his family, and he should not allow his wife to work anywhere but in the house. Same dynamics took place in church. In the same novel, the narrator claims: “The men helped to write the parish newsletter, but the women delivered it; the men organized the church social evenings, but the women cleaned up when they were over; the men encouraged the children to take part in family Masses, but the women had to look after them when they did. [...] I have known men and women like this all my life and there are some things, rotten and discordant to the eye, that will never change” (333). Women, then, were left the hard work in all the atmospheres.

<sup>73</sup> When referring to fatherhood, Segal also adds that fathers’ involvement in child-rearing “usually involves the more pleasurable aspects of childcare, such as playing with children or taking them out, leaving the routine care of feeding, dressing, washing and so on to wives.” (35)

than emotional support” (Purvis 210). All in all, studies like the one carried out by Hanlon and Lynch show that, despite having evolved as a society, men in Ireland still believe it is the woman’s duty to take care of the family, and cannot conceive a scenario where they are held responsible for childcaring.

Something similar happens in the rest of the world with the figure of the ‘new father’:

have men generally changed? Is a new *type* of man emerging? One way of throwing light on this question is to look at men as fathers. There is little dispute that fathers have become more involved in at least some aspects of childcare over the last two decades. Yet controversy surrounds the image and reality of the ‘new father’, ranging from approval and celebration to skepticism and derision. (Segal 26, emphasis in the original)

In the case of Ireland, Deirdre McCann claims that ‘new fathers’ are still devoting less time than mothers to their children (two and a half hours weekly versus four and a half hours, respectively) (10), showing that even if the figure of the father is shifting, it is not the same as the mother’s yet.<sup>74</sup>

As a result, this absence of caring and therefore this specific image of fatherhood as absent and work-focused influence young boys and what they might become in the future. As I discuss in each respective chapter, fatherhood and masculinities are of great importance when dealing with the novels chosen. Debbie Ging argues regarding Irish film that “the dominant trope” in Irish father-son relationships “is one of dis-identification, for the Irish father on-screen is more often than not a bully whose only emotional outlet is to inflict psychological damage on his children” (81). Even if referring to cinema, this

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<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Kimmel argues that, even if fathers are starting to spend ‘quality time’ with their children, “[w]omen in the U.S. and the E.U. still do about 80% of all housework and child care” (“Why Men” 110). In this regard, he also claims that it is a matter of “quantity time”, rather than quality (110).

statement could also be applicable to literature, and more specifically to the novels chosen. Ging continues stating that “the harsh, autocratic father figure has arguably become a metonym for all that is backward about Ireland, and he is frequently posited as an impediment to progress” (81). As analysed in each chapter, this statement is very much in accord with what can be found in the selected narratives.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### NARRATION

“The only way to write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself.”

*The Blind Assassin*, Margaret Atwood

The idea of a teller who lies to its audience, either to follow a certain purpose or because it cannot help it, is not a recent one.<sup>75</sup> The concept of the unreliable narrator is indeed as old as literature itself, traceable as far back as Greek literature with Odysseus’ own accounts of his adventures in some parts of *The Odyssey* (8th century BC), and it is also seen in other prominent examples from the seventeenth century with Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605), Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) in the nineteenth century, or Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) in the twentieth century.

The term ‘unreliable narrator’, however, is much more recent. Most critics date the coinage of this debated narratological concept in the 1960s by Wayne C. Booth in his revealing study *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). This publication constituted a landmark in many narratological aspects, that of the unreliable narrator amongst them. Nonetheless, even if the vast majority of literary critics agree on the establishment of the term by Booth, some of them argue that his definition is not as complete or accurate as a term such as this one requires. The main aspect of controversy is found in its constituents, whether other related terms such as focalization, the implied author, or even the implied

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<sup>75</sup> For the sake of simplicity and unless making reference to a specific narrator/character in a novel, I use the impersonal third-person pronoun ‘it’ to refer to the general concept of the narrator.

reader are relevant when discussing this type of narrator, or in the lack of a procedure to appropriately identify the unreliable narrator. The aim of this chapter is to illustrate and clarify this theoretical concept. To do so, works from world literature, especially contemporary works written in English, are used.<sup>76</sup>

#### 4.1. The narrator: plain and simple (?)

To understand the narratological implications of and related concepts to that of the unreliable narrator, one must be familiar with the basic concept of the narrator itself. Every reader of fiction in general is aware of the figure through which the story is told, a figure we should clearly distinguish from that of the flesh-and-blood author. In this regard, we could differentiate at least two levels related to the analysis of the narrator: (1) its position towards the story (the role played in it) and (2) its involvement in it. Although at first sight this distinction may not seem as such, the second layer goes much deeper into the analysis of the story than the first one. Hence, whereas the first level of analysis refers to the part played by the narrator in the story (whether it is a character in the story told, i.e. whether narrator and characters share the same story world), the second one refers to the degree of information we receive from the narrator (whether it is a mere witness of the action or rather if the narrator adds its own thoughts and comments to the narrative). Let us comment on this distinction in further detail.

Traditionally, we are taught at school the distinction between narrators as marked by their position towards the story, namely a first-person narrator or a

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<sup>76</sup> I should highlight here that “unreliable narrators have for a long time been mostly, or even exclusively, male” (D’Hoker, “Powerful Voices” 23; Nünning, “But Why Will You Say” 89). Even if this dissertation follows that trend, given that the three narrators analysed are all male (and are studied as such), throughout this theoretical chapter many examples of female unreliability are presented (e.g. McEwan’s *Atonement*, Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of the Hills*, or Flynn’s *Gone Girl*, among others), which show a change in contemporary literature regarding the image of the heroine, who should not be trusted any longer merely for being a woman.



third-person one—the former being a character in the story and the latter an outsider to it (generally speaking). However, this classification seems overtly inaccurate, since it could be argued that the narrator is always going to be an ‘I’, a speaking entity—the difference will remain, therefore, in the narrator’s use of the first or the third person to talk about the world. This is a point of view shared by critics like Mieke Bal (21) and Gerard Genette, the latter claiming that

in my view every narrative is, explicitly or not, ‘in the first person’ since at any moment its narrator may use that pronoun to designate himself. [...] The general distinction between ‘first-person’ and ‘third person’ narratives thus operates within this inevitably personal character of all discourse, depending on the narrator’s relation (presence or absence) to the story he tells: ‘first-person’ indicates his presence as a character of whom mention is made, ‘third person’ his absence as such a character. (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 97)

In other words, the entity of the narrator telling the story is always going to be that of a person with the necessary ability to tell or write the story, the difference lying in the distance it takes from the story itself. Along these lines, Booth also considered that “[t]o say that a story is told in the first or the third person will tell us nothing of importance unless we become more precise and describe how the particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects” (150).

The inaccuracy of terms requires critics to come up with more specific concepts able to solve the gaps found. As seen in the quotation above, Genette realised that the distinction made between first-person and third-person narrators merely had to do with whether these were characters in the story or not. Hence, Genette solves the problem with the coinage of the terms ‘homodiegetic’ and ‘heterodiegetic’ narrators:

We will therefore distinguish here two types of narrative: one with the narrator absent from the story he tells [...], the other with the narrator present as a character in the story he tells [...]. I call the first type, for obvious reasons, *heterodiegetic*, and the second type *homodiegetic*. (*Narrative Discourse* 244-5, emphasis in the original)

This distinction leaves aside the way in which the narrator talks about the world, whether in the first person or the third, since the most important aspect is its relation to the story and its position inside or outside the recounted events. Examples of homodiegetic narrators include Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* or Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*, whereas heterodiegetic narrators can be found more prominently in the novels written by Jane Austen, for instance.<sup>77</sup> Within the concept of the homodiegetic narrator, nonetheless, Genette distinguishes between those narrators who are also the protagonists of the stories they tell and those who are mere observers, the former being 'autodiegetic' narrators (*Narrative Discourse* 245). From the previous examples, only Humbert Humbert could be considered as such, whereas Nelly Dean would be an observer of Heathcliff and Catherine's story.

Bal also shares the importance of distinguishing those narrators who play a role in the story from those who are not recognised as characters in it. Consequently, she comes up with the concepts of 'character-bound narrator' and 'external narrator': "When in a text the narrator never refers explicitly to

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<sup>77</sup> As can be appreciated and has been developed below, these concepts are greatly related to the concept of the unreliable narrator, for most of the deceiving narrators we are to encounter are homodiegetic narrators—those with an emotional or personal involvement in the story and therefore subject to a high degree of unreliability in their narration. Not all of them, however, must necessarily be homodiegetic, since other examples of heterodiegetic unreliable narration can be named, such as John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2007). In this case, unreliable *focalization* should be discussed.

itself as a character, we speak of an external narrator. [...] If the 'I' is to be identified with a character, hence, also an actor in the fabula, we speak of a character-bound narrator" (21). In relation to Genette's terminology, a character-bound narrator would be homodiegetic (with the possibility of being autodiegetic as well) and an external narrator would be heterodiegetic.

Hence, the concepts coined by these two authors point towards the distance of the narrator towards the story, whether it is telling the action from the inside or the outside. The distinction is no longer focused on the grammatical person used by the narrator to speak about the world, but rather the position where the narrator finds itself in that world.

The second level of analysis I have referred to previously alludes to the information we get from the narrator. The narrator, as a bridge between author and reader, can be used as a mere channel of information—whose role is that of just telling of the events happening around it in as neutral a manner as possible—or it can rather be conscious of its role as teller, contributing to the story with its own views of the events and therefore guiding and influencing the reader at will. In *Story and Discourse* (1978), Seymour Chatman distinguishes between 'overt' and 'covert' narrators, alluding to their degree of involvement in the story. Overt narrators are clearly present in the discourse, mainly by being conscious of the fact that they are recounting the events for an audience and, consequently, by the addition of their own personal views and comments on the matter. Ansgar Nünning refers to the concept of the overt narrator as those narrators "who are clearly recognizable as speakers or writers and about whom the reader gets to know quite a lot" ("But Why Will You Say" 84). Covert narrators, on the other hand, seem to be mere observers or witnesses of the recounted events, usually without the personal involvement that an overt narrator might imply.

Booth also alluded to this distinction between present and non-present narrators albeit using a different terminology. This critic distinguishes between

“*self-conscious narrators*, aware of themselves as writers [...], and narrators or observers who rarely if ever discuss their writing chores [...] or who seem unaware that they are writing, thinking, speaking, or ‘reflecting’ a literary work” (155, emphasis in the original). Most of the heterodiegetic or external narrators we find in fiction could be classified as the observers Booth refers to, for they are not overtly aware of their identity as writers. Self-conscious narrators abound in homodiegetic narratives, since almost all of them are well aware of the presence of an audience listening to their story, either inside or outside the story itself. Nonetheless, we can also find examples of homodiegetic narrators who are not aware of the audience behind the page, as may be the case of Nick Dunne in Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012) or Jack in Ian McEwan’s *The Cement Garden* (1978). Contemporary examples of self-conscious narrators include Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) or Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), to name only two. McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001) would be an example of a novel which includes these two types of narrators at once. During the three main parts of the novel we find a heterodiegetic observer, able to get into the minds of the characters but without much involvement in or personal commentary of what is being told. In the last section of the novel, however, the reader suddenly comes across a homodiegetic self-conscious narrator, who admits to having written the book we have previously read and gives her personal account of the events as a result.

The question of unreliability goes quite unnoticed through the first level of analysis (the position of the narrator towards the story), for unreliability is usually going to be associated with a homodiegetic narrator, whose participation in the narrative drives it to comment on it and lead the reader through its own path.<sup>78</sup> Unreliability is therefore more evident in the second

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<sup>78</sup> Indeed, some authors would argue that all homodiegetic narrators are by their own nature unreliable: “[t]he presence of such a narrator in the world of fictional characters and his

layer discussed, since it has much to do with the degree of involvement of the narrator as a character. We might encounter homodiegetic unreliable narrators who are mere observers to the narrative, since they do not add their comments or thoughts on the events taking place around them—which I would argue makes them slightly suspicious. Their leaving aside parts of the action turns them into unreliable narrators by omission, as may be the case of one of the best-known examples of unreliable narration, Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), or of the narrator in John Boyne’s *A History of Loneliness*, as analysed in its specific chapter.<sup>79</sup>

Reliable narrators, on the other hand, are more common in heterodiegetic narratives, since the external narrator would not have *a priori* any reason or purpose to deceive the audience. This notwithstanding, when dealing with (un)reliability we should bear in mind that it is arduous to find a completely reliable or unreliable narrator. Booth speaks about a “variety of more-or-less reliable narrators” (274), since to what extent can we fully trust the teller of any story? And the other way round, to what extent is an unreliable narrator completely unreliable? In the following section the nature of the unreliable narrator is discussed in more depth.

#### 4.2. The unreliable narrator: a concept in progress<sup>80</sup>

##### 4.2.1. The problem of definition

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endowment with an individuality which is also physically determined leads to a limitation of his horizon of perception and knowledge” (Stanzel 89).

<sup>79</sup> For further information on the omission of events in unreliable narration, see section 4.2.3. How to detect unreliability.

<sup>80</sup> As the term ‘unreliable narrator’ clearly states, I focus here on unreliable narration with a narrator. However, for unreliability *without* a narrator, see the works of Köppe and Kindt (2011) or Currie (1995, for unreliability in film). I also deal with unreliable first-person narrators, although some critics have analysed unreliable third-person narrators (Martens 2008), as present for example in Katherine Mansfield’s works (Murphy and Walsh 2017).

As hinted at above, the definition of unreliable narration is not something of agreement amongst critics. Booth's definition still stands as the official and (perhaps too) basic one, although some changes and additions have been made throughout the years. Wayne Booth coined the term unreliable narrator in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* as follows: "For lack of better terms, I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not" (158-9, emphasis in the original). In other words, for Booth the unreliable narrator is closely linked to the figure of the implied author and the norms and values that the latter has attached to the text. The unreliable narrator, therefore, is that who does not agree with the implied author's view of the world and drifts widely apart from it. Nonetheless, there are some critics who have problems with this definition.

#### 4.2.1.1. *The unreliable narrator and the implied author*

The first problem comes precisely with the linkage of the unreliable narrator to a term as slippery as that of the implied author—turning therefore the concept of the unreliable narrator into an equally unsteady term. The implied author is also a term coined by Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and used worldwide by other literary critics. For Booth, the implied author is the image of the actual author that the reader infers from the text, the idea of them that they have consciously created in the text. In the critic's own words, "[a]s [the author] writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself'" (70). This 'version of himself' is a specific image created in a specific text, given that not every text by the same author portrays the same implied author—consequently, Ishiguro's implied author in *Never Let Me Go*, to name a contemporary example, is not the same as that found in *The Remains of the Day* (1989). Besides, voiceless as the implied author is, the

role played by the reader in the game is extremely relevant, since this figure would not exist without a reader to reconstruct it.

It goes without saying that the views presented by an implied author do not need to be shared by the actual author or even by the narrator, and it is here where unreliability occurs. Booth argues that the distance between the implied author and the narrator might be a question of morality, intelligence, space, or time, among others (156). A thoroughly discussed case in point in this regard is Nabokov's controversial novel *Lolita*, in which, as far as I am concerned, neither the actual author nor the implied author shares the narrator's paedophilic impulses, making Humbert Humbert disagree with the implied author's moral views and hence a highly unreliable narrator.<sup>81</sup>

Chatman seems to agree with Booth's notion of the unreliable narrator and the implied author as connected entities. Following Booth, Chatman claims that the implied author is the unit who created the narrator and everything else and whose image the reader reconstructs (148). He continues thus:

What makes a narrator unreliable is that his values diverge strikingly from that of the implied author's; that is, the rest of the narrative—'the norm of the work'—conflicts with the narrator's presentation, and we become suspicious of his sincerity or competence to tell the 'true version'. The unreliable narrator is at virtual odds with the implied author; otherwise his unreliability would not emerge. (149, emphasis in the original)

However, not all critics are willing to accept Booth's definition of unreliability precisely because of its connection to the concept of the implied author. Bal or Genette are two detractors of this idea, since they argue the inaccuracy,

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<sup>81</sup> For further discussion of the unreliability of Nabokov's *Lolita*, see Phelan (2007) or Wasmuth (2009).

inappropriateness or even pointless nature of the concept of the implied author.

Indeed, Bal is one of its harshest critics. In *Narratology*, she discusses the term of the implied author as “introduced by Booth (1961) in order to discuss and analyse the ideological and moral stances of a narrative text without having to refer directly to a biographical author” (17). Nonetheless, Bal meets three inconsistencies with the use of this term:

First, in Booth’s use of the term, it denotes the totality of meanings that can be inferred from a text. Thus, the implied author is the *result* of the investigation of the meaning of a text, and not the *source* of that meaning. Only after interpreting the text on the basis of a text description can the ‘implied author’ be inferred and discussed. Second, therefore, the term mystifies and overwrites the reader’s input and is easily recuperated to grant the interpretation of one person [...] and thereby relegates the reader again to the margins. Third, the notion of an implied author is, in this sense, not limited to narrative texts, but can be applied to any text. (17, emphasis in the original)

Bal argues that the views that we grant the implied author come only after a thorough investigation of the text and is therefore subject to interpretation. Booth claimed that the implied author is the image that the actual author creates, but he did not take into account that it might be biased by the reader’s perception. Thus, a particular reader may not infer the values the actual author wanted them to. Bal also points out the universality of the term, in the sense that it can be applied to fiction and historical texts alike, thus the term lacks precision and specification to literary texts.

Genette is another critic who denies the appropriateness or relevance of the term implied author that Booth had granted it:



The implied author is everything the text lets us know about the author, and the literary theorist, like every other reader, must not disregard it. But if one wants to establish this *idea of the author* as a 'narrative agent', I don't go along, maintaining always that agents should not be multiplied unnecessarily—and this one, *as such*, seems to me unnecessary. In narrative, or rather behind or before it, there is someone who tells, and who is the narrator. On the narrator's far side there is someone who writes, who is responsible for everything on the near side. That someone—big news—is the author (and no one else), and it seems to me, as Plato said some time ago, that that is enough. (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 148, emphasis in the original)

Genette defends the role of the actual author, whose importance Booth seems to concede to the implied author instead. For the French theorist, the actual author should not be left aside and removed from their essentiality in the creation of the text. Another problem arises in this case, however: that of the inconsistency between the actual author's views and the ones the reader can infer from the text. As mentioned above, the actual author needs not share the implied author's views of the world; therefore, if we eliminate the figure of the implied author, where does that leave the author's perspective? Are we to link all the information we get from the text to the actual author themselves, leaving aside their personal opinion on the matter? This does not seem completely fair, to say the least.

#### 4.2.1.2. *The unreliable narrator and the reader*

Once stated the inaccuracy of the first definition, we will see how to fix it. The main problem with Booth's definition seems to be the lack of the indispensable inclusion of the role played by the reader in the detection of unreliability. Critics coming after Booth defended the importance of a reader to interpret the text,

so much so that they contended that a text without a reader to give it meaning does not exist.<sup>82</sup>

Before dealing in depth with the relationship between unreliability and the reader, it is worth devoting some space to what has been called 'reception theory' or 'reader-response theory'—the analysis of the role played by the reader in any given text. Throughout literary criticism, much thought has been devoted to the study of the author, the narrator, and the implied author (that is, to the 'senders' of the text) but little effort was put into the study of the 'receivers' of that same text—the reader/audience and the implied reader—until literary critics such as Wolfgang Iser or Hans Robert Jauss started theorizing about them.

Roland Barthes, in his essay "The Death of the Author," famously argues:

a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (148)

As suggested above, critics dealing with reception theory emphasised the role of the reader in 'decoding' the text. The meaning of a text is not intrinsic to the text itself, but rather emerges after the text has been read—it is the game between author, text, and reader which creates meaning. For Umberto Eco, "[e]very text, after all (as I have already written), is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work. What a problem it would be if a text were to say everything the receiver is to understand—it would never end" (3). In other

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<sup>82</sup> This is not something new, however, for classical authors and philosophers like Plato or Aristotle already admitted the importance of the audience, be it poetry or drama.

words, a narrative is full of gaps and it is the reader's job to fill them. In literary terms, Wolfgang Iser explains this distinction between sender and receiver in his enlightening volume *The Implied Reader*:

the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie half-way between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader [...]. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader. (274-5)

Iser also follows the idea that a text has as many different meanings as readers, since "each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled" (80). These gaps, however, are not to be filled at will but, as Iser points out, the text is there to give certain rules and guidelines to the reader as to how they should interpret the narrative: "the guiding devices operative in the reading process have to initiate communication and to control it. [...] Although exercised *by* the text, it is not *in* the text" (in Suleiman and Crosman 110, emphasis in the original).

To fill in these gaps, the reader must include what Terry Eagleton calls 'pre-understandings,' "a dime context of beliefs and expectations within which the work's various features will be assessed" (67). The reader, therefore, will juxtapose their previous knowledge to the text itself, including their experience

with other literary works of the same genre, for instance.<sup>83</sup> In his thought-provoking book *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, Hans Robert Jauss deals with what he calls 'horizon of expectations,' making reference to this set of preconceptions that the reader brings, unconsciously and inevitably, to the text. Jauss mentions three possible factors present in the reader's horizon of expectations, namely the "familiar norms" of the genre, the "implicit relationships to familiar works of the literary-historical surroundings," and the distance between reality and fiction (24). Consequently, the artistic value of a work can be measured against the gap between the horizon of expectations it produces on the reader and the work itself; the greater this distance, the greater the change it will produce on the reader's expectations (the greater the surprise), and hence the better quality of the work (Jauss 25).<sup>84</sup>

What should be clear by now is that there is not just a single reader of a text, just as there was not a single author. In the 1950s, Walker Gibson shed some light on this distinction as follows:

there are two readers distinguishable in every literary experience. First, there is the 'real' individual upon whose crossed knee rests the open volume, and whose personality is as complex and ultimately inexpressible as any dead poet's. Second, there is the fictitious reader—I shall call him the 'mock reader'—whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language. The mock reader is an artefact, controlled, simplified, abstracted out of the chaos of day-to-day sensation. (265-6)

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<sup>83</sup> The concept of intertextuality, coined by Julia Kristeva, is quite relevant here, for it emphasises the relationship between the reader and those preconceptions that they bring to the reading experience. For an interesting analysis of this relationship, see Montoro Araque (1996).

<sup>84</sup> This key concept of the surprise is of use when dealing with unreliability, since some of the unreliable narrators I have mentioned and tackle below are based upon the surprising element on the reader.

A couple of decades later, Peter Rabinowitz expands Gibson's two-reader distinction to four possible readers. Let us start with the first three readers he proposes, and leave the fourth one until we deal with unreliability:

1. First, there is the *actual audience*. This consists of the flesh-and-blood people who read the book. [...]
2. Second, the author of a novel designs his work rhetorically for a specific hypothetical audience. [...] he cannot write without making certain assumptions about his reader's beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions. [...]
3. Since the novel is generally an imitation of some nonfictional form (usually history, including biography and autobiography), the narrator of the novel (implicit or explicit) is generally an imitation of an author. He writes for an imitation audience (which we shall call the *narrative audience*) which also possesses particular knowledge. (125-7, emphasis in the original)

Since the first version of the reader is quite straightforward, I focus now on versions two and three. What Rabinowitz calls "a specific hypothetical audience" or 'authorial audience' is what Gibson denoted 'mock reader' and what other authors will call 'implied reader,' as seen next. His third reader, however, is to be linked to the narrator itself; therefore, his 'narrative audience' might be understood as the narratee (Prince, 1971; Bal, 2009). Indeed, the implied audience of the narrator and the that of the author need not be the same—for example, Iris's narratee in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) is her granddaughter, whereas Atwood's implied reader is a completely different entity.

Thus, parallel to the concept of the implied author, some critics introduce the widely-used term 'implied reader' (Booth, Chatman, A. Nünning, Yacobi), albeit other critics use another terminology to refer to the same entity

(Genette's 'potential reader,' Phelan and Martin's 'authorial audience,' Gibson's 'mock reader,' or Eco's 'model reader,' among others). Following the analysis of the implied author, Genette argues that

The author of a narrative, like every other author, addresses a reader who does not yet exist at the moment the author is addressing him, and who may never exist. Contrary to the implied author, who is the idea, in the reader's head, of a real author, the implied reader is the idea, in the real author's head, of a *possible* reader. (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 149, emphasis in the original)

To avoid the dissymmetry between implied author and implied reader, Genette prefers the term 'potential reader' to denote the idea of a reader in the author's head, the best audience they could think of for their text. In other words, Chatman also understands the implied reader as "the audience presupposed by the narrative itself" (150). Besides, "only by agreeing to play the role of this created audience for the duration of his/her reading can an actual reader correctly understand and fully appreciate the work" (Suleiman 8).

Indeed, the actual reader, looking for a better understanding of the text, might want to be closer to the authorial audience in those cases where the implied author has assumed certain knowledge from them that the actual reader might not have. For instance, in his novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Jonathan Safran Foer imposes some knowledge about 9/11 on the implied reader that the actual reader might not be familiar with. Thus, the actual reader is required to make some prior research and hence merge either with the implied reader or not, but his better understanding of the novel is based on that.

Moreover, Susan Suleiman argues that "[n]arratees can be analyzed in terms of some of the same categories as narrators: they may be intrusive or discreet, dramatized or not, single or multiple, and they may be present in a

given narrative on several levels” (13-4). Chatman and Genette also claim that this audience might be implied or not, in the sense that the narratee to which the narrative is addressed might or might not be a part of the text itself. In this regard, Genette talks about an extradiegetic and an intradiegetic narratee, the former merging with the implied reader as outsiders to the story, whereas the intradiegetic narratee is to be identified with a character in the story: “To an intradiegetic narrator corresponds an intradiegetic narratee [...]. The extradiegetic narrator, on the other hand, can aim only at the extradiegetic narratee, who merges with the implied reader and with whom each real reader can identify” (*Narrative Discourse* 259-260). The intradiegetic narratee, therefore, is a character inside the story to whom the narrator is recounting it and, as such, it is even more troublesome for the reader to identify with this entity. Among the aforementioned examples, we could claim that both *Lolita* and *Wuthering Heights* present intradiegetic narratees: Humbert’s story is meant for a jury whereas Nelly Dean’s narratee is Lockwood. However, according to Genette, extradiegetic narratee and implied reader refer to the same entity, although they are not necessarily in accordance with the real reader. As we will see with Rabinowitz’s fourth audience, the narrator also creates an implied reader—its extradiegetic narratee, the audience for whom the narrator designs its narrative, be it inside or outside the text.

Chatman also shares Genette’s distinction between the addressee inside and the addressee outside the narrative, and he goes a step further in the claim that even when the narrator might not refer to the implied reader specifically, we can still feel the presence of the audience:

Like the implied author, the implied reader is always present. And just as there may or may not be a narrator, there may or may not be a *narratee*. He may materialize as a character in the world of the work [...]. Or there may be no overt reference to him at all, though his presence is felt. In such cases the author

makes explicit the desired audience stance, and we must give him the benefit of the doubt if we are to proceed at all. The narratee-character is only one device by which the implied author informs the real reader how to perform as implied reader. (150, emphasis in the original)

In some novels, we might encounter references to an audience such as direct addresses to the reader, even if we are not sure about the identity of this audience. According to Chatman, the author is making clear what they expect from their audience, the path they are expected to follow while reading the text. Monika Fludernik also supports this idea of the implied reader as the ideal audience, claiming that the implied reader “is a projection from the text and is perceived by the reader as acting out the role of an ideal reader figure, although the real reader may not actually assume this role” (23). Indeed, the narratee-character might react one way to the narrator’s story, but the real reader does not need to share the same reaction: “just as the narrator may or may not ally himself with the implied author, the implied reader furnished by the real reader may or may not ally himself with a narratee” (Chatman 150).

This idea is especially relevant for the notion of unreliability. As I have already mentioned, I would argue that just as the author has created an implied reader, so has the narrator. Rabinowitz’s fourth audience, then, is what I would call the narrator’s implied reader:

This is the audience for which the narrator wishes he were writing and relates to the narrative audience in a way roughly analogous to the way that the authorial audience relates to the actual audience. This final audience believes the narrator, accepts his judgments, sympathizes with his plight, laughs at his jokes even when they are bad. I call this the *ideal narrative audience*—ideal, that is, from the narrator’s point of view. (134, emphasis in the original)



Consequently, unreliability occurs when the real reader is not in accordance with the narrator's (fictive) narratee (or implied reader)—when the real reader is not behaving as the narrator would expect them to. The narrator would want a fully-trusting audience, a reader who does not question what the narrator is stating and approvingly nods without demands. Nonetheless, unreliable narrators often come across suspicious readers who are not willing to believe what the narrator is claiming just because it seems to be the authority around the narrative. In other words, “[t]he implied reader senses a discrepancy between a reasonable reconstruction of the story and the account given by the narrator. Two sets of norms conflict, and the covert set, once recognized, must win” (Chatman 233). In my view, this is when unreliability occurs—not when the narrator does not share the implied author's views, but precisely when the reader is not the same as the reader desired by the narrator. In this case, the author's implied reader is not the same as the narrator's, since the author desires an independent audience not willing to believe everything they read, unlike the narrator.

Along these lines, in a lecture on the unreliable narrator at the University of Oxford, Catherine Brown also discussed the nature of unreliable narration as arising from the connection between the audience implied by the narrator and the actual reader:

How do we know a narrative is unreliable? It arises from the impression that we are not the reader desired by the narrator. The desired reader is not only competent of understanding [...] but is also sympathetic to its perspectives and trusting in its facts. A feeling of discomfort arises when the distance between the actual and the implied reader is large and especially when you are aware

that the implied reader is one that you don't want any more closely to resemble.<sup>85</sup>

Ansgar Nünning is another critic who shares this notion of the direct participation of the reader in the identification of unreliability:

Whether a narrator is regarded as unreliable not only depends on the distance between the norms and values of the narrator and those of the text as a whole (or of the implied author) but also on the distance that separates the narrator's view of the world from the reader's or critic's world-model and standards of normalcy, which are themselves, of course, subject to change. ("Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration" 95)

For these critics, the reader is the one to detect the narrator's unreliability according to their own values and concept of reality, which will change depending on the reader itself and their historical, social, or cultural context. In this regard, Bruno Zerweck claims in a study on unreliability and history that, "because unreliability is the effect of interpretive strategies, it is culturally and historically variable" (2). For him, "unreliable narration can therefore be considered as a phenomenon on the borderline between ethics and aesthetics, between literary and other cultural discourses" (2). In the lecture mentioned above, Brown exemplifies this idea with Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925), which is not read nowadays in the same light as it was read within the context of the years prior to the Second World War.

Unreliable narration, therefore, seems to be a secret game between flesh-and-blood author and reader, as well as between implied author and implied reader, at the expense of the narrator. In other words, Chatman claims

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<sup>85</sup> Lecture available online: <<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/literature-and-form-1-unreliable-narrators>> (Accessed 5 Sept 2021).

that “[t]he implied author has established a secret communication with the implied reader” (233), leaving the narrator out of it. If the narrator is unreliable, there is an “indirect or inferential communication” between implied author and implied reader (Chatman 234). Monika Fludernik also refers to this internal connection as if “the implied author [were] communicating with the reader behind the first-person narrator’s back” (27). Chatman also uses metaphors along these lines to define unreliable narration: “In ‘unreliable narration’ the narrator’s account is at odds with the implied reader’s surmises about the story’s real intentions. [...] We conclude, by ‘reading out,’ between the lines, that the events and existents could not have been ‘like that,’ and so we hold the narrator suspect” (233).<sup>86</sup> The reader, therefore, is able to identify the mischief or misinterpretation the narrator is committing thanks to the hints or clues that the implied author is leaving for them to unmask the unreliable narrator.

Taking everything into account, Ansgar Nünning proposes his own definition of the unreliable narrator, trying to include what Booth’s missed. For him, “[u]nreliable narrators are those whose perspective is in contradiction to the value and norm system of the whole text or to that of the reader” (“But Why Will You Say” 87). Nünning considers here both the values of the implied author (and, as a consequence, of the text itself) and the reality of the reader, what they may understand as normal according to their particular reality. In this sense, an unreliable narrator demands from the reader much more input and participation than a reliable narrator would. Every text is subject to interpretation, but those featuring unreliable narrators seem to require a much more in-depth interpretative process than a less complex narrative, perhaps

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<sup>86</sup> Ansgar Nünning, nonetheless, does not fully accept this definition due to its basis on metaphors that “fail to shed much light on how a narrator’s unreliability is actually determined by the reader” (“Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration” 93). He continues: “Such metaphors, though vivid, provide only very opaque explanations of unreliable narration. From a methodological and theoretical point of view, they amount to nothing other than a declaration of bankruptcy” (“Reconceptualizing the Theory” 38).

one with a more reliable narrator. The connection between implied author and real reader that we have been alluding to makes the latter an essential actor in the story, which would remain completely pointless without them.

In balance, unreliability is not only a matter of the discordances between the narrator and the implied author, as Booth claimed, but the reader must also be included in the equation. Unreliability occurs when the real reader and the reader implied by the narrator are not in assonance, which leads the real reader to hold the narrator suspect. Therefore, unreliability seems to be a combination of intention and interpretation—the intention the narrator has in telling the story, the specific purpose it is trying to fulfil, and the reader's interpretation of that intention, which can vary depending on readers. Intention without the interpretation of a reader to construct the text does not lead to a successful and complete reading experience. However, for a fully and successful identification of the narrator as unreliable, both the reader's interpretation of the narrator as a character and the clues that the text grants the reader are necessary.

#### 4.2.2. Different classifications of unreliability

Whenever I have to explain the concept of the unreliable narrator to someone who has not studied English at university or is not familiar with certain specific narratological concepts, I always tell them that an unreliable narrator is the narrator that lies to and deceives its audience. The concept would be easier to understand if I used specific literary or filmic examples but, then again, I would be hugely spoiling the novel or the movie if I reveal that the intention of its teller is to trick its audience into believing a fallacy. Nonetheless, my simple definition is clearly incomplete, as has been shown, since unreliability is much more than merely lying to the audience. Indeed, the narrator might be naïvely mistaken

in its thoughts and interpretations of the events, but it may not even be aware of it. As I explain below, the reader's attitude towards these two types of unreliability is significantly different.

For Booth,

[n]or is unreliability ordinarily a matter of lying, although deliberately deceptive narrators have been a major resource of some modern novelists [...]. It is more often a matter of what [Henry] James calls *inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him. (159, emphasis in the original)

What is more, some narrators might not only be mistaken but their problem might lay in the recollection of the events they are trying to present. In this sense, the concept of memory is of paramount importance for, as explained in the following chapter, memory is a highly unreliable source for narrators to discuss their past. Hence, unreliability is not only a matter of lying or the narrator being mistaken about what it is telling but also its impossibility of recalling past events with exactitude, especially those having to do with traumatic events. Among these narrators we could name Tony in Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) or Mike Engleby in Sebastian Faulks's *Engleby* (2007), who does not remember properly the events he partook in due to his psychological problems.

Vera Nünning refers to this distinction with regard to unreliability with the idea of intentionality, differentiating thus between deliberately unreliable narrators and unintentionally unreliable ones. She classifies this distinction as that between the liar and the fool (11). In the case of the latter, Nünning claims that the narrator's incompetence in the retelling can come from several angles, namely its emotional involvement, obsessions, its inability to interpret the events, or its social incapability (11). In a broadening of this distinction,

Nünning distinguishes three different types of unreliability based on different criteria: the text, the narrator's lack of sincerity, and its incompetence (86). Firstly, the reader can detect unreliability due to the inconsistencies between the text and the actual facts, the lack of "correspondence between the narrative discourse and the facts within the storyworld" (V. Nünning 86)—probably due to the fact that the narrator is a liar. This might be the case of Flynn's *Gone Girl* or McEwan's *Atonement*, when the reader realizes at the end of both novels that the events they have read about do not correspond to the reality of the storyworld. Secondly, we find those narrators who are not sincere with the reader, either because they themselves are not aware of the truth or rather because they are not willing to share the actual truth with the reader. Belonging to the first category, we can name character-narrators such as the butler Stevens in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, who is a victim of his own misunderstandings. As for the second category, Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* features a narrator who consciously deceives his audience, hiding the incriminating truth from the reader. Finally, the third kind of unreliability Nünning discusses has to do with the incompetence of the narrator, who is unable to deliver a truthful or even correct depiction of the events. To name some examples, this inability might come from psychological impediments, as it is the case in Nabokov's *Lolita* or Faulks's *Engleby*, or from the naiveté of a child narrator, as in Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010).<sup>87</sup>

Following these and other critics' conceptions of intentionality in unreliability, Greta Olson talks about fallible and untrustworthy narrators, the former being gullible or mistaken tellers, unable to tell the whole truth, and the

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<sup>87</sup> In the light of Nünning's classification, James Ferry adds to the difference between being unreliable and a mere liar when he says: "To tell a lie is to tell a fiction: the intention is to deliberately deceive, but to be unreliable is to—consciously or unconsciously—encode. If I'm telling you a lie, I'm hoping that you'll read me 'straight' and take my words at face value. However, if I'm being unreliable, I'm communicating more than I'm actually saying" (9). In the case of the novels analysed in this thesis, I will argue that all lying narrators are trying to convey more information—it is not merely a question of lying *per se* but of the purpose behind the lying.

latter consciously unreliable narrators. In her own words, “[w]hen narrators are untrustworthy, their accounts have to be altered in order to make sense of their discrepancies. Fallible narrators by contrast make individual mistakes or leave open informational gaps that need to be filled in” (104). Among fallible narrators, then, we could name child narrators such as those found in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) or Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The unreliability of a fallible narrator lays in its “limited education of experience” rather than in the mistakes it might commit in the analysis of the events (Olson 101). Untrustworthy narrators, however, are completely able to tell the truth but they prefer to hide it from the reader, in order to fulfil a specific self-interest, as can be the case in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

Kathleen Wall also comments on this distinction between consciously unreliable narrators and unavoidably unreliable ones. Like Olson, Wall distinguishes three types of narrators: the narrator willing to deceive the audience to give the narratee a desired image of itself or of an event, the narrator who is characterized by its short-sightedness, and what she calls the “ordinary unreliable narrator,” whose ignorance or absent-mindedness drives it to interpret the events in an inaccurate way (22). Furthermore, Wall also questions the degree of unreliability of those narrators who admit their unreliability for one reason or another: “Are narrators who admit their unreliability still unreliable? [...] What bearing does it have upon our perception of unreliability if the narrator provides the means for correcting his or her unreliability—consciously or unconsciously?” (21). This might be the case of the narrators of Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) or *When We Were Orphans* (2000), who constantly point out to the inaccuracy of their memories and therefore of the past events they are addressing. Can we consider these narrators to be unreliable, therefore? To provide an answer to this question, it is worth mentioning here the distinction

Per Krogh Hansen makes between ‘unreliable narrator’ and ‘unreliable narration,’ explaining that “[t]he two instances would obviously in most cases accompany each other—but not necessarily” (299). Indeed, following the abovementioned examples from Ishiguro, the narrators of those novels could not be considered fully unreliable since they are aware of the unreliability of their narration and admit it, thus turning unreliability away from the narrator and into the narrative itself.<sup>88</sup>

Another scholar who ventures to propose a classification for unreliable narration is Theresa Heyd, who links unreliability to the degree of intentionality on the part of the unreliable narrator. She mainly follows the Cooperation Principle established by Paul Grice (1975), claiming that an unreliable narrator would be the one who violates the maxims of the Gricean principle (Heyd 225). As narrator, it implicitly understands and respects these maxims for communication to be successful. Grice established the categories of “Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner” (45), following which the communicator should be “as informative as required” and not more than that (45), truthful in its telling (avoiding what is known to be false), relevant, and precise (avoiding ambiguity) (46). Heyd’s thesis revolves around the statement that unreliability occurs when the narrator does not meet one or more of the aforementioned Gricean criteria. She continues claiming that

The procedure for detecting and pinpointing UN [unreliable narration] is therefore conceivably simple: one needs to identify utterances that are either manifestly false, or which explicitly correct, clarify or contradict utterances made earlier in the discourse, or else which belatedly convey information that would have been salient at an earlier stage. (226)

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<sup>88</sup> As seen in further sections, focalization should also be considered when dealing with unreliable narration.



Heyd then classifies unreliable narration into three categories depending on the narrator's degree of intentionality: quiet deception, self-deception, and unintentional unreliability (227-231). She exemplifies the first category with Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, arguing that Dr Sheppard is unreliable by the omission of relevant information, namely his involvement in the murder, and therefore fails meeting the Gricean principles of Quantity and Quality. She claims that this is a form of "highly intentional unreliability" (227) since, as has been mentioned before, the narrator has a specific purpose whose accomplishment depends on his hiding the truth from the reader.

Heyd's second category is 'self-deception,' which she exemplifies with the butler Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*. This category would be less morally unacceptable, for the narrator is not as highly intentionally unreliable as in the previous case, although it still deceives not only the reader but also itself with clear "mechanism[s] of suppression" (230). This might include time lapses or partial lies that are relevant to the story and the characterization of the narrator.

Thirdly, Heyd alludes to the unintentional unreliability of the mad narrator, "often marked by naivete, lack of education, or even mental illness" (231). Once again, this narrator will not meet Grice's maxims because it fails to be cooperative in the process of communication, especially in the Quality category, albeit lacking a specific intention or purpose for its untrustworthiness. To sum up, Heyd claims that "[t]he more unreliability is intentional, the narrator will mislead about facts and events; the more unreliability is unintentional, it will be attributed to the narrator's worldview or perception" (234).

In this regard, the response these types of narrators may elicit in the reader will be significantly diverse. In relation to untrustworthy narrators, the reader might feel more sceptical about the narrator's account of the events, they will try to mend its mistakes and question everything the narrator claims. Fallible narrators, however, are more likely to be forgiven by the reader, for

their mistake was probably one they could not avoid committing. They are not fully and intentionally unreliable but just imperfect in their attempt to tell some truth they cannot comprehend for different reasons.

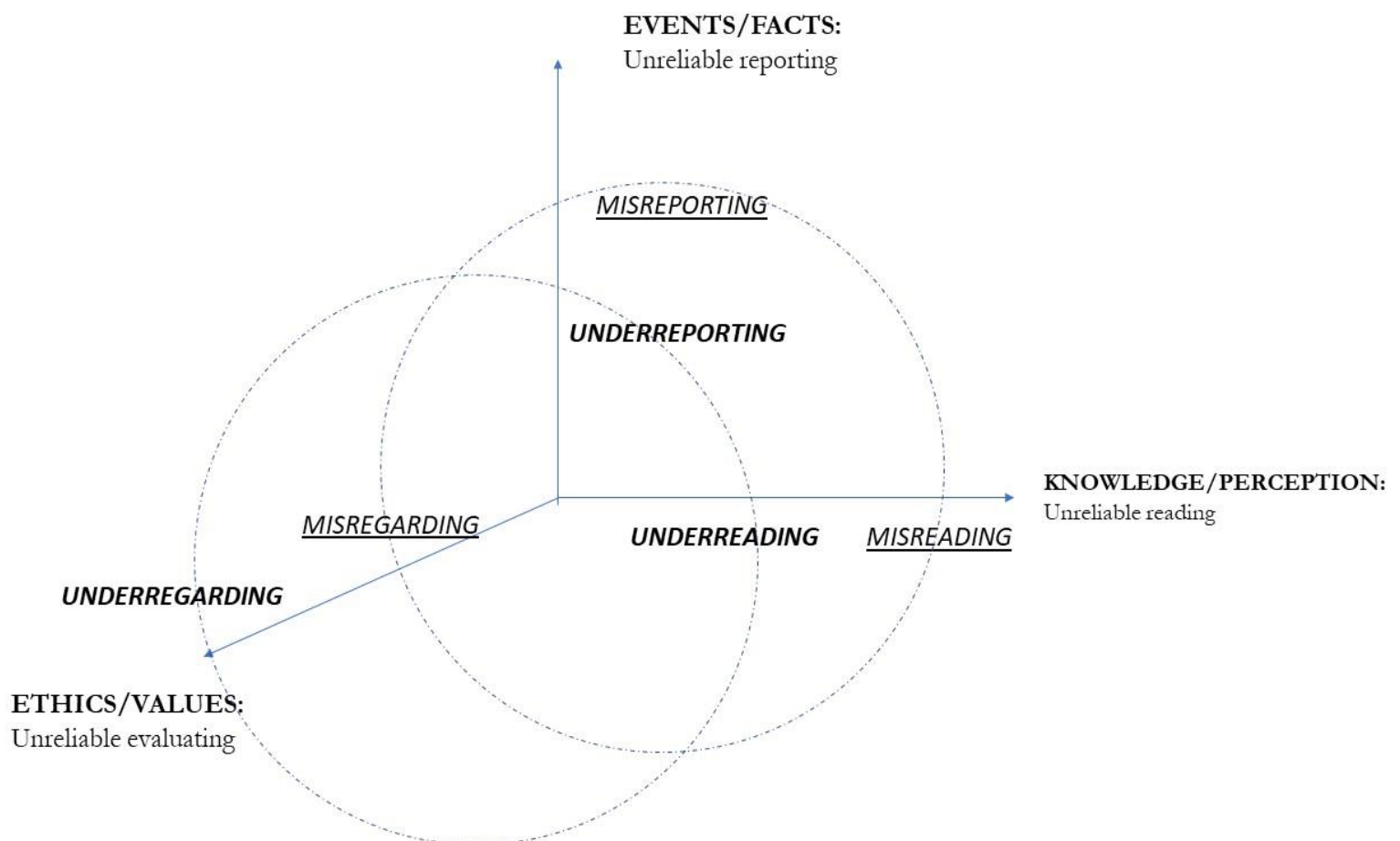
Thus far we have addressed distinctions based on the intentionality of the narrator and therefore on its degree of (un)reliability. In their revealing essay “The Lessons of ‘Weymouth’: Homodiegesis, Unreliability, Ethics, and *The Remains of The Day*,” James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin distinguish six different kinds of unreliability, taking into account the relationship and communication between reader and narrator: “misreporting, misreading, [...] misregarding, underreporting, underreading, and underregarding” (95). To begin with, these two authors differentiate three layers where unreliability can occur: the axis of facts/events, of knowledge/perception, and of ethics/evaluation. The six kinds of unreliability mentioned will fall into these axes, depending as well on the narrator’s lack of knowledge or excess of it. In this respect, a distinction could be made between misreporting, misreading and misregarding, on the one hand, and underreporting, underreading and underregarding, on the other (see Graph 1).

Hence, misreporting makes reference to unreliability on the axis of facts/events, that is to say, on the incorrect account of the events taking place.<sup>89</sup> As I have mentioned above, an example of misreporting could be McEwan’s *Atonement*, since the narrator fails in providing an accurate description of the facts. Secondly, misreading “involves unreliability at least on the axis of knowledge/perception” (Phelan and Martin 95), and thus inaccuracy in the understanding of the events and, as a consequence, delivering mistaken

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<sup>89</sup> The concept of misreporting is closely related to Brian Richardson’s term ‘denarration.’ In his own words, denarration is “a kind of narrative negation in which a narrator denies significant aspects of his or her narrative that had earlier been presented as given” (87). In other words, it is the narrator claiming as false something it had previously stated, hence its relationship to misreporting. I would argue that the concept of denarration could be understood as a compulsory continuation of misreporting, its next step, since the reader needs to know either from the narrator itself or from another character that a previous statement was a fallacy.

commentaries on them, which is highly related to misregarding, which involves unreliability “at least on the axis of ethics/evaluation” (95). Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* is full of misreading and misregarding on the part of the protagonist and narrator, since he is not completely able to understand the meaning of the events happening around him and, consequently, the reader can grasp the inaccuracy of Stevens’ evaluation of them.<sup>90</sup>



Graph 1: Phelan and Martin’s three axes and terminology.

Whereas these three kinds of unreliability have to do with the (un)deliberate misconception of the events and therefore the inaccuracy of the

<sup>90</sup> Obviously, Phelan and Martin’s example of *The Remains of the Day* is an excellent one, since Stevens seems to partake of all the different types of unreliability these authors point out.

narrator's evaluation of them, the three remaining types of unreliability relate to the insufficient account of the narrator for several reasons. According to Phelan and Martin, "[u]nderreporting, underreading and underregarding occur at least on the axes of event/fact, understanding/perception, and ethics/evaluation respectively" (95). Firstly, underreporting occurs when the narrator does not recount everything it knows but rather leaves certain facts outside the narrative, as in Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*, in which the reader knows that the narrator is omitting something or knows more about certain aspects than he is willing to admit yet. Secondly, underreading is clearly in accordance with misreading, but in this case the narrator is poorly understanding and interpreting the events—it is not only a matter of being mistaken but rather of not comprehending the whole picture. This could be the case of narratives with children as narrators, who may not understand everything that happens around them and therefore provide the reader with an incomplete account of the events and a poor interpretation of them. Finally, also linked to underreading, "[u]nderregarding occurs when a narrator's ethical judgment is moving along the right track but simply does not go far enough" (Phelan and Martin 96), therefore showing the narrator's inability to evaluate the ethical involvement of certain events completely and successfully.

Discussing *Lolita* in this case, Phelan also differentiates between two other types of unreliability, estranging and bonding. He claims that this double classification refers to the relationship between the narrator and the reader, without leaving aside the implied author, and the consequences that the narrator's unreliability might imply. In this sense, Phelan claims that

in estranging unreliability, the authorial audience [the implied reader] recognizes that adopting the narrator's perspective would mean moving far away from the implied author's, and in that sense, the adoption would be a net loss for the author-audience relationship. ("Estranging Unreliability" 225)

The reader of this type of unreliability recognizes the narrator's fault and, what is more, does not share its views but rather prefers to stay by the author's side. For Phelan, these discrepancies leave the narrator and the reader as strangers to each other (225), as might be the case of Nabokov's *Lolita*. On the other hand, "in bonding unreliability, the discrepancies between the narrator's reports, interpretations, or evaluations and the inferences of the authorial audience have the paradoxical result of reducing the interpretive, affective, or ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience" ("Estranging Unreliability" 225). The reader here is also aware of the narrator's untrustworthiness, but it inspires endorsement in both the reader and the implied author. A good example of this type of unreliability might be once again Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, or any unreliable child narrator. By way of summary of the two types, James Ferry writes that "[w]e're endeared to the [bonding unreliable narrator] because of his innocence reflected in his unreliability, and we're repelled by the [estranged unreliable narrator], whose unreliability reveals him as loathsome" (29).

To sum up, all the different kinds of unreliability I have discussed here take into account the degree of responsibility that the narrator holds in its unreliability, whether it is deliberate or unconscious, and the analysis of the mistakes committed by an unreliable narrator, whether it is by excess or lack of information. The study and research of unreliable narration is still a work in progress and much is still to be said about the different types of unreliable narrators that we can encounter in fiction.

In the case of the deliberately unreliable narrators, or untrustworthy ones, I would argue that more attention needs to be paid to the purposes of their unreliability, whether it is a matter of guilt and ethics or a question of improving

their personal image.<sup>91</sup> Fallible narrators, on the other hand, are very much related to issues like memory and trauma, for the reasons behind their unreliability seem to come from the inability to deliver an accurate depiction of the past, both due to the unreliability of memory itself or to the incapacity of coming to terms with a traumatic past.

As suggested, fallible narrators do not inspire the same reaction or even rejection in the reader as an untrustworthy narrator might, since most fallible narrators admit their awareness of the unreliability of their story, which turns them into slightly more innocent in the eyes of the reader. With untrustworthy narrators, on the other hand, the reader is left with a feeling of having been cheated, the narrator silently laughing at the reader's gullibility.

#### 4.2.3. How to detect unreliability

One of the areas of unreliability that is yet to be more significantly explored refers to the capacity of identification of an unreliable narrator by the reader. When one has read an important amount of narratives featuring unreliable narrators it is easier to perceive a set of recurring characteristics that might appear as red flags for the reader, such as the narrator's constant claim of the inaccuracy of its memories, the desire for self-praise in some cases, or the persistent presence of the narrator in every commentary, among many other examples. In other words, "[i]n order to qualify a narration as unreliable the reader has to detect some kind of contradiction, discrepancy or incongruity

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<sup>91</sup> The narrator of John Banville's *Eclipse* (2000) is unreliable precisely because of a mixture of his guilt and the improvement of his self-image. In fact, Mar Asensio Aróstegui argues that "Banville's narrators are characteristically white, upper-middle-class, self-centered males, who speak in the first person—mostly about themselves—are aware of the unreliability of both their immediate perceptions and their past memories and present themselves to the reader as conscious or unconscious deceivers who, paradoxically enough, yearn for objective knowledge and, consequently, strive hard to unveil their authentic selves" (45).

between what is overtly narrated and what is supposed to be inferred as fictional truth” (Zipfel 120).

Literature is not a science, and therefore it is not subject to scientific equations or analyses that might assure us, without a shadow of a doubt, that a narrator is unreliable and why. Nonetheless, some critics have studied the reasons behind unreliability and the clues to be found within the text that may help the reader go one step ahead of the narrator.<sup>92</sup> Booth argued that there is some way in which the narrator’s unreliability can be perceived by the reader, who might still have enough time to redirect his thoughts on the narrative:

Both reliable and unreliable narrators can be unsupported or uncorrected by other narrators [...] or supported or corrected [...]. Sometimes it is almost impossible to infer whether or to what degree a narrator is fallible; sometimes explicit corroborating or conflicting testimony makes the inference easy. Support or correction differs radically, it should be noted, depending on whether it is provided from within the action, so that the narrator-agent might benefit from it in sticking to the right line or in changing his own views [...], or is simply provided externally, to help the reader correct or reinforce his own views as against the narrator’s. (159-160)

I will start by exploring and dividing this quotation into more palatable chunks. In unreliable narration, especially homodiegetic narration, it is most likely that the narrator’s account is “unsupported or uncorrected by other narrators”

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<sup>92</sup> It would be interesting to highlight here the importance of second-time readers. As I argue in the chapters devoted to the analyses of the novels, there are some clues that might be found in unreliable narration that are left as winks from the author to the second-time reader—one step further in the secret game between author and reader. I would argue that readers approaching the narrative for a second time (or third, or fourth, and so on) would read the same text but under a different light, allowing them to read between the lines and understand much more than what is just written on the page. This second-time experience, therefore, is much more interesting in unreliable narration than in a more straightforward style of narration, I would argue.

(159)—what the reader gets is the narrator’s self-narrative and it is undoubtedly not willing to share the spotlight with anyone else. This implies that the only point of view the reader gets is that of the narrator, making the narrative almost certainly unreliable. However, the narrator can also be “supported or corrected” (160), which helps the reader in a high degree to identify the narrator as unreliable. We encounter this support or correction once again in McEwan’s *Atonement* or Flynn’s *Gone Girl*, for in these two novels the narrators are corrected by the actions or even by themselves. In these examples, the support is “provided from within the action” (Booth 160), allowing the reader enough time to correct their perspectives on the narrative, change their views, and read the rest of the novel in a different light. In the case of *Gone Girl*, even the narrator’s (Amy’s) perspective towards the narratee changes significantly as well, and vice versa.

Booth continues claiming that the degree of unreliability of a narrator is sometimes extremely difficult to identify, at least until the narrator uncovers itself. For instance, since *Atonement* is told by a heterodiegetic narrator in the third person, the reader does not find enough evidence or reason to suspect the narrator, who even covers its tracks with the inclusion of letters or several perspectives that support the facts it recounts. Readers do not see the necessity of questioning the narrator’s veracity—why should they indeed?—therefore the trick comes more as a surprise at the end of the novel. In *The Remains of the Day*, however, the reader is able to see beyond the narrator, to infer some meaning and truth that even the narrator himself is not seeing. The narrator’s unreliability in this case does not surprise the reader as much as in the previous example, since they are able to see it coming.

In terms of this capacity to detect unreliability, Booth points out to the “explicit corroborating or conflicting testimony” (160) that undresses the narrator. Likewise, Marie-Laure Ryan remarks that “the only way for an author to suggest a lack of fit between the facts of the fictional world and the narrative



discourse is by having the narrator's declarations corrected by another discourse arising from the same text" (530). An example of this is found in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, where the narrator is contradicted at the end of the novel by the rest of the characters, who are finally able to provide their version of the story that differs from the one recounted thus far by the narrator and protagonist. The reader is left alone in the consideration of which version to believe: the narrator's or the rest of the characters'.

Furthermore, Ansgar Nünning also argues that there might be textual evidence to help the reader detect unreliability:

Most theorists agree, however, that to determine a narrator's unreliability one need not rely merely on intuitive judgments, because a broad range of definable signals provides clues to gauging a narrator's unreliability. These include both textual data and the reader's pre-existing conceptual knowledge of the world and standards of normality. In the end it is both the structure and norms established by the respective work itself and designed by an authorial agency, and the reader's knowledge, psychological disposition, and systems of norms and values that provide the ultimate guidelines for deciding whether a narrator is judged to be reliable or not. ("Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration" 105)

Nünning argues that it is not only the reader's interpretation of the text that ultimately concludes on the narrator's unreliability, but rather the combination of the reader and the textual data that makes unreliability self-evident. To put it another way, Liesbeth Korthals Altes claims that unreliability is "triggered by textual incongruities of various kinds that readers stumble upon and interpret as clues, which induce them into searching for plausible interpretations" (119). Hence, the reader might be able to identify an unreliable narrator guided by their normalcy views, as it might be the case in McEwan's short story "Dead as They Come" (1978), in which the reader is capable of identifying a deranged

narrator whose psychological disposition makes him unable to perceive his own unreliability. In this sense, A. Nünning claims that “[d]eviations from what is usually referred to as ‘common sense’ or general world-knowledge may indicate that the narrator is unreliable” (“Reconceptualizing the Theory” 47). On the other hand, the textual data Nünning refers to include signals in the text that help the reader recognize unreliability, such as contradictions, conflicts between story and discourse, between the narrator’s comment on the action and the text itself, the narrator’s explanations or evaluations, or the inclusion of multiperspectival approaches to the same events, as in McEwan’s *Atonement* or Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*, for instance. He also mentions the literary knowledge the reader has, in the sense that they may identify stereotypical characters or specific conventions of literary genres and so determine the reliability of the narrator against them (Nünning, “Reconceptualizing the Theory” 48). For instance, a reader would not classify the narrators of Phillip K. Dick’s science-fiction works as unreliable for depicting extra-terrestrial creatures because they know this belongs to the realm of science fiction.<sup>93</sup>

Vera Nünning broadens the textual evidence alluded to by Ansgar Nünning and identifies three types of clues to distinguish unreliable narration: “text-internal, text-external and paratextual clues,” the latter alluding to “signals in the title or foreword,” for example (10). She develops this idea as follows:

The text-internal clues consist of inconsistencies concerning the story and/or discourse level as well as stylistic features. Since fictional homodiegetic unreliable narrators are often deeply emotionally involved, obsessed or disturbed monologists, they can frequently be recognized by features like

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<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, the protagonist of Dick’s short story “The Eyes Have It” (1953) does precisely this, he takes at face value what he reads in a science fiction story and believes that an alien invasion is imminent. The story is available online: <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/31516/31516-h/31516-h.htm>> (Accessed 23 Sept 2021).

exclamations, ellipses, rhetorical questions, any number of repetitions and the tempo of their narration. In trying to convince readers of the truth of their story, they often appeal to the reader by direct address and explanations. A third group of criteria in the field of cognitive narratology can be applied to those narrators who are untrustworthy not mainly because of their incorrect account of the facts within the fictional world but rather of their faulty interpretations, evaluations and morals. (10)

Hence, the text-internal clues refer to the inconsistencies between the facts and the events the narrator recounts, due to the narrator's desire to change its reality (as in *Gone Girl*) or due to narrator's incapacity of remembering properly (as in *The Remains of the Day*). Besides, this last novel is also full of explanations and instances the narrator uses to try to explain and excuse himself, which also points to some personal interest the narrator fails to hide. In this sense, Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* could also be considered the untrustworthy narrator Nünning is alluding to, due to his mistaken evaluations and morals. Finally, exclamations and self-explanations are also present in *Lolita*, since Humbert Humbert seems willing to make the reader understand the inevitability of his desire.

Textual proof of unreliability also includes the choices made by the narrator when recounting the story, mainly the omissions or additions that an unreliable narrator makes to the story in order to fit its specific purpose, deliberately for the most part. Genette addresses this distinction with the coinage of the terms 'paralepsis' and 'paralipsis,' the former to refer to the addition and the latter to the omission of information:

The classical type of paralipsis, we remember, in the code of internal focalization, is the omission of some important action or thought of the focal hero, which neither the hero nor the narrator can be ignorant of but which the

narrator chooses to conceal from the reader. [...] The inverse alteration, the excess of information or *paralepsis*, can consist of an inroad into the consciousness of a character in the course of a narrative generally conducted in external focalization. [...] *Paralepsis* can likewise consist, in internal focalization, of incidental information about the thoughts of a character other than the focal character, or about a scene the latter is not able to see. (*Narrative Discourse* 196-7)

The concepts of *paralipsis* and *paralepsis* are of utmost importance when dealing with narrative unreliability, since the choices the narrator might make as to the omission or addition of information can highly condemn its unreliability as a whole. *Paralipsis* implies the omission of significant information that might change the reader's perception of the narrative in general or the narrator in particular.<sup>94</sup> This deliberate exclusion leaves the reader at a loss in certain aspects, even if they can infer that something of importance is missing from the narrative.<sup>95</sup> As has been pointed out before, this might be the case in Ishiguro's *A Pale View of the Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World* or even *The Remains of the Day*. In these three novels, the narrator is constantly alluding to an event the reader has not had access to yet, an event the narrator is deliberately omitting or reserving for the end of the narrative. The reader, nonetheless, is able to infer more meaning than the narrator is willing to admit.

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<sup>94</sup> In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette distinguishes between '*paralepsis*' and '*ellipsis*,' which are two elements of the same nature (52). Whereas '*paralipsis*' is the omission of some part of the information (omitting the presence of a character in a scene, or part of a conversation, for instance), '*ellipsis*' is the omission of a whole scene and therefore it "cannot be perceived" because there is nothing in the text that alludes to that omission (Bal 101). An example of '*ellipsis*' is found in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, when the narrator completely erases the murdering scene from the text, incapacitating the reader for its discovery. *Ellipsis* is also extremely relevant when dealing with trauma and memory, since the narrator might omit a specific event due to its inability to remember it or to deal with it at a particular moment.

<sup>95</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan addresses this same idea using the term *delay*: "Delay consists in not imparting information where it is 'due' in the text, but leaving it for a later stage. Depending on the temporal dimension to which the withheld information belongs, delay can create suspense of two different types: future-oriented and past-oriented" (125). In the case of the novels by Ishiguro we are using to exemplify the concept of *paralipsis*, this delay is always past-oriented.

For instance, in the case of *The Remains of the Day*, the reader is able to recognize that some kind of disgrace came upon Lord Darlington, given some characters' attitude towards his figure and even Stevens' rejection of him—which clarifies to the reader that some episode of extreme importance or dishonour is involved. Thus, paralipsis is used by the unreliable narrator in order to modify the reader's opinion of him. Nonetheless, this deliberate omission can also be due to a traumatic event the narrator is not yet able to deal with.<sup>96</sup>

On the other hand, paralepsis refers to the addition of information the narrator could not have had access to, for the most part, and tells the reader that they should take with a pinch of salt what they are being told. The narrator of Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015) seems to be a heterodiegetic narrator, but it is revealed later in the novel (and in some hints throughout) that he is actually a character in the story. Nonetheless, he makes reference to the thoughts and feelings of the rest of the characters—information he could not have had access to, especially since he was not present at the moment when the events took place. The same could be said of McEwan's *Atonement*, in which the heterodiegetic narrator, later revealed to be a creation of the protagonist herself, gives several perspectives of the same events or even claims to have access to the rest of the characters' internal thoughts.

Hansen has also added to the discussion of the detection of unreliability with the distinction of four different categories depending on the techniques used in unreliable narration, namely intranarrational, internarrational, intertextual and extra-textual unreliabilities (298-300). The first category, intranarrational unreliability, is the one “established and supported by a large stock of discursive markers in the narrator's discourse” (298), that is, by the clues in the text that point either to the narrator's unreliability or that of the

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<sup>96</sup> I deal with this particular case of paralipsis when talking about trauma and memory.

narration. Internarrational unreliability occurs when the narrator's version is juxtaposed to that of other characters and hence the narrator is confronted by the feasibly true version of the events. This would be what Booth called the narrator being "supported or corrected" (159). Hansen's third category, intertextual unreliability, is based "on manifest character types" (300), on characters whose stereotypes point towards their unreliability such as a child or a thief. Finally, extra-textual unreliability is "dependent on the reader's direct implementation of own values or knowledge [sic] in the textual universe" (300), making therefore this category and the previous one dependent on the reader's previous knowledge, the values the reader brings to the text, unlike the first two which were mainly based on textual evidence that did not need the reader's input to be detected.

So far all the analyses to discover unreliable narrators seem to be fixed mainly on textual clues, but the detection of unreliability should not be based exclusively "on *what there is* in a text, but on how the text may be understood by readers and thus on complex interpretational operations" (Zipfel 120, emphasis in the original). In his enlightening book *Understanding Unreliable Narrators*, Michael Smith (16) deals with how to explain to students the concept of the unreliable narrator, and he argues that it is the reader's task to discern between reliable and unreliable narrators following six questions:

1. Is the narrator too self-interested to be reliable?
2. Is the narrator sufficiently experienced to be reliable?
3. Is the narrator sufficiently knowledgeable to be reliable?
4. Is the narrator sufficiently moral to be reliable?
5. Is the narrator too emotional to be reliable?
6. Are the narrator's actions too inconsistent with his or her words to make him or her reliable?

These six questions are all quite relevant to apply to narrators we may be suspicious of. According to Smith, one positive answer is enough for the reader to hold a narrator suspect (16). The first question refers to self-interest, which may make the narrator deviate the story for its own benefit without being too cautious in terms of truth. This self-interest, I would add, can also come from a place of guilt in which the narrator needs to be forgiven for a past mistake, or merely one in which the narrator is too involved to be completely objective. Among other examples, this could be the case of the narrator in McEwan's *Atonement*.

The second question refers to the narrator's experience or innocence, and it is very much related to the third question as well. As I discuss in further sections, there are some narrators or focalizers who are too naïve (due to their young age) to be reliable, since they do not possess the world knowledge needed to present reliable narration. While the second question refers to experience and the lack thereof, the third one may focus on the narrator's knowledge or ignorance rather, but perhaps not due to a matter of age but of knowledge about a certain topic. The narrator may be discussing a topic it does not know much about and therefore cannot be completely trustworthy because it itself may not understand it. In other words, this relates to "people speaking outside their area of expertise, or [...] people who were not in a position to observe the incident on which they are passing judgment" (Smith 25).

The fourth question deals with the narrator's ethics and its principles of right and wrong, of which Flynn's *Gone Girl* could be a good example. This narrator is moved by revenge and her intention is to win the reader's sympathy, at the expense of being truthful. She is not sufficiently moral to be reliable, in this case in terms of the veracity of some events.

The next question is related to the first one in the sense that it involves the narrator's personal emotions in the narrative, which may cloud its sense of judgement. Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* or *The Artist of the Floating World*

could be considered examples that would fit this category, since the narrators are too emotionally involved in the narrative to be objective. On the contrary, the narrator in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is not emotional enough to be reliable either.

Finally, the sixth question refers to the textual inconsistencies between the narrator's actions and words, and I believe this could be applied to the straightforward liar or to mad narrators, such as the one in McEwan's "Dead as They Come" or Faulk's *Engleby*.

All in all, Smith's questions add to the textual evidence pointed at by Nünning, Booth, Genette, and Hansen, all of them providing the reader with tools to identify the unreliability of a narrator. The combination of the information provided by the discourse and the interpretation of the reader, along with the interaction of the narrator with the rest of the characters, gives the reader the necessary proof to classify a narrator as unreliable and to analyse the causes of its unreliability.

However, it should be mentioned here that unreliability is not a matter of right or wrong, of black or white, but rather something more difficult to perceive, as I have tried to prove with all the previously mentioned theory regarding the figure of the unreliable narrator. There are different shades of grey when it comes to unreliability, as can be seen in the analysis of the novels chosen. Classifying a narrator as completely reliable or unreliable is rare, sometimes even impossible, since there are too many aspects to look at in order to reach a trustworthy assumption about narrators.

#### 4.3. Focalization and point of view

Unreliable narration is not only a concept involving the narrator; as already mentioned, the implied author, the reader, and the text itself play an essential



role in its creation and identification. Notwithstanding, there are other narratological terms that go hand in hand with that of the unreliable narrator, namely focalization and point of view.<sup>97</sup>

For Bal, the term focalization is as equally important as that of the narrator, claiming that “[n]arrator and focalization together determine the narrative situation” (18). The identity of focalizer and narrator might coincide, but this is not always necessary (Rimmon-Kenan 72-3). Thus, “[f]ocalization is the relationship between the ‘vision,’ the agent that sees, and that which is seen. This relationship is a component of the story part, of the content of the narrative text: A says that B sees what C is doing” (Bal 149). In Bal’s equation, A would be the narrator whilst B is the focalizer and C a character in the story (or focalized).

Focalization is significant in unreliable narration since the main authority in the narrative, the narrator, is going to choose what reaches the reader—which events, characters, and perspectives to focus on and which to leave aside. The information the reader gets is going to condition their interpretations of the narrative, therefore focalization is a narratological tool the unreliable narrator should master if its desire is to deceive the reader.<sup>98</sup>

Rimmon-Kenan discusses the concept of focalization in first-person retrospective narratives, claiming that in this case narration and focalization are two separate entities (73). In narratives dealing with past events in the first person, we should distinguish between the narrator and the focalizer considering that the narrator is an adult, experienced individual but the

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<sup>97</sup> Brian Finney distinguishes between these two concepts as follows: “Focalization’ is a term coined by Gérard Genette to distinguish between narrative agency and visual mediation, i.e. focalization. ‘Point of view’ confuses speaking and seeing, narrative voice and focalization. Hence the need for Genette’s term” (144). Mieke Bal also argues that these two terms should not be understood as synonyms, for it might lead to misunderstandings. For her, terms such as ‘point of view’ or ‘narrative perspective’ “do not make a distinction between those who see and those who speak” (146). ‘Point of view’ does not distinguish between focalization and narration.

<sup>98</sup> Focalization is also highly significant when dealing with memory and trauma, therefore I go back to this concept when tackling the issue of traumatic memories.

focalizer might be an inexperienced and naïve young person.<sup>99</sup> As in McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996) or Donogue's *Room*, the linguistic utterances belong to the adult narrator, whereas the reader has access to the events through the eyes of a young man or even a child—even if we can also get the comments made by the experienced narrator on those events. In these examples, the focalizers are Frank and Jack respectively, the protagonists, and the focalized is everything happening around them. Nevertheless, the vision of the past can be modified by the adult self in terms of what it recalls—the adult and experienced narrator is recounting what the young focalizer saw and understood, even if that narrator can be unreliable either due to its confused memory or its biased account of the past. This is the case of Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*, where the information the reader receives from past events is told by an adult Tony, whose memories of them are not entirely accurate and therefore forces the reader to question everything they are being told.

Following this train of thought, it could be argued that unreliability in some novels is a matter of focalization rather than narration. Ansgar Nünning questions whether we can “conceive of focalizers as unreliable” (“Reconceptualizing the Theory” 66), and I would argue that we definitely can and indeed we should, as seen in the analysis of some of the selected novels. Nilli Diengott discusses the issue of focalization and (un)reliability and argues that most critics, when talking about unreliability, mention unreliable narration when in some cases it is a matter of unreliable focalization. She concludes that “any discussion of reliability must make a distinction about whether one is faced with unreliable narration or unreliable focalization” (44-5). Indeed, in novels like the ones I analyse below, there is a clear distinction between the *experiencing self*, that I will be calling character-Gabriel/Odran/Cyril, and the

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<sup>99</sup> As seen in the respective chapters, this is much the case of the narrators of the selected novels.

*experienced self*, that I will refer to as narrator-Gabriel/Odran/Cyriel.<sup>100</sup> Frank Zipfel argues in this regard that “[n]ormally there is a difference in age between the two personas, and this difference can be the reason for further dissimilarities e.g. in experience, knowledge, moral attitudes, wishes or needs” (123). The three narratives I analyse below feature first-person narrators recounting their stories from a position of experience and full knowledge of how the story unfolds, even if the discourse does not always represent this. The focalizer, the main character, analyses the events taking place (focalized) from his own perspective and therefore limited knowledge, which turn him into unreliable by ignorance. The narrator, on the other hand, would be unreliable by omission, since it withholds certain events and thoughts from the reader.<sup>101</sup> All in all, Diengott offers her own definition of unreliability, one that incorporates focalization: “unreliability is created for the reader when he perceives a discrepancy between the implied author and the system of norms or values either of a narrator, *or of a focalizer*” (45, emphasis in the original).

The concept of point of view is another narratological idea extremely linked to the unreliable narrator and to focalization, since the point of view is the perspective from which the events are told. Robert Scholes *et al.* argue in *The Nature of Narrative* that there are three points of view in every narrative: “those of the characters, the narrator, and the audience” (240), and unreliability would occur when there is a discrepancy among them. Chatman also distinguishes three types of point of view, namely literal/perceptual, figurative/conceptual, and transferred/interest (151-2). Literal/perceptual point of view refers to the perspective of the vision, to the eyes through which the

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<sup>100</sup> In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson propose expanding this terminology by the distinction between the ‘real’ or historical ‘I’ (the author of the narrative, a figure mostly unreachable for readers), the narrating ‘I’ (the narrator), the narrated ‘I’ (the subject of analysis), and the ideological ‘I’ (similar to the implied reader) (59-62). To simplify, however, I will stick to my proposed denomination of “character-” and “narrator-”.

<sup>101</sup> Gunther Martens also discusses this topic, albeit briefly, when mentioning unreliability in film (81), for in this media we do not find a narrator but rather a character/focalizer who may be mistaken and thus mislead the audience.

action is seen (the focalizer). Such is the case in *Atonement* with the multiple perspectives and the retelling of the same actions through different perceptual points of view. Secondly, figurative/conceptual point of view alludes to the moral or ethical perspective of the narrator, which does not need to be shared by the implied author or the reader, as I have discussed in previous sections. Finally, the transferred/interest point of view is very recurring in unreliable narration, for it refers to the story told from a perspective of self-interest, mainly that of the narrator. This perspective of self-interest is not significantly applied to external narrators, since *a priori* they do not have any personal interest in the narrative. However, this point of view is quite relevant when dealing with homodiegetic unreliable narrators:

Other sorts of interest arise only if he is or was also a character. Then he may use the narrative itself as vindication, expiation, explanation, rationalization, condemnation, or whatever. There are hundreds of reasons for telling a story, but those reasons are the narrator's, not the implied author's, who is without personality or even presence, hence without motivation other than the purely theoretical one of constructing the narrative itself. The narrator's vested interests may be so marked that we come to think of him as unreliable. (Chatman 158)

This kind of point of view implies that the narrator is telling the story from its own perspective, according to what it thinks to be in its best interest, albeit leaving aside other aspects that might damage its position. As Chatman points out, in some novels this intention can be so evident that the reader does not doubt to classify the narrator as unreliable. For instance, the narrators in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, and *An Artist of the Floating World* are telling their stories from their points of view and no one else's—not only from their interest point of view but also their perceptual

and figurative perspectives. The reader might agree or disagree with them, but they have no other choice than to follow the path marked by the narrator.

The concepts of focalization or point of view are widely used by unreliable narrators to fulfil their purposes, especially by those deliberately unreliable. Even if all first-person narrators tell their stories from their perspectives and points of view, that does not necessarily make them unreliable—but it is definitely going to help. The most attractive type of point of view among those coined by Chatman is that of interest, which is especially relevant when dealing with deliberately unreliable narrators.

#### 4.4. Confession and life narratives

The novels chosen for the analysis of trauma, guilt, shame, and unreliability in contemporary Irish fiction are also examples of confessional narratives, since their main emphasis is on the examination of the characters' past, alongside that of their societies, and the confession of their involvement in some past events. The Encyclopaedia Britannica (1999) defines 'confession' in literature as "an autobiography, either real or fictitious, in which intimate and hidden details of the subject's life are revealed." Dennis Foster expands on this definition as follows:

Confession may provide a form for exploring the motives for narrative. It seems clearly to be based on a model of communication, and yet it has been exploited by writers because it provides room for evasion. Usually, it involves a narrator disclosing a secret knowledge to another, as a speaker to a listener, writer to reader, confessor to confessor. A full confession would presumably require that a private knowledge be revealed in a way that would allow another to understand, judge, forgive, and perhaps even sympathize. (2)

Foster's commentary includes something that the simple definition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica misses: the role played by the listener. In this regard, Michel Foucault claims that "[o]ne confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell anyone else" (59). Indeed, confessional narratives must include a listener, a narratee willing to understand the narrator. In some cases, that narratee can be a character within the story (as in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), for instance) or an outsider to it (as in McEwan's *Atonement*<sup>102</sup>). Moreover, Roger W. Shuy claims that

the confessor believes that what he or she did was wrong according to a recognized set of norms, that the confessor believes that the person to whom he or she is confessing also shares those norms, or that the person to whom the confession is given is in a position of authority over the confessor and that the confessor is aware that his or her confession correlates with some type of punishment. (4)<sup>103</sup>

In all the novels that have been mentioned hitherto, the narrators do not need to explain the reasons why their actions are morally wrong, since their listeners

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<sup>102</sup> For an analysis of McEwan's *Atonement* as a confessional novel, see D'Hoker ("Confession") or Sykes, Jr. (2018).

<sup>103</sup> A similar perspective is to be found in Hepworth and Turner: "Confession is normally considered to be a private act of contrition for wrong-doing during the course of which an individual accepts responsibility for his offence and reveals that he has, like other men, a conscience and shares with them an essentially moral status" (220). Nietzsche criticizes this, however. He argues that our culture is Christian, and so is our moral. Consequently, religion establishes good and evil. He argues, therefore, that goodness is associated to powerlessness (fasting, sexual abstinence, etc.), whereas evil is associated to anything different from powerlessness or repression. Our moral being religious sheds a new light on the meaning of guilt and confession, as seen in the next chapter. For more on this, see Ridley (2005) or Nietzsche (2011).

share their set of norms and views of the world.<sup>104</sup> Needless to say, the fact that these narratives dwell in the past and in a confessional tone marks their narrative mood, namely their unreliability both due to the fallible nature of memory in old age and the necessity of the characters to achieve some sort of atonement. In this case, as in that of the novels under study here, “literary confession reveals not just what the author has known all along but has kept secret for reasons of guilt and shame” (D’Hoker, “Confession” 33). These affects, therefore, are also a source of unreliability for the narrators, as is seen in the three novels analysed in this study.

Moreover, the concept of confession can refer to many different areas: for instance, “religion, law enforcement, prisoners of war, or therapy” (Shuy 4). Considering the novels selected, the kind of confession that most interests my purposes is that of religious confession: “the acknowledgment of sinfulness in public or private, regarded as necessary to obtain divine forgiveness” (Britannica 2021). In *A Catholic Dictionary*, confession is defined in similar terms: “accusing ourselves of our sins to a priest who has received authority to give absolution” (qtd. in Hepworth and Turner 221). Forgiveness is a key concept here, since that is precisely the main goal the confessor is longing for in their confession—someone’s forgiveness (in this case, God’s).

Confession is not practiced in every religion, but “all religions value truth and truthfulness as signs of integrity and purity” (Von Kellenbach 247). Aaron B. Murray-Swank *et al.* recollect several confessional methods among Christian traditions, such as the “formal one-on-one confession,” the “mutual sharing of sins between members of the laity,” the confession to the congregation, or a “forum for confession” (277). In the novels, considering that their narrators all share a Catholic upbringing, the expected style of confession

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<sup>104</sup> As shall be explained in the respective chapters, the narrators of the selected novels do not make explicit the identity of their listeners or narratees, but they could perhaps correspond to a superior figure (God?) or not correspond to anyone at all, focusing on the importance of the act of confession itself.

is that of a one-to-one conversation with a listener, an unacknowledged narratee that could also be a priest.<sup>105</sup> In the Catholic tradition, religious confession must follow a series of steps: contrition (*contritio cordis*), confession (*confession oris*), absolution, and satisfaction (*satisfactio operis*) (“Experience God’s Mercy”; Von Kellenbach 243). With their narratives, the narrators of the novels chosen reach contrition and confession, but are not fully absolved by the people they hurt and therefore cannot reach complete satisfaction. In this sense, Elke D’Hoker rightly distinguishes between secular confession and religious confession in that the former, despite having “a reader or audience, [...] has no authorities empowered to absolve” (“Confession” 32). As is later discussed, the narratives studied attempt at confession and forgiveness, but the latter cannot be fully achieved.

Moreover, given that *A Son Called Gabriel* presents some instances of juxtaposition of Catholicism and Protestantism, it is worth exploring here the role that Protestantism attributes to confession. Catholics confess individual sins, whereas the “Protestant convert confesses his sinful nature and sinful past” (Allen, n.pag.). Besides, Protestants might also confess sins in public, together as a congregation, especially “when the sin has harmed someone else” (Allen, n.pag.). Catholicism, however, presents a more individual, private, and personal moment in which the sinner enumerates their sins and expects to be forgiven by the priest.

Murray-Swank *et al.* also discuss the functions of spiritual confession, namely “reducing guilt and shame, seeking social connection, seeking meaning and coherence, and impressions management” (282). As is seen in the chapters devoted to the novels, the main function that confession (and the confessional narrative) serves in Boyne’s and McNicholl’s selected novels is that of reducing guilt and shame. Indeed, “studies suggest that guilt is reduced

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<sup>105</sup> In *The Heart’s Invisible Furies*, there is an episode in which the narrator confesses to a priest—with lethal consequences. Chapter eight expands this.



through the confession experience” (Murray-Swank *et al.* 283), which is precisely what these narrators are looking for, alongside forgiveness. Along these lines, Anthony Hermann *et al.* also claim that “Western religion has made the experience of guilt central to its message of salvation” (540). However, attention should be paid to how the absolution of guilt is to be achieved:

If we accept that guilt is a moral category as well as a feeling, who can legitimately absolve us of it? The person we may have offended can forgive us of the wrong we have done to her, but it is not her prerogative to forgive us the moral violation itself. If I steal money from you, you may be satisfied with an apology and reimbursement, but you can't absolve me of the theft. I remain a thief, and I remain guilty. (Sykes Jr. 3)

For some religious people, therefore, a priest is the only entity that can concede forgiveness.

Nonetheless, this confession experience does not need to be religious necessarily. Roger W. Shuy makes some distinctions between secular and religious confession. First, one would not be equally forgiven if confessing an evil deed to a divine figure or to a fellow human. In the first instance, the wrongdoer might expect “concomitant forgiveness” (with some kind of penance, perhaps), whereas in the second (legal) punishment is expected (2). Second, Shuy also argues that another difference lies in the “area of competence,” referring to the different forms of forgiveness we would concede a child or a person with mental disabilities, as opposed to a mature adult (2). The third distinction this author proposes is that of the “different methods of encouraging and probing a person to confess” (2). Shuy alludes here to law enforcement agencies and the different techniques they require to elicit a confession—quite different from those religion employs.

Given the nature of some of the novels to be analysed, *A History of Loneliness*, *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, and *A Son Called Gabriel*, I believe that the concepts of autobiography, biography, memoir, life writing, and other related terms are worth exploring. As seen, Boyne's novels can be understood as confessional narratives, due to their nature as a declaration of the events of the past and the narrator's involvement in them, but we should not leave aside other literary genres that might equally fit the narratives, adding to their complexity and meaning. Philippe Lejeune has defined 'autobiography' as "the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality" (in Folkenflik 13). However, this term might appear as rather incomplete, especially after the appearance of similar concepts including 'life writing' or 'life narrative.' In their revealing volume *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson analyse 'life writing' as "a general term for writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject," whether that writing is "biographical, novelistic, historical, or an explicit self-reference to the writer" (3). On the other hand, they understand 'life narrative' "as a somewhat narrower term that includes many kinds of self-referential writing, including autobiography" (3)—in fact, 'autobiography' seems to be "the most widely used and most generally understood term for life narrative" (3). In other words, life narrative distinguishes itself from life writing in that the former implies a figure writing about his or her own life, even if it is a fictional protagonist and narrator, as in the novels chosen.

From a psychological rather than literary perspective, Amia Lieblich goes one step further when dealing with narratives of ageing and discusses among the common concepts of 'reminiscence,' 'life review' and 'life narrative' (72). 'Reminiscence' would be the spontaneous act of "bringing up memories" as fragments, whereas 'life review' is a more intentional process which emphasises the positive and negative perspectives of one's life (72). 'Life

story' or 'life narrative' focuses on the "process of constructing our lives as a coherent story, which is also our identity" (72). Precisely due to the nature of the narrative as a story that creates one's identity, this last term seems to be the one which best fits the narratives in this study.

Besides, in all of these concepts we are generally dealing with ageing narrators, characters who recount their stories almost at the end of their lives. As Rosario Arias Doblaz states,

in gerontological literature there exists the belief in the life review as a beneficial exercise of introspection, since the collection of memories will have a therapeutic effect on the ageing person, who can make amends, forgive and resist regret. Added to this, in life review there must always be a listener, a recipient of this information, a witness to what the ageing protagonist is at pains to tell. (10)

Indeed, the narrators of confessional novels are telling their stories now because they need to be heard, to let go of certain traumatic memories, perhaps, or to atone for past mistakes before it is too late.<sup>106</sup> This relates to unreliability in that the narrators of life narratives recur to their personal memories to relate the events which, as I discuss in further sections, do not allow for complete reliability—especially when dealing with ageing narrators. According to Smith and Watson, "in autobiographical narratives, imaginative acts of remembering always intersect with such rhetorical acts as assertion, justification, judgment, conviction, and interrogation. [...] [L]ife narrators address readers whom they want to persuade of their version of experience" (6). This, in my opinion, is the main problem when dealing with confessional narratives: the narrator's main objective will be to atone, to justify themselves,

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<sup>106</sup> This is very much in accord with the religious confessions mentioned above. Both life review narratives and confessional narratives serve similar purposes.

to confess a sin but with the inner intention of being forgiven. In other words, “when one is both the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative, as in life stories, the truth of the narrative becomes undecidable. We need, then, to adjust our expectations of the truth told in self-referential narrative” (Smith and Watson 12-3). The unreliability of these narrators, therefore, is intrinsic to the text—although, as analyzed in their respective chapters, the narrators of the selected novels show different approaches to this issue of (un)reliability.

Paying attention to the topic of the novels, mainly that of *The Heart's Invisible Furies* and *A Son Called Gabriel*, it is also important to see which the relationship between homosexuality and life writing is. Studies like the ones carried out by Bertram Cohler (2007) or Phillip Hammack and Cohler (2009) explore the way homosexual life writers have dealt with their own memoirs and how they differ from other life writers. Historically, homosexuality has been categorized as a sexual deviation or inversion (Freud, 2016), and many homosexuals throughout the world have been persecuted and even killed, especially during most part of the twentieth century. In their volume *The Story of Sexual Identity*, Hammack and Cohler argue that there are a series of “major historical markers” that characterize the life story of homosexuals in the last decades of the twentieth century, namely the Stonewall Inn riots of 1969, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, and the 9/11 attacks in NYC in 2001 (8). These authors argue that “such events create distinct cohorts of individuals with same-sex desire, whose narratives of identity [...] subsequently diverge in important ways” (8).<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> In *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, apart from the AIDS crisis, which is a major point in the novel since Cyril has to witness his best friend die to this disease, the rest of significant events mentioned by Hammack and Cohler (8) in the life of homosexuals are also reproduced in the novel. Although the Stonewall Inn riots are not mentioned, there is an equivalent for these in the violent homophobic assault on Cyril and Bastian, also happening in NYC. Finally, the attacks on the World Trade Center of 2001 are also present in the novel, albeit just in passing and as a reminder of the troubles Cyril suffered in New York. All these historical events emphasise shame, since, especially the AIDS crisis and the episodes of homophobic violence attack homosexuals more crudely than other groups.

Moreover, Hammack and Cohler also argue that the writing of this type of memoir helps the individual to come to terms with their identity:

as they come to recognize the meaning of the social categories of identity available to them in a given cultural context, they must make decisions (conscious or otherwise) about the relationship between their own sexual desire and the discourse available to make sense of that desire. (13)

This is applicable to both *The Heart's Invisible Furies* and *A Son Called Gabriel*, since through their narratives both characters try to find themselves and understand their place in society. These narratives are told in the retrospect, as I explore in further sections, and show the importance of the past, especially childhood, in life writing. In other words, "[p]ersonal accounts such as memoirs and autobiographies have placed particular emphasis on beginnings and on the significance of childhood experiences for the course of adult life" (Cohler, in Hammack and Cohler 276). Along the same lines, David Jackson argues that

most of us keep on telling stories, both to ourselves and others, about our embodied experiences, and the key transitions and critical turning points confronted in our life courses. Through these dynamic processes of re-ordering, selecting and re-assembling the random flux of our lives, we constitute an identity as aging men by shaping a narrative account of how we got to be the way that we are. (11-12)

The same view is shared by Margaret O'Neill and Michaela Schrage-Früh in their claim that "identity formation is closely bound with the continual reviewing of one's life story" (184). Indeed, the protagonists of the selected novels, that of *A History of Loneliness* included, understand the importance of their past to

find their identity and see its relevance to comprehend their lives as a whole. As seen in their respective sections, the events of their childhood and adolescence have a strong impact on themselves as individuals.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### TRAUMA, MEMORY, GUILT AND SHAME

“But I *must* say what I feel and think in some  
way—it is such a relief!”  
‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Trauma, memory, and the unreliable narrator are three concepts very much related and present in contemporary fiction. As has already been mentioned, one of the reasons why a narrator might be unreliable is its partial loss of memory, provoked precisely by a traumatic event. Furthermore, narration seems to be necessary to heal from trauma, even if this is also seen as a paradox. In this chapter I explore what has been said about trauma and its relation to psychoanalysis, with especial emphasis on the twofold relationship between trauma and literature, both as necessity and impossibility, and its connection to unreliability. Likewise, I focus on other extremely related affects, such as guilt and shame can be.

#### 5.1. Trauma theory

Etymologically, the word ‘trauma’ comes from the Greek word for ‘wound,’ thus becoming attached to a physical wound rather than to the mental significance that it has carried from the twentieth century onwards. The most common use of the word ‘trauma’ nowadays is that of a mental wound, a sudden event considered disturbing by the mind and which influences the victim’s behavior or even identity. Roger Luckhurst understands this shift in significance as a “metaphorical drift of ‘trauma’ from physical damage to psychical wounding” (34). The latter is the meaning that is considered throughout this thesis, given

that the damage a particular event has caused upon the mind is of high relevance for our analysis, especially how to confront it through literature.

Cathy Caruth exposes the Freudian conception of trauma as follows:

most centrally in [Sigmund] Freud's text, the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. [...] [T]he wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (*Unclaimed Experience* 3-4)

Consequently, for Freud it is not just the happening of the event that causes the trauma but rather the abrupt and unexpected occurrence of the incident, the shock it produces on the mind. Caruth continues claiming that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4, emphasis in the original). For Freud, as for Caruth, the traumatic event is in some cases not considered as such at the moment of its occurrence, but rather its continuous repetition is what turns it into something traumatic for the victim. In other words, “[s]ome later similar event [...] suddenly recovers the memory of the original event and makes it traumatic. The new event triggers lasting psychic suffering, all those symptoms Freud, following the medical nomenclature of his time, called ‘hysteria’” (Miller 90). This might be the case with childhood abuse, which is not understood by the child at the moment it occurs but is only comprehended later on when it keeps haunting the victim.



Jean Laplanche and Jean Bertrand Pontalis define trauma along the same lines, calling attention to the victim's inability to understand what has happened or the permanent wounds that it causes, as "[a]n event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychological organization" (465). They also address the idea that it is the suddenness of the incident that causes its being understood as traumatic: "psycho-analysis carries the three ideas implicit in it over on to the psychological level: the idea of a violent shock, the idea of a wound and the idea of consequences affecting the whole organization" (466).

When dealing with trauma, it is imperative to discuss the term post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. This syndrome has existed throughout history with victims suffering from it in every war and conflict, but it achieved formal recognition after the Vietnam War (Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* 4). Caruth explains that:

While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (*Trauma* 4)

Hence, PTSD alludes to the constant repetition of the event mentioned above, to the haunting of the victim until they can eventually work through trauma and heal. Furthermore, the symptoms of PTSD include a wide range of reactions: "Aside from myriad physical symptoms, trauma disrupts memory, and therefore identity" (Luckhurst 1). Trauma, therefore, is re-experienced through

flashbacks or dreams, but also “the complete opposite: ‘persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma’ that can range from avoidance of thoughts or absence of recall of the significant event” (1). This ‘avoidance of thoughts’ can be seen for instance in Boyne’s *A History of Loneliness*, as I discuss in its corresponding chapter, since the protagonist decides to hide the traumatic events at the back of his mind and erase any recollection of them in order to protect himself and be able to move on. Finally, Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007) can serve to illustrate the other symptom Luckhurst was alluding to, “the absence of recall of the significant event,” since the protagonist is trying to work through the trauma of her childhood by deciphering what happened and what did not. Once again, the mind acts as protector by deleting or hiding the traumatic event, allowing the victim to work through and eventually come to terms with the trauma.

#### 5.1.1. Trauma and narratives

Paul Ricoeur claims that “la dimension narrative est constitutive de la compréhension de soi” (278),<sup>108</sup> recognizing the relevance of narrative as a means to put one’s life story into words. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan claims that “trauma survivors recuperate best when enabled to *narrativize* their suffering—to represent their own histories in ways that give them a sense of control and authorship over their own lives” (19, emphasis in the original). Indeed, for many critics and fiction writers, giving words to trauma is necessary to heal from it, although this is also seen as a paradox, as an impossibility. Dominick LaCapra for instance, points towards the difficulty of writing trauma itself because

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<sup>108</sup> “the narrative dimension is constitutive of self-understanding” (my translation).

trauma is not locatable in a specific moment of time, as aforementioned, but rather has delayed effects. For him, writing about trauma

involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and 'giving voice' to the past—processes of coming to terms with traumatic 'experiences,' limit events, and their symptomatic effects that achieve articulation in different combinations and hybridized forms. (186)

The key words here are 'working through' and 'acting out.' Narrating allows the victim to give voice to what still haunts them, to come to terms with past events and to eventually heal from that trauma. In other words, "[t]o tell a story of a traumatic past, then, becomes both a task (in so far as it is difficult) and a 'cure' (in so far as it assimilates the unassimilated), since only with the ability to tell the event does it become true memory, relegated to the past, and therefore over" (Garratt 8).

Robert Garratt also refers to the characteristics of the 'trauma novel' thus:

The designation 'trauma novel' identifies a work of fiction that treats as an important and central part of the story the struggle of a disturbed individual to discover, confront, and give voice to a vague yet threatening catastrophic past. [...] A trauma novel [...] employs a narrative strategy in which a reconstruction of events through memories, flashbacks, dreams, and hauntings is as important as the events themselves. In a trauma novel, both subject and method become central: in addition to developing trauma as an element of the story and part of its dramatic action, it depicts the process by which a person encounters and comes to know a traumatic event or moment that has previously proved inaccessible. (5)

Indeed, some of the novels that will be discussed here fit this definition, since the main aim of their protagonists is to confront and come to terms with their traumas through a process of revisiting memories, which, as discussed in the next sections, does not always prove to be accurate.

Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* is a very good example of this need to discuss trauma. The most interesting aspect of Ishiguro's first novel is the feeling of loss and confusion that the reader experiences throughout the novel and especially at the end of it. The narrator, Etsuko, is remembering her time in Japan with her friend and neighbour Sachiko, whilst in the present she is trying to cope with the suicide of her eldest daughter. The narrative of the past intermingles with that of the present, to the extent that the reader is unable to distinguish Etsuko from Sachiko, and might deduce that the narratives of the two women are in fact the experience of Etsuko alone. Etsuko is therefore trying to come to terms with her past, but for her it is easier to attach those traumatic experiences to an external character rather than to herself, dissociating herself from the events. She needs to give words to the trauma that began in Japan and ended in England, but it seems easier for her to do so through fiction, a feeling that can also be perceived in McEwan's *Atonement* or in Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*.

Nonetheless, other authors such as Jean-François Lyotard or Caruth share the belief that writing trauma is itself a paradox precisely because of the difficulty to communicate trauma, even if language is also necessary to heal from it. Leigh Gilmore illustrates this apparent contradiction as follows:

Crucial to the experience of trauma are the multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it. Indeed, the relation between trauma and representation, and especially language, is at the center of claims about trauma as a category. Something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way,

that language fails in the face of trauma and that *trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency*. Yet, at the same time language about trauma is theorized as an impossibility, *language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma*. (6, emphasis added)

Language is not powerful enough to communicate trauma, as some postmodern novels have proved,<sup>109</sup> but it is seen as a requirement towards the possibility of healing. As a matter of fact, Western culture swarms with examples of “stories that see trauma not as a blockage but a positive spur to narrative” (Luckhurst 83). Throughout this study examples of fiction narratives that highlight the need to write trauma, to give voice to the unspeakable, in order to be actually able to start healing will be found.<sup>110</sup> As a result, the reader functions as the therapist listening to the victim, the much needed and comprehensive listener that might, in some cases, be able to understand and forgive the speaker.

Trauma narratives are also significant in the sense that it is the narrative that echoes the trauma, placing the reader thus in a similar position to that of the victim. Laurie Vickroy claims that

[t]rauma narratives reveal the tensions and conflicts implicit in retelling and reexperiencing traumatic events. [...] Writers have created a number of

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<sup>109</sup> Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* exemplifies the need to include additional visual reinforcement when dealing with trauma, since language alone is unable to convey the multiple layers of meaning that a traumatic event such as the 9/11 attacks meant. The same goes for Art Spiegelman's account of the horrors of the Holocaust in *Maus* (1980), proving the impossibility of language to convey meaning of this kind and therefore the necessity to express this trauma with the aid of images and cartoons. Natasha Rogers claims along these lines that “one of the most prominent statements made by Holocaust survivors is that their experiences seem inexpressible” (67).

<sup>110</sup> In terms of trauma and healing, and of special relevance for the discussion of Irish trauma, a mention needs to be made here to the Prison Memory Archive, a series of filmed interviews with “loyalist and republican former prisoners and internees, prison officers and governors, visitors, educators, journalists, probation officers, welfare workers, and chaplains,” among others, who were in Northern Irish prisons during the Troubles (*Prisons Memory Archive*, 2021). For more on this, see McLaughlin (2016; 2021).

narrative strategies to represent a conflicted or incomplete relation to memory, including textual gaps (both in the page layout and content), repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and a focus on visual images and affective states. (29)

These narrative strategies are commonly seen in those twentieth- or twenty-first-century narratives dealing with trauma, such as the previous examples of Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, where the changes of narrator, time, or space are constant, or Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*, where this back and forth of time and space shifts are also present, which emphasise the difficulty to describe trauma and the need to dissect the narrative for its easier comprehension.<sup>111</sup> Along these lines, Natasha Rogers points out that the protagonists of novels such as those mentioned

do not reject narrative, as they all acknowledge its necessity in working through and bearing witness to trauma, but instead install and then disrupt the conventional narrative structure to create a narrative form that recognizes the necessity of creating narratives about trauma but also acknowledges its own provisionality and limitations. (27)

Once again, narrative is seen as a necessity as well as a limitation, thus what we encounter is not a linear, foreseeable, and understanding narrative but a disrupted one whose difficulty of comprehension echoes the incomprehensible nature of trauma itself. Thus, novels such as Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* or *The Buried Giant* show that "trauma cannot be transformed into language and thus no meaningful discourse can grasp it or portray it. It remains an unclaimed hole in one's narrative" (Abfalterer 30). In the case of the former, the narrator

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<sup>111</sup> Similarly, in *A History of Loneliness* the changes in time and space are constant, emphasising the narrator's state of mind.

of the novel is asking the reader to grasp more meaning than the one she is delivering, for the reader is able to understand much more than what the novel is saying, proving once more the limitations of language and narratives.

#### 5.1.2. Trauma and unreliability

Since narratives are used to tell one's own story, they can therefore be used to tell exclusively one's story, leaving aside other angles to it. As I explore in more depth in other sections below, trauma narratives, especially those recounted by a homodiegetic narrator, very frequently feature unreliable narrators whose main purpose is to tell their stories, regardless of their accuracy. In this regard, Natasha Rogers points out that "the relationship between narrative and trauma is paradoxical: narrative is an essential tool, both for working-through and bearing witness to the trauma, but it can also intentionally or unintentionally be used to create an inauthentic version of events" (ii). Garratt also argues along these lines that "[f]requently in the trauma novel the reader must puzzle over the relationship between what is being told or described by the traumatized voice and the reality of the event itself" (6). In this sense, Tony Webster in Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* might be an unintentionally unreliable narrator, since his untrustworthiness is due to his poor memories of his childhood and his inability to comprehend what takes place around him. Throughout the novel, he is trying to come to terms with what happened during his college years, even if he did not understand the events as traumatic as other people viewed them, and therefore he is not trying to impose any particular version on the reader. On the other hand, Briony in McEwan's *Atonement* is being intentionally unreliable, for her main purpose is to misconstrue the reader and to prevail over the truth, in order to achieve the atonement to which she has devoted her life.

As a result, the linkage between the unreliable narrator and trauma is highly relevant here. Some of the untrustworthy narrators we come across throughout this study behave thus due to a traumatic event they are trying to overcome or to some fault in their memories, often caused by the traumatic event as well. The impossibility of narrating trauma that is discussed above is made present in the appearance of unreliable narrators who feel incapable of conveying trauma and thus seek for other alternatives to a linear and comprehensible narration. Other unreliable narrators take advantage of narratives in order to position the reader by their side, to expose their relationship to trauma and to try to overcome it by making sure of their innocence. Narrators such as those, which are found in Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* or McEwan's *Atonement*, are using their narrative to hide or expose their guilt and shame and to try to make amends with their pasts. Indeed, "guilt-based intrusions [...] are associated with ruminative activity as the individual replays what happened again and again, looking for indications of how he could have done things differently" (Lee *et al.* 462). These novels by Atwood and McEwan do not exclusively feature the perspective of the narrator, however, since their protagonists acknowledge the role they played in the traumas of their past and their prime objective is to atone for them. The inclusion of other points of view, therefore, will be seen as a sign of apologizing, of acknowledging the versions of the story they did not perceive at the time, even if it may be too late. Briony in *Atonement* tries to present a false version of what the traumatic experiences brought about not only in order to atone for her mistake but also to try to heal from it. She needs to give words to the past and make amends with it but she is not able to give an accurate depiction of it yet. Likewise, unreliable narrators such as the protagonist of Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* use narratives to explore their past with the only intention of justifying their actions, of establishing their innocence. Ono's version of the events is highly influenced



by his lack of memory and by his need to be liked and praised, which does not leave any room for the inclusion of past mistakes that might stain his figure.

All these examples belong to what has been called 'the novel of recollections.' Petr Chalupsky defines this genre as a

short novel narrated in the first person by an adult narrator who in his/her memories returns to his/her past—childhood, adolescence, student years—which he/she attempts to present to the reader [...] as a comprehensible and indisputable sequence of objectively perceived and absolutely clearly recollected events. [...] [T]he narrator's memory proves to be unreliable, frequently embellishing the unpleasant history through conscious as well as unconscious defensive mechanisms such as selectiveness, idealization [...]. Such an image of the past is to some extent a fiction. (90)

Novels such as Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*, McEwan's *Atonement*, Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*,<sup>112</sup> or Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* feature aging narrators recalling their pasts, often with the apparent intention of being as truthful as possible, but who realize the impossibility of conveying such truth as the novel goes on. Not only is their aging memory responsible for their untrustworthiness, but their unreliability often comes with a specific purpose. The image of the past that they have been constructing is an ideal fiction which does not correspond with the truth, but which seems the only plausible and possible explanation for their traumatic pasts. These novels represent the "dramatic and often painful coming to terms not only with the past but also with the present and, along with that, with the immediate future, with other people's fates but, above all, with [the narrator] him/herself and his/her own conscience" (Chalupsky 90). The novel of recollections therefore shows the necessity to

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<sup>112</sup> I believe these last two novels could be included here despite their length.

understand the past in order to make sense of the present and to be able to foresee a future.

Besides, trauma is of paramount importance in these novels. The presence of trauma in narratives comes in two ways: novels can show the impact of trauma on the narrator's identity (as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1991)), or they can show the narrator's role in the trauma and its need to be redeemed. These novels "depict the process of admitting one's guilt, becoming reconciled with one's failure and coping with their consequences" (Chalupski 91). The importance of novels like *Atonement* or *The Remains of the Day*, to name two of the most significant ones, lies in the reaction of the narrator to trauma, whether it admits its active role in it or whether the protagonist recognizes its part in it but its performance is mainly passive.

### 5.1.3. Irish Trauma

All of the above is obviously also applicable to the case of Ireland. Like any other country, history in Ireland, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is not particularly uplifting. The Great Famine (1845-1849) could be mentioned here, since it resulted in the loss of a quarter of the population of Ireland, either due to emigration or starvation. Irish history in the twentieth century is mainly marked by the constant fight for independence, namely the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), the declaration of the Republic of Ireland in 1949 and the more recent Troubles in Northern Ireland (1968-1998). The causes for trauma, therefore, are many. Nonetheless, in this study I do not focus on these historical events but rather on the Irish society of the twentieth century as deeply influenced by the Catholic Church.

Many Irish authors of the last century used fiction to condemn those aspects of Irish society they could not accept. As Costello-Sullivan points out,

[t]roughout the twentieth century, Irish authors increasingly confronted fictionally the hazards and crimes of a seemingly all-powerful Catholic Church, the systemic neglect and abuse of children, the suffocating nature of Irish domesticity, and the crippling familial and social silences that perpetuated and tacitly condoned such abuses. (12)

Although Costello-Sullivan refers mainly to the work of Colm Tóibín, Patrick McCabe or Jennifer Johnston among others (18), writers like John Boyne and Damian McNicholl can also be included in this category, as they do so even in the twenty-first century. Costello-Sullivan continues claiming that “[t]hrough their fictional representations of trauma, Irish authors made visible in the twentieth century what had been silent and initiated conversations that Irish society had avoided” (12). Indeed, as I discuss in their corresponding chapters below, *A Son Called Gabriel*, *A History of Loneliness*, and *The Heart’s Invisible Furies* tackle traumatic issues that were taboo for decades, namely the sexual abuse of children by the Church and homosexuality respectively. In doing so, authors like Boyne and McNicholl “opened the space for needed dialogue more broadly in Irish society” (Costello-Sullivan 19), presenting “a society not only looking to explain its past but also proactively seeking closure and a better future” (26). Along the same lines, Leszek Drong argues that “in many Irish novels written over the last few decades history is indeed portrayed as a nightmare from which numerous characters are desperate to awake” (21). Irish history, as I have hinted at above, is certainly seen as traumatic by many Irish novelists and critics,<sup>113</sup> and this drives Drong to coin the category of post-traumatic realism (2015). Following Costello-Sullivan’s line of thought, he also ascertains that “most of the novels raise extraordinarily sensitive and painful

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<sup>113</sup> See Garratt 4-5.

issues connected with the internal conflicts in post-independence Ireland,” although he mainly mentions the Troubles or the Irish diaspora (23). However, his claims regarding the need for characters to narrate their stories strikes closer to home for our study:

The post-traumatic realism is not a device which Irish authors use to negate their nation’s history or erode Irish people’s sense of identity. It is post-traumatic because the past continues to exert a paralyzing influence on the characters, and in most cases the only way to wake up from the nightmare of history is to narrate one’s own version of it. Confessing, disburdening oneself, verbalizing grief, and acknowledging a grudge one holds against others are recurring themes in those novels. (Drong 23)

Certainly, these novels do not only offer a space for debate however painful or uncomfortable the issues may be, but they also give room for their protagonists to heal from the trauma caused on them by that same Irish society. And not only the characters, I would say, but also the authors themselves. Both Boyne and McNicholl are homosexual men who grew up in the Republic and the North, respectively, during the second half of the twentieth century and therefore had to suffer the homophobia inherent to the time and place. Consequently, their novels can also be read as a healing therapy for the authors themselves and not only their characters. In other words,

[r]ather than centrally focusing on capturing trauma, many novels from the late 1990s to the current day started to emphasize not only the representation of personal or cultural trauma but also the act of representation itself and the *curative* power of such representation. (Costello-Sullivan 22, emphasis in the original)

Along these lines, Garratt also shares Costello-Sullivan's view when he claims that

[t]rauma certainly plays a role in Irish history [...]. The treatment of trauma in recent Irish fiction, however, tends to focus less on public events on a grand scale such as the Famine, and more on individuals who witness or experience single acts of political violence within the context of revolutionary Ireland. (5)

Thus, narratives like those offered by *A Son Called Gabriel*, *A History of Loneliness*, or *The Heart's Invisible Furies* present a space for their protagonists to find themselves, to come to terms with their pasts and to be finally able to heal from their traumas. As I discuss in further sections, Odran and Cyril write their memoirs, or life stories, to understand their pasts and their mistakes in an attempt to live with themselves for the remain of their lives. Gabriel, on the other hand, only goes back until his childhood and adolescence, but it is through this time span that he matures and manages to find his true identity.

Overall, Irish novelists from the 1970s onwards have been paying especial attention to historical events of the twentieth century to juxtapose them to their protagonists' traumas. According to Garratt, Irish novels from the 1990s to the 2010s

illuminate many changes within contemporary Irish society, especially a *rethinking of national heritage, including religious and political identity*, within a larger cultural frame. They also portray tension between traditional Irish culture and international popular culture, often in a satirical vein and reflected in an informal and edgy literary style. Even when these changes are subtle, they clearly reflect an attitude in Irish thought and literary practice different from that of the 1970s and 1980s. (114, emphasis added)

Novelists like Boyne or McNicholl, therefore, question their protagonists' identities as Irish also in a contemporary context, transporting them to other countries and different societies. But these characters have always to face the background of twentieth-century Ireland in societal and historical terms. In particular, these novelists focus on the influence that the Catholic Church has had not only on the Irish society of the second half of the twentieth century, but also and more specifically on the personal lives of their protagonists.

## 5.2. Memory and unreliability

Memory is something that has inspired much thought throughout history. Many philosophers from Plato to Freud have explored the role of memory and have delivered their own thoughts on the matter.<sup>114</sup> The Scottish philosopher David Hume, for instance, linked the concepts of memory and imagination, claiming that these can become so blurred as to mix one and the other. In other words, for Hume “the ideas of the imagination can acquire ‘such a force and vivacity, as to pass for an idea of the memory’” (Whitehead, *Memory* 60). Hume mentions liars here, who might not be able to separate memory from imagination.<sup>115</sup> Whitehead goes on with her analysis of Hume:

The boundary between memory and the imagination therefore becomes profoundly unstable in Hume; memory, by implication, can no longer be relied upon to be faithful and historically accurate to the past that it records, and it

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<sup>114</sup> In my analysis, I only focus on those aspects that are most relevant for my interests. For an enlightening historic review of the concept of memory in philosophy, see Anne Whitehead (2009).

<sup>115</sup> For more on Hume's views on memory see Hume (1978).

therefore becomes difficult to ‘know’ the past, to distinguish clearly between remembered and imagined realities. (*Memory* 60)

Applied to literature, examples mixing reality and fiction would include Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of Hills* or Roddy Doyle’s *Smile* (2017).

On the other hand, Friedrich Nietzsche sees memory as a burden for human beings, who cannot escape from their pasts—unlike cattle, whom human beings should envy. Nietzsche continues thus:

Man, on the other hand, braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden which he can sometimes appear to disown and which in traffic with his fellow men he is only too glad to disown, so as to excite their envy. (*Untimely Meditations* 61)

He appeals thus to the bliss of ignorance, since only in ignorance—i.e. living ‘unhistorically,’ forgetting the past and living in the present—can men be truly happy. Edward Casey analyses Nietzsche’s philosophy on memory claiming that he “stressed the virtues of ‘active forgetfulness,’ that is, the capacity to forget not merely by lapsus but wilfully and for a purpose—so as to erase, or at least to cover over, the scars which repeated remembering would only turn back into open wounds” (Casey 7). As seen above in the section on trauma, there are victims from traumatic episodes who unavoidably forget those episodes as if to heal from them.

Paradoxically, this idea seems to clash with what has been previously mentioned regarding the close relationship between narration and trauma, in the sense that narratives are necessary to heal from trauma. Narrators such as that found in Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*, for example, who gives such an importance to remembering the past, would disagree with Nietzsche’s view of

the past in our memories, and perhaps these narrators would agree more with the view presented by Milan Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). As noted by Whitehead,

for Kundera, however, remembering seems to assume a crucial moral and ethical dimension. To remember may be a crushing and painful activity but it is also a 'responsibility;' he implies that to actively forget the sufferings of the recent past would be more truly 'unbearable' than to carry their weight within him. (*Memory* 88)

For these narrators, therefore, it is only when they come to terms with their pasts, when they are able to finally put it into words, that they can move on and live peacefully the remains of their lives.

Since the protagonists and narrators of the novels chosen for analysis are aging homodiegetic narrators recalling their pasts,<sup>116</sup> the reader should foresee both the intentional and unintentional unreliability of their memories. In other words, "narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered" (Smith and Watson 16), since "there may be little relationship between the memory of the past and the past as it 'really happened'" (Cohler 5). Casey also agrees with this perception, claiming that "the way the past is relived in memory assures that it will be transfigured in subtle and significant ways" (xxii). Chapulsky points out the narrators of the 'novel of recollections' is often "an unreliable narrator who keeps modifying his/her story, manipulates the facts and, along with that, the reader" (92). As mentioned above, although the purpose of some narrators is to influence the reader's view of themselves (as in Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*), some other unreliable narrators are merely writing for themselves and using narrative as a therapeutic tool to cope

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<sup>116</sup> I understand Gabriel as older than his character, as I explain when dealing with this novel.



with their pasts, trying to be “reconciled to something that can no longer be redeemed, rectified or changed” (Chalupsky 92), as in *The Remains of the Day*, *Atonement* or *The Sense of an Ending*.

Memory is very much related to identity as well, since we are what we remember. Memory can therefore refer “to the subjective experience of reliving our past, which is essential to our sense of personal identity” (McNally 28). The novels of recollections that have been previously discussed emphasise this idea: the need to remember our past to understand our present. Undoubtedly, trauma marks a turning point in our identities that memory tries to overcome either by erasing any recollection of it or by modifying it until we are able to accept its meaning.

Some authors discuss the concept of traumatic amnesia, making reference both to memory loss and to the constant repetition of the traumatic events:

On the one hand, the theory of traumatic amnesia proposes that the survivor is unable to remember their traumatic experience. On the other hand, the theory of traumatic intrusion emphasizes that the experience repeatedly intrudes in the form of nightmares and flashbacks. (Rogers 36)

Even if it might look paradoxical, some victims might be unable to recall any past traumatic experience (to remember it accurately, fully, or in depth) but nonetheless have repeated episodes that echo those events and make the victim unable to move on.

In this sense, traumatic memories are not always reliable due to the partial loss or modification of memory that the traumatic experience might impose on the victim’s recollections. I would argue that this modification on memory might also be self-imposed as a means of self-defence, as in Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, where Grace Marks claims to have no recollection whatsoever

about the night when she, along with James McDermott, allegedly murdered their master Thomas Kinnear and his lover Nancy Montgomery. The novel plays masterfully with the figure of the unreliable narrator to let the reader decide what they want to believe, since the reader is left to determine whether Grace is innocent or guilty of the murders. Grace's memory loss of the traumatic events (and therefore unreliability) can be read as an intentional one, as a means of defending herself against the accusations of murder; or as a defensive mechanism of her brain, to protect her from the atrocious events she witnessed.

### 5.3. Guilt and shame

Alternatively, another key theme when discussing trauma and unreliability is that of guilt, especially if taking into consideration the essential implicature of the term in the novels mentioned hitherto and those discussed hereafter. The Oxford Dictionary defines guilt as "the fact of having committed a specified or implied offence or crime" and provides a related meaning, "a feeling of having committed wrong or failed in an obligation," which is considered to be more appropriate to this analysis given the emphasis it lays on the noun being a feeling or sensation of the individual. Another definition that assumes 'guilt' as a feeling rather than a mere fact is the one provided by Roy F. Baumeister *et al.*: guilt, then, can be described as "an individual's unpleasant emotional state associated with possible objections to his or her actions, inaction, circumstances, or intentions" (245; qtd. in O'Keefe 68). To this it can be added that those "possible objections" can be aroused by oneself or by an external individual, the former conveying a much stronger feeling than the latter. Indeed, according to Lee *et al.*, "individuals may experience guilt when they believe that they have done something contrary to their code of conduct and/or

when their actions have injured another” (456). This might be precisely the case of narrators such as Briony in *Atonement* or Iris in *The Blind Assassin*.

Many scholars agree on the individual and solitary implications of the term guilt, in the sense that it is a much more self-centred feeling than shame or embarrassment for example, as seen later. When dealing with guilt, “ultimately we judge ourselves” (Crossen, n.pag.)—and we can be our worst enemy. Guilt, then, is not something visible for others but rather stays within, influencing our vision of ourselves. According to Tangney *et al.*, “guilt is thought to be the reaction of one’s internalized conscience to a breach of one’s personal standards and thus may be felt when one is entirely alone” (1256-7). McDermott also agrees with this assumption, stating that guilt “is a personal emotion that we attempt to keep to ourselves as we try to outrun, evade, or squelch it” (iv). As seen in the analysis of the novel, in *A History of Loneliness* the protagonist tries to avoid the admittance of his guilt almost until the end of the novel, which emphasises McDermott’s idea of the evasion of the feeling of guilt because “guilt becomes an attack on our self-image” (vii) and might often bring ideas of worthlessness, regret, concern, or remorse (Tangney *et al.* 1257; Harder 370).

In the most Christian sense of the term, which is also of interest for our study given the subject of the selected novels to be analysed, guilt is also associated with “sin, remorse, penance, and forgiveness” (Arel 4). Similarly, Catholic guilt has been associated with “feelings of shame, remorse, self-doubt, or responsibility of a unique tone and persistence, rooted in particular in a Catholic spirituality that is said to emphasise obedience, sin, damnation, confession, and penance” (Vaisey and Smith 415). Catholic guilt in particular “also connotes a generalized tendency to feel bad for a wide variety of sins, including imagined or seemingly trivial wrongdoings” (Vaisey and Smith 415). Indeed, some religions (including the Catholic Church) emphasise the inherent

sinfulness of humanity. Religious guilt, therefore, is a heavy burden,<sup>117</sup> were it not for confession.<sup>118</sup>

Moreover, David Crossen discusses that “when we feel guilty, we also feel profoundly isolated” (n.pag.), precisely because of the personal experience that the feeling of guilt produces in the self. In the case of the literature examined, guilty narrators tend to shrink and turn to their inner selves, exploring their souls in an introspective and often confessional mode that might allow them to cope and live with their guilt. In this sense, it could be argued that *feeling* guilty is a much stronger emotion than *being* guilty, since an individual might be guilty unconsciously, making the implications of the feeling of guilt not applicable and irrelevant. Feeling guilty, therefore, might bring reactions such as “thinking that you shouldn’t have done what you did,” “feeling like undoing what you have done,” “wanting to make up for what you’ve done wrong,” and “wanting to be forgiven,” among others (Roseman *et al.* 215, qtd. in O’Keefe 69). In the light of the novels discussed above, it can be claimed that McEwan’s *Atonement* presents a narrator whose guilt moves her to try to undo what she did in the past while trying to make up for it by creating the fictional life her sister could never have. Briony, in this case, does not yearn for forgiveness—she knows she cannot have it.

The relationship of guilt and unreliability might seem paradoxical given the desire for forgiveness a narrator might have (and, consequently, full accuracy is needed) and the inability to be precise that the yearning for forgiveness might actually imply—the narrator, in this case, will be driven by repentance and the need to clean its self-image, and hence unable to fully confess its sins. The narrator of Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World*, for

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<sup>117</sup> Narratives of religious guilt (mainly of the relief and unburdening arriving with time and maturity) are more and more common. They mainly emphasise the atmosphere of fear and guilt rooted in Catholic or Christian upbringings. For more on this, see Brown, 2017; or Friendly, 2017).

<sup>118</sup> See chapter 4.4. Confession and life narratives.

instance, is eaten by guilt but unable to admit it, which turns him into an unreliable narrator by omission.

As suggested above, the concept of 'shame' is not as inward-looking as the concept of 'guilt,' since shame is something felt against a background—against a community, in most cases. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'shame' as “a painful feeling of *humiliation* or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or *foolish* behaviour.”<sup>119</sup> I have emphasised here the terms 'humiliation' and 'foolishness', showing that shame implies someone—“a disapproving audience” (Tangney *et al.* 1256)—reproaching someone else's foolishness or stupidity and therefore alluding to the latter's sense of pride, among other things. Compared to guilt, shame requires at least two individuals—one will criticize the behaviour of the other. In other words, “shame is a more public emotion, whereas guilt is a more private affair” (Tangney *et al.* 1256).<sup>120</sup> Along these lines, R.C. Johnson *et al.* argue that “[shame] results from the existence of a real or imagined audience (or observer) of one's misdeed, while guilt generally is defined as a feeling of negative self-regard associated with the real or imagined commission of an act, without any need for an audience” (359; qtd. in Wallbott & Scherer 467).

As suggested before, guilt does not require an observer to disapprove of the self, whereas shame involves the implication of an audience.<sup>121</sup> Erik

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<sup>119</sup> For instance, in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018), the narrator describes the shame the female protagonist feels at one point as follows: “Shame surrounded her like a shroud. She could hardly see through it. The cloth caught up her breath, prickled on her skin. It was as if her life was over” (230). The whole novel, as seen in this passage, revolves around shame and humiliation.

<sup>120</sup> Tangney *et al.* also discuss the difference between the concepts of shame and embarrassment, alluding that “shame results from more serious failures and moral transgressions, whereas embarrassment follows relatively trivial social transgressions or untoward interactions” (1258). For more information on this distinction, see their excellent study (1996).

<sup>121</sup> This implication has been criticized, though, since, among other things, “shame may also occur when no audience is physically present” (Wallbott & Scherer 467). For more information, see Piers & Singer, 1971; or Kaufman 6.

Erikson, when discussing childhood, has also argued that “[s]hame is an infantile emotion insufficiently studied because in our civilization it is so early and easily absorbed by guilt. Shame supposes that one is completely exposed and conscious of being looked at—in a word, self-conscious” (110).

Furthermore, most critics seem to have reached an agreement regarding the difference between shame and guilt in their perception that shame implies that the whole self is bad (*I did something wrong*), whilst guilt refers rather to a wrongdoing of the self (*I did something wrong*) which could be amended (Arel 8, 36; Barrett 44; Ferguson and Stegge 176; Kaufman 6; Mascolo and Fischer 68; Tangney 117). In that sense, “shame is associated with withdrawal from social contact. Guilt, on the other hand, is associated with outward movement, aimed at reparation for a wrongdoing” (Barrett 25-6).

Due to this withdrawal, shame has been linked to “the internal experience of the self as undesirable, unattractive, defective, worthless and powerless,” and associated to “being defective or inadequate in some way [...], an experience of the self related to how we think we exist in the minds of others” (Pinto-Gouveia and Matos 281). Unlike guilt, in which the individual must deal with their own guilty conscience almost on their own, in the experience of shame our actions derive in an external perception of ourselves—the importance lies in how others view us, rather than how we view ourselves. In other words, “shame is the emotion resulting from self-condemnation along with a fear of condemnation from others” (Johnson and Yarhouse 85). Along these lines, José Pinto-Gouveia and Marcela Matos make a distinction between internal and external shame thus:

shame can be a painful social experience (also defined as external shame), linked to the perception that one is being judged and seen as inferior, defective or unattractive in the eyes of others [...]. Shame can also be internalized, emerging as a private feeling (also designed as internal shame) related to our

own negative personal judgements of our attributes, characteristics, feelings and fantasizes [sic] and linked to self-directed effects. (281)

In other words, “[e]xternal shame relates to the experience of one’s social presentation,” whereas “[i]nternal shame [...] relates to experiences of the self as devalued in one’s own eyes in a way that is damaging to the self-identity” (Lee *et al.* 452). In the light of this difference, I would argue that the latter is more closely linked to the idea of guilt as discussed above, whereas external shame refers more significantly to concepts such as embarrassment.

Drawing on Kaufman and Lev Raphael’s arguments regarding homosexuality (1996), Jac Brown and Robert Trevethan continue stating that “[s]elf-acceptance may be influenced if judgmental parents, friends, and the broader heterosexual society provide repeated experiences of disapproval, which could lead to shame becoming internalized” (268). Veronica Johnson and Mark Yarhouse exemplify this with the conflict of homosexuals who possess a strong religious identity, and who “admit to conflict between their religion and their attractions and, consequently, feel shame and guilt” (86).<sup>122</sup>

Needless to say, guilt and shame are very much related to the concept of identity, mainly due to the aforementioned feeling of worthlessness. Both affects influence how an individual sees oneself, and also how others view them. In this regard, Kaufman describes the feeling of shame thus:

Shame is the affect of inferiority. No other affect is more central to the development of identity. None is closer to the experienced self, nor more disturbing. Shame is felt as an inner torment. It is the most poignant experience of the self by the self [...]. Shame is a wound made from the inside, dividing us from both ourselves and others. (16)

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<sup>122</sup> As I discuss below, this is of paramount significance in *A Son Called Gabriel* and *The Heart's Invisible Furies*.

Indeed, the impact of shame on identity is extremely relevant when dealing with my corpus, since the narrators of *A Son Called Gabriel*, *A History of Loneliness*, and *The Heart's Invisible Furies* are deeply influenced by shame and guilt, and their identities shift through time as a consequence.

All in all, shame, guilt, and even embarrassment are of paramount importance when tackling related issues such as trauma or the unreliability of memory. Kaufman aptly summarizes the relationship among these concepts as follows: “Embarrassment is shame before any type of audience. Shyness is shame in the presence of a stranger. Shame is loss of face, honor, or dignity, a sense of failure. Guilt is shame about moral transgression, immorality shame” (22). In the next chapters, they are explored as present in the novels.

#### 5.4. Guilt, shame, coping, and gender roles

To put an end to this chapter, it is worth paying attention to the relationship between the affects analysed, namely trauma, guilt, and shame, and gender roles. Unfortunately, there is not much consensus amongst scholars in this regard, for there is not enough evidence to prove that men or women are more or less prone to develop guilt or shame (Ferguson and Eyre 269). Nonetheless, despite the lack of certainty, some studies have argued that women are, in general, more prone to feeling shame, while men are more guilt-prone (Lewis, 1971; Ferguson and Crowley, 1997). In this sense,

a guilt-prone style is presumably cultivated in many men, reflected in the tendency to interpret events in terms of issues of blame or responsibility (guilt) as opposed to identity (shame), to defend the self by externalizing or isolating



affect, and to advocate stereotypically masculine attributes. (Ferguson and Crowley 22)

Those ‘stereotypically masculine attributes’ are often related to violence and aggressivity, as some studies discuss (Jakupcak *et al.*, 2003, 2005; Gebhard *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, this has to do with how men and women cope with the said affects. Thus, men are more prone to using “internal coping strategies (mobilization of personal resources to solve problems),” whilst women tend to use “external coping strategies,” such as seeking social help and support (Shek, 2005; in Martínez *et al.* 112-3). As I discuss in relation to the selected novels, the guilt, shame, or trauma of the protagonists are suffered in silence, for they do not seek support or discuss their feelings with anyone else. In fact, masculinity has been conventionally characterized by lacking emotion, or at least by being less emotional than femininity (Jakupcak *et al.* “Masculinity and Emotionality” 111; Gough, 2018).<sup>123</sup>

Another important aspect to be discussed is the diverse stressors in men and women. The study by Paul Efthim *et al.* (2001) is quite relevant in this regard, since they argue that stress appears when someone regards themselves “as violating societal expectations for gender roles” (430). In the case of men, that violation of expectations arises in “situations that reflect physical inadequacy, emotional inexpressiveness, subordination to women, intellectual inferiority, and failure in meeting masculine standards of work and sexual adequacy” (431). All in all, these are situations that threaten men’s feelings of manhood, that affect the attributes society has attached to men—their strength, lack of emotion, superiority to women and inferiority complex, their role as provider and sexual satisfier. Moreover, “deviating from what

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<sup>123</sup> This is examined in Newsom’s documentary (2015), in which some of the male participants discuss the importance paid to the fact that men do not cry—especially in the field of sports. Men who do cry are seen as feminine, which, as has been seen, is the main rejection of masculinity. See Chapter three for more on this.

society defines as a 'good' man or woman may result in a direct threat to one's self-concept" (431), which is precisely what happens to the protagonists of the novels analysed in the following chapters.

For women, on the other hand, stressors are also related to society's view of women, and how they are culturally expected to perform. They include "emotional detachment, [...] physical unattractiveness [...], victimization [...], unassertiveness [...], and failed nurturance" (Efthim *et al.* 431). This links with the fact that women are "more influenced by social context" (Martínez *et al.* 113), and so their stressors have to do with culture's influence.

Some of these characteristics are present in the protagonists of Boyne's and McNicholl's novels. As has been discussed above, the main characters of the three novels are all men, hence the focus on masculinities in my analysis. Nonetheless, I show how these protagonists differ from the traditional images of men, therefore they might not fit all the studies mentioned above. The rest of the male characters, however, might.

## CHAPTER SIX

### DAMIAN McNICHOLL'S *A SON CALLED GABRIEL*

Damian McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel* is similar to but also quite different from the novels by John Boyne that I analyse next. Here the protagonist is not an ageing male looking back on his life, but rather a child and, later, an adolescent finding his place in a conflictive world. McNicholl's is a coming-of-age novel in which its protagonist is struggling to find himself and to cope with an array of feelings he has always been taught to be abnormal. Gabriel's narrative allows him to find his own self and to understand, expose, and criticize some aspects of the changing society that surrounds him.

The analysis of *A Son Called Gabriel* begins a pattern that is followed in the next two analyses. I focus, first, on Gabriel as narrator and character, studying his narration in terms of its (un)reliability. In this case, the most characteristic feature of his narrative is that we encounter a child growing up, therefore we find some differences between the narration in the first part of the book (when Gabriel is a seven-year-old child) and that in the second part of the novel, when Gabriel swiftly turns into a teenager. Second, an analysis of identity and masculinity follows. The main theme of the novel is the protagonist's exploration of his homosexuality in a community that is not well disposed towards it, mainly due to religious oppression. And third, the affects of guilt and shame are to be explored. Gabriel yearns to find himself but is required to deal with his guilt in the meantime, which is pushed towards him by the Catholic community he belongs to. As has been discussed above, the novel also reflects on the Northern Irish society of the 1960s and 70s, and so its characters participate actively in the politics of the time.

## 6.1. “I didn’t want to catch this woman’s cancer”: narration

As is the case with novels with child narrators, in *A Son Called Gabriel* we find an omniscient narrator—unobtrusive, or covert (Chatman), in this case—who uses his younger self as focalizer. By doing this, McNicholl’s narrator presents an innocent perspective of the events which changes and evolves alongside the focalizer, as he himself grows up. For the most part of the novel, the focalizer presents a narrow scope of the world, insomuch as he is just a child who does not fully understand everything that is going on around him. This results in a homo- and autodiegetic narrator and a focalizer whose (un)reliability does not come from an intention to be unreliable—after all, he is not hiding any shocking secret nor is he deceiving the reader consciously for any other reason—but rather from an impossibility to be otherwise. Gabriel’s main obstacle in his reliability as a character and focalizer is his own innocence, and the narrative, as told by an adult but focused on a child, cannot be fully reliable or unreliable but something in between. The narrator, understood as an adult recounting the events of his childhood, is then narrating the story in the retrospect, therefore the knowledge he holds is not the same than the one he shares with its audience and main character. Before dwelling deeper on this issue, it is interesting to mention what critics have to say on the matter of child narrators.<sup>124</sup>

Even if there are significant studies dedicated to the analysis of the narrator in children’s literature (Wall, 1991; Goodenough *et al.*, 1994) or to the technique of the child narrator in terms of language (Bayrak Akyildiz, 2014, for instance), not many of them are devoted to studying the relationship between

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<sup>124</sup> *A Son Called Gabriel* is not told by a child narrator *per se*, in the sense that the narrator is Gabriel as an adult. However, by focusing on the experiencing self—Gabriel as a child—the narrative echoes those recounted by child narrators, which is why they are to be analysed next.

this type of narrator and the issue of unreliability.<sup>125</sup> Nonetheless, some of the scholars discussed in the above chapters do have dedicated some space to the unreliability a child's innocence may imply for their narrative. Thus, in this section such concepts as Olson's fallible narrator, Heyd's unintentional unreliability and Phelan's bonding unreliability will be applied to the analysis of the narrator in *A Son Called Gabriel*. All of these terms refer to figures that do not intend to be unreliable but eventually are because of their circumstances. Consequently, I show that the response they elicit in the reader is not the same as that caused by consciously unreliable narrators.

Before going on with the analysis, and for clarity's sake, it is necessary to make a distinction between character-Gabriel and narrator-Gabriel. Character-Gabriel is the experiencing self, the focalizer of the action. He is first a child and then an adolescent, and it is his point of view that reaches the reader. His perspective, therefore, will be biased by his innocence. Narrator-Gabriel, on the other hand, is supposedly an adult who understands a great deal more than character-Gabriel does but still does not correct the latter's misunderstandings. Unlike what may be the case in other novels featuring child narrators—such as the above-mentioned Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, where “the narrative often oscillates from a childlike perspective to an adult retrospective recollection or commentary” (Bindasová 8)—here narrator-Gabriel is utterly unobtrusive, as I explain later. We assume that narrator-Gabriel's is a retrospective account of the events of his childhood and teenage years from an adult position mainly because of the past tense and the mature language that are used in his narrative. Indeed, as is the case with Odran in *A History of Loneliness*, the narrator gives voice to the character—his young

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<sup>125</sup> There are some studies dedicated to the analysis of child narrators in adult's fiction, but they all focus on a specific work or group of works and they do not address the issue of (un)reliability as extensively as I do here. For more on this, see Steinmetz (2011), Seraphinoff (2007) or Viñas-Valle (2008). Kate Cantrell (2011), however, does deal with unreliability and child narrators, focusing primarily on Lauren Slater's memoir.

self—even if the narrator knows that he, as character, is mistaken regarding some knowledge he did not possess at the moment the events took place. In this sense, what we find in the novel is an *unreliable focalizer* rather than an unreliable narrator. It is character-Gabriel who is mistaken in his interpretation of the events, and not so much narrator-Gabriel, who simply chooses to present the story from character-Gabriel's point of view. The narrator, speaking from the present moment, has some knowledge the character does not have access to yet and, in his coyness, does not clarify much at the beginning. Narrator-Gabriel is just a witness of character-Gabriel's actions and thoughts.

Going back to Smith's six questions for the detection of unreliability,<sup>126</sup> Gabriel, as narrator, would be considered reliable: (1) he is not too self-interested, for his intention is not to deceive the reader for any ulterior motive; (2) he is experienced enough (again, considering the narrator is an adult); (3) he knows what he is talking about, that is, his own life; (4) he is moral enough, in the sense that is able to distinguish between right and wrong; (5) he is not too emotional and (6) his actions are not inconsistent with his words. As mentioned, his slight unreliability comes from his lack of explanation of the focalizer's mistakes, rather than unreliability on the part of the narrator himself.

In this sense, there are some foreshadowing moments in the novel where narrator-Gabriel ironically introduces winks for the second-time reader who, as the narrator, knows how the story will unfold but which may go unnoticed for the first-time reader. For instance, when Uncle John and Gabriel are having a conversation about the lamb Gabriel's grandmother always saves for him (even if it ends up in the market anyway), the chapter ends with Uncle John stating: "Stop this silly talk, Gabriel. That wee lamb doesn't know who its parents are" (28). This would seem a casual statement, unworthy of further analysis, were it not for what it means if read against the context of the whole

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<sup>126</sup> See 4.2.3. How to detect unreliability.

novel. It is significant that narrator-Gabriel ends the chapter thus, emphasizing its importance, and so the second-time reader sees the irony of the lamb not knowing who its parents are, just as the protagonist of the novel himself is not aware of the identity of his real parents. In other words, only a recurring reader would see that Gabriel and the poor wee lamb have more in common than character-Gabriel sees at that point.<sup>127</sup> The same happens when Gabriel meets Brendan and calls him “Uncle-Father Brendan” (76) apparently by mistake because he belongs to the clergy, not knowing at the moment that Brendan is indeed Gabriel’s father. All these clues show how McNicholl rewards the second-time reader at the expense of character-Gabriel. Besides, these ironic clues serve the first-time reader to start grasping the revelation that comes at the end of the novel.

Once this has been clarified, attention should be paid to Olson’s term ‘fallible narrator.’ Olson argues that this type of narrator does “not reliably report on narrative events because they are mistaken about their judgment or perceptions or are biased. Fallible narrators’ perception can be impaired because they are children with limited education or experience” (101). The case of Gabriel in McNicholl’s novel meets Olson’s criteria, although I would attach this type of unreliability to the focalizer instead. His perception of certain situations at the beginning of the novel is biased by his little knowledge of the world, due to the education he has received, his young age and hence innocence. He misinterprets actions and events and reports them as he sees and understands them as a boy, but the reader should know better and read between the lines to fully grasp all the content character-Gabriel himself is not able to perceive. In this case, however, I would argue that fallible unreliability

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<sup>127</sup> In light of the importance of religion in the novel, it is worth highlighting here the meaning of the ‘lamb’ in Christian terms. Indeed, any other animal would have worked the same, but the lamb carries connotations of innocence and purity—being therefore linked to Gabriel in yet another sense.

should be allocated to the focalizer instead of the narrator, as has been shown above.

Using Phelan and Martin's terminology, character-Gabriel is unreliable in the axis of ethics/interpretation, rather than in that of facts/events. He is not misreporting the events, for he recounts them faithfully, but he is misinterpreting them instead, since his is a problem of lack of comprehension.<sup>128</sup> Once again, Phelan and Martin's terminology of this kind of unreliable narrator would suit better the unreliable focalizer in this novel, since it is character-Gabriel the one misinterpreting the events he witnesses.

As discussed above, Heyd is another critic whose classification of unreliable narration is relevant to analyse Gabriel's narrative. Her term 'unintentional unreliability' applies to narrators who "do not engage more or less consciously with the moral entanglements of CP violation" (231).<sup>129</sup> Innocence, like Gabriel's, or mental illness like the one the narrator in Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* has (the example Heyd gives to illustrate the term) are in these cases the most frequent causes of the narrator's unintentional unreliability. Their narratives do not meet the criteria established by Grice, but this is not a conscious or evitable result. In other words, what we find in narrators like Gabriel is "a speaker who produces his or her utterance with the best of intentions, and whose violations are due to cognitive, intellectual, or other deficiencies" (Olson 232). Regarding Gabriel, his violation of the Cooperation Principle comes from his poor knowledge of the world, or at least of some of its aspects, because he is a child. Along these lines, Phelan also mentions this type of unreliability but uses the term 'naïve defamiliarization'

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<sup>128</sup> It should be pointed out here that I am assuming that the desired audience of McNicholl's is an adult one, a reader who would understand what Gabriel does not. Even if its protagonist is a young man, *A Son Called Gabriel* is not a novel for children, and so any reader should understand significantly more than Gabriel himself. The author does not provide any clue for the reader to fully understand what is really going on because this should not be necessary for an adult audience.

<sup>129</sup> For more information on Grice's Cooperation Principle, see chapter 4.2. The unreliable narrator.



(“Estranging Unreliability” 229), making reference to the lack of knowledge about the world that the narrator—or focalizer—presents.

Indeed, Gabriel’s innocence is crystal clear from the beginning of the novel, for instance when he believes he has killed his classmate Henry because he has prayed for him to have a mortal accident (105) or when he believes he could catch a woman’s cancer by standing next to her (84). Moreover, he does not seem to understand how birth works, since he claims: “We’d been told she was delivering our new baby, though I didn’t think it could be in Nurse’s case; it looked far too small” (29). This example is significant in the sense that it shows Gabriel’s ignorance of anything related to sexuality. Gabriel has been brought up in a Catholic context in which, as has been mentioned in previous chapters, sexuality was a taboo subject and so it was not discussed at home. This has some serious consequences in the case of our protagonist, given that this ignorance makes the rest of characters around him try to take advantage of him—and indeed some of them succeed. Thus, in a misunderstanding typical of child narrators—like Briony’s mistake in McEwan’s *Atonement*—Gabriel also misinterprets the scene he witnesses between his uncle and aunt having sex in his bedroom: “My bed’s springs were squeaking louder than James and I could make them squeak. [...] Uncle Tommy was on top of Auntie Bernie, who had her legs wrapped tightly around his very white backside. He was pumping her like a bull I’d once seen pumping a cow in a field” (30). As he has not been confronted with this type of scene before, he does not understand what is taking place in his bedroom, unlike the reader who is able to grasp the full meaning of the scene. What is even worse is that his mother, driven by her need to shut out sex from their children’s lives, does not explain properly what it is he has witnessed and so he still does not understand later on when he faces a similar situation.

Likewise, character-Gabriel is not able to understand his own homosexuality either. Narrator-Gabriel focuses on his experiences at the

beach appreciating the body of a young man, but the character does not comprehend the response of his own body: “I couldn’t understand what was happening” (59). However, character-Gabriel’s biggest misinterpreting comes from the games he plays with Noel. Noel, a bit older than Gabriel, is a much more experienced child than Gabriel himself. Noel introduces him to the world of pornographic magazines and masturbation and, even if Gabriel is clearly not completely comfortable with their explorations, they soon start playing doctors and nurses: “You take off your clothes and I’ll be the doctor and examine you and then you do the same to me. Loads of boys play that game” (99). Gabriel claims: “After Noel did the other kind of examination on me, I found I liked it a lot. We played doctors and nurses every time he asked” (100). Gabriel, in his naiveté, does not comprehend what Noel and he are doing, but the reader sees through character-Gabriel’s misinterpretations and places himself alongside narrator-Gabriel and the explanation he is withholding. Language is significant in this regard, because narrator-Gabriel gives voice to character-Gabriel when describing the “lovely pains” he feels when playing with Noel (100): “They came after Noel had been playing with my thing for a bit. [...] All I knew was I enjoyed them, but I couldn’t understand why I was having them—or why they changed quickly into bad feelings that made me need to leave until the next time” (100). The narrator clearly takes character-Gabriel’s point of view here, as seen in childish terms like ‘my thing’ or the ‘bad feelings’ he does not understand.

Another term that is useful to analyse Gabriel’s narration is Phelan’s ‘restricted narration.’ He places this type of narration as “fundamentally reliable, yet its effects point to its affinities with both unreliable narration and other subtypes of reliable narration” (“Reliable, Unreliable” 96). Indeed, this term would be placed between unreliable and reliable narration, since the intention of the narrator is to be reliable but fails to be so for different circumstances. He continues thus: “In restricted narration, the implied author

limits the character narrator's function to reliable reporting and uses both the reliability and the restriction to convey interpretation or evaluations that the character narrator remains unaware of" ("Reliable, Unreliable" 96). In *A Son Called Gabriel* the narrator is quite unobtrusive, in the sense that it gives voice mainly to the character's perspective. In other words, the narrator limits himself to a reporting of the events, whereas he leaves their interpretation to his protagonist, his younger self. Hence, it could be argued that what we encounter in narratives like Gabriel's is reliable reporting but unreliable interpreting. This enhances the idea that Gabriel is an unreliable focalizer rather than an unreliable narrator, because it is the narrator who reports (reliably) but the character/focalizer who interprets (unreliably).

As has been already mentioned, the role played by the reader in this type of narratives is essential. In this sense, Phelan distinguishes between estranging and bonding unreliability (2007).<sup>130</sup> Phelan uses the latter to explain naïve narrators like children, whose misunderstandings and discrepancies make the reader bond more with the narrator, rather than part away from him. In his own words, "although the authorial audience recognizes the narrator's unreliability, that unreliability includes some communication that the implied author—and thus the authorial audience—endorses" ("Reliable, Unreliable" 225). Paradoxically, there is something in the unreliability of this type of narrators (or focalizers, as in this case) that the reader recognizes and accepts, instead of condemning the narrator as we would in other narratives where it is being consciously deceitful, as in Flynn's *Gone Girl* or the everlasting case of Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Olson argues something similar regarding the relationship between reader and narrator in this kind of narratives:

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<sup>130</sup> For further explanation, see chapter 4.2. The unreliable narrator.

I believe that readers regard the mistakes of fallible narrators as being *situationally motivated*. That is, external circumstances appear to cause the narrator's misperceptions rather than inherent characteristics. Readers may justify the failings of fallible narrators [...] on the basis of circumstances that impede them rather than on their intellectual or ethical deficiencies. (102, emphasis in the original)

Precisely, readers of *A Son Called Gabriel* would justify Gabriel's faults in his misunderstandings, for the reader understands their cause to be his childish innocence. Besides, Gabriel's mistakes are understandable and legitimate, and they do not impede the comprehension of the narrative, in the sense that they are not particularly relevant to the development of the story—although they are to characterization and irony, since it helps the reader see Gabriel's naiveté and McNicholl's criticism.

Another problem may arise when dealing with further discoveries the character makes, namely the shaming secret regarding Brendan that his family seems to have been keeping. The distinction between character-Gabriel and narrator-Gabriel is again meaningful here, as the former is in the dark at the moment of the action whilst the latter is recounting the events from a position of higher knowledge. Character-Gabriel, our unreliable focalizer, is unaware of Brendan's real identity, and so he underregards (following Phelan and Martin's terminology) some statements such as: "I overheard Mammy say to Daddy that Brendan was a priest, should know what was proper, and wasn't he the right bad article?" (McNicholl 15), or "[s]he'd scream that Granda Harkin had never liked her, even when he'd come to her, cap in hand, to ask for the big favour and she agreed to help the Harkins out" (18). This is no longer a matter of innocence but of ignorance, since character-Gabriel cannot know at this point—and neither can the first-time reader—what these statements mean. However, it is narrator-Gabriel who is underreporting, since he does know

about the real meaning of those conversations but still leaves the reader in the dark as to what they mean in favour of the revealing ending. It is in a second reading that the reader can fill in the gaps and fully comprehend what narrator-Gabriel is leaving behind in his narrative for the said reasons. In sum, continuing with Phelan and Martin's terminology, the focalizer is mistaken in the axis of ethics/values, whereas the narrator is focusing on events/facts.

Phelan argues that the debate is whether this type of narrator ("a naïve narrator's accurate but uncomprehending reports") is unreliable or not ("Estranging Unreliability" 224-5). As I have argued, the core of the question resides here in the distinction between narrator and focalizer. To my mind, Gabriel is mainly a reliable narrator because he is being accurate, despite some delay in the revelation of events—however, it is the focalizer that uncomprehends those reports. It can be affirmed then that in *A Son Called Gabriel* we find reliable reporting but unreliable interpreting, that is, mainly reliable narration and unreliable focalization.

## 6.2. "Why have You made me *different* from the other boys?": identity and masculinity

*A Son Called Gabriel* is mainly a story of development, of the construction of the self and the finding of one's true identity. When the novel begins, Gabriel<sup>131</sup> is a six-year-old child who does not really know who he is or what he wants, whereas at the ending of the novel he is going to university in London and has found his real self and his place in life. The novel, therefore, is very much concerned with identity—mainly sexual, national and religious.

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<sup>131</sup> Unless said otherwise, throughout this section the protagonist's name is used to refer to character-Gabriel, following the distinction made above.

Adolescence is a time of change, both in physical and psychological terms. It is when individuals define themselves and find their way within the society they live in, adopting a specific religious or political stance. Adolescents are extremely vulnerable to the opinion of others, and so they seek the approval of those around them, namely their family and friends. This is also a period of confusion both physically and psychologically, since the body is undergoing significant changes that the adolescent may not understand at first, and which define who and what they are going to become in life.

As suggested above, *A Son Called Gabriel* can be considered a *Bildungsroman*, or a coming-of-age novel, since it covers Gabriel's path from innocence to maturity, from childhood to adulthood. As argued by Barbara Bindasová, “a Bildungsroman novel will be concerned with the shaping of oneself in relation to the surrounding environment and society” (9), and indeed this is very much the case of Gabriel. He grows up as a member of the Irish Catholic community and is taught from the beginning to despise the enemy, British Protestants. Besides, he also ends up belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, even if it takes him almost the whole novel to accept this, partly because being gay strongly opposes the teachings of his Catholic community. His growth, therefore, needs to happen against the background of his family, first, and of his community (religious and national), then. A *Bildungsroman* novel like *A Son Called Gabriel* “covers the liminal spaces of one's life, i.e. the end of childhood and beginning of maturity. The meaning is encoded in the hero's struggle to establish himself, first as an individual being and second, as a member of society” (Bindasová 12).

Being aged six at the beginning of the novel, he is a child starting to question his identity and his role in life. Erikson argues that, in childhood, “[b]eing firmly convinced that he is a person on his own, the child must now find out what kind of a person he may become” (115). In the case of Gabriel, he is picked at at school, called names—“fucking sissy boy” (McNicholl 9)—

and bullied throughout his school years because he plays with girls and does not like football (4). This introduces the idea of his being different from most boys, and statements like “I’d picked Chelsea because I like the photographs of the players in their blue shorts” (10) point to his latent homosexuality. Gabriel is unaware of this, but the reader is able to anticipate that the protagonist is beginning to be sexually attracted to men rather than women. Indeed, there are several examples of this throughout the novel, especially at its start, such as: “I wanted to fall asleep remembering the beautiful man’s face. I wanted to relive the water droplets glittering like diamonds on his brown back and legs” (60).<sup>132</sup> His idea of masculinity is also clear from the beginning, since he admires certain features in his Uncle Tommy which are relevant for the later development of his sexuality: “I liked [Uncle Tommy’s] sideburns, and also liked feeling the hard bump when he bent his arm and told me to feel his muscles. His lower arms had reddish hairs just like the Chelsea players” (17). As seen in chapter three, the idea of masculinity presented here—at least to Gabriel’s mind—is stereotypically that of a strong man, with a muscular body and hairy face and arms. He also identifies it with football players, whom he had chosen for their pose in shorts (10). Will Fellows’s *Farm boys: Lives of gay men from the rural Midwest* (1996) is quite telling in this regard, since it depicts stories of young boys being impressed by male bodies at the beach, engaging in sexual play with their brothers at night and asking for the attention of their fathers, who did not consider them macho enough (in Hammack and Cohler 285). The story of Gabriel, set in rural Northern Ireland, resembles those stories of the rural Midwest in the United States in the isolation and the possibility to resort to familiar figures for their longed desire, brothers, or cousins as in the case of Gabriel.

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<sup>132</sup> The image that we have stereotypically received in film and TV of a boy fantasizing with a woman’s body (Laura Mulvey’s ‘the male gaze’ comes to mind) is here reversed in Gabriel’s daydreaming with a male body. The same is present in Pedro Almodóvar’s *Dolor y Gloria* (2019), in which the protagonist is also moved by a man washing his nude body with a sponge.

Besides, not only is the reader able to foresee Gabriel's homosexuality, but so are his classmates. Apart from calling him names, at school they laugh at Gabriel because he wants to become a priest, and tease him arguing that "[y]ou'll not be able to put your hand up Thunderthighs's skirt and cop a good feel if you become clergy.' [...] 'Gabriel would rather put his hand up Father Cornelius's soutane'" (160).<sup>133</sup> This quotation also shows Gabriel's classmates' linkage of being a priest and a homosexual, as if the two came stereotypically together, in a clear criticism of the priesthood: "Mickey thinks you want to be a priest to hide the fact that you're a poof" (162). Clearly, his mates seem to know more about him than he himself does.

Similarly, Bernard Zuger (1980) introduces some similarities between a series of boys and their relationships with their parents, which are also applicable to Gabriel in McNicholl's novel. He argues that, during childhood, homosexuals tended to have a better relationship with their mother than with their father, they felt "different from other boys and from their male siblings," they were not interested in sports but rather preferred to play with girls, and they would often play games that implied wearing women's clothing (55). Indeed, this is very similar to *A Son Called Gabriel*, whose protagonist feels closer to his mother than to his father, who seems to prefer his brother James—"You don't get it, Daddy. You don't understand me" (McNicholl 113)<sup>134</sup>—and rejects playing football but prefers playing with his girlfriends. He also enjoys wearing women's clothing when he is with his cousins.

This period of mere observance prepares the way for a period of experimentation. Erikson argues that, in childhood, there is a "phallic stage in the theory of infantile sexuality. It is the stage of infantile curiosity, of genital

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<sup>133</sup> This quotation also presents a revealing idea by juxtaposing Thunderthighs's *skirt* and Father Cornelius's *soutane*. These two elements introduce something that is mentioned again in chapter seven—the feminine aspect of priests due to their long clothing, resembling a woman's dress.

<sup>134</sup> Fatherhood in *A Son Called Gabriel* is discussed later on in this same chapter.



excitability, and of a varying preoccupation and overconcern with sexual matters" (116). As has been discussed above regarding Gabriel's innocence, his first sexual experience comes from Noel, an older and more experienced neighbour who challenges Gabriel to touch "his thing" to see what happens (98).<sup>135</sup> From then on, the two boys engage in a relationship based on mutual masturbation, after which Gabriel always experiences "bad feelings that made [him] have to leave until the next time" (100). He, once again driven by his innocence, is not completely sure of the legitimacy of their game but, when reassured by Noel, he claims thus:

I felt so happy about this that I forced myself to stay after the lovely pains passed and the other feelings, the ones that always made me jump up and leave, came over me. I ignored them and forced myself to stay, because I wanted to continue pleasing Noel. (140)

As mentioned above, the fact that Gabriel comes from a deeply Catholic background leaves him completely in the dark as to anything related to sexuality. He starts to perceive the wrongness (for Catholic standards) of his encounters with Noel when he has a conversation about sex with his mother. When, driven by Noel's words and his own naiveté, he asks his mother whether it would be his father the one explaining "the other part," namely the sexual relationships of men with men, his mother replies thus: "Men don't do the sacred act with other men. That's unnatural. [...] It's only the women that have eggs... forbidden... abomination... eyes of the Church... [...] Unnatural... mortal, mortal sin... abomination... hear such a thing?" (143).<sup>136</sup> Gabriel starts

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<sup>135</sup> This scene inevitably reminds us of Cyril's own first encounter with Julian in *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, where they also exchange views of 'their things.'

<sup>136</sup> This quotation is also of interest to analyse Mrs Harkin's narration linked to her Catholic morals and ideals. When asked about homosexuality, she seems nervous and lost for words, incapable of comprehending why she is being asked something of that kind. She cannot form complete sentences and ends up asking where Gabriel has heard 'such a thing', surely to take

to see here that Noel had not been truthful to him and shame and guilt start to kick in: "I couldn't say I heard boys talking about it at school, because it was unnatural. I realized then that no boy did talk about this at school. How could I have been so stupid?" (143).<sup>137</sup>

Despite this realization and his abandoning his encounters with Noel, Gabriel then starts a sexual game with his cousin Connor. However, for Gabriel and Connor, despite being cousins, these encounters are not as wrong as those the former had with Noel: "*I told myself* this wasn't the same thing Noel and I had done, because Connor and I were thinking of girls as we touched each other" (204, emphasis added). In a way, both Gabriel and Connor are in denial of their true identity, as seen in the emphasised 'I told myself.' Gabriel knows the truth but is not able to admit it to himself, which points towards the conclusion that he is no longer being unreliable unconsciously but consciously—in terms of his ignorance of his sexuality. Gabriel is not able to admit to himself what he already knows. In this case, Gabriel and Connor reject their homosexuality with the idea that "[s]o long as [Connor] talked about [Rosellen], everything was fine. We couldn't possibly be poofs" (206).<sup>138</sup> The problem, however, comes when Gabriel cannot be sexually aroused by a girl and feels "utterly bewildered" (223):

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appropriate measures. Besides, it is significant that she constantly uses the word 'abomination' to describe homosexual intercourse, the same description the Bible offers: "If a man also lie with a man kind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they surely shall be put to death, their blood is upon them" (Leviticus 20:13; qtd. in Garfinkel 120-1).

<sup>137</sup> I discuss guilt and shame in more depth in the next section.

<sup>138</sup> Pedro Almodóvar's *La Mala Educación* (2004) is also relevant here. In the film, two boys from a Catholic school also experiment sexually with each other, masturbating each other while watching Sara Montiel's films, and then regret what they have done. Both in this film and in Gabriel's narrative, the boys justify their actions arguing that they are thinking about girls while doing it (in *La Mala Educación*, the boys start masturbating each other after they claim how beautiful Sara Montiel is). As a matter of fact, this film would be extremely interesting to analyse in terms of unreliability and metafiction, having multiple stories, narrators, and perspectives.

It was nerve-wracking being with [Lizzie]. I felt nothing. My thing never stirred [...]. It remained relentlessly shrivelled in her presence. Yet it turned hard as oak whenever Connor touched me. *That* preyed on my mind. I could fool myself that I was thinking about girls when Connor and I were doing things, but my flaccidness when I was alone with Lizzie let me know exactly how things stood. (231, emphasis in the original)

Being unable of sexually performing with girls is also a threat to Gabriel's masculinity, for he is only aroused by men. It takes him years, then, to accept that he is indeed a homosexual and will have to deal with it in a hypocritical society that does not accept people like him.

Hitherto it has been shown how Gabriel struggles to find and accept his true self. Gabriel states that “[t]here were two of me: good Catholic Gabriel, who wanted to be normal and lead an exemplary life, and dark, degenerate Gabriel, who lived only to lust” (McNicholl 320). Indeed, the image of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde is repeated here in Gabriel's two faces, and they only merge when Richie comes in the picture.<sup>139</sup> As has been discussed above, the union of the two Gabriels does not take place in the original version of the novel, since Richie does not exist there. Gabriel is, at the end of that version, still split by his two selves, for he has found no solace that would allow him to merge.

Taking everything into account, it could be argued that what can be found in the novel in terms of sexual identity are three degrees of acceptance, identified with three different characters and their different portrayals of masculinity. We could talk about the self-acceptance of Richie, Gabriel, and Connor regarding their coming to terms with their sexual identities. First, Richie is the most honest one, the most self-confident, and true to himself. He does

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<sup>139</sup> The metaphor of Stevenson's characters, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, has been attributed to homosexual people before (some even point to “homosexual undertones” in the story (Fielding, 2017; McIntyre, 2020)). Richard Dyer notes that British newspapers already used this image when discussing Rock Hudson's coming out: “Rock Hudson's Jekyll and Hyde Existence” (27). This duality is also repeated in *The Heart's Invisible Furies*.

not hide who he is, and is essential in people like Gabriel's lives to open their eyes to the evident. He seems to have already gone through everything Gabriel is experiencing when they meet, and he teaches Gabriel, for instance, that "it's nicer to say 'gay'," for "homosexual is harsh [and] clinical" (341). Naturally, it should be mentioned that Richie is a grown man when we meet him, therefore he might have gone through Gabriel's learning process as well, but we have not witnessed it—the only clue we have is that he was also rejected by his father and thrown out on the street (352).

Then we have Gabriel, who, as has been discussed above, needs a full journey from childhood to adolescence to understand and come to terms with his identity. The difference between Gabriel and Connor, then, is that both of them reject their homosexuality at first, but only Gabriel is prepared to accept it at the end. Connor, driven by his strong sense of Irishness, cannot accept his sexual identity, to the extent that he even points a gun at Gabriel when he suggests Connor might be gay as well (379). The form of masculinity he exemplifies is of weakness and self-consciousness, representing men's abovementioned fear of other men, afraid of their unmasking as not proper men themselves. Connor, in this sense, is afraid of what Gabriel may say, since he can accuse Connor of having engaged in sexual practices with him, hurting his sense of manhood. In order to hide his weak masculinity, Connor chooses to appear strong and violent, at school first, by smoking "the way the so-called 'hard men' smoked" (378), and later by joining the IRA.

The character of Martin should also be discussed in this regard, for it could be argued that he is somewhere in between Richie and Gabriel. Martin does not hide his apparent lack of masculinity as suggested by the way he dresses or by the fact that he enjoys wearing women's clothing as a game: "Martin was just like me: the town boys hated him as Henry hated me. They called him a pansy because he was forever readjusting his heavy bangs. The difference between us was Martin didn't care what the boys called him" (62).

He parades around school like he was part of a fashion show (147), but no one messes with him because he does not acknowledge the mockery from the rest of students: “It’s what you believe about yourself that matters. You mustn’t allow these people to control your life” (148). Nevertheless, he also flirts with women and tries to engage in sexual intercourse with them—or pretends to do so (309-310)—and ends up studying fashion in London (362). Even if the novel does not clarify Martin’s sexuality, it is clear that he does not follow features commonly attributed to heterosexual masculinity and is more comfortable displaying feminine traits instead. Perhaps McNicholl is trying to fight stereotyping by portraying Martin as effeminate (and he gives several examples of this throughout) but heterosexual anyway. When Gabriel comes out to his family, Martin supports him by claiming that he has gay friends in London, but this does not suggest he might also be homosexual himself.

Gabriel’s identity is worth exploring not only in terms of his sexual identity, but also related to the identity of his real parents and his religious and national identities. First, there is a constant feeling in the novel that points towards the fact that Gabriel does not fit properly in his family. The dark secret underlying the family seems to involve Brendan, but also Gabriel somehow. As I have discussed when dealing with narration, character-Gabriel is unaware of the real identity of his parents but knows that there is something that his family does not want him and others to discover. When he finally seems to have come to terms with his sexual identity, he overhears his mother tell his father: “I didn’t take that fella under my roof only to find out I’ve raised a queer” (349).<sup>140</sup> Gabriel seems perplexed because this new information requires re-evaluating his whole life: “I felt hopeless, adrift. My past was a lie” (356). Needless to say,

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<sup>140</sup> With this quotation, Mr Harkin’s sense of failure is clear. He feels he has failed as a father because he has not raised ‘a proper man’. Perry Garfinkel argues in this regard that “If a father sees his son as a reflection of himself, having a homosexual son reflects rather poorly on a man invested with the belief in the rightness of heterosexuality” (123).

this is a revealing moment for Gabriel, who has to reconsider his whole past in this new light: “It was as if I was compelled to scrutinize and revalidate each memory in light of this new knowledge” (358). Erikson discusses in this regard that, when almost reaching adulthood, the adolescent questions his past and the possible unreliability of their childhood:

Self-consciousness is a new edition of that original doubt which concerned the trustworthiness of the parents and of the child himself—only in adolescence, such self-conscious doubt concerns the reliability of the whole span of childhood which is now to be left behind and the trustworthiness of the whole social universe now envisaged. (183)

Indeed, Gabriel’s need to re-evaluate his past is also a universal need, and his future life in London is seen now in a different light, since he has taken the blinds out of his eyes and is able to see clearly. Besides, not only should Gabriel re-evaluate his past as a lie in terms of his family, but also regarding his Catholic upbringing. He has also learnt at this stage that everything he was taught (the Catholic doctrine) could also be considered a lie—first and foremost the claim that being a homosexual is an abomination. In the end, Brendan teaches him that “[r]egardless of how we are, we’re all God’s children and He loves us” (285).<sup>141</sup>

Therefore, throughout the whole novel, Gabriel has a feeling of not really fitting in, not only in his community but also in his family. It did not help that his father seemed to prefer Gabriel’s little brother James over his eldest son.

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<sup>141</sup> The Church’s position towards homosexuality has changed throughout the decades. As stated in chapter two, the Catholic Church has traditionally rejected homosexuality, but in recent times Pope Francis has approved of same-sex civil unions (whilst rejecting homosexuality within the clergy) (Prange, 2020). He is also claimed to have said to a gay victim of sexual abuse: “God made you this way and he loves you” (*BBC News*, 2018), which bears a striking resemblance to Brendan’s comforting Gabriel. However, Pope Francis’ statements about the LGBT+ rights are quite contradictory. For more of his quotations on this, see Prange (2020) or “Seven Quotes” (*Human Rights Campaign*).

Gabriel feels left out and misunderstood, and he knows he is not as similar to his father as James is:

'You're a brave man, aren't you, James? Brave like your daddy.'

My father liked to compare James and me, and say my brother was just like him. He said that because my brother loved football and played with toy lorries. [...] James always wanted Santa to bring him lorries, while I wanted pencil cases or cows and horses for my farmyard set. (47)

This quotation also shows the existing stereotypes in boys, and how 'masculine boys' play with lorries and 'less-masculine boys' play with farm sets. Mr Harkin is concerned about this, urging Gabriel to play Gaelic football "instead of doing hair" (70). Gabriel only builds an interest in sports when he stops his games with Noel, after seeing his masculinity affected:

It was wonderful to be decent at sport. I spent part of Saturdays practicing at home with James as my competition. Even my father seemed pleased I was good at one sport, though he also admitted to knowing next to nothing about sprinting.

I began winning races at inter-school athletics meets and brought back glittering medals. For the first time in my life, I had boys slapping me on the back. (156-7)

It seems as if Gabriel needed to overcompensate for engaging in sexual practices with another boy, adopting traits typically attributed to masculinity, like sports can be.<sup>142</sup> There are other moments in the novel where Gabriel

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<sup>142</sup> In this regard, in *The Mask You Live In*, it is argued that "[t]he first lie every boy learns in America is we associate masculinity with athletic ability" (Newsom 2015). Similarly, in his book *Sport and Film* (2013), Seán Crosson discusses some films that reaffirm "the importance of sport as a crucial means of encouraging robust masculinity by means of individual achievement," such as *The Pinch Hitter*, *Brown of Harvard* or *The Drop Kick* (42). See this volume for an enlightening analysis of masculinity and the sports film.

needs to make his masculinity clear, such as when he does not decline a cigarette (even if he had never smoked) because it “didn’t seem manly” (217).

James, on the other hand, is more similar to his father, closer to his idea of masculinity:

James adored Daddy and was very interested in the truck. He asked questions ‘til I wanted to scream at him to stop. His contentment widened the distance between my father and me. With James, he talked and laughed in an adult way about diggers and English and Irish football teams. My father never asked about my schoolwork or the books I read. He never approached when I played with my farm set. He never straightened my tie when I dressed for church. [...] I felt sad I couldn’t be more like my brother.” (115)

Mr Harkin and James present similar ideas of masculinity, which imply boys discussing football and playing with trucks. Mr Harkin is clearly shaped by the masculinity he has been taught of strong men fighting for their country, avoiding characteristics attributed to women such as showing one’s feelings: “the two brothers [Harry and Brendan] had a great deal of love for one another, although Father’s was disguised by machismo” (275). Mr Harkin also argues: “Maybe I should have given all of you more attention, but it wasn’t in my nature. I was never one to hug or say nice things. I was reared that it was womanly, that men don’t go in for that” (361). In his mind, men work hard to provide for their family, and they also beat their sons (113).<sup>143</sup>

Hence, the narrator is constantly alluding to Mr Harkin’s disregard for Gabriel: “My father just didn’t know or understand me” (111). Instances like these seem to suggest what the reader may have already guessed, namely that Mr Harkin is not Gabriel’s real father, but only his uncle. It is significant, however, that he does not eventually reject Gabriel when he learns about his

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<sup>143</sup> For an analysis on fatherhood, emotions, and love, see Macht (2020).



homosexuality but claims to accept it: “Your mother says you’re made that way and you can’t change it. I’ve thought about it tonight and I can accept it. I won’t lie and say I understand it. But there are lots of things I don’t understand in the world” (361).<sup>144</sup> As has been discussed above, the trouble comes when he learns that Gabriel is in a relationship with ‘the enemy,’ a British soldier. Gabriel is therefore not rejected by his father because he is homosexual, but rather because he is in love with a British soldier. This is something that Mr Harkin cannot overcome, and so a reconciliation between father and son is unthinkable as long as Gabriel is with Richie.

As has also been mentioned, Mr Harkin is not Gabriel’s real father, Brendan is. Brendan is a priest when he fathers Gabriel as a result of his relationship with a woman. Given his holy orders, he cannot act as a father—not only is he a priest, but Gabriel is conceived out of wedlock. Gabriel, then, is rejected by both his biological father—who is unable to perform as such—and Mr Harkin, who seems to prefer James before him, as has been shown above. By the end of the novel, however, Brendan has left the priesthood and starts behaving more as Gabriel’s father by being there for him when he needs help (284) or advice (335).

The novel presents a Catholic family from Knockburn, a fictional Catholic town, where the members of the family are highly identified as Irish rather than British. This is especially so in the case of Gabriel’s brother James, their father, and their cousin Connor. Even if James is too young to get involved in politics, he shows he shares his father’s political views. Gabriel’s father and cousin will eventually get involved in the IRA, whether by belonging to it as in the case of Connor or by sheltering a member of the IRA in their own house, as Gabriel’s

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<sup>144</sup> Interestingly enough, in the original version of the novel in 2004 the reaction of Gabriel’s parents is totally different to the one found here. As has been mentioned above, Gabriel is sent to the doctor claiming that his homosexuality is just a phase, and he does not find the acceptance he so much needs.

father does. Gabriel, on the other hand, is not too keen on Northern Irish politics and does not understand the fight between Catholics and Protestants. He daydreams at one point: “I imagined us talking about the real differences between Catholics and Protestants. Not obvious stuff like religion, but rather about what made us dislike one another and what could be done to improve relations” (192).<sup>145</sup>

In another example of Gabriel’s lack of agreement with his father, Mr Harkin knows that Gabriel is not as interested in politics as James is, and condemns him for not being Irish enough: “You’re no Irishman. You’d rather have English rule than a free Ireland. [...] You don’t want a united Ireland, [...]. You’re the enemy every bit as much as them” (228). Quite to the contrary, Mr Harkin thinks that, instead, James is “the sort of Irishman this country needs” (229).

It is significant that the above-mentioned encounter takes place before Gabriel’s involvement with Richie, a British soldier. It is the fact of him being the enemy rather than being a man that Gabriel’s family have more difficulty with: “His being homosexual is one thing. [...] I could live with that. But sharing a bed with the fucking British enemy...!” (381). For Gabriel’s father, he has become a traitor not of his religion but of his country. As Gabriel argues: “Richie was Father’s and my brother’s enemy. They despised him more than they despised my homosexuality” (382).

As commented on above, Irishness implied, in most cases, Catholic identities as well. Thus, a part (or all) of Gabriel’s self is his belonging to the

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<sup>145</sup> Channel 4’s *Derry Girls* (2018-) is a hilarious and heartwarming TV show depicting a group of friends attending Catholic school in Derry in the 1990s. In the episode “Across the barricade,” the group takes part in an integration weekend with a Protestant school, and they are asked to write on a blackboard the things that make Catholics and Protestants different or alike. The blackboard is filled with stereotypes, the first one being that “Protestants are British and Catholics are Irish”, and then moving on to the music taste of each group (“Protestants hate ABBA”), their height and wealth, or their holiday destinations. The episode has become a television classic and the blackboard is now on display at the Ulster Museum in Belfast. For more on this, see McGreevy (2020) and Clarke (2019). The full scene is available online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4O-nOI-6Qg>> (Accessed 5 Sept 2021)

Catholic Church, following his family and community—so much so that he even considers becoming a priest when he grows up.<sup>146</sup> This idea, however, may be seen as a desire to please his mother, who wishes for Gabriel to be *the* priest in the family (143, emphasis added), indicating that every family should have at least one, and to resemble his Uncle Brendan. Erikson argues in this regard that “[c]hildren now also attach themselves to teachers and the parents of other children, and they want to watch and imitate people representing occupations which they can grasp” (122). Gabriel, then, wants to become a priest and a hairdresser.<sup>147</sup> Brendan tries to make him understand the loneliness of the priesthood, echoing Boyne’s *A History of Loneliness*: “Take time to choose what you want to do, Gabriel. [...] Remember, only you must decide this. Being a priest is a lonely life, though it’s full of people” (86). In instances like this one, Brendan seems to suggest that he regrets having chosen the priesthood, as he himself was also pushed into it by his family: “When I took Holy Orders, I thought I had a vocation, but I was fooling myself. I was trying to please someone else” (270).<sup>148</sup>

Gabriel, then, attends a Catholic school, has Catholic friends and is taught not to sympathise with Protestants from an early age: “It’s the Salvation Army. [...] They’re the *other* sort. [...] The nerve, coming to try and convert us on the beach” (48, emphasis in the original). Since the novel is set against the background of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, politics has a strong relevance in Gabriel’s life: “Politics was big in our house at that time. The Catholics were

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<sup>146</sup> Gabriel’s identity is also present in his very name, since his being named after the Archangel Gabriel is not random and brings with it ideas of Christianity and purity. The title of the novel also implies the importance of Gabriel’s name.

<sup>147</sup> Gabriel’s family also rejects his idea of becoming a hairdresser because he is a man and that is not a job for a man: “Those aren’t men [...] Those people are effeminate. [...] I’ll wager *those* people played with dolls when they were young.’ [...] I didn’t understand the word ‘effeminate’, but it was clearly something terrible” (70, emphasis in the original). This quotation also shows the image of masculinity of the society at the time—real men do not play with dolls and do not earn money cutting people’s hair.

<sup>148</sup> This echoes Odran in Boyne’s *A History of Loneliness*, as explained in the following chapter.

marching in the streets to complain that Protestants were discriminating against us in housing and government jobs. We were also demanding the right to vote. Daddy liked only a few Protestants” (118, emphasis added). Clearly, Gabriel identifies himself with Catholics, but he is not as extreme as his family is against Protestants and ends up befriending Pearse, a Protestant he met on the bus to school, and dating Fiona, also a Protestant. As discussed later, despite the fact that Fiona’s family is quite wealthy and she attends an exclusive school, what really matters to Gabriel’s mother is her being a Protestant (328).

In this regard, the novel also illustrates the above-mentioned identification of Protestants or Catholics depending on their physical traits or their names: “‘Hello there, Mrs. *Harkin*,’ the clerk said. She’d emphasized the surname so the other customer [...] would know at once we were Catholics.” (179, emphasis in the original). Moreover, schools are also a sign of segregation, seen for instance in Gabriel being a St Malachy’s boy and Fiona attending a highly valued Protestant school. The headmaster of Gabriel’s school was pleased when “Saint Malachy’s boys [are] invited to a Protestant social. Schools of different denominations rarely socialized [...]. Father Rafferty was delighted. In his eyes, we’d crossed some invisible barrier” (321).

During his time at school, Gabriel is also picked at because he befriends a Protestant boy: “I don’t think you should be reserving seats for Prods [...]. They’re all the same. Nice to your face and stab you in the back when it suits them” (196).<sup>149</sup> The situation worsens when Gabriel, in an attempt to hide his homosexuality, starts dating Fiona, a Protestant girl with a pronounced British accent:

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<sup>149</sup> Prod: derogatory, Protestant.

Fiona and I started dating, but I didn't tell my parents about it. She was a Protestant and they wouldn't accept her. [...] It didn't matter to Mammy that Fiona was a pupil at exclusive Granderson College, that she owned two horses being shipped to England in the near future, or that her father owned every blade of grass around the village. All that mattered was that Fiona was of the wrong religion. (328)

As has been suggested above, Gabriel's parents wrestle with the idea of him dating a Protestant girl because relationships between Catholics and Protestants were not common or well seen in Northern Ireland at that time. In a conversation between Gabriel and his childhood friend Fergal, the latter reaches one conclusion: "If you like a girl, what does her religion matter?' 'I would never go steady with her. You only ride the Prod girls'" (197).

Along these lines, there is a telling difference in the way that girls are portrayed in the novel judging by their religion. When Gabriel goes on holiday to Bundoran (Co. Donegal) with Martin and his parents, they meet a couple of Irish girls who do not hesitate to invite the boys over to their B&B to spend the night (310). It goes without saying that both Gabriel and Martin are hesitant—neither of them seems too interested in girls. The image of Bridget and Sheila, portrayed as defiant and tempting the boys, juxtaposes that of Fiona, the prudish Protestant. The latter is determined to wait until marriage to have sexual relationships—again, something that fits Gabriel just fine—because "[t]hat's for committed relationships" (336). On the other hand, Bridget and Sheila, even if they are the same age as Fiona, embody the stereotypical image of rebellious young girls who are seen as disgraceful by older women, in this case by the owner of the B&B. As seen next in another example, the novel shows its intention against stereotyping in Fiona's resemblance to Gabriel's mother (Protestant vs Catholic) in their approach to sexuality. The

Catholic Irish girls would paradoxically be seen by someone like Mrs Harkin as devils more typically identified with Protestants.

Politics and religion, therefore, seem to go hand in hand in Gabriel's home. Unlike his father and brother, Gabriel is not too political but rather tries to see the truth in both sides (something that the novel as a whole also attempts to do): "It's ridiculous that we can't criticize what's rotten and useless down there [Ireland] out of fear we're acting disloyal" (228). However, all this brings are accusations by his father and brother: "You're too fucking English. [...] Why can't you be a real Irishman?" (229). Gabriel, then, is "a disgrace" (229). This difference is also made clear when the Harkins decide to offer shelter to an IRA man, to which Gabriel opposes: "I don't agree with the IRA's bombing and shooting [...]. They're killing innocent people, as well as the soldiers. They give Catholics a bad name" (227). He is not too keen on his father sheltering a member of the IRA because he does not understand his father's strong sense of Irishness, which seems to imply fighting for Ireland in any possible way. However, Gabriel changes his mind regarding the IRA man when he eventually meets him, which shows another instance of the novel's intention against stereotyping: "He didn't fit my image of a vicious IRA volunteer, though admittedly, I didn't have much information as to what they were supposed to look like" (236). Moreover, Mammy also opposes out of fear her sons may be "recruited for the cause" (226). Gabriel's father, however, points out that the only one in danger of being recruited is James, "definitely not Gabriel" (226). Clearly, Mr Harkin knows that Gabriel is not as interested in politics as James is, as has been discussed above, and he seems disappointed in him. Besides, sexuality also seems to be linked to politics and identity, since a member of the IRA confronts Gabriel for having sex with men claiming that "[r]eal Irishmen don't do that" (377). Connor's denial of his own identity is present here, since he was the one initiating things with Gabriel, but

his strong sense of Irishness does not allow him to accept he is a homosexual as well, as we have seen above.

There is hope at the end of the novel, however, something that was not there before. The final note of the novel leaves the reader with a certain feeling of hope, since Gabriel leaves Northern Ireland for London with Richie in another example of the *bildung* as journey. London is seen as a place where there is no need to hide, where they can be themselves without fear of repression:

'We have to meet in secret. [...] What's honest about us?' [...]

'It's how things are for gay people'.

'Forever?'

'Not in London.' (345)

The difference between Northern Ireland, where Gabriel and Richie have to meet in secret, and London, where they can be free, shows how Ireland at the time still had a long way to go in terms of acceptance and modernizing its socio-cultural structure. The novel cannot end in any other way, for it is impossible for the protagonist to achieve a different outcome in his homeland. As has been mentioned, the 2004 version of the novel also ended with Gabriel leaving for London, even if alone, emphasising his impossibility to be happy in Northern Ireland. Besides, this moving to London can also be looked at from the perspective of Gabriel choosing Britain over Ireland—something that his father and brother had already accused him of. The novel only covers the 60s and 70s, and so it does not allow socio-cultural change in the country. Unlike what happens in *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, here Gabriel cannot evolve along his country but needs to escape from it to be truly happy.

*A Son Called Gabriel* tells the story of a young man seeking his sexual, national and religious identities. The last two are clearer to him, since he has lived within those communities all his life. This, nonetheless, does not prevent him from questioning their relevance—especially as he grows older. In words of Damian McNicholl, Gabriel is denied equality “because he was both a member of the population’s religious minority and a young gay man” (389). As we have seen, he does not completely agree with the politics he encounters at home and, as I discuss in the next section, there are some events that also make him question his religion. Gabriel’s sexual identity is what is most difficult to accept for him, for he has never been exposed to anyone like him and he is required to grow out of his innocence and be accepted by others in order to accept himself. At the end of the day, it is the acceptance of his own homosexuality that creates the core of the novel and what allows him to grow up and live a happy life, even if he has to leave Ireland to do so.

### 6.3. “guilt lingered like a bitter aftertaste”: guilt and shame

Guilt and shame are two essential emotions in the life of the protagonist of *A Son Called Gabriel*. Likewise, guilt and shame are brought about by the Irish society of the twentieth century. In this case, the protagonist feels guilty and ashamed of his sexuality and his subsequent relationship with a British soldier—an enemy of his country and religion. Besides, Gabriel is also sexually assaulted by a priest, but he believes it to be his fault, due to his sensibility and homosexuality.

Gabriel’s main source of guilt during almost the whole novel is twofold, since he is not only masturbating (a sin), but doing so with another boy (an abomination, according to his mother). In Gabriel’s own words:



I was a sinner receiving Our Lord's body. It was hell for me when I died. Roasting flames and bodies that never cooked. [...] I'd have to go on receiving Our Lord's flesh in a state of sin, because I was too young to refuse. Mortal sin would pile upon mortal sin. I couldn't breathe. (144)

This example also shows the aforementioned naïveté of Gabriel's, in his belief that he will be forever burning in hell for committing sin, and the ever-present link between guilt, shame, sexuality, and religion. Indeed, Gabriel has been brought up in a Catholic environment and so resorts to religion to alleviate his guilt and shame:

At my bedside, for the next ten nights, I got down on my knees and chanted the Act of Contrition. I did it faithfully. I did it swiftly, too, before James came into the room and asked what the hell I was doing. I also talked in my own words to God, told Him how sorry I was and that I'd never do it again.

An astonishing thing happened as I was doing this one evening. He came to me. He came and spoke inside my head in a beautiful, fatherly voice. He told me I was completely forgiven. (149-50)

As explored in chapter four, religious confession is necessary to atone for your sins and achieve salvation. Here, Gabriel does not confess his sins to a priest, but he rather prays every night to be forgiven and changed, even if he continues to masturbate anyway. This shows how his approach to religion is a rather innocent one, as I have discussed regarding Gabriel's narration. Besides, the final idea of the quotation alludes to a fatherly figure—something Gabriel really needs in his life—granting him forgiveness. Even if it is not the confession done to a priest, Gabriel still receives absolution from something he understands as God.

Along these lines, the representation of Catholic confession in the novel, which is treated rather ironically—similarly to what is discussed in chapter seven regarding *A History of Loneliness*—should be mentioned here. As stated, Gabriel’s approach to religion is a rather innocent one, and the same is present in confession. For instance, when he witnesses his uncle and aunt having sexual intercourse, he believes it is something he should tell the priest in the confessional, for “then I’ll really be able to forget, because it’ll be truly forgiven” (34). His mother and aunt, however, dissuade him from the idea:

“Just tell him you’ve disobeyed me, Gabriel... or tell him you stole a chocolate bar behind my back, if you can’t come up with a proper sin before then.”

“But I haven’t.”

“Just tell him anyway, son.” (35)

These examples show how Gabriel, in his naiveté, takes religion and confession seriously—he truly believes he would not be forgiven or able to forget otherwise—but the approach to confession his mother and aunt—who throughout the novel show more devotion than Gabriel—have is more practical. Gabriel needs to be a sinner to be forgiven—but the sin itself is unimportant.

In those examples above, Gabriel’s urge to confess comes from a sin related to sexuality. Gabriel prays every night, as has been shown, but is not able to confess the games he plays with Noel to a priest:

The hardest part to analyze and overcome was the confessing aspect. I could never tell a priest. The very thought of confessing always brought Uncle Brendan to mind, which set me back every time because it whipped up the shame again. I thought about how clean living and holy he was. I could never tell him, or any other priest. As I analyzed that problem, it popped into my head

that God was all about forgiveness, too. God would forgive what I couldn't tell a priest. I would talk to Him directly and ask for forgiveness. No priest was required here. (149)

This example shows how ashamed Gabriel is of his homosexuality, to the extent that he is not even able to tell the truth to a priest—a figure which should be safe and provide the sinner with the needed forgiveness. Along these lines, studies like the one carried out by Donald Mosher and Kevin O'Grady (1979) show that homosexuality and masturbation are linked to affects of guilt, shame, and anger, among others. Indeed, the results of the study illustrated negative attitudes towards masturbatory and homosexual films, namely “self-disgust and guilt” (861). Between these two, it was the homosexual film the one producing “significantly higher levels of affective disgust, anger, and shame” (867). This study shows the negative views of men towards masturbation (even if many of them engage in such practices) and homosexuality especially and, being carried out in the 1970s, it can help understand Gabriel's and his community's attitudes towards his own homosexuality: “[Noel] was the one who'd offered to do it to me. But I'd permitted him. Did my permitting him make me as guilty as him? I wasn't sure” (McNicholl 151).

However, guilt comes back soon enough for, not long after stopping his games with Noel, Gabriel starts to engage in a similar gameplay with his cousin Connor. Surprisingly, it is not the fact that Connor and himself are family, but the fact that he is also a male that makes Gabriel feel guilty once again: “For the rest of the day, guilt lingered like a bitter aftertaste. I remembered the promise I'd made to God. Now I'd broken my promise at the very first temptation. I'd committed the abomination again and enjoyed it. I loathed myself” (203). This final idea also shows Gabriel's self-hate for what he is, and not only his guilt or shame. His own community has made him loathe

himself.<sup>150</sup> He even considers he is unworthy of any friendship, especially the one he had with Fergal, and attributes Fergal's estrangement to his discovery of Gabriel and Noel's relationship: "If [Fergal] chose to sit beside another boy in the classroom, I was convinced it was because I was an abomination" (145). In fact, Fergal also represents society, in the sense that he rejects Gabriel, with whom he has been close friends, when he witnesses his sexual game with Noel.

Sexuality, then, is a source of guilt and shame for Gabriel, more so homosexuality. Nonetheless, even if he considers himself 'an abomination,' he cannot call himself a homosexual: "*I'm not a homosexual*, my mind screamed. [...] I'd never initiated things. Connor was the one who always started things between us" (245, emphasis in the original). Gabriel's denial of his true self, as I have mentioned in previous sections, shows the shame he feels for something he has been taught is wrong. His anger is then turned towards God, whom he makes responsible for his flaws: "*Why the hell are you doing this to me, God? What have I done to you?* [...] Why have You made me *different* from the other boys?" (262, emphasis in the original). Thus, even if at the beginning he cannot define himself as a homosexual, he understands he is different from the other kids, until he eventually acknowledges what he is trying to deny.

A significant event in this regard is when he is about to have sex with a girl in Bundoran and the girl's body elicits a satisfying response in his own, something he was not sure could happen: "The next six days in Bundoran were beautiful. I'd touched a girl's private parts and my body had responded as it was supposed to. I was the same as other boys. I wasn't a homosexual" (314). This happiness does not last long for Gabriel, however, since he immediately goes back to past habits:

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<sup>150</sup> As I discuss in the next chapter, this is also present in Boyne's *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, to the extent that Cyril even considers suicide.

On the final night [...] I spied the attractive football player type [...]. I spent the entire evening watching him from a discreet distance. Later in bed, [...] I self-abused myself near witless thinking about him. The last-minute substitution of Bridget's soft breasts and rough nipples didn't alleviate the guilt this time. Homosexuality stalked me still. It would not be denied. I could never let down my guard. (314)

As he grows up, Gabriel realizes what he cannot deny anymore, even if it is still a source of guilt. As seen in the last line of the previous quotation, for most part of the novel Gabriel sees homosexuality as a threat haunting him, as something he should keep guard for, in case it attacks him again.

Eventually, however, he learns to accept who he is, and his feelings of guilt—but not shame—start to be directed towards other related matters. As I mentioned in the introduction, the character of Richie presents deep changes in Gabriel's evolution. Even if Richie has also been brought up in a Catholic environment, he teaches Gabriel to love himself for who he is, no matter what other people may think, and shows him that sexuality should not be something to be ashamed of. Indeed, Gabriel's Catholic upbringing refuses to acknowledge sexuality, not only homosexuality, and that is something that Gabriel must reconsider as well. In this sense, Richie and Gabriel present two different responses to a similar religious upbringing. As a consequence, by the end of the novel Gabriel is no longer feeling guilty of being a homosexual but of dating Richie, a British soldier and therefore an enemy of his family's beliefs:

I also felt guilty—entirely for dating a British soldier and not for being gay. Quite frankly, I'd used up all my reserves of guilt on this supposed sin and, intellectually, I figured God had made me this way. How could something that felt right be sinful in His eyes? (343)

This acknowledgement is significant not only because it means self-love and appreciation, the finding of one's true identity, but also because this recognition was lacking in the original version of the novel. As has been discussed, in the 2004 version, Gabriel does not accept himself at any moment and flees from Northern Ireland with the hope of being understood somewhere else.

Another clear example of Gabriel's guilt and shame is what he feels after being sexually abused by Father Cornelius, one of his teachers at school. Instead of acknowledging the priest's blame in the assault and reporting it,<sup>151</sup> Gabriel suffers from the victim's guilt and believes he is the one to blame. In this regard, it is argued that "[c]hildren are taught early not to talk about sex, to keep their clothes on in public. So after a sexual act occurs, the child assumes he is to blame" (*Los Angeles Times*, n.pag.). In the case of Gabriel, it is a mixture of the silencing of sex in his household<sup>152</sup> and his inner fear of his own homosexuality which makes him decide he should also carry the blame for the assault:

I'd curse Father Cornelius, but deep within I knew he wasn't the only one to blame. What he'd done was sinful, but my desires had their own poisonous roots. I'd also try to bargain with God. I'd make desperate promises, promises to lead a good Catholic life if He'd just see His way to spare me, just see His way to turn me *normal*. (263-4, emphasis added)

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<sup>151</sup> Unfortunately, statistics about sexual abuse are highly unreliable worldwide, and most of the cases of sexual abuse go unreported and unnoticed (see Power 2019 for the case of Ireland). In the US, only 23% of sexual assaults are reported to the police (Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 2010-2016 (2017)), <<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>> (Accessed 5 Sept 2021).

<sup>152</sup> An example of which is that Gabriel's mother "can't even watch a man and woman kissing on TV. She changes the channels" (284).

Homosexuality, then, as seen by a child growing up in a deeply Catholic environment, is an anomaly resulting in deserved abuse: “I was too sensitive and [...] the priest had detected this and somehow *knew* he could do wicked things to me” (284, emphasis added). The verb ‘to know’ has been emphasised in this quotation to show that Gabriel believes Father Cornelius to have some kind of right to do those things to him; otherwise, he would have used something like ‘thought’ instead. After the assault, Gabriel just “wanted to be alone and replay, analyse, work out other endings that could have been, had I only said different, better words” (261), showing how Gabriel believes it was his own actions or mutterings that caused the abuse.

Moreover, the fact that the perpetrator of the abuse is a member of the clergy is also quite significant if explored against the Irish socio-cultural background exposed in chapter two. Studies show that 93% of victims know their attacker, who is a close member of the victim’s community.<sup>153</sup> As has been discussed above, the Catholic Church held a massive amount of power in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (within the Catholic communities) during most part of the twentieth century, and especially in those decades in which Gabriel’s story is set. In the novel, Gabriel recalls that “[e]very cell sweated at [Father Cornelius’s] overriding power” (260), emphasising that nothing could be done to avoid the abuse, even if he believes otherwise. Furthermore, this power is also seen in Gabriel’s household and their belief and trust in the Church, to the extent that “Mammy believes priests can’t do any wrong. [...] And Daddy would never understand a man doing things to another man, much less a priest” (284). Gabriel’s only solution is to eventually confide in Brendan, whom he sees as a loving figure and role model.

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<sup>153</sup> Child Sexual Abuse Statistics. (2015). Rape Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), <<https://www.rainn.org/articles/child-sexual-abuse>> (Accessed 5 Sept 2021)

Brendan makes Gabriel see that he is not to blame and confronts Father Cornelius in an attempt to make him stop abusing any other child.<sup>154</sup>

Thus, guilt diminishes throughout the novel, but shame does not disappear just yet. When breaking up with Fiona, Gabriel is not able to tell her the true reasons for their break-up: “I wanted to tell her the real reason, but she’d never understand. Anyway, it would be impossible to tell her the truth. I couldn’t bear to think of her seeing me as a queer. Better she hated me than that” (344). Therefore, even if it seems he has accepted his homosexuality, his shame for that same reason still lingers and does not allow him to be himself among the people he loves. Gabriel is also ashamed when he tells his mother the news of his homosexuality, since he “felt sorry for her. First, she’d hoped I’d become a priest, but had stopped pushing after Uncle Brendan quit his vocation. Now, I was telling her I liked men” (346-7). His identity, then, is also a source of pain for his mother, something Gabriel knows will hurt his family. His feelings of guilt and shame, therefore, come from the fear of hurting his family.

Furthermore, shame, related to how other people see oneself, is also present in other characters of the novel. We learn from the beginning that there is a secret in the family that no one dares to mention, mainly because of the shame it would bring to the family. Brendan, then, is “a black sheep” (76) not only for having had a son outside of marriage and cutting ties with his family for years, but also for quitting the priesthood. As has been mentioned in previous chapters, having a son join the priesthood was a source of pride for a family in Ireland at that time, and when Brendan quits his vocation the family loses some of the respect devoted to priests in their community. Auntie Celia

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<sup>154</sup> However, in a similar pattern to that presented in *A History of Loneliness*, Brendan does not denounce the assault to the police or any other source of power, in order to prevent more assaults from happening, but he rather makes Fr Cornelius leave the school and seek treatment in England. As a member of the clergy, Brendan follows what has been mentioned in chapter two regarding the cover-ups by the Church—cases like this are treated behind closed doors.



is very relevant in this regard, since she is the most concerned for what other people may think of their family: “You won’t have to face the people knowing they’re laughing because one of the Harkin’s has left the priesthood” (270). She also claims that she would have gone to live in Belfast, “where nobody knows [her], [...] if a darkie woman had been in the picture” (269). Hence, Celia represents the fear in small communities of what other people may say or think about oneself, showing shame for what members of one’s family do or did in the past. The same happens with Gabriel’s mother, who is ashamed of his results in the exams only if compared to the neighbours’ or Martin’s and Connor’s.

As I have discussed when dealing with identity in the novel, shame can also be analysed in other characters, especially those mentioned as performing different degrees of acceptance of themselves. It could be argued that, among those mentioned above, there is a clear difference between Martin’s and Connor’s attitudes. Martin is not ashamed of being himself even at school, since he does not care what others say about him. Connor, on the other hand, is similar to Gabriel in the shame he feels regarding his identity, but, unlike Gabriel, he never accepts it and is bound to live ashamed the rest of his life. Richie, however, does not seem to be embarrassed of who he is, at least when the reader comes to know him.

Thus, what we see in *A Son Called Gabriel* matches the difference between guilt and shame seen in chapter five. This way, Gabriel feels guilty for what he did, namely being involved in sexual games with Noel, first, and Connor, second; and he feels ashamed for what he is, that is, a homosexual in a Catholic environment. The origin of his guilt and shame is, in any case, his latent homosexuality, understood against the background of the 60s and 70s in Northern Ireland that has been exposed in chapter two of this dissertation. The end of the novel, however, leaves room for hope—in Gabriel’s family, politics seem to be more important than sexual orientation, since in the end it

is the fact that Gabriel is dating a British soldier (the enemy) rather than being attracted to men that makes him unworthy in his father's eyes. Leaving Northern Ireland symbolizes the journey the country still needs to take—and will take, eventually—towards equality and freedom.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### JOHN BOYNE'S *A HISTORY OF LONELINESS*

The narrator and protagonist of John Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* is a strong example of all the types of unreliability that have been mentioned in chapter four.<sup>155</sup> Odran's characterization is extremely complex given his inner knowledge of his past and its concealment from the reader and even from himself. His intricacy revolves precisely in what he is trying to hide, in what he is not ready to admit yet, and in the final recognition of his complicity in the crimes of his past—also shown in the way the narrative is presented. The novel offers a character and narrator for whom the reader might have contradictory feelings, for they are able to comprehend what Odran does not wish to admit, namely that he is guiltier than he would be willing to accept, at least at the beginning. Readers<sup>156</sup> of the novel, even if they feel inclined to deplore Odran for his part in the cover-up of sexual abuse, should understand his naïveté—but not his full innocence—throughout his story, although that does not save him from being considered profoundly unreliable. Besides, the character of Odran would not be fully understood were it not for his relation to trauma, memory, or guilt. The whole novel becomes meaningful when understood against the backdrop of Odran's guilt since his infancy, which also plays an essential role in his unreliability, as is discussed below.

Furthermore, Odran should also be examined in terms of his masculinity. His aim throughout the novel is to discover who he is, and why he acted the way he did. His being an aging male in Ireland in the twentieth century has much to do with the construction of his identity and who he is in later life. Other

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<sup>155</sup> He himself claims as much, even if alluding to something different altogether: "I had proved myself to be an unreliable soul" (379). For Sue Leonard, however, "Odran is a slightly unreliable narrator" (9). This chapter shows he is more than that.

<sup>156</sup> Both those who approach the novel for the first time and those who do so as second-time readers.

male characters are also analysed in these lines, paying attention to masculinity and its relationship to fatherhood.

With *A History of Loneliness*, John Boyne sets a novel in his homeland, Ireland, for the first time in his prolific literary career. He himself explains this by claiming that he did not want to write about Ireland until he had a story worth telling (Boyne *The Guardian*; WHSmith, 2018). He continues stating that he is now confident enough to write about Ireland and real events in his life, as both *A History of Loneliness* and *The Heart's Invisible Furies* show (WHSmith, 2018). Remarkably, for the former Boyne does not choose a priest accused of sexual abuse, but rather focuses on the side of the 'innocent' priests that saw their lives turned upside down due to the immorality of other members of their institution.<sup>157</sup> Boyne tackles this as follows:

It would be very easy to write a novel with a monster at the centre of it, an unremitting paedophile who preys on the vulnerable without remorse. The challenge for me was to write a novel about the other priest, the genuine priest, the one who has given his life over to good works and finds himself betrayed by the institution to which he has given everything. (*The Guardian* 2014)

I personally believe the novel is more powerful this way, as the reader would compulsively reject its protagonist and narrator were he a convicted paedophile. With *Odran*, the reader can empathize with the other side, although they should determine the degree of guilt *Odran* holds in the aforementioned cover-up of sexual allegations. Along these lines, Boyne

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<sup>157</sup> Irish writer Colm Tóibín takes a similar perspective in "A Priest in the Family," but he chooses the point of view of the paedophile's mother (in *Mothers and Sons*, 2006). John Michael McDonagh also chooses an 'innocent' priest as the protagonist of his film *Calvary* (2014).

explains that the novel is not intended as a mere attack on or a defence of the Church, but as a means to explore the whole perspective:

In writing this novel I hoped that those who blindly defend the church against all critics might recognise the crimes that the institution has committed, while those who condemn it ceaselessly might accept that there are many decent people who have lived good lives within it. [...] it's not written in defence of the church—indeed, by the end of it, the reader has to consider the narrator's complicity in the events that were taking place before him—but nor is it an outright attack. It is simply a novel that asks people to examine the subject from a broader perspective and to reconsider the lives of all those who have suffered. (Boyne *The Guardian*, 2014)

Besides, this novel is extremely personal, for Boyne was a student at Terenure College himself, where he was abused in two occasions by members of the staff (Boyne, 2021). It is significant that Boyne chooses this school to set the protagonist of his story, portraying a teacher who silently knew of the actions of some colleagues, namely Miles Donlan in the novel, whom Boyne has identified with former teacher John McClean. McClean was sentenced in February 2021 to eight years in prison, following a trial for “assaulting 23 pupils between 1973 and 1990” (Power, n.pag.) in Terenure College. Significantly, survivors claim that the “abuse had been covered up,” since the response of the school at the time “was one of ‘silence and indifference’” (Power, n.pag.). With *A History of Loneliness*, we can see how this is carried out.

#### 7.1. “Hidden at the very back of my mind”: narration

We should take into consideration here that what we are reading is Odran's retrospective account of his past, which would turn *A History of Loneliness* into

a 'novel of recollections'<sup>158</sup> in which the protagonist and narrator is trying to make sense of his past to understand his present. Hence, Odran delays the revelation of some key information he is fully aware of precisely because he is telling/writing<sup>159</sup> the story from an omniscient position. There are several moments in the novel when Odran both addresses his audience and admits that he is speaking from the future, with instances such as “[a]nd I look back at that night, more than a decade ago now” (31) or “[n]ow I ask you, what could I do but go over to him?” (233). His retrospective position is clear, therefore, but the identity of his audience is not. Whom is he telling his story to? I would argue Odran is not addressing anyone specifically, but he just feels the urge to confess, to come to terms with his past and admit to what still haunts him. In this regard, Deborah Lee *et al.* argue that “guilt-laden memories focus on a desire to confess wrongdoing (whether actual or imagined) in an attempt to make amends” (456). Along these lines, Kaufman also asserts that “[e]ach individual must find a way to relieve the intolerable burden of guilt or shame by making peace within, by embracing the self once again, and thereby becoming whole” (254).

Likewise, in the abovementioned documentary *Deliver Us from Evil*, Father O’Grady claims:

I am here because I recognize... in my life there has been a major imbalance, mainly caused by what I have done in a criminal way. I want to promise myself that this is going to be the most honest confession of my life, and in doing that,

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<sup>158</sup> As I have discussed when dealing with trauma and unreliability, *A History of Loneliness* could very well fit the term coined by Chalupsky (2016) were it not for its length. The narrator’s main aim is also to present the reader with what he believes is the truth, at least at the beginning. As Chalupsky expands, in the novel of recollections “the narrator’s motivation for presenting his/her life’s story is essentially auto-therapeutic” (92), as is the case with the confessional mode of Odran’s story.

<sup>159</sup> There are no indicators in the text that might point towards the assurance that Odran is writing or telling his story, although it can be inferred that there is indeed an audience listening to his tale. From this point on, I will make reference to Odran as telling rather than writing his story, since I believe it refers to its nature as confession in a clearer way.

I need to make the long journey backwards to understand what I did, to acknowledge that, in some way to make reparation for it, and to let those whom I have offended know that, if possible. Basically what I want to say to them is, you know, it should not have happened. It should not have happened.<sup>160</sup>

O’Grady’s intention with the documentary is the same as Odran’s with his narrative, despite the obvious differences—to go back through the journey of their past and try to make amends with those they hurt. Thus, Odran’s implied reader is someone who understands and forgives him, probably someone he himself would call God.<sup>161</sup> In this sense, Odran’s narrative could be understood as his religious confession to a priest, or even to God, to be absolved of his sins. In fact, in terms of Catholic confession, Boyne takes in this novel—as in *The Heart’s Invisible Furies*—a sceptical perspective, in the sense that Odran states: “I thought suddenly of the minutes I spent waiting outside the confession box every Saturday morning where, rather than actually remembering my sins of the previous week, I would use my imagination to think up what I thought the priest wanted to hear” (139). Here Odran is still a teenager, and not a particularly religious one, but the cynical perspective he already presents of confession (as something to not take particularly seriously) is relevant when taken against the context of the whole novel as a confession.

At the point from which he is speaking, Odran knows how all the events turned out but still does not reveal them to the reader until the precise moment, adding to the novel’s suspense. Here lies the difference between character-Odran, the experiencing self, and narrator-Odran, the experienced, remembering or narrative self—the main difference between them being the

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<sup>160</sup> In terms of narration, it is worth paying attention to how O’Grady uses here the impersonal form, detaching himself from any action or responsibility.

<sup>161</sup> Needless to say, the figure of the implied reader may not correspond here with the real reader, the person behind the page, who is subject to their own morals and, consequently, might not empathise with Odran at all.

quantity and quality of the knowledge they hold. In the novel, the chapters recounting episodes from the past (those going up to 1994) are mostly focused on Odran as a character/focalizer rather than a narrator, even if he interrupts the narrative from time to time to comment on the events themselves or on his memory of them: "I look back and am not sure why that was the case" (199). Those chapters dealing with his recent past, from the beginning of the novel in 2001 until its end in 2013, are told from the advantageous perspective of the present, when Odran performs more significantly as a narrator rather than merely a character. In this sense, narrator-Odran is omniscient to the denouement of all the events character-Odran is experiencing but still does not clarify certain meanings, and hence his unreliability by omission. The narrator, therefore, chooses to disappear slightly but significantly, letting the reader in the dark as to the development of the story just as character-Odran is, in order to put the reader and the protagonist in the same position.<sup>162</sup> Unreliability is to be found in the narrator's focalization of a character with a limited point of view, in this case with limited knowledge. Thus, in the greatest part of the novel, character-Odran is the focalizer, the perspective from which the story is told. His limited perspective is what causes unreliability, combined with narrator-Odran's omission of the real events. In other words, even if Odran as narrator can be categorized as unreliable, it is mainly character-Odran, the focalizer, the one presenting the events in a more unreliable manner. The combination of the two makes the narration unreliable, especially in the 'past chapters' mentioned above. Character-Odran, then, would be unreliable in his misjudgements and misunderstandings. Although this unreliability would be so against the information that we, as readers, hold in hindsight and that character-Odran does not possess yet, he still misreads certain crucial

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<sup>162</sup> As has been done with *A Son Called Gabriel*, I am deliberately eliminating the flesh-and-blood author out of the equation, since our main interest here is the narrator and the choices he makes in the telling of the story in order to classify him as unreliable.



situations and behaviours that clearly position him in the spectrum of unreliability. Narrator-Odran is unreliable insofar as he does not correct his own past misconceptions as a character and thus leaves the narratee outside the real development of the events. Thus, character-Odran's unreliability would be unconscious, whereas narrator-Odran's is conscious.

On this account and following V. Nünning's and Olson's insightful classifications of unreliable narration,<sup>163</sup> Odran could be identified as both a liar and a fool, or untrustworthy and fallible, applied to the narrator and the focalizer respectively. I would argue he is more of a liar than a fool, precisely because of the retrospective nature of his account mentioned above and hence his having been classified as consciously unreliable, but he is also a fool in his misunderstandings and misjudgements as a character/focalizer. Despite being a reconstruction from the present/future, Boyne's narrator presents himself with the knowledge he possessed at the moment the events were taking place rather than when he is speaking. Consequently, it could be argued that narrator-Odran is a liar whilst character-Odran is *supposedly* a fool—indeed, a fool in some respects but, in others, he feigns ignorance, as we learn at the end. I would also maintain that this turns the protagonist into a more appealing and understandable character, for it shows the reader how he truly misreads situations and is incapable of comprehending certain events owing to his naïveté. Just as it is the case with the butler Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*,<sup>164</sup> in *A History of Loneliness* the reader can infer more meaning from the text than the narrator is letting out—they may or may not

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<sup>163</sup> For these and other classifications of unreliable narration, see chapter 4. Narration.

<sup>164</sup> Stevens and Odran are very much alike, both as narrators and characters. They both recount their past stories whilst making sense of how they got to that point in their lives. They devoted them to their jobs and, as a consequence, they lost a part of their humanity, which made them unable to fully and truly live. Thus, they have reached the end of their lives full of guilt and shame because of the mistakes they have made, which have led them to regret having wasted their lives. Furthermore, they both misread situations and misregard certain behaviours, allowing the reader to understand more about the events and characters than they themselves are aware of.

commit his same mistakes, putting them closer or further away from the narrator and protagonist. Hence, Odran is an untrustworthy narrator because of the information the reader has to fill in throughout the narrative in order to make sense of the story, especially regarding gaps in the narration, time lapses, or the understanding of some characters. As a character, Odran is extremely gullible and naïve up to the end of the novel, when he has to question what he thought he knew about certain people around him. There are several instances in the novel when some characters point to this trait of his, namely Archbishop Cordington and Tom. As for the latter: “[Tom] sat up in bed and stared across at me, tilting his head a little to the side as if he was trying to understand how I could be so naïve. ‘God love you, Odran,’ he said. ‘You’re a pure innocent, aren’t you?’” (199). I believe this makes the reader more aware of character-Odran’s potential unreliability, since the narrator is deliberately showing this trait as if it served as an excuse for any future misunderstanding. We have been warned: Odran was extremely innocent so he should not be blamed.

Heyd’s classification of unreliability could also be used to analyse *A History of Loneliness*. As is the case in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Odran is also quietly deceiving the reader with the omission of information. This concerns mainly narrator-Odran, who is in charge of presenting the events and does so in a non-chronological way, jumping back and forth in time, forcing the reader to keep track as to where we are at each moment.<sup>165</sup> He deliberately postpones the inclusion of decisive information for the characterization of Odran himself and the rest of the characters. Firstly, he keeps delaying the true account of his shameful involvement with an Italian waitress during his time in Rome (and the dreadful consequences for his career in general and for Pope John Paul I in particular). He claims in chapter two that “of course my job

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<sup>165</sup> In this sense, Odran’s chaotic narrative echoes his mind and shows his inability to be orderly.

was taken off me before the year was up and a black mark put against my name that was impossible to wipe clean” (38), but it is not until chapter thirteen that he is able to tell the full story. Heyd asserts that this category is of “highly intentional unreliability” (227) and, although this case cannot be compared to the extremely intentional unreliability of Dr Sheppard in Christie’s novel, here Odran’s intentionality could be twofold. On the one hand, he does not want to influence the narratee’s perception of himself too early in the narrative but instead intentionally chooses to present them with different, less controversial events that might persuade the audience into creating a better image of the narrator/protagonist before reaching his shameful confession—namely, that he knew about Tom’s involvement with children and said nothing. Nonetheless, I also believe that, by postponing and delaying the truth, the narrator is unconsciously creating doubts in the reader’s mind, who becomes suspicious of Odran precisely because of his delaying of information. On the other hand, he is not able to admit to his actions yet, not even to himself. His deception here is not intentional—he is too ashamed to admit to not being in his post the night Pope John Paul I died.<sup>166</sup> This event is one of the most shameful revelations he has to offer, which seems an understatement if compared to his final disclosure—his inner knowledge of the sexual assault and his complicity in its cover-up, which takes him the whole novel to admit. Thus, the novel presents different confessions little by little, from least to most shameful—first, his childhood trauma for the death of his father and brother; second, his not being present when Pope John Paul I died; and third, his complicity in the scandals of sexual abuse within the Irish Catholic Church.<sup>167</sup>

However, the depiction of some other characters in the story is also fundamentally influenced by Odran’s ‘quiet deception.’ By delaying the

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<sup>166</sup> He was not in his post because he had been obsessed with an Italian waitress, to the extent of following her to her house and breaking in. She then confronts him and Odran has to flee from the scene when her husband arrives (366-9).

<sup>167</sup> Guilt and shame in the novel are explored later on in this same chapter.

revelation of Tom's true character as a paedophile—which narrator-Odran knows, character-Odran claims to ignore, and the reader might be able to grasp—Tom's characterization is deeply transformed from a position where the reader might even pity him (for he has been sent to the seminary by force, moved by his father's physical and psychological abuse), to a complete loathing of Tom's character. This duality positions the reader alongside Odran in their attachment to and affection for Tom. Both Odran and his narratee have to suffer the same disappointment in Tom, for they both start caring about him and are forced to switch to a total rejection of this character. In other words, narrator-Odran's unreliable narration influences the narratee's perception of Tom intentionally to place them in the same 'limited' perspective character-Odran is.<sup>168</sup>

The second type of unreliability proposed by Heyd refers to self-deception, which I would argue is the strongest type of unreliability in Odran's case. His narrative does not go as far as it should regarding the evaluation of some characters or of his own thoughts and comments on certain events. Especially relevant in this sense is his memory of the sexual abuse he suffered when he was sixteen years old, which he first recalls in chapter five but does not explain fully until chapter thirteen, when he also admits to the episode with the Roman waitress. In this regard, he claims to “move some things to one part of my mind, and other things to another, where they stayed for many years to come” (145). There are some traumatic episodes in Odran's life story such as this one that he just prefers to lock at the back of his mind without giving them a second thought.<sup>169</sup> Odran is clearly deceiving himself in his own sexual abuse, for he is unable to confront the traumatic episode and instead believes

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<sup>168</sup> Needless to say, only the first-time reader would experience the narrative as Odran desires, that is, going through Odran's same experience. The experience of a second-time reader, however, is different but no less interesting, in the sense that they can grasp Tom's misbehaviour and Odran's unreliability earlier, understanding therefore much more about their characters.

<sup>169</sup> This applies to the three episodes mentioned above, which he just keeps delaying.

it would be easier to delete it completely, without realizing or wanting to understand the event wholly. Indeed, the remembering self (narrator-Odran) does not recognize (or admit) that something more serious happened, he just thinks he “did faint then” (144), whereas the experiencing self (character-Odran), when faced with another event of similar sexual connotations, finally acknowledges the truth: “[Father Haughton] was standing next to me now, his foul breath in my ear, his arm around my shoulder, pulling me to him, his hands tugging at my pants, reaching inside” (369).

Notwithstanding, Odran’s greater self-deception is the fact that he is convinced of his ignorance, at least at the beginning of the novel. As mentioned above, the identity of his narratee points towards a more confessional tone (in religious terms) than to an actual narratee listening to his story. Thus, we could claim that his deception is made with the intention of making himself and the reader believe that, in his extreme innocence, he could not have possibly known about the sexual assaults taking place around him and hence to relieve him of his guilt. In a review for *The Guardian*, Helen Dunmore argues that Odran

hides from himself what he doesn’t want to see, and tells his own story with an apparently nonchalant fluency that omits a great deal. Boyne makes expert use of the gaps in Odran’s narration [...], he proves that what Odran considers to be his own innocence may also be seen as wilful ignorance.

This is especially true of Tom Cardle’s case, his best (and only) friend, since in other instances he acknowledges his selfishness and his concealment of the truth as in the case of Miles Donlan: “Of course I had heard whispers. [...] ‘I didn’t know him very well,’ I said, avoiding his question. [...] ‘if you were to hear whispers about someone else, tell me what would you do?’ *Nothing* was the honest answer” (43, emphasis in the original). Apart from the last statement

being somewhat foreshadowing, it is significant that he admits to knowing about Miles Donlan at the beginning of the novel but it takes him more than four hundred pages to admit to knowing about Tom Cardle. In Tom's case, Odran completely misses (or so it seems) the hints thrown at him, such as the fact that the children in Tom's parish have nicknamed him Satan (50), that Tom's housekeeper prevents him from being alone with a kid (288-90), the incident with Brian Kilduff (299-300), or Odran himself condemning Tom as a "sex maniac [...]. He thinks about it morning, noon and night" (200). Tom himself confronts him about this at the end of the novel: "You see, I think you knew everything, Odran," he said quietly. 'And I think you never wanted to confront me about it because that was a conversation that was beyond your abilities to have. I think you were complicit in the whole thing'" (467). Odran's response is also quite significant: "I didn't," I said and I could hear how half-hearted the words sounded even to my ears" (468). Character-Odran dismisses all these attempts at opening his eyes, probably moved by his selfishness and terror of being involved in something as troubling as these events, but he knows the truth deep down. Besides, he does not seem able to contemplate the possibility of his best friend being a monster. Narrator-Odran, on the other hand, is able to evaluate his knowledge of Tom's true character or lack thereof, but still does not admit the whole truth until the end.

Two moments in the novel in which he addresses this issue deserve to be analysed here. Firstly, we come across a clear case of misreading and misregarding, as I analyse later on, when Odran speaks of Tom's mistreatment due to his being constantly moved from parish to parish: "The poor man was being treated unfairly, I thought, for no sooner did he find his feet in a parish than he was on the move again" (276). As the words 'I thought' emphasise, narrator-Odran is giving voice to character-Odran's perceptions, since he is unaware of the later developments of the story and allegedly in the dark as to Tom's real reasons for being moved. Narrator-Odran, on the other hand,

comments on it a paragraph later, asserting: “I look back now at those years and think of all the phone calls I made to Tom in different counties of Ireland and wonder that I did not make more of it at the time” (276). Paradoxically, he here denies understanding the real reasons for Tom’s constant moves, but at the end of the novel he claims otherwise:

I had known everything, right from the start, and never acted on any of it. I had blocked it from my mind, time and again, and refused to recognize what was staring me in the face. I had said nothing when I should have spoken out, convincing myself that I was a man of higher character. (471)

Just as he did with the abuse he had suffered in his adolescence, Odran blocks from his mind the episodes that trouble him because it is easier for him to live denying the truth. When he deceives himself wondering why he failed to understand Tom’s moves from parish to parish, Odran is also deceiving his narratee, who classifies him as a complete fool and even a liar.

It should be pointed out here that Odran and the reader of the novel are not in the same position regarding the possibility to suspect that priests might be getting sexually involved with little children, and therefore their reactions to those doubts are going to be utterly different. Unfortunately, by the time Odran discusses the case of his colleague Miles Donlan abusing children in 2006, scandals and allegations of paedophiles within the Irish Catholic Church have already been heard of, unlike at the time of Tom’s crimes. In this regard, Susie Donnelly points out that “the discovery of the systematic abuse of children only emerged in the mid-1990s” (2), which would explain why Odran and his narratee are not able to make the same assumptions and arrive at the same conclusions, given the time gap that exists between the time of the story (the 80s and 90s) and 2014 which was when the novel was published. The reader of this novel comes from a strong and inevitable preconception as to the

relationship between priests and children—in fact, I might add that the reader might even think ill of Odran at the beginning of the novel, precisely because of that prejudice. The reader’s position, therefore, is completely biased by the continuous appearance of cases of abuse within the Catholic Church, whilst Odran’s is not. The novel itself exemplifies this idea with the juxtaposition of people’s reaction to Odran’s cassock in 1980, when pregnant women yielded their seats for Odran on the train and old men bought his lunch, and in 2008 at the time of Tom’s trial, when Odran, who is wearing the same cassock, is assaulted and insulted at a cafeteria. In the interval of almost thirty years between these two examples, cases of sexual assaults by the Catholic Church have been uncovered, and therefore the prejudice against priests is at its peak.

Hence, Odran’s ignorance can be explained if confronted against the context of the time of the story, and the reader should understand that it was difficult for Odran to read ahead, to comprehend something that was not as widespread as it is for the reader in the present time.<sup>170</sup> Thus, trying to discern how Odran was unable to see what was in front of him is not simple to judge, and we should take into consideration that it could not have been as obvious for him as it is for twenty-first-century readers to condemn Tom as a paedophile. All in all, the combination of his lack of context, his pure innocence and his wishful thinking would explain his silence, even if any of this does not justify it.

In the light of Odran’s many similarities to Ishiguro’s Stevens, I now analyse the former’s unreliability drawing on the terminology proposed by Phelan and Martin in their enlightening essay “The Lessons of ‘Weymouth’: Homodiegesis, Unreliability, Ethics, and *The Remains of the Day*.” As seen

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<sup>170</sup> This might seem paradoxical given his childhood experience with abuse but, as I mention below, Odran does not recognise the experience until he is faced with a similar event many years later.



extensively in chapter three, Phelan and Martin's proposal proceeds on the basis that unreliability might occur in different axes depending on its origin, which is an idea that also found in Booth (1983). As I intend to prove, Odran Yates goes through all these categories during the journey of his past in *A History of Loneliness*. First of all, the amount of knowledge Odran possesses throughout the years about his friend Tom Cardle and his accusation as a paedophile, even if it is arduous to reach a definite conclusion that might please all interpretations of the novel, should be discussed. As mentioned, I believe character-Odran had enough information to suspect and even condemn Tom for his continuous abuse on children, as narrator-Odran recognizes at the end of the novel. However, his naïveté and the philosophy of seeing the best of people prevents him from fully realizing it and therefore from acting on it. It is in his final confession when he admits to suspecting but not realizing, the difference lying in what he knew but did not want to see—what Dunmore called 'wilful ignorance.' It is in the retrospect, when analysing his past, that he realizes what could have been avoided had he opened his eyes or dug deeper into his suspicions, instead of blocking these red-flags at the back of his mind. It could be argued that Odran (as character but mainly as narrator) has been underreporting Tom and the real reasons why he was constantly being moved, but underreading (and, consequently, also underreporting) Tom's abuse of Aidan, since I believe he honestly did not know about this.

According to Phelan and Martin, underreporting takes place along the axis of facts/events and occurs "when the narrator tells us less than s/he knows" (95), that is to say, when it does not admit the whole truth. It is not that it consciously delivers mistaken information (which would be misreporting) but rather that it omits relevant information. In Odran's case, his unreliability lies in the knowledge he holds and does not share mainly, but not exclusively, regarding Tom. Hence, he is underreporting when he claims he did not have a

clue about Tom's impulses, since he suspected as much and hence he is not telling the whole truth, he is not sharing his real feelings and thoughts with the reader but rather just reports facts and events. He seems to be underreading some episodes, since he appears not to understand certain moments (for instance, he does not follow the hints of Tom's housekeeper when she insists on his staying with Tom and Brian), but in the end admits to having been underreporting instead, given his inner knowledge. It is not that he did not understand but rather that he did not *want* to understand nor show that he understood.

Odran, both as the protagonist and the narrator, is also underreporting when he postpones the inclusion of certain information regarding his past in Wexford and Rome, leaving gaps in the narrative. This is what Genette calls 'paralipsis' (*Narrative Discourse* 196-7), referring to the knowledge the protagonist has but which both he and the narrator decide to withhold from the reader. One of the earliest instances of underreporting in the novel occurs when Odran visits his sister and nephew and comments on a photograph found in the living room:

There was a framed photograph on top of the telly of little Cahal, laughing his head off as if he had his whole life in front of him, poor lad. [...] he was standing on a beach in a pair of short trousers [...]. There was only one beach that Cahal had ever stood on in his life and why would Hannah display a memory from that terrible week? (17)

He does not expand on this comment, although the reader can infer that something happened to 'little Cahal,' whoever that is, probably even his death. This underreporting has to do with Odran's childhood trauma, the death of his father and brother, and even his guilt upon the episode, which he is not able to admit just yet. In the next chapter, he once again mentions the event but

does not give any further explanation about its meaning: “When [Tom] told me that he was from Wexford, however, I felt a wound inside me opening once again, for I could never hear that county’s name without an accompanying burst of grief” (47). His narratee has to wait for the next chapter for Odran to be ready to share his past trauma. Along these lines, the incident in Rome is also withheld from the reader, as commented above, in another case of underreporting.

The next episode he underreports is his reaction when he witnesses Brian Kilduff slicing Tom’s tyres. He mentions he “go[es] back to bed and didn’t know what to think” (299) without explaining what he did the next day, but a few chapters later he decides to include his involvement in Brian’s punishment:

When I told you that story earlier, when I told you about 1990, did I mention that I had reported what I had seen to Tom the next morning, who had called the Gardaí in? [...] Perhaps I didn’t. If I didn’t, I should have. Anyway, here it is out in the open now. We are none of us innocent. (395)

Once again, his underreporting comes from his feeling of guilt—he is not ready yet to admit to himself or his narratee his involvement in this particular episode, “because I did know what to think. Only I could not bring myself to think it” (299). He knew what it meant that Brian was vandalizing Tom’s car, but still thought it best to report it to Tom and, consequently, to doom Brian to more personal interviews with the priest.

At the other side of the chart we find misreporting. Whilst underreporting refers to the omission of information, misreporting has to do with the inclusion of false facts or events. In that sense, Odran is quite reliable, for he does not present false episodes as if they were true—his unreliability is mainly based on underreporting and misreading instead. Nonetheless, there are moments in which he is not completely sure of the accuracy of his memory, as when he

says “if I’m recalling these events correctly” (135), or in other instances in his interview with Aidan, when Odran tries to convince himself and his nephew that he did not know about Tom’s true nature and that, had he even suspected, he would never have permitted Tom’s abuse: “Do you think that if I’d guessed what he was like I would have left him alone with you?” (439). However, by the time Aidan’s assault happened in 1994, Odran had enough suspicions and even some proof to condemn Tom or at least to have some doubts about him, the episode with Brian Kilduff having taken place in 1990. He is misreporting his knowledge of Tom here, in his claim that he never suspected him but, as we learn at the end of the novel, he had realized it even if he had concealed it from his mind.

As I anticipated above, Odran’s main fault is his underreading and underregarding, given the inaccurate or deficient interpretation he makes of some events surrounding him. The evaluation of Tom is quite poor and incomplete, for which both character-Odran and narrator-Odran are to blame. The former is too naïve to properly understand or successfully evaluate certain events, whilst the latter does not correct the former’s misjudgements. Therefore, he is both underreading and misregarding Tom’s character, as in the following example: “We had stayed as cell-mates through all that time and had got to know each other as well as only those thrust into such close proximity—seminarians, astronauts or prisoners—can” (246). His misregarding here refers to his misunderstanding of Tom’s true character, since he claims to know him extremely well, while the end of the novel proves otherwise.

In this regard, Odran and Tom’s friendship requires more expanding. How much are we told about it? In her review of the novel, Jennifer Bort Yacovissi claims that “we never see what bonds them beyond proximity and time, and perhaps that is truly all that is there, and it is Odran who mistakenly equates time with closeness.” Indeed, we do not witness their friendship

except for the latter's visits to Tom from parish to parish and the mention of the letters they sent each other throughout the years, which we do not get to see either. More significantly, Odran's assertion to have known Tom perfectly proves to be an extreme overstatement and a misreading of Tom's character. Along these lines, Odran's misunderstanding of Tom's character does not only lie in his inability to realize that Tom is a paedophile, but it also includes Tom's childhood. When Tom reveals to Odran his traumatic childhood in Wexford, Odran displays once again his innocence and misreads what Tom is insinuating:

He said that from the age of nine to the day he left for Wexford, he was either woken after midnight by his father or he woke himself, in anticipation of the man coming through the door.

'What was he doing there?' I asked him and he turned away.

'Ah, Odran,' was all he said. (248)

The reader can infer the implication of the sexual abuse Tom suffered,<sup>171</sup> but Odran seems to completely miss the hint, which explains his unreliability in the axis of knowledge/perception.

Later on, Odran falls into a similar misconception when Hannah deliriously hints at Tom's abuse of Aidan:

'He'll never forgive me. But sure he'd been drinking, hadn't he? He couldn't have driven home with drink on him.'

'When did Aidan try to drive with drink on him?' I asked.

'Not Aidan,' said Jonas quietly. 'She doesn't mean him.' (310)

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<sup>171</sup> This also links Tom Cardle to the figure of Father O'Grady in Berg's documentary *Deliver Us from Evil*, since it is revealed at the end of it that Father O'Grady was also sexually abused by his older brother and visiting priests. As is discussed in the next section, the intention of *A History of Loneliness*, as that of the documentary, is never to justify their actions because of the fact that they had also been abused as children.

Once again, character-Odran misreads the conversation and thinks Hannah is talking about Aidan having drunk, when she is actually talking about Tom the night he assaulted Aidan back in 1994. Narrator-Odran, in retrospect, understands this conversation properly but still does not clarify Hannah's real meaning. Consequently, character-Odran is misreading the scene while narrator-Odran is underreporting it. The same happens with the scene of the night of the abuse, when Tom and Aidan are seeing Odran off as he goes back home on the night of his mother's funeral: "when I reached the door of my car I looked back and there he was, standing in the doorway next to Tom, who had a hand on his shoulder, my nephew waving so hard that I thought his arm might fall off" (353). Odran is constantly misreading certain scenes or behaviours, since he does not fully comprehend the meaning of this scene, for example, and therefore does not offer an accurate evaluation of the moment and its consequences. Character-Odran, given the suspicions he holds at this point in the narrative, could have expanded on his thoughts of the scene but instead leaves the reader to interpret it under their own uncertainties. On the other hand, narrator-Odran, who knows the implications of that night, does not clarify the real meaning of the scene yet but just adds that "that was the last [he] ever saw of [...] *that* Aidan" (353, emphasis in the original), in a clear example of underreporting.

The same could be said of Aidan's hostility towards his uncle, since Odran also misreads his nephew's anger and resentment. He primarily does not understand why he behaves that way, when he has done nothing to offend him in any way, or so he thinks. Narrator-Odran, once again, could intercede and explain the real reasons for Aidan's hostility, but decides against it. However, we as readers can infer more meaning than what we are given, for we have some hints about Odran's involvement in Aidan's anger. Why would it be then that Aidan does not want to contact his uncle, avoids him, and even

Jonas does not feel entitled to give Odran Aidan's phone number?<sup>172</sup> Nonetheless, Odran's misreading goes further to reach Aidan's anger altogether and his sudden change from a lively boy to an angry and depressed young man. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator introduces Aidan as follows: "One day, without warning, he had turned from being a cheerful and extrovert boy, something of a precocious entertainer, to a distant and angry presence in Hannah and Kristian's house" (11). I would argue that character-Odran shows his unreliability here in his little understanding of Aidan's real motives to be angry, whilst narrator-Odran prefers to leave the reader outside the knowledge he now holds. As is seen with the aforementioned examples, the whole novel revolves around the differences between character-Odran, who misunderstands events and behaviours (or claims to do so), and narrator-Odran, who does not clarify despite the knowledge he holds *a posteriori*.

Our analysis has hitherto been based on Phelan and Martin's terminology. Phelan, however, also discusses the relationship between unreliability and the reader in his distinction between estranging and bonding unreliability. As has been stated, estranging unreliability leaves narrator and reader far away from each other, since the reader recognizes the narrator's errors and does not remain alongside its interpretations. In bonding unreliability, on the other hand, the reader endorses the narrator's faults, recognizing that they are due to the narrator's naïveté or lack of judgment, for instance, making the reader fonder of him/her. This is the case of *A History of Loneliness*. Although the reader might disapprove of Odran and the mistakes he commits throughout the narrative, rejecting his lack of agency, this is not due to his unreliability—it is not his prime goal to be untrustworthy—but to his mistaken values. As mentioned, the reader should bear in mind when judging Odran the different positions they find themselves in and the limited knowledge

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<sup>172</sup> A second-time reader, of course, understands the situation better and is able to see more than meets the eye in these encounters.

about the amount of scandals and their cover-ups that Odran holds throughout his past.

Even if Odran's unreliability does not primarily appear in the axis of facts/events as can be the case with other contemporary unreliable narrators such as Victor in Doyle's *Smile*, for example, Odran's unreliability mirrors that of Stevens in Ishiguro's novel in their misreading and misjudgements of actions and characters around them. Boyne's narrator misunderstands certain scenes he witnesses, and his moral or ethical judgements of several characters are manipulated by his naiveté and innocence, which prevent him from being completely accurate and trustworthy. His self-deception also includes the manipulation of the reader given the retrospective nature of the narrative, hence the distinction between narrator-Odran and character-Odran that has been suggested.

In balance, character-Odran's faults lie in his misreading of certain events and characters, his misunderstandings and misconceptions, driven by his extreme innocence and inexperience. Narrator-Odran, on the other hand, is first and foremost underreporting his past, since he comes from an advantageous and omniscient position but still leaves the reader outside the denouement of the narrative.

## 7.2. "What was I? Even I didn't know": identity and masculinities

Identity is especially relevant in *A History of Loneliness* in the character of Father Odran Yates. His identity can be divided into his national identity as an Irish man, his community identity as a member of the priesthood, and his individual identity as a combination of the two. Thus, he is meaningfully a priest but delays letting his reader know, and indeed he will be treated significantly different as such depending on the moment in time. Besides, he does not



choose to become a priest but is almost forced into the priesthood by his mother.<sup>173</sup> This emphasises Odran's passivity, not only in the choice of his own career but also in the events taking place around him. In a way, he literally does nothing throughout his whole life.

To begin with, the start of the novel does not state clearly what Odran does for a living. His nephew Aidan asks at one point: "Listen to me, you. Do you never think you wasted your life, no? Do you never wish you could go back and live it all over again? Do everything differently? Be a normal man instead of what you are?" (12). At this moment, the reader is unaware of Odran's profession, which he does not reveal until chapter two, suggesting that Odran is ashamed of what he does and delays the revelation for a chapter at least. Besides, the quotation above may also suggest that Odran's profession is not a 'normal' one, but it may imply something suspicious about it, even criminal. This way, it also shows Aidan's contempt towards his uncle and what he represents since, unbeknownst to Odran himself, Aidan has been a victim of sexual abuse by a member of the clergy. It can be assumed, therefore, that he unavoidably links his uncle to Tom and sees every priest despicable and the life in the church loathsome. The response to Aidan's question, nonetheless, is that "at the centre of [Odran's] life was a feeling of great contentment" (12), which may seem rather paradoxical—or unreliable—if juxtaposed against the whole novel, since at the end of it he claims otherwise, having eventually admitted to his complicity in the scandals.

Related to his profession, moreover, Odran is asked by Archbishop Cordington not to let people know that he is related to Jonas (his nephew and Aidan's brother), because "it wouldn't look good" (52). It is ironic that Jonas, being a successful writer,<sup>174</sup> may be a greater source of shame than being a

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<sup>173</sup> As has been already discussed, having a priest in the family was something to be proud of in the Ireland of the second half of the twentieth century.

<sup>174</sup> Jonas is a similar character to the one we encounter in *The Heart's Invisible Furies* with Ignac, Cyril's adoptive son. First, they are both writers but, most importantly, they inspire a

priest in Ireland in the twenty-first century, taking all the scandals into account.<sup>175</sup> Indeed, as mentioned above, the reader (and probably Odran himself) cannot be really sure of the extent of Odran's calling to become a priest. It is his mother that insists on his joining the Church, especially after his father's and brother's deaths, claiming that he has a vocation. At some point, he analyses it thus:

The truth was that *if I had a vocation, which Mam had said that I had*, then I wanted to explore it privately. I wanted to understand who I was and why I had been chosen for this life and what I could offer the world from within it. That did not seem to me to be a bad ambition in itself. (280, emphasis added)

As emphasised in the quotation, Odran is not extremely certain of the choice he made, or whether his identity is something he himself chose. During his year in Rome, doubts arise, and he is tempted by a secular life where he can marry and have children. However, at the end of the day it seems to be a matter of settling for a life someone else has chosen for him, of making as little trouble as possible, tiptoeing through his life as if it was a stranger's. The same could be applied to his lack of involvement in the scandals of the Church, his desire not to be involved in matters as troublesome. In this sense, not only does he question his complicity in the cover-ups at the end of the novel, but he also continues to analyse his identity: "Had I really discovered my vocation for myself, I asked myself. Had I ever woken with a sense of it or was it merely my mother who had forced it upon me?" (370). Significantly, he keeps

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sense of paternal duty in the main character (also represented by Aidan in *A History of Loneliness*).

<sup>175</sup> This is not Boyne's first and only attempt at irony, since Odran also claims that "[t]here was a problem with my sight in infancy which provoked fears that I might become blind in later life" (58), in a clear foreshadowing statement.

questioning himself: “Twenty-three years old. A boy. A man. What was I? Even I didn’t know” (371).

A clear indicator of his identity is his clothing. There is a significant difference between the way Odran is treated in the 1980s (as seen in the anecdote of the train) and in the 2000s, during the incident of the lost boy in the department store or that of the coffee shop.<sup>176</sup> In both, identified by his clothing, he was relegated to his identity as a priest and his belonging to the Catholic Church, turning him unavoidably and unjustly into an abusive father. In his trial, Tom Cardle follows the same line of thought and decides to appear without his clerical clothes:

It crossed my mind then that Tom had chosen not to wear his priest’s clothing today but appeared as a layman and I wondered about the thought process that had gone into his decision. Did he—or his lawyers—think that the jury would automatically think badly of him if he was clad in clerical garb? [...] Or did he simply not feel like a priest any more? (391)<sup>177</sup>

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Odran himself also considers leaving aside his cassock and other religious clothing once the scandals have been made public:

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<sup>176</sup> Something similar happens in John Michael McDonagh’s film *Calvary*, which presents a priest from a small village in Sligo (Ireland) undergoing some of the prejudice Odran also suffers from. For instance, he meets a young girl in the street and starts a conversation with her, until her father arrives and shouts angrily and frightenedly at him, wanting to know what he was saying to her. The approach of *Calvary* to the scandals of sexual abuse within the Irish Catholic Church is similar to that of *A History of Loneliness*, since both works present a ‘good priest’ being blamed for the crimes of others in their institution, as well as being discriminated against or prejudiced for that same reason.

<sup>177</sup> Once again, there are some significant similarities to Berg’s *Deliver Us from Evil*. During the whole documentary, O’Grady appears as a layman, although that may make sense given he is not part of the clergy anymore. On the contrary, the rest of the members of the clergy that are accused of concealment, mainly Father Roger Mahony, do appear in their clerical clothes just as Odran does.

It was a mistake to wear my clerical clothes to the first day of Tom Cardle's trial; I should have chosen something non-descript that wouldn't draw attention to my position within the Church. [...] But then I had been dressing in my black suit and white collar every day for more than thirty years so it had become something like a second skin to me. (380)

Indeed, Odran's identity is linked to his being a priest and, after thirty years and even if he is not certain of the truth of his vocation, he cannot conceive his life out of his clerical clothes. Significantly, the only moment he considers best not "to wear the symbols of [his] profession" is when he visits Aidan in Norway, alluding that it "could prove a catastrophic error of judgement" (408).

Notwithstanding, even if Odran is clearly identified as a priest and cannot conceive his life out of the clergy, he has never truly behaved as a priest. He has spent most of his life being a teacher and a librarian who also happened to be a priest. Tom says as much: "'A good priest?' he asked. 'Is that what you think you are? But sure, Odran, you're hardly a priest at all.' [...] 'You call yourself a priest, do you? You're not a priest. You never were'" (464). This seems to prove Odran's lack of vocation, since he did not really lead the life a true priest would have.

Lately, the Catholic Church has brought upon itself the stigma of being associated to cases of sexual abuse, especially in Ireland. Harry Ferguson argues that there have been cases of sexual abuse by farmers, businessmen, and fathers in Ireland (249), but the linkage of paedophilia and the Church is much stronger:

The intense focus on the sexuality of priests constitutes a selective response to recent disclosures of sexual abuse which not only raise issues for the church, but serious questions about men, masculinity, the family, sexuality, and organizations in general. In constructing the debate in terms of clerical celibacy

and the 'paedophile priest', attention is deflected from the fundamental issues that men from *all* social backgrounds commit such crimes of violence and are policed by a range of organizations that are male dominated. (Ferguson 250, emphasis in the original)

For this author, the term of the 'paedophile priest' carries implications against an "organisation (the Catholic Church), a male role (priest) and [...] the decision about sexuality (celibacy)," implying there is something doubly wrong in them (Ferguson 253).

As mentioned at the beginning, it could even be the case that the first-time reader starts the novel with a different idea of Odran and to where the novel itself may lead. Odran himself questions: "Hadn't the two words *paedophile* and *priest* become irrevocably attached to each other in some unholy way?" (403, emphasis in the original).<sup>178</sup> I would argue, however, that not only are those two terms linked, but it could also be added a third—Ireland itself. *A History of Loneliness* opens in a relevant and shocking way: "I did not become ashamed of being Irish until I was well into the middle years of my life" (9). Meaningfully, Odran is not ashamed of being a priest (if we regard all the connotations linked to the word), but rather of being Irish, contrary to what studies show regarding the Irish and their pride in their identity, which even "increased during the 1990s" (Fahey *et al.* 82). Furthermore, even if "the majority of the Catholic population [...] are still more positive than negative in their expressions of confidence in the church" (Fahey *et al.* 220), confidence in the Catholic church has weakened significantly. Indeed, the cases of sexual abuse and cover-ups in Ireland have been well-known worldwide, and it is a stigma that will take decades for the country to overcome.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> For more on this, see Ferguson (1995) and McGarry (2003).

<sup>179</sup> Another instance can be seen in John Patrick Shanley's Tony Award-winning play *Doubt: A Parable* (2004). Set in New York, the play presents teacher Father Brendan Flynn, accused of being involved with the children in a school. Despite its American setting, the name Flynn implies his Irish roots since, according to an analysis of Irish surnames, Flynn comes among

But apart from being Irish, Odran is first and foremost a man. He does not embody the traditional stereotypes attributed to masculinity, discussed in previous chapters, since he is everything but strong, reliable and in control.<sup>180</sup> He even claims that he is not “an ambitious lad” (252), something also attributed to manhood, and he is chosen for a position in Rome that requires “brains, reliability and a great deal of discretion” (252). In terms of the Church, Odran fits those requirements throughout most of his life.

Moreover, when asked what he thinks of himself in terms of being a man (when he is twenty-three), he replies thus: “I feel sometimes [...] that until my ordination I will remain a boy” (266). Odran does not seem to accept that his “childhood was behind [him]” (266), unwilling to grow up and be forced to confront his identity as an adult man. The Italian waitress accuses him of the same thing when she finally confronts him: “You think I would give this to a *boy* like you?” (368, emphasis added). And yet, in a way, his innocence and naïveté make him a boy still, a child who has not fully grown up.

Furthermore, Odran could even be considered a coward for not coming forward and denouncing the crimes taking place around him. Thus, Odran is a scared figure, unable to confront the injustices around him—something that

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the fifty most frequent in Ireland (<<https://irelandroots.com/flynn.htm>> (Accessed 5 Sept 2021)), and indeed the actor who played this role at the world premiere was Brian F. O’Byrne, born in Co. Cavan. Why was an Irish character and Irish actor chosen to portray a paedophilic priest? Also, for the film adaptation of the play, directed by John Patrick Shanley himself, Philip Seymour Hoffman was cast as Fr Brendan Flynn. Hoffman has been described as a “proud Irish American” (McCarthy, n.pag.), therefore the Irish origin of the character is clear. Furthermore, references to abuse, the Church, and Ireland are also constant in playwright Martin McDonagh’s work. In *The Lonesome West* (1997), Coleman tries to soften Father Welsh’s belief of his not being a good priest by claiming that “you don’t go abusing five-year olds so, sure, doesn’t that give you a head-start over half the priests in Ireland?” (McDonagh 135). Something similar appears in the British TV show *Peaky Blinders* (2013) with Father Hughes in Season 3. The viewers know he is an evil character, and every allusion points towards the bad deeds of his past in a school—and nothing more is necessary for the audience to condemn him as a child molester, emphasised by scenes of him playing with children. It is clear that Hugues comes from Ireland, even if the actor portraying the role, Paddy Considine, is British but with Irish descendants. Thus, as seen by the examples mentioned, one of the current stereotypes of the Irish priest is his being a paedophile. As commented above, it is significant that Boyne chooses an ‘innocent’ protagonist for his novel—a priest that, despite his guilt and complicity, ends up being a victim as well.

<sup>180</sup> Besides, his cassock (dress-like) also makes him appear more feminine.

haunts him for all his life. It is only in old age when he can admit to his past silence—only in old age has he achieved the necessary maturity to come to terms with his life and his mistakes.

Odran's aging in Ireland in the twentieth century could not have been an easy one. His childhood was troubled, as he exemplifies with the death of his brother and father, and was left to be the man of the house, in charge of his old mother and sister. As has been mentioned in the chapter devoted to masculinities, the father figure is of extreme importance in the upbringing of a child—especially a boy. Odran grew up with an alcoholic father who resented his family for preventing him from following his vocation of becoming an actor. Odran's father's final revenge is to drown along his own son in order to punish his family the hardest way he could think of. The masculine role model Odran was left to follow, then, is a troubled, revengeful, coward, and selfish man who put his own wishes before anyone else's.

Odran himself becomes a father later in life, even if merely in a religious sense. His masculinity, or lack of it, might echo his own father's—he is inevitably coward and scared, faced with the demons of his father but becoming him anyway. Odran, if unwillingly, also draws children to misery with his own silence and becomes as selfish as his father was. Ironically, he confronts Tom Cardle at the end of the novel and claims that Cardle's own troubled childhood cannot be used as justification for his crimes in later life—but something similar could also be said of Odran himself.

Thus, Odran presents the masculinity that the Church allows him to. He is silent, reserved, blind—attributes the Church is grateful for. Apart from his brief romance with Katherine Summers when he is a teenager, the only moment in which he presents a masculinity the Church dismisses is his infatuation with the Italian waitress in Rome. Before Rome, he claims never to have

experienced profound attraction before. [...] Unlike Tom Cardle and some of the other boys at the seminary in Dublin, I didn't find myself racked with desire through those lonely nights, tossing and turning as I longed for a woman to do those things to me that other boys of my age dreamed of. (260)

Since his childhood and adolescence, Odran is not the typical boy—nor will he be the typical man in later life. He even wonders “whether perhaps there was something wrong with me, an element of my personality that had been omitted during my creation” (260). But in Rome he shows some signs of masculinity in his obsession with a woman, the first sign of his hidden sexuality: “This, I realized, is what normal men feel. You're not different at all, Odran, I told myself. You're just like everyone else” (262). Thus, for him this infatuation is proof of his masculinity, of his being a ‘normal man’. His fears of being different are swept away when he starts to behave like a heterosexual man—obsessed with a woman.

In terms of the analysis of masculinities in the novel, other male characters should be discussed here, namely Tom Cardle and his father, and Odran's nephew Aidan.

Tom Cardle is presented in the narrative as the protagonist's best friend—someone we believe we can trust, but who deceives us ultimately. The core of his identity as a man resides in his abuse of young children, perhaps in an attempt to hide his latent homosexuality. The priesthood and sexuality are linked here in the case of Tom, as we have seen previously in *A Son Called Gabriel*. As has been mentioned in the case of Odran, the Church condemns any sign of sexuality also for Tom—but he does not accept it and looks for comfort in the wrong place.

At the end of the novel, Tom tries to excuse himself alluding to his troubled childhood. Tom's father was also an abusive man, violent even, who abused of his own son (or so the narrative suggests) and beat him also



physically: “his father would kill him if he did [leave the seminary], and the beating that he had received after running away five years previously was proof enough of that” (247). The theories on fatherhood I have alluded to above suggest that the father figure is highly influential for the son, and Boyne in this novel seems to agree with this view. Both Odran and Tom mirror their fathers later in their lives, echoing their mistakes. However, Boyne also makes clear that he does not agree with the possibility of justification for a difficult childhood, as seen in the section devoted to the issue of guilt.

Moreover, it seems that the father figures in this novel, namely Odran’s and Tom’s fathers, embody a more stereotypical image of manhood than Odran and Tom do. They are both violent, unloving, and abusing. According to Segal:

The question of why it is men, and most often fathers or step-fathers, who sexually abuse children is not addressed. Mothers, held responsible for internal family dynamics, are here blamed as both collusive with men’s abuse, and culpable—through lack of attention to husband’s sexual needs—for its initial occurrence. (55)

Something similar happens in the case of these two father figures. Mr Yates’s anger is driven towards his family, namely his own wife, for crushing his dreams. Odran’s mother is thus to blame—in his view—for Mr Yates’s violence and the eventual death of their son Cahal. In the case of Mr Cardle, the reader does not get much insight on what drives him to abuse his own son. As for Tom, however, I believe we could argue that the ‘lack of attention’ attributed to the wives of abusive men can be linked here to religious celibacy, something Tom disagrees with.<sup>181</sup> As seems to be the case with Odran, Tom has not

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<sup>181</sup> Needless to say, neither celibacy nor the wife’s lack of attention justify in any way any kind of abuse, as clarified in the novel.

chosen the priesthood himself either. Odran, on the one hand, does not rebel against it but accepts his fate in silence. Tom, on the other hand, lives a life he despises but is unable to distance himself from the image of his own father.

The other male figure worth exploring is Odran's nephew Aidan. Aidan is presented at first as a lively young boy, described as "a scream. So full of life. You'd never stop laughing when he's around. [...] Aidan was the life and soul of any gathering with his impressions and his jokes and the way he'd belt out a song at a party without even being asked" (337). Odran's nephew is truly adored by everyone (349) but one day, unexpectedly, he changes completely and becomes an angry and resentful teenager who hates his uncle. The reader, as did his own family, can attribute his change to age—after all, he is only an early teenager. However, it is later revealed in the novel that Aidan suffers sexual abuse from Tom Cardle the night of Mrs Yates's funeral, which will deeply change him.<sup>182</sup>

As a man, therefore, Aidan presents great masculine aggressivity and anger, also probably increased by his father's death. At least that is the image that we get of him until the end of the novel, when Odran reunites with him in Norway and finds him as head of a loving family, only possible after years of therapy. Aidan is now forgiving, a caring father and husband who has left the past behind and has succeeded in building a new, better life. In this sense, he does not display the stereotypically male traits of violence or aggressivity as he had before, but relates more to the 'new father,' a type of new masculinity that, as has been discussed in chapter three, is more in keeping with the idea of a caring and attentive father.

For the sake of our analysis, the most interesting aspect of the character of Aidan is his relationship with his uncle. Odran is the only uncle-figure in Aidan's and Jonas's lives, given that their paternal family is all living in Norway

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<sup>182</sup> More discussion is devoted to this when I deal with guilt and trauma in the next section.

and their father died when they were young. The narrator shows Aidan's love towards his 'Uncle Odie,' which later turns into resentment when Aidan believes that Odran is partly to blame for his abuse. Later in Aidan's life, Odran becomes the only father figure in his nephew's lives, and so I would argue that Aidan's resentment of Odran—and Odran's guilt—also comes from their view of Odran as, somehow, Aidan's father: "I am overwhelmed by guilt and shame. [...] I was your uncle. [...] I should have looked out for you. I should have protected you" (439). Thus, Odran feels guilty for what happened to Aidan as if he had failed in his role as uncle/father. In a way, he has also failed in his role as Father—he was supposed to protect his whole flock, both his blood and religious families. Throughout the novel, Odran had been shown as a cold-hearted individual, mainly in terms of the knowledge he had of the abuses but did not share—which involved the lives of many children and adults. His cowardice silences him, also regarding the expression of emotion. However, when he reunites with Aidan in Norway, decades of silences and injustices, only triggered by the knowledge that his own nephew was also a victim of the actions of the Church, give way to a flow of tears and pain (431). Both his silent cowardice and the final expression of emotion show that a new type of man is present in Odran, one who is not reliable or in control but who reaches old age with the necessity of confronting his past and reaching some kind of closure.

In essence, *A History of Loneliness* is also the narrative of a quest for identity. Through his narration, Odran's intention is not only to atone for his mistakes, but also to find himself in the meantime. Will he be able to admit to his guilt or will he keep on turning a deaf ear to the signs around him? Only at the end of his life does he manage to admit to his complicity in the cover-ups, as so many members of the Church had done at the time,<sup>183</sup> and to apologize to the closest person he has hurt—his nephew Aidan. In the end, it all boils

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<sup>183</sup> See chapter two for more on this.

down to his identity as an Irish priest, and the consequences attached to that label nowadays.

### 7.3. “Did I have blame of my own to carry here?”: guilt and trauma

As the previous sections suggest, the main factor that triggers Odran’s unreliability is his guilt for inaction from his childhood onwards, when he was a victim of two main traumatic events, namely his father’s and brother’s deaths and his sexual abuse. These events, even if Odran has tried to hide them in the depth of his mind, keep making appearances in his life, preventing him from working through his trauma and moving on.

Trauma theorists such as Freud, Caruth or Miller allude to the continuous repetition of the traumatic event, or the victim’s association of the memory of the past event to a similar incident. In the case of *A History of Loneliness*, Odran relives the traumatic events in his life in several moments of the novel. First, I have categorized as traumatic his father’s and brother’s deaths.<sup>184</sup> Indeed, Odran’s alcoholic and depressed father chooses to take revenge on his wife (he believes he failed in his career as an actor because of her) by drowning their youngest son in the Irish Sea, and then committing suicide. Apart from the obvious trauma inflicted by the deaths of two of the closest members of his family, Odran has also deep feelings of guilt for that incident, since his father had asked him first to go for a swim. Had he not refused, he would have been the one drowning instead of his younger brother Cahal, and that is something that haunts him for the rest of his life: “I blamed myself for not accompanying my father when first asked” (290). This is known as survivor

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<sup>184</sup> It should be mentioned here the choice made by the publishing house regarding the image for the cover. In most of the editions I have seen, the recurring images for the cover include a beach, a young kid and even the figures of what could be seen as a father and son walking towards the sea, emphasising this traumatic event as the main theme of the novel, instead of focusing on its religious aspect (which other covers also do).

guilt, a term linked to PTSD and having to do with those individuals who feel guilty for having survived when others did not or for the things they had to do in order to survive, especially used for Holocaust or Hiroshima survivors (Murray 600). In this case, Odran could be said to be suffering from survivor guilt since, in his mind, he was the one 'destined' to die along his father instead of his little brother.

Odran, moreover, seems incapable of discussing the event, as proven by the fact that he keeps delaying the revelation of the incident, as I have been commenting above. The reader might guess that something dreadful happened, but it takes Odran a few chapters to recount the event in full and, when he does, he does not even claim his shame as guilt, not until two hundred pages later. This might be due to his inability to fully comprehend this first traumatic event, which forces him to give it the meaning he can cope with, the explanation he can understand and accept:

I have thought of this a hundred times, a thousand times, ten thousand times over the years between then and now and have resolved it in my mind by saying that this man, my father, was not in his right head at the time, that he was ill [...]. I tell myself this because to think otherwise would open up a sea of pain that would swallow me as easily as the Irish Sea swallowed my younger brother.  
(82-3)

Even if this is not the actual truth—which we will never know for sure—Odran needs to create a version of the event that he can accept and that may allow him to heal, preventing too much pain. He continues claiming: "That's what I believe anyway. I have no way of knowing" (84).

The deaths of Odran's father and brother reveal themselves as traumatic in the recollections and hallucinations he suffers:

And I watched as the father in the group stood up and spun around, [...] declaring that he was going to teach this boy to swim or what good was being down here at all, and I felt a surge of fright and ran towards them, calling to the man to stop, to come back, to let go of that child's hand and send him back to his family. [...] the closer I got the more their smiles faded, and with them their legs and arms and heads and bodies until they disappeared altogether, for of course they hadn't been there at all. They hadn't been there in twenty-six years and it was too late to go calling for any of them now. (295)

This is the constant repetition we were alluding to—it is when Odran goes back to Wexford to visit Tom that he relives the incident from his childhood, making his trauma almost palpable.

Something similar happens with his second traumatic event: the abuse he suffered by a priest when still a teenager.<sup>185</sup> As has been mentioned when dealing with unreliability and underreporting, the sexual abuse Odran suffered as a sixteen-year-old is not fully comprehended at the moment of the occurrence—he reckons he fainted but does not provide further details, probably because the reader does not need them to fill in the blanks. It is rather when he is faced with a similar situation in the future—his final encounter with the Italian waitress—that he recognizes what happened for what it really was. Once again, Odran's main goal throughout his life is to try to avoid certain painful moments by hiding from them, avoiding confrontation, as he himself admits in this case: "Father Haughton. I felt my stomach turn at the memory of it. He was not someone I ever thought about. I had made a point of trying to

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<sup>185</sup> When dealing with trauma in this novel, the trauma suffered by victims of sexual abuse cannot be left unnoticed. They are represented by Aidan or Tom himself, along with Brian Kilduff or other victims, but they are ever-present in the mind of the reader. As seen above, Boyne has argued that his intention with the novel was to "reconsider the lives of all those who have suffered" (*The Guardian*, 2014). Indeed, victims of sexual abuse retain a vast array of sequelae: physical (chronic pain, eating disorders, depression, or drug-abuse), sexual ("disturbances of desire" or "gynecologic problems") or psychological (Committee on Health Care 2). The latter include emotions such as "fear, shame, humiliation, guilt, and self-blame" (2), which resemble those encountered by abused characters in the novel.

forget” (170). His reaction to trauma, therefore, is based on non-confrontation instead of working through it, which prevents him from healing. Needless to say, this non-confrontation philosophy of his is what makes him complicit in Tom’s and other priests’ crimes.

Odran is not the only character suffering from childhood trauma in the novel. The most obvious example is that of Aidan, Odran’s nephew, who changes drastically from a cheerful young boy to an angry and serious teenager after he is sexually abused by Tom in 1994. Odran is not able until almost the end of the novel to put together all the pieces of the puzzle and to guess what the problem with his nephew is, but on a second reading there are some hints throughout that point towards the truth of Aidan’s transformation, such as his change of mood when Tom is mentioned:

‘How is Father Tom?’ asked Hannah, but I waved away the question; we were here to talk about Aidan.

‘I need to go to the bathroom,’ said Aidan, *jumping up as if he was about to be sick*, and I wondered whether this was a ruse on his part to put an end to the conversation. (229, emphasis added)

Clearly, Odran’s previous guilt is made extensive here to his relationship with his nephews and his negligence as an uncle. He himself claims that “[o]ne of my great failings in life—and I realize this as I get older—is what a terrible uncle I was to those two boys. [...] I had not been truly present in their lives, had never given them a reason to care for me” (225-6). More specifically, his guilt has to do with his nephew’s trauma, with his inability to see what was happening in his own family. Besides, it was Odran who allowed Tom to sleep in Hannah’s home, therefore he feels utterly responsible for Tom’s misconduct in a moment when he had some suspicions as to Tom’s behaviour. He claims as much when he meets Aidan again after years of his avoiding his uncle: “In

a moment I felt the build-up of twenty years of lies and deceit, of trauma and cruelty, and recognized my hand in it, for had I not left that man alone with my nephew to do whatever he wanted with him?" (431).

Tom also suffered abuse in his childhood by his own father; as we have mentioned above, Tom hints as much but Odran does not understand the implications of his allegations at the time. Boyne cleverly juxtaposes Odran's and Tom's childhood traumas to tackle the issue of responsibility. What degree of responsibility can be blamed on their childhood traumas regarding their behaviours as adults?

Was there a way to blame [Tom's] father, who had surely damaged him in some way, and if there was, would that even be fair, for surely a man was responsible for his own actions, regardless of what had happened to him growing up. Bad things, awful things, could be visited upon you in your youth—I knew that as well as anyone—but I did not mean that you allowed yourself to act without conscience. (397)

Odran's (and Aidan's) childhood abuse and their later behaviour in adulthood exemplify that trauma cannot be used to justify immoral behaviour, as Tom is trying to do:

'You don't have the first concept of what my childhood was like. Of all the things that happened to me in the years before I arrived at Clonliffe. None.'

'And I don't want to know,' I told him. 'Nothing that happened to you back then makes anything that you did acceptable. It doesn't justify anything.' (460)

Thus, the three main characters in the novel see their traumas linked to one another. Odran feels responsible for Aidan's abuse insofar as he could have



avoided it by denouncing Tom sooner. Tom, for his part, tries to conceal his guilt by attributing his behaviour to his difficult childhood, but the novel shows the impossibility of that justification.

*A History of Loneliness* is as much about guilt as it is about trauma. One of the main themes of the novel, if not the most important one, is the concept of guilt as represented in Odran's inability to condemn the crimes taking place around him and hence his complicity in them. The most prominent feeling of guilt that Odran experiences is the recognition of his knowledge of Tom's and other priests' immoral behaviour and his failure to take action: "I had been complicit in all their crimes and people had suffered because of me. I had wasted my life. [...] in my silence, I was just as guilty as the rest of them" (471). He also admits to having had some suspicions, but at the time he simply could not believe that his best friend—someone he thought he knew well enough—could have been capable of such crimes.

One of the first moments in which Odran recognises his passivity appears when he evokes the episode in which Brian Kilduff slices Tom's tyres:

I got back to bed and didn't know what to think. But there's the lie. Because I did know what to think. Only I could not bring myself to think it. [...] And *the guilt* now, as I think of it. *The guilt. The guilt, the guilt, the guilt.* [...] It is so strong that there have been moments in recent years when I have wondered whether I should make my own way down there to Curracloe beach and let that be the end of the matter. (299-300, emphasis added)

This passage seems to suggest that Odran's guilt appears afterwards, once the crimes have been unravelled, victims have spoken out and more fingers have pointed at Tom. At the moment of the occurrence, Odran knows what to think (despite what we had been claiming regarding his utter naïveté) but

decides to remain silent, perhaps because he is not fully aware of the consequences of Tom's actions (and his own). Hence, it is in retrospect when he realizes the aftermath of the events he has been involved in and the implicature of his inaction and therefore when guilt arises.

Indeed, Odran's guilt comes as a consequence of an external provocation and reminder of his involvement in the crimes. As O'Keefe points out, guilt "is the sort of emotional state that might straightforwardly be aroused by another person (by another person's raising objections)" (68). In this case, it is Tom who reminds Odran of his complicity in his crimes, perhaps to soften any kind of remorse or responsibility he himself might have—even if he does not show it at any moment: "Are you going to pretend that that's a surprise to you?' I looked away. I could not meet his eyes. Had there been a mirror in front of me, I would not have been able to meet my own" (325). Tom seems to be trying to hide his own involvement behind Odran's inaction; by making Odran guiltier than (or at least as guilty as) him, Tom might be trying to feel better with himself and soften his guilt. In any case, even if Odran knows that he had not acted wisely and correctly throughout most part of his life, he still needs Tom to remind him that he is not as innocent as he wants to appear. Odran has successfully hidden those guilty or troubling thoughts at the back of his mind, but he reaches a point of no return when he is forced to face his demons: "So here it was at last. The moment that I had always imagined might come one day but in my silence and complicity had hidden at the very back of my mind" (324-5). Furthermore, he also has to face the testimony of a victim and his denunciation of not only the convicted priests, but also "the ones who stood by and did nothing" (387), which seems to point to Odran directly.

Besides, Odran's feelings of shame for his actions inundate the novel, especially during the events of his year in Rome:

May God forgive me, but when Pope Paul suffered a heart attack on a Sunday evening after Mass, my first thoughts were how quickly our travelling party might return to the capital. A shameful admission, but a truthful one. [...] And when I think back to that August evening when the cardinals elected one of their numbers to serve as the 263rd Pope [...], I feel shame that I was not there to see it, for of course it was a moment of history and I was caught up in more secular affairs. (272-3)

Odran's recent discovery of sexuality keeps him away from his duties and makes him miss important historical events, and that shameful behaviour, in light of his Catholic standards, still haunts him in the present day. Indeed, Eugene O'Brien argues that "Catholicism has generally seen desire, especially sexual desire, as a negative human quality in need of repression" (140). Odran's shame is not only caused by his sexual desire but also by his not being at his post on that day as a result. Hence, it is not only trauma that is linked to his year in Rome but also guilt and shame.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### JOHN BOYNE'S *THE HEART'S INVISIBLE FURIES*

John Boyne's second novel with an Irish setting, *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, is a precise depiction of a deeply religious Irish society, which restricts the freedom of the protagonists to be who they really are and to live shamelessly. The novel depicts the protagonist's long but necessary quest for identity against the oppressive Irish culture of the second half of the twentieth century. As a matter of fact, the novel was titled *Cyril Avery* in its German translation, and it was also subtitled *Who is Cyril Avery?* in the British edition, leaving thus clear the paramount importance of this search and making the whole novel revolve around this character's search for identity.

This chapter begins with the analysis of the narrator of this novel in terms of his (un)reliability, since he presents traits that could place him both in the reliable and the unreliable spectrum. This comes as a consequence of the fact that *The Heart's Invisible Furies* deals thoroughly with issues of trauma, guilt, and shame, also brought upon the characters by their own homeland. Not only Cyril but also his mother Catherine, for instance, is a victim of her time and place, as I discuss below. Guilt comes as a consequence of the silence they keep due to the shame that is imposed on them, which is ultimately the cause of a trauma that takes a lifetime to be overcome.

#### 8.1. "She would tell me years later": narration

Cyril Avery, as a narrator, appears to be typically Boyne's. He recounts his story in timespans, in this case of seven years, in a chronological manner

starting some years before he was even born.<sup>186</sup> What we find here is a homo- and even autodiegetic narrator, since the narrative is told in the first person by Cyril himself, who is a character and protagonist in his own story. As with the previous analyses, I have to make a distinction here between narrator-Cyril and character-Cyril, referring to the two different narrative perspectives we find in the text: the moment when Cyril performs more significantly as a narrator at the end of his life, and the instances when Cyril is first and foremost a character in and focalizer of his own story, holding only the knowledge he possesses at those moments.

Moreover, we should also ask ourselves whom he addresses the story to. Cyril's narratee is not clear in the text, in the sense that there are no direct addresses to the reader which would indicate their identity. Nonetheless, I would say that Cyril's narrative—with its misfortunes and little moments of joy—serves two purposes. First, it is necessary for Cyril to narrate his story to come to terms with his past, as I discuss when dealing with issues of trauma, and to understand how he, alongside Ireland, has reached the present moment. Second, his narrative could also be meant for the next generation of homosexuals—in Ireland and around the world—to understand how difficult it was for gay people before them to be accepted for who they really were. As Bertram Cohler argues regarding memoirs of gay people,

gay and lesbian readers look to the personal accounts of other gay life-writers in order to help us understand the meaning of sexual desire in their own lives, to learn about how others have dealt with issues of coming to terms with a gay identity, how they have disclosed their gay identity to family and friends, how

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<sup>186</sup> The contents of his story, then, are presented chronologically (from his pregnant mother to his old age) but it should be borne in mind that the narrator recounts the events from a present/future perspective. Consequently, what he narrates in the first chapters is probably what he last learns about himself, almost at the end of his life, although, chronologically, they are the first narrated events.

they have dealt with stigma at school and in the community and, alas, how gay men have managed issues related to the AIDS pandemic. (6)

Fiction can also serve this purpose, since “[r]eading about how men across succeeding generations have dealt with their same-sex desire may help us better understand our own sexuality and its expression in the time and place in which we live” (Cohler 7-8).<sup>187</sup> Thus, Cyril’s narrative could be meant for his grandson George, for example, so he can appreciate the trouble his grandfather has gone through in his fight against oppression in Ireland, and to understand how different his life as a homosexual man is in 2015, if compared with that of his grandfather.

The issue of Cyril’s reliability as a narrator is as complex, albeit quite different, as that of Odran in *A History of Loneliness*. First of all, I would like to start by citing James Phelan’s wise words: “Reliable and unreliable narration are neither binary opposites nor single phenomena but rather broad terms and concepts that each cover a wide range of author-narrator-audience relationships in narrative” (“Reliable, Unreliable” 94). Besides, drawing on the previously mentioned philosophy of Nietzsche, another of his famous assertions was the impossibility of complete truth or fact, since interpretation is all there is (1873).<sup>188</sup> Total reliability (let alone total unreliability), therefore, is impossible to achieve—especially for a first-person narrator. As mentioned in chapter four, homodiegetic narrators are unreliable by definition, for their views will always be biased by certain purposes or circumstances, or merely by the fact that these narrators wish to come out as well as possible. As William

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<sup>187</sup> For an excellent exploration of gay literature, see Woods (1998).

<sup>188</sup> A similar idea is present in Ramón de Campoamor’s poem “Las dos linternas”, published in *Las Doloras* (1846): “todo es según el color del cristal con que se mira” (*Biblioteca Virtual Cervantes*). Sociologist Carl Gustav Jung also agrees with this perspective: “It all depends on how we look at things, not on how they are in themselves” (66-7).

F. Riggan notes in his seminal study *Picaros, Madmen, Naifs, and Clowns: The Unreliable First-Person Narrator*, a “[f]irst-person narrator is, then, always at least potentially unreliable, in that the narrator, with these human limitations of perception and memory and assessment, may easily have missed, forgotten, or misconstrued certain incidents, words, or motives” (19-20; in Murphy 6). Thus, although some first-person narrators may be close to reaching the ‘reliable’ end of the spectrum, it is quite impossible to achieve full reliability. Cyril Avery is not an exception in this respect: even if he does not show strong signs of unreliability—his story is lineal, he admits there are certain episodes he did not witness first-hand, and he does not give any reason for the reader to hold him suspect—that does not make him fully reliable. For instance, there is a recurring anecdote about the first time Julian and Cyril met which neither of them is completely sure of how it actually happened: in the narrator’s account of the incident, Cyril claims that it was Julian who asked him if he wanted to see his penis (74), whereas Julian is constantly declaring that it was the other way round: “it may interest you that many years ago, when Cyril here and I were only children, he asked whether he could see my thing” (172; 141). The anecdote is never clarified, in the sense that the reader does not get to know who may be telling the truth, although I would argue that it is more likely that Julian, moved by his constant desire to prove his masculinity, is denying the incident so as not to appear as a homosexual—his biggest fear. This comes along the lines of what Balirano and Baker argue, that “men are forced to prove—to themselves and to others—over and again—that they are masculine” (3).<sup>189</sup>

Furthermore, a shocking remark needs to be made in this respect: the novel, especially its first part, abounds in inaccuracies and anachronisms.

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<sup>189</sup> In this sense, D. Gilmore talks about some tests of masculinity carried out in different cultures. In some the test “is sexual; in some cultures it’s a bravery issue; in others, there are rites of passage where boys are beaten, or starved, or terrified by older males in costume. Once they’ve passed the test, they are given their manhood” (“Cultures of Masculinity” 33).



Among other examples, Fidel Castro sends Charles cigars in 1952 (when he was not PM until 1959), Charles reads *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in 1952 (although the book was not published until 1962), and the “former French President George Pompidou” (129) is mentioned in 1959, even if he was not President until 1969. Mistakes of ten years are just too intrusive to be casual.<sup>190</sup> In this sense, some critics have long condemned Boyne for his lack of research—his “offensive” last novel was almost boycotted (Lonergan, 2019), and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is quite often considered historically inaccurate (Randall, 2019)—but in this occasion the mistakes are far too easily verifiable to be mere slips.<sup>191</sup> Therefore, I prefer to consider them clues as to characters’ unreliability: it could be Charles or Julian showing off (which would agree with these characters’ behaviour) or Cyril’s mistakes when remembering his past (which is also plausible since he is writing about his life at the end of his life). If this line of thought is followed, however, Cyril’s whole narrative should be reconsidered under this new perspective, that is to say considering Cyril to be an unreliable narrator given his poor memory. However, since as has just been mentioned, these inaccuracies are mainly and almost exclusively present at the beginning of the novel, I would not consider them strong enough to declare Cyril an untrustworthy narrator. I prefer to think of him as a fallible narrator instead, using Olson’s terminology.

Apart from this, the main points that trouble Cyril’s reliability are precisely his narrative of the things he has not witnessed but has been told, namely by his mother, and the fact that his story is a retrospection and a reconstruction of his life. First, there are constant allusions in the novel, especially in the first part, that point towards the role Cyril has as mere external narrator of the events that Catherine focalizes: “The Mass began in the typical fashion, *she*

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<sup>190</sup> Was Boyne going to set his novel ten years later and changed his mind at the last minute?

<sup>191</sup> I personally cannot conceive that an author (and editor) could be so careless as to miss all these inaccuracies.

*told me*" (5, emphasis added); "Her face was not scarlet, *she would tell me years later*, but pale" (7, emphasis added); "A face like a girl's, *she told me afterwards*" (17, emphasis added). These extracts exemplify the slight unreliability on Cyril's part, in the sense that, as he himself admits, he is recounting something someone else has told him—hence, what might be assessed instead is Catherine's memory and her reliability as an old woman, of which she would probably not come out well. Besides, they also slightly spoil the novel for the reader, since they show that Cyril and Catherine will reunite at some point and recognize each other.

Furthermore, there are some other comments in the novel that allude to the retrospective nature of the narrative but that also point out the innocence of character-Cyril and his choice of not clarifying certain events. For example, retrospection is clear in instances such as: "had I known at the time who Joan Crawford was, I would have said that she was giving us her very best Joan Crawford" (104). Or, even more clearly: "Had I been a little older I would have realized that she was flirting with him and he was flirting right back. Which, of course, is a little disturbing *in retrospect* considering the fact that he was just a child and she was thirty-four by then" (80, emphasis added). These comments that narrator-Cyril makes from the present/future leave clear the perspective of maturity and experience he is writing from, compared to the innocence which is characteristic of his childhood. Indeed, there are other instances where his naiveté is clear: "This baffled me and on one occasion I enquired as to where her Aunt Jemima lived, for she seemed to make it her business to be in Dublin every month for a few days" (216). Even if character-Cyril is twenty-one by now, he still does not understand that Miss Ambrosia is talking about her period. Julian also points out Cyril's innocence on some occasions, mirroring what Tom Cardle had thought of Odran in *A History of Loneliness* or Gabriel's innocence in *A Son Called Gabriel*: "'Bless your pure heart,' he said, looking at me as if I was an innocent child" (135).

As suggested by the examples chosen, narrator-Cyril is also selective of the facts and events that he chooses to clarify for the reader and the moments when he leaves the reader to do their homework understanding the novel on their own. For instance, Cyril reports his mother's appreciation of the living situation she found herself in with Jack and Seán thus: "It was no wonder, she told herself, that she heard the most peculiar sounds emerging from there during the nights. The poor boys must have had a terrible time trying to sleep" (35). Since the narrative is told in the retrospect, therefore, both Catherine and Cyril (along with the sharp reader) know that Jack and Seán are a couple and that the sounds that Catherine hears at night are not caused by their sleeping in a small bed. However, both Cyril as narrator and Catherine as focalizer choose not to clarify things at this point, showing Catherine's naiveté and keeping the suspense for those readers who have not joined up the dots yet.

As above-mentioned, the reader knows from the very first line of the novel that Cyril and his mother will be reunited eventually. For that reason, the constant encounters Cyril and Catherine have without them realising their real identities are satisfying but also frustrating for the reader. In this case, Boyne is secretly winking at the reader, since they seem to be the ones having fun at the expense of these two characters.<sup>192</sup> Once again, narrator-Cyril knows that, when he claims "I wish she'd been *my* mother" (345, emphasis in the original) referring to Catherine, he is indeed talking about his mother. In other words, narrator-Cyril could clarify character-Cyril's desire, claiming that it will come true eventually, but chooses not to—unnecessarily, in a way, because the reader is already aware of their relation—which reinforces Boyne's irony and intimacy with the reader. This game with the reader is also present in the moments when Catherine or other characters believe to see some traits in Cyril

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<sup>192</sup> Clearly, Boyne chooses not to hide Catherine's surname, for instance, leaving clear from the very beginning the real identity of the character and her relationship with the protagonist. We would be talking of a different story had Boyne chosen to keep that information from the reader, creating a revealing moment of anagnorisis at the end of the novel.

which remind them of someone they know. Catherine is constantly seeing her uncle, Cyril's father, and she even mistakes him for Kenneth when they meet at the end of the novel (641). Mrs Hennesy also sees some similarities in Cyril—"You remind me of someone but I can't think who" (118)—and, once again, narrator-Cyril and the reader know who she is talking about.

As mentioned, it should also be borne in mind that Cyril, as narrator, is recounting his life at its end, thus his own memory should also be assessed in terms of its reliability. Although there are almost no episodes in the novel in which he denies accuracy—the only one being the attack in New York, after which he claims: "I don't remember anything else after that" (507)—at the end of the novel he admits to the weakness of his recollections, which would explain the abovementioned inaccuracies: "The memories, which had always been such a part of my being, had dimmed slightly over the last twelve months. It saddened me that no strong emotions came back to me now" (683). Consequently, the whole novel should be taken sceptically, taking into consideration these instances. This notwithstanding, I would argue that Cyril is as reliable a narrator as he can possibly be, considering his involvement in the narrative.

In order to understand Cyril's reliability, I analyse now his narrative against the five factors Terence Murphy describes as a pattern to detect this phenomenon in "Defining the reliable narrator: The marked status of first-person fiction" (2012). When examining F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Murphy distinguishes the following marks of the narrator's reliability:

Nick's [the narrator in *Gatsby*] secure speaking location "back home;" his use of the middle or elegant English style; his observer-narrator status; his ethical maturity, which has been secured before the novel commences; and his retrospective re-evaluation of Jay Gatsby as the Aristotelian anagnorisis of a marked order narrative. (13-14)

First, Murphy deals with a narrator speaking ‘from home,’ mainly alluding to a “place that signals his stance of achieved personal freedom, mental stability and ethical rightness” (14). This may be said to be the case of Cyril Avery in *The Heart’s Invisible Furies*, since it is at the end of the novel, when attending his mother’s wedding, that he acknowledges to be “finally happy” (701). Both his personal life and the context in which his country finds itself is one of deserved happiness and freedom after decades of miseries. Consequently, narrator-Cyril and character-Cyril merge at this point, from a safe place they can call home.

Second, Murphy discusses the narrator’s prose, claiming that “the unmarked style of reliable narration is the elegant or middle style” (14), and alluding also to “the difficulty of conversing in completely fluent, adequately formed sentences for pages at a time” but being this “linguistic convention [...] a key defining characteristic of the reliable narrative” (14). Unlike what was said when dealing with unreliability,<sup>193</sup> in Cyril’s narrative there are barely any indicators of inaccuracy—there is almost nothing in the text that could point towards Cyril’s unreliability (except for the few examples mentioned above). For instance, we do not find here the chaotic narrative we encounter in *A History of Loneliness*. Cyril’s narration is more linear and clearer and his prose, following Murphy’s distinction, reinforces his reliability.

The third factor discussed by Murphy, however, cannot be applied to Cyril—which links to my previous distrust of his reliability. In the case of *The Great Gatsby*, the novel Murphy uses to exemplify his theory, Nick Carraway is not the protagonist of the narrative, but he is recounting the lives of the people around him, namely Gatsby and Daisy. Murphy claims in this regard that “the first-person narrator’s role in the plot is strictly limited” (15). However,

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<sup>193</sup> See chapter 4. Narration (4.2.5.) for an analysis of the textual evidence to mark a narrator as unreliable.

this not so in *The Heart's Invisible Furies* because Cyril is both the narrator and the main protagonist of his story and, consequently, he is clearly biased in the perspective he chooses to offer. Although this, as has been discussed, does not make him utterly and unavoidably unreliable, it does prevent him from being completely reliable.

Fourth, critics like Murphy (15) or Booth (176) agree that, in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick could not have been reliable unless confronted with an experience such as that of the First World War. At the moment of his recounting the story, Nick has matured and succeeded in “a significant moral trial” (Murphy 16), which has meant a transformation “necessary in order for Nick to be in a position to be able to re-evaluate the character of Jay Gatsby” (16). In a similar manner, so has Cyril. Although it would be uncalled-for to compare the First World War to the experience of being a homosexual in Ireland during the second half of the twentieth century, I would argue that Cyril’s life has been a constant challenge resulting in a deep morality and a reinforcement of his maturity, which is present from his childhood. From this perspective, it is easy to trust Cyril in his assertions, for the reader knows that his struggle strengthens his reliability and his unnecessary attempt at unreliability.

Finally, Murphy’s fifth factor alludes to Nick’s “retrospective re-evaluation of Jay Gatsby at the novel’s climax” (15); in other words, to Nick’s capacity to go back to his first impression and portrayal of Gatsby and to mend its faults or insufficiencies. In *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, as suggested, Cyril cannot actually re-evaluate any other character’s portrayal but his own. It is at the end of the novel that narrator-Cyril admits to the mistakes that character-Cyril has made throughout his life, namely the silence he has kept regarding his true self. Cyril understands the difference in perspective between the moment in which he speaks and the moment in which he narrates, that is to say, the difference between character-Cyril’s and narrator-Cyril’s perspectives. At the

end of the novel, he claims: “I look back at my life and I don’t understand very much of it. It seems like it would have been so simple now to have been honest with everyone, especially Julian. But it didn’t feel like that at the time. Everything was different then, of course” (601). Like Nick, Cyril is able to evaluate his life in the retrospect, understanding things he could not understand before and trying to make amends for the mistakes of his past. Drawing on Murphy’s study, the mere fact that Cyril is able to re-evaluate his actions is an indicator of the narrator’s reliability.

All in all, Cyril seems to comply with almost all the factors that Murphy attributes to reliable narration. Nevertheless, Cyril still casts some doubts in terms of his reliability as a narrator for, as shown above, apart from being a first-person narrator—which implies the impossibility of his being completely reliable—he presents traits of both reliable and unreliable narration.<sup>194</sup> There are passages in the novel in which he finds himself in a position to be reliable, whereas there are others—mainly when he acts as a character-focalizer, or when his memory fails him—in which Cyril needs to be unreliable, or cannot be otherwise. In sum, unreliability, as was the case of Gabriel or Odran, seems more a matter of focalization.

## 8.2. “It was a difficult time to be a man who was attracted to other men”: identity and masculinity

*The Heart’s Invisible Furies* is John Boyne’s most personal novel to date. He himself claims that:

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<sup>194</sup> In terms of Smith’s six questions for the detection of unreliability, for instance, Cyril would not pass the test. The time inconsistencies mentioned above could condemn the narrator to fail question number six, and so it would bring Smith to call Cyril an unreliable narrator.

[t]he idea was that I would take an elderly Irish homosexual whose life has been diminished by being unable to express his sexuality and through his eyes the reader would see how Ireland, across seventy-plus years, had changed. [...] [M]y narrator, Cyril Avery, was basically a good-hearted, amiable, bumbling chap who goes from disaster to disaster in his personal life simply because he cannot be honest with the world. Or rather, the world—Ireland—will not let him be honest about himself. (*The Heart's* 708)

Indeed, Ireland is the other main protagonist of the novel. It is the oppressive and heterosexist<sup>195</sup> Irish society that does not let Cyril find his true self—or express himself once he has found it—until he eventually gets to know different, more free societies, and becomes aware of the journey that Ireland still needs to make. In other words, Asier Altuna-García de Salazar aptly argues that

[t]he novel explores a likely and much-expected rupture in the continuity of the influence of power structures in Ireland, especially that of the Catholic Church, and advances challenges which offer political, economic and social change, eventual individual understanding and the undoing of silence. (18-9)

Along those lines and while discussing contemporary Irish fiction and gay fiction in particular, Eve Patten asserts that “Irish society as a whole comes to seem erratic and abnormal from the perspective of its homosexual contingent, and in this respect gay fiction has contributed fully to a mainstream novelistic process of social critique and revision” (271). Certainly, the references to Ireland as a country throughout the novel are not particularly positive. Irish life, especially rural Irish life, is represented as full of violence, injustice, and abuse.

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<sup>195</sup> Heterosexism has been defined as “an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (Herek, n.pag.).



For instance, Mrs Hennessy is sexually abused by her father, who then drowns the child she gives birth to as a consequence—in fact, “infanticide was still prevalent in Ireland in the 1940s” (Ferriter 245). Besides, Catherine, Seán and Jack are all beaten by their parents (Seán is even killed by his father), and the Catholic Church is also constantly represented as an oppressive institution, following the denouncing line that Boyne had begun in *A History of Loneliness*, with instances such as: “maybe they [the altar boys] just knew how much cruelty the man [Father Monroe] was capable of and were happy that on this occasion it was not being directed towards them” (6). Furthermore, not only Cyril but also Jack Smoot end up leaving Ireland, the latter assuring to never go back ever again: “Awful country. Horrible people. Terrible memories” (394).<sup>196</sup> From the outside, Ireland is viewed as a hateful and incomprehensible place, where people are forced into unhappiness:

‘What’s wrong with you people?’ he asked, looking at me as if I was clinically insane. ‘What’s wrong with Ireland? Are you all just fucking nuts over there, is that it? Don’t you want each other to be happy?’

‘No,’ I said, finding my country a difficult one to explain. ‘No, I don’t think we do.’  
(382)

The journey through Cyril’s past follows some key moments in both Irish and world history in a time span that goes from religion-led de Valera’s Ireland to a country that has legalized same-sex marriage. The image of Ireland portrayed at the beginning of *The Heart’s Invisible Furies* is presented against the Ireland of 2015 at the end of the novel, which has witnessed the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger and shines as a tolerant and modern country. By way of example

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<sup>196</sup> The same rejection for his country is shared by Aidan in *A History of Loneliness*: “I would never live in that country again. [...] Ireland is rotten. Rotten to the core. I’m sorry, but you priests destroyed it” (441). In the case of *A Son Called Gabriel*, however, this rejection is directed towards the English people rather, showing the characters’ strong sense of patriotism.

of this change, Cyril and Alice not only get divorced, becoming one of the first couples to do so in Ireland, but they also end up living together for some periods of time, along with their son and Alice's second husband. Besides, Cyril's grandson is able to display public signs of affection and love towards his boyfriend without fear of being persecuted.

Through Cyril's journeys abroad, Boyne explores international events, such as the Holocaust or the terrorist attacks of 9/11, albeit some critics do not see fit the juxtaposition of these exceedingly different events.<sup>197</sup> Besides, Boyne also presents the reality of AIDS, an illness at its peak during the 1980s, and criticizes not only its wrong attribution to homosexuality exclusively but also other misbeliefs relating to its transmission, for example. In fact, a poll led by *The New York Times/CBS* in 1985 shows that

47 percent of Americans believed that AIDS could be transmitted via a shared drinking glass, while 28 percent believed that toilet seats could be the source of contamination. Another survey found that 34 percent of those polled believed it unsafe to "associate" with an AIDS victim even when no physical contact was involved. (Brandt 153)

Shocking as these data may be, they show the poor knowledge on the subject that American population, in this case, held at the time.<sup>198</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that homosexuality suffers the consequences of these misbeliefs, to the extent that

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<sup>197</sup> Noticeably, Altuna-García de Salazar argues that "Boyne is so provocative in equating the incommensurate trauma of the Holocaust with the oppression of the gay community globally. Though perhaps erroneous in his comparison, Boyne wants to address the importance of individual traumas" (25). Perhaps Cyril is just trying to relativize his trauma against the suffering of the world by comparing individual and collective traumas.

<sup>198</sup> Similarly, Ignac in *The Heart's Invisible Furies* claims at one point that "You only get diseases if you fuck the dirty bitches in the windows; everyone knows that. You can't get anything from men" (409).

the public perception of homosexuality becomes largely indistinguishable from its perception of AIDS. This, in turn, has two consequences: (1) It causes unnecessary discrimination against all those who are identified as gay (including, in some cases, lesbians), and (2) it also means that people who are not perceived (and do not perceive themselves) as engaging in high-risk behaviors can deny that they are at risk of HIV infection. (Altman 302)

As suggested, this is seen in the novel through Julian and his refusal to let his family know of his illness, since he sees himself as utterly heterosexual and perceives his contagion as a shameful act, to the extent of referring to his condition as “your disease” (483)—Cyril’s or homosexuals’ in general. Julian’s fear of appearing unmanly comes from the threat that it would impose on his masculinity, and especially on his reputation as a Don Juan. This also links with what has been discussed in chapter five regarding coping and gender roles. Julian is proud enough as to prefer to die alone instead of letting people know his suffering. He copes with his illness alone and in silence, instead of seeking any kind of help.

In Ireland the situation is quite different, since the Catholic Church was there extremely powerful at the time. It is not surprising, therefore, that in an article about Thomas Kilroy’s *Ghosts*, José Lanter mentions that “it was taboo and in fact in Ireland, nobody officially knew anything about HIV or Aids [sic] at all” (“Panel Discussion 2” 84, in Lanter 12). Indeed, much to Cyril’s frustration, Julian’s disease is seen back in Ireland as a shameful offense and as a clear sign of his undeniable homosexuality:

‘Didn’t he get... you know...’ He leaned forward and whispered. ‘The AIDS.’ [...] that’s what he died of, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘So I was right,’ he said, sitting back and smiling. ‘He was a gay.’ (531-2)

By the time this conversation between Cyril and Charles takes place, it is 1994 and homosexuality has just been decriminalized in Ireland. Cyril has returned home after years living in exile, escaping from the repressive and heterosexist Irish society that did not let him be. As Diarmaid Ferriter recalls in *Occasions of Sin*, the Censorship Board decided in 1938 “to ban Kate O’Brien’s *Land of Spices* because it contained a reference to homosexuality,” showing that “any open discussion of homosexuality was not remotely likely” to take place in Ireland (219).

*The Heart’s Invisible Furies* hints at its main theme from the cover of the novel itself: “The search for happiness can take a lifetime.” Before we have even taken a look at the title or the beginning of the novel, we know we are before a quest narrative—in this case not only is the protagonist looking for happiness, but also for his true identity. As I have been suggesting above, and as the quotation used in the title of this section shows, identifying oneself as a homosexual in Ireland during the second half of the twentieth century was certainly a one-way ticket to prison. It was, therefore, a difficult time to be Irish if you did not adhere to the rules and restrictions that the Catholic Church imposed on Irish society. This way, “culture significantly impacts the expression of personality and the development of identity [...]. Culture and identity are thus forever joined” (Kaufman 288).

As was the case in the previous two novels, in *The Heart’s Invisible Furies* the analysis of masculinities is also quite pertinent. Cyril, once again the focus of the narrative, is a man made by society. Like the other two protagonists of the previously analysed novels, Cyril does not represent the typical attributes of men in the 1950s, but finds himself in a constant fight between what is expected of him and who he really is. His main struggle is the inner fight between the façade he has created of himself and his real self.

Homosexuals are often accused of lacking masculinity, of being too feminine, as seen in the chapter devoted to the study of masculinities. Boyne, however, does not characterize Cyril as feminine, he is merely a man who is attracted to other men. Therefore, Cyril cannot be accused of lacking masculinity—he is as masculine as Odran, for instance. At times, he even does things that emphasise his masculinity in traditional terms, like, for example, when he brags about having gone to a rugby match with his friend Julian (218). And yet, being a homosexual, his is a masculinity rejected by the society of the time, unaccepted by his community and, as a whole, his country.

For Cyril the quest for identity begins quite early on in his life, before he is even aware of the existence of a repressive Catholic Church. From early childhood, he is constantly being reminded of the fact that he is adopted and, what is even worse, that he will never be a part of his adoptive family: “From the start, [Charles and Maude] never pretended to be anything other than my adoptive parents and, in fact, schooled me in this detail from the time I could first understand the meaning of the words” (62). Consequently, he never refers to his foster parents as ‘mother’ or ‘father’ but calls them by their first names. In this regard, Cyril claims to have been named after “a spaniel they’d once owned and loved” (63), showing that they care for Cyril the way they had cared for a dog—and indeed treat him more like a pet than a son. This way, whenever someone refers to Maude or Charles as Cyril’s mother or father, he corrects them and emphasises that they are his ‘adoptive parents.’ This is due to the special care they always take to make clear that he “was not a real Avery and would not be looked after financially in adulthood in the manner that a real Avery would have been” (63). For Maude and Charles, taking Cyril into their home is “an act of Christian charity” (67, 189) and they never do anything to help Cyril understand who he is or where he comes from—especially since he does not show much interest in his biological parents himself. The first and only time he seems to enquire about the identity of his real parents comes

precisely as a consequence of Maude and Charles's insistence of his strangeness to the family:

Only when I reached an age where I was old enough to understand fully the concept of natural and adoptive parents did I break one of our home's golden rules and enter Maude's study uninvited to enquire as to the identities of my real mother and father. [...] [S]he simply shook her head in bewilderment, as if I had asked her to tell me the distance to the nearest mile between the Jamia Mosque in Nairobi and the Todgha Gorge in Morocco. (66)

It seems surprising, therefore, that Cyril spends so much of his life trying to understand who he is but he never thinks of tracking down the "little hunchbacked Redemptorist nun" (49, 67) who might be able to guide him to his real parents.

Despite his dearth of knowledge regarding his parents, Cyril knows from an early age that he is somehow different from the other kids around him: "I thought I was just a slow developer; the notion that I could have what was then considered to be a mental disorder was one that would have horrified me" (145). In this sense, it is worth referring here to the moment in which character-Cyril is seven years old. One could argue that both Cyril and Julian are far too smart and developed (especially Julian) for their age. For instance, Maude asks Cyril for synonyms for her novels (93) and she even flirts with Julian and he flirts back (80), as has been mentioned earlier. I personally do not think this is a matter of Boyne "scarifying authenticity for a cheap laugh" (Lederman, n.pag.), but rather I would argue it boils down to a matter of coherence with the characters. Hence, for the rest of his life Julian conforms to what he promises he will be already at the age of seven—a promiscuous, careless and stress-free individual. Something similar happens with Cyril: he is never brought up as a proper child, and is never allowed to even behave like one, so

it is not surprising that he does not adhere to the characteristics of a child his age.<sup>199</sup> Another sign of Cyril's maturity, which is linked to what I have mentioning earlier, is the absence of any feeling of rejection, shame or blame towards his mother for abandoning him, as any other child might have done. Instead, he understands her situation and conditions at the time and does not question her decision to give him a better opportunity in life. Taking all this into account, it is very significant for the purpose of the novel that, despite this maturity, Cyril turns out to be so deeply innocent in other aspects of his life, especially those concerning sexuality and homosexuality, as seen later.

It is precisely the fact that in Ireland homosexuality was considered a mental disorder that forces Cyril to hide his true identity and even to have suicidal thoughts:

It was a difficult time to be Irish, a difficult time to be twenty-one years of age and a difficult time to be a man who was attracted to other men. To be all three simultaneously required a level of subterfuge and guile that felt contrary to my nature. [...] the more I examined the architecture of my life, the more I realized how fraudulent were its foundations. The belief that I would spend the rest of my life on earth lying to people weighed heavily on me and at such times I gave serious consideration to taking my own life. [...] It was an option that was always at the back of my mind. (242)

Not only does the world around him force him to hide who he really is, but it also makes him duplicate, to the extent of creating two different Cyrils, even if neither of them corresponds to him truly: "Over the years, I had created two fundamentally dishonest portraits of myself, one for my oldest friend and another for my newest ones, and they had only a few brushstrokes in common"

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<sup>199</sup> In this regard, Boyne himself claims that "[he] liked the idea of Cyril being the only mature person in the house, even though he's only 7" (*WHSmith*, n.pag.).

(297-8). In a way, I would argue that narrator-Cyril is Cyril showing his real identity—it is 2015-Cyril, someone who finds himself in a safe haven, at a moment of peace with himself, and who is finally able to embrace and celebrate his identity (the narratorial ‘home’ I mentioned regarding Murphy’s essay). After all, Irish identity now “embrace[s] a more open, inclusive, diverse and prosperous society, compared to previous periods of more inward-looking and homogenised portraits of being Irish” (“The Sense of Irish Identity” n.pag.). On the other hand, it is character-Cyril the one having double identities depending on who he is talking to, led to it by the culture and society he has grown up in: “The darkness concealed my crimes but convinced me that I was a degenerate, a pervert, a Mr Hyde who left my benevolent Dr Jekyll skin behind” (244). Sadly enough, he identifies his real self with the evil murderer Mr Hyde, whilst the respectable Dr Jekyll is just his skin, the body he is cocooned in. For Brown and Trevethan, “[s]elf-acceptance is clearly connected to a positive identity formation” (268), therefore the fact that Cyril identifies with Mr Hyde shows that he has not accepted himself yet, so his identity cannot be formed positively and completely. It is not until he accepts himself, in Amsterdam mostly, that he can begin to live a happy life.

The Cyril Julian seems to know, then, is that Dr Jekyll, the Cyril whom he tries to set up on a date, Mary-Margaret’s boyfriend and, eventually, Alice’s fiancé and husband. This comes as a result of Cyril’s promise that “[t]here would be no more men, no more boys. It would just be women from now on” (288)—a promise he is unable to keep. He continues claiming that “[he] would be like everyone else. [He] would be *normal* if it killed [him]” (288, emphasis added), showing his belief that he is abnormal, that he bears a disease that needs to be cured.<sup>200</sup> This was common practice in Ireland and other countries

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<sup>200</sup> In her paper from 1968, Mary McIntosh hints at the fact that homosexuals at the time used to “welcome and support the notion that homosexuality is a condition” (184). Therefore, it is not far-fetched for Cyril to believe that he suffers from a condition, since it is what society has



where religion exerted high influence upon moral issues such as family, sex, and marriage. Brown and Trevethan argue in this regard that “some gay men may have heightened shame and insecure attachment styles and, in an attempt to deal with their internalized homophobia, may marry women thinking that their problems will be avoided by doing so” (268). Another possible solution to their so-called problem may be a visit to the doctor, and Cyril is reminded of a motto he should live by: “here’s what you have to remember: *There are no homosexuals in Ireland*. You might have got it into your head that you are one but you’re just wrong, it’s as simple as that. You’re wrong” (253, emphasis in the original). Besides, one of Cyril’s greatest fears of his visit to the doctor is that Mr Sadler adheres to Catholic values and therefore may denounce him to his employers. He is somewhat scared when he sees “a St Brigid’s cross on the wall [...] not to mention the statue of the Sacred Heart behind his desk” (250), for he senses that this doctor will also “[trust] the rules of their profession within Catholic Ireland” (250). And indeed, the best conversion therapy he can think of is that of “[stabbing] [Cyril] in the balls with [his] syringe” (257) whenever Cyril gets excited at the mention of movie or music stars like Warren Beatty or George Harrison (257-8). This was a very recurrent practice in Ireland in those days, and not only with syringes but also with electric shocks. It was a common practice in Northern Ireland as well—in fact some studies show that gay men were “shown pictures of naked men and given electric shocks if [they were] aroused” in Queen’s University Belfast (Meredith, n.pag.), although it is stated that this “electrical aversion therapy had been almost totally abandoned by the mid-1970s in the UK.” In the end, however, no medical practice can reverse someone’s nature, and Cyril is adamant about it: “I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I can’t help what I am. It’s the way I was born” (287). This scene at the doctor’s is representative of how Ireland dealt

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led him to believe. In fact, homosexuality was only removed from the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Diseases in 1990 (Drescher, 2015).

with its controversial issues, merely by closing their eyes at them, as Boyne had denounced in *A History of Loneliness* regarding the sexual abuse committed by priests throughout the years.<sup>201</sup>

In this novel, religious confession plays an important part, and Boyne provides a quite ironic or satiric undertone. First, confession is mentioned at the beginning of the novel, when Cyril's mother is being judged at Church before the whole town for being pregnant. Father Monroe urges Catherine to tell them the name of her baby's father "so he can be made to give his confession and be forgiven in the eyes of the Lord. And after that you're to get out of this church and this parish and blacken the name of Goleen no more, do you hear me?" (9).<sup>202</sup> The father of the child, therefore, is to be forgiven by God if he confesses, whilst Catherine is not given the same opportunity and is directly expelled from the town. Boyne exposes here the irony of religious confession—confess and you will be absolved of all your sins, no matter their importance—as well as the different roles men and women play within the Church.

Confession is also mentioned later on, when Cyril is brought into the Garda station to be questioned about Julian's kidnapping. Charles, who is with him, states at one point that, since that place "is a sort of confessional" for him, he would like to confess something—how attractive he finds the Queen of England (194). Once again, confession is treated lightly by Boyne, more in a humorous than a serious way.

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<sup>201</sup> The same happens with sex diseases in Ireland, to which they close their eyes: "we pretend they don't exist and no one ever talks about them. That's how we do things in Ireland. If you catch something, you go to the doctor and he gives you a shot of penicillin, and on the way home you go to confession and tell the priests your sins" (Boyne *The Heart's* 417). This last statement points towards the use of confession to relieve from guilt. It also takes a very critical perspective of how sinning may work in Catholicism—it does not matter what you do, as long as you confess your sins.

<sup>202</sup> This extract is also relevant to show the priest's power over his congregation inasmuch as he knows all their secrets. Even if he is not supposed to reveal them (confessional secret), Father Monroe exposes Catherine's pregnancy in front of the whole town, in an attempt to show the dominant power he possesses—threatening the whole town, in a way.

The author continues in the same fashion for the rest of the novel. In Ireland, Cyril only confesses his homosexuality four times, and almost neither of them has a good ending—three deaths and an estranged best friend, with the exception of his mother Catherine who, unaware of Cyril’s identity, does not judge him at all.

Cyril’s first confession comes “after much soul-searching:” “I thought that perhaps if I prayed for [Julian’s] release and confessed my sins then God might see fit to take pity on my friend” (202). Cyril mentions here his relationship with confession, which is similar to that of other boys his age:

I had been going to confession fairly regularly since my first communion seven years earlier but not once had I ever told the truth. Like everyone else, I simply made up a collection of ordinary decent sins and rattled them off with little thought before accepting the obligatory penance of ten Hail Marys and an Our Father afterward. Today, however, I had promised myself that I would be honest. I would confess everything and if God was on my side, if God really existed and forgave people who were truly contrite, then he would recognize my guilt and set Julian free without any further harm. (204)<sup>203</sup>

Cyril, therefore, does not take confession seriously—at least at that stage of his life. After a list of minor sins, like stealing sweets or having nicknamed a priest, he gets prepared for his biggest sin: his thinking about boys, “about doing all sorts of dirty stuff to them like taking their clothes off and kissing them all over and playing with their things” (206). Cyril’s long confession (fifteen lines) is here told without any sort of punctuation, mirroring his stream of consciousness and showing the heavy lift he is taking off his shoulders. Cyril’s confession, however, is interrupted by a crashing sound, and inside the

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<sup>203</sup> In *A Son Called Gabriel* this same approach to confession is present in Mother’s insistence on Gabriel making up some sins instead of telling something having to do with sex (McNicholl 35). For confession in McNicholl’s novel, see chapter six.

confessional, instead of the figure of the priest, Cyril finds “a beam of light [that] was streaming in from up above” (206), which he identifies with God. The priest, after hearing Cyril’s ‘outrageous’ outburst, “had fallen out of his box and was lying on the floor, clutching his chest” (206). While the priest is dying of a heart attack, Cyril wonders if he has been forgiven and, since the priest cannot offer an answer, an elderly man reassures Cyril telling him that he has, “[a]nd he’d be happy to know that his last act on earth was to spread God’s forgiveness” (207).<sup>204</sup>

This example of religious confession shows, as mentioned above, how Boyne treats confession ironically and satirically. This is the first time Cyril confesses his sexuality, which results in the death of his listener, but it is not the only casualty his confession causes. Years later, when he is dating Mary-Margaret but still meeting boys in secret, there is one night in which she follows him and finds him with a boy in a public toilet. A police officer comes to the scene, ready to arrest Cyril—with the approval of Mary-Margaret, who urges the officer to hit “the filthy article” (286). Cyril has no other choice but to confess his homosexuality: “I can’t help what I am. It’s the way I was born” (287). It is then when Nelson’s pillar starts to teeter, “and it seemed to me that he had come to life as he leaped from his pedestal, his arms and head exploding from his body as the stone shattered above us” (287). Cyril’s second confession, therefore, also ends mortally, as both Mary-Margaret and the police officer are killed under the statue.<sup>205</sup>

Given the record of prior confessions, it is understandable that Cyril keeps for himself what he cannot say out aloud. Cyril, then, is partly unable to

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<sup>204</sup> A reading of this entire hilarious passage by Boyne himself is available online: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6seBuhsFJyk&ab\\_channel=PenguinBooksUK](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6seBuhsFJyk&ab_channel=PenguinBooksUK)> (Accessed 5 Sept 2021).

<sup>205</sup> With these three deaths—the priest, Mary-Margaret, and the police officer—it seems as if Boyne is condemning a certain group of people: those complying with the Catholic doctrine and therefore rejecting everything related to homosexuality.

embrace his identity because he is not recognized by his community. As Sandra Baillie defends,

individual identity is produced and maintained by our membership of a group, and our healthy perceptions of ourselves within that context. It is not possible to construct an identity independent of recognition by another. Our identities are formed in our childhood but are constantly being worked upon in a variety of ways. The subject becomes conscious in relation to others. Identity is relationally dependent. (8)

As I have been suggesting, place is an essential element when building one's identity. In other words, "[f]amily and place combine to create a strong sense of identity: people become wedded to the webs of meaning in which they were brought up" (Inglis, *Meanings of Life* 47). As a matter of fact, Cyril keeps defending Ireland—and ends up living his last years there—despite all the suffering Ireland has caused him:

'Jack here is always telling me that Ireland is a terrible place,' said Bastiaan.  
'Can it be true? I've never been there.'  
'It's not that bad,' I said, surprised at my willingness to defend my homeland.  
'Jack hasn't been home in a long time, that's all.'  
'It's not home,' said Smoot. (400)

We find here two opposite views regarding the sense of place and self, representing Irish diaspora. According to Inglis, "[p]eople may move around the world, but they still strongly identify with and remain attached to the place in which they grew up" ("Local belonging" 1). Cyril, even if he has found a more comfortable, accepting, and loving community in Amsterdam, still feels persuaded to defend his homeland. Jack Smoot, on the other hand, rejects

Ireland as his home—and it is only at the end of the novel, to attend Catherine’s wedding, that he agrees to return for the occasion.

In terms of masculinity, the most interesting character is Cyril’s best friend Julian, who is defined at one point as “a curious mix of tenderness and masculinity” (354). Throughout the whole novel, Julian is constantly establishing and proving his masculinity. At eight, he is already flirting with older women, namely Maude, and showing off the size of his penis—comparing it to other boys’, namely Cyril’s. He also tries to set up Cyril with Mary-Margaret, in an attempt to have something himself with Bridget; he brags about all the girls he has been with; and he finally dies alone of AIDS because he refuses to let people think that he might be gay. Julian represents what I have been mentioning above regarding the fear that men profess of other men, namely the fear that they might condemn them for not being man enough. Julian, after all, has been brought up in a country which rejects anything unmanly, anything feminine, hence his need to prove his masculinity everywhere he goes. However, he also confesses later in the novel to having kissed another man in high school (295), to which Cyril is appalled both because it was not him and because this does not fit the concept of masculinity Julian has been displaying thus far. Julian even claims then that he has still been good friends with the boy he kissed (“Why wouldn’t I be?” (296)), showing that he does not care too much about people’s sexual orientation. The same is claimed when Cyril finally tells him of his homosexuality: “I don’t give a fuck that you’re gay. I never would have cared. Not for a moment, if you had bothered to tell me” (356). This notwithstanding, Julian prefers to die alone rather than let people think he might be gay.

For all these reasons, Julian can be assimilated to Cyril’s father Charles but from another generation. Charles represents the classic image of masculinity, what manhood meant in the 1950s, whereas Julian’s masculinity

seems to have evolved since then—an evolution that is mainly seen in Julian’s acceptance of homosexuality, which Charles rejects.

Charles is presented later in the novel thus:

He’d always been a handsome man, of course, and his good looks had stayed with him into old age, as they so often do with undeserving men. The only surprise was the grey stubble that lived his cheeks and chin. As long as I had known him, he’d been scrupulous about shaving, condemning men with beards or moustaches as socialists, hippies or reporters. (528)

Charles is said to constantly give great importance to his physical appearance and his reputation, so much so that since he is quite popular among the ladies—something his wife Maude knows but does not really care about. He is also sent to prison in two occasions—both for tax evasion—marries five times and divorces three.

Another important characteristic of his when analysing his masculinity is his alcoholism. Studies show that alcohol consumption and gender roles are deeply linked (Lemle and Mishkind, 1989; Iwamoto *et al.*, 2011; Merlino, 2019). Russell Lemle and Marc Mishkind argue that few other disorders are as common among men as alcohol abuse is, pointing out that “[p]revalence rates for women are far lower than those for men” (213). Indeed, alcohol consumption is seen as a symbol of masculinity in Western cultures:

It signifies a male’s entrance into manhood, and confirms his acceptance among fellow men. Ordering, being offered, consuming, and sharing alcohol elevate the user’s manliness. Heavy drinking symbolizes greater masculinity than lighter drinking, and the more a man tolerates his alcohol, the more manly he is deemed. (Lemle and Mishkind 214)

Therefore, Charles is characterised as the typical man of the 50s, embodying all the attributes stereotypically linked with masculinity.

However, Charles should also be analysed here as a father. As I have been mentioning above, Charles and Maude make extremely clear for Cyril from an early age that he is not a real Avery, that they are merely his adopted parents and are never going to treat him as a real son.<sup>206</sup> Charles, therefore, is the only father figure in Cyril's life—given that his biological father was only “the man who handed two green pound notes to my mother outside the Church of Our Lady, Star of the Sea, in Goleen seven years earlier to soothe his conscience” (62). Nonetheless, Charles has never behaved as a father for Cyril, for he has never cared for him or taken an interest to be part of his life: “Think of this more as a tenancy” (63). At the end of his life, however, Charles admits to not having been a good father: “I’m glad we adopted you. [...] You’re a good boy. A kind boy. You always were. [...] I was terrible. I showed no interest in you at all. But that’s just who I was. I couldn’t help it” (535).<sup>207</sup> His role as father, therefore, is always one of rejection. Neither Maude nor Charles are real parents for Cyril, and that forces him to look harder for his identity, as seen above.

As I have shown in the analysis of *A History of Loneliness*, here a case of the son mirroring the father can also be found. Even if unbeknownst to Cyril himself, he also fathers a son, Liam—consequence of his single sexual encounter with a woman. Cyril does not know this until his son Liam is almost an adult, but this fact links Cyril with his biological father (his mother's uncle, Kenneth), who is also absent from his son's life. In the case of Kenneth, his absence is the consequence of the oppressive Irish society, which would not

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<sup>206</sup> In Amsterdam, when wondering about Cyril and Bastiaan's parenting of Ignac, Cyril admits that his (lack of) desire for parenting might have been caused by his own upbringing: “I had such peculiar experiences of parenthood when I was actually *being* parented that it put me off” (414, emphasis in the original).

<sup>207</sup> This statement is similar to that of Gabriel's father in *A Son Called Gabriel*, when he argues that he should have paid more attention to his children (see chapter 6.2.).



allow children before marriage—although, in this case, the father was also the mother’s uncle. Cyril’s absence comes from his ignorance of Alice’s pregnancy and not his fearing rejection of his son, but Liam feels resentment anyway, especially for Cyril’s abandonment of his mother. When discussing Liam, Cyril notes that: “We’re not very close. [...] I wasn’t there for him when he was growing up and he resents me for it. It’s fair enough but I don’t seem to be able to bridge the divide between us, no matter how hard I try” (525). Cyril has missed part of his son’s life, even if unknowingly, but he is able to turn the tables with time—just as Irish society changes in the last decades of the twentieth century. Cyril manages to solve the problems with his son, which neither Catherine’s father nor Seán’s father manage to do. In fact, Seán’s father runs to Dublin to punish his son when he learns he is living with another man (“to beat some decency into [him]” (54)) and ends up killing his own son for not adhering to the teachings of the Catholic Church.<sup>208</sup> The contrast between Séan’s father’s attitude against his son’s homosexuality and that of Cyril against that of his own grandson represents an illustrative juxtaposition of the deadly consequences of being a homosexual in the 50s as opposed to Ireland’s acceptance of homosexuality in 2015.

Cyril should also be discussed here as a father for Ignac. Cyril and Bastiaan meet Ignac, a teenager sex worker, in Amsterdam when the latter is almost beaten to death by one of his clients. They take him to their home and treat him as if he was their own son. He also lives with them later in NYC and with Cyril in Ireland, after Bastiaan is murdered. Ignac is also a victim of his own father, who pimps him out and makes him have sex with other men for money. When Ignac, eventually clean of drugs and alcohol, decides to quit that life and goes to live with Cyril and Bastiaan, he has to confront his father who considers Ignac his own property (423). In an act of revenge for his lost love,

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<sup>208</sup> Shockingly, after the trial, Séan’s father is set free by the jury, “finding that his crime had been committed under the extreme provocation of having a mentally disordered son” (58).

Jack Smoot ends up killing Ignac's father and therefore freeing him of a life of misery (427). This way, Jack, who could do nothing to prevent Séan's father killing him as he was also badly injured in the attack, avenges Seán's death by saving Ignac from the injustices committed against him by his own father: "I couldn't let it happen again" (427).

Hence, Ignac's, Catherine's, and Seán's fathers show nothing but rejection towards their respective children for having a different behaviour from the one that society establishes as normative for both men and women. Catherine's father is repelled by his daughter's pregnancy outside of marriage, and he is the one who reports her to the priest who expels her from the village:

'Your poor daddy can't help you now,' said the priest, following the direction of her gaze. 'Sure he wants nothing more to do with you. He told me so himself last night when he came to the presbytery to report the shameful news. And let no one here blame Bosco Goggin for any of this, for he brought up his children right, he brought them up with Catholic values, and how can he be held to account for one rotten apple in a barrel of good ones?' (9)

Boyne subverts the image of women in Ireland in the 50s with the character of Catherine, since she does not embody "the stereotypical image of the shy Irish colleen, silent about herself and her emotional needs, [reflecting] [...] a strict silence imposed on sex and sexuality in general and on female sexuality in particular" (Inglis, "Origins and Legacies" 26). Significantly, it is Catherine the one who lures Kenneth into having an affair with her and is adamant regarding the Great Plan she has for her child. Catherine, therefore, seems to break the rules when it comes to the stereotypical Irish girl, and begins a pioneering rupture with the Church.

Something similar is present in the novel with the emergence of the new type of family—Alice, who is "a married woman with a child and a missing

husband” (555), is said to be the first woman to get a divorce in Ireland (613) and ends up living with her current boyfriend, her gay ex-husband and their son.<sup>209</sup>

In *The Heart’s Invisible Furies*, Cyril undertakes a journey from innocence to experience, from rejection to acceptance. His journey mirrors that of a whole country, Ireland, and although it takes him through some happy moments and may be said to have a happy ending, it mainly delivers sad ones, moments full of trauma, guilt, and shame that I analyse in the following section.

### 8.3. “It’s what I haven’t said”: silenced trauma, guilt, and shame

Cyril Avery shares his trauma with Father Odran—and also, to some extent, with Gabriel—due to the fact that they have a difficult childhood, full of guilt for what they have not said, and shame for who they are. In sum, they share the silence they kept regarding key moments in their lives.

Cyril’s trauma, however, is not as strong as Odran’s. As has been suggested above, the all-powering Irish society traumatizes Cyril with its oppression and repression preventing him to be who he really is for a very long time. It restricts his identity to the extent that he feels repressed enough to hide who he is instead of celebrating and embracing his identity. As noted in previous chapters, shame, guilt, and other affects are intimately related to the notion of belonging. In other words, “[t]o live with shame is to feel alienated and defeated, never quite good enough to belong” (Kaufman 24). To put it another way, “social identity theory suggests that we tend to divide our world into social categories, and define ourselves in terms of the groups we feel we

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<sup>209</sup> Accordingly, Alice has never been the typical Catholic Irish girl, as opposed to Mary-Margaret, as seen for instance in that she is the one who insists on Cyril and her having sex before marriage.

belong to” (McKeown 6). Since early infancy, Cyril is constantly being reminded of the fact that he does not belong, not even to his own family let alone to a society such as the Irish of that time. This makes him live with shame, as highlighted in the title of the first part of the novel, and thus forces him to feel alienated and worthless. Indeed, “[t]he need to [...] feel identified with something larger than oneself, can shape the course of one’s life” (Kaufman 92)—and this is what Cyril tries to do his whole life, as suggested earlier.

As seen in chapter five, a distinction between internal and external shame can be made here. Taking this into account, it can be argued that Cyril suffers from both internal shame, although this feeling softens as the novel progresses and he is eventually able to embrace his sexuality, and external shame, for he is conscious of the repulsion others feel towards him judging his sexuality. In this sense, Deborah Lee *et al.* argue that “[i]t is possible for an individual to recognize he carries traits that are associated with stigma and devaluation from others [...], but the individual himself feels no personal shame about such traits” (452). This would be true of Cyril at the end of the novel, when he has truly accepted his identity but is aware of others’ rejection of him.

Expanding this, Altuna-García de Salazar argues that there are several types of shame in the first part of the novel, namely “individual shame, community shame, institutional shame and national shame” (21), all of them condensed in several characters. Indeed, not only Cyril but also Catherine, Julian and Alice are victims of shame due to the influence of the doctrines of the Catholic Church in their lives.

Julian is a very prominent character during the first part of the novel but becomes estranged until we encounter him again in New York in a completely different situation. Julian’s shame is both individual and national and has the same cause. He feels shame for his condition as an HIV carrier, to the extent of preferring to die alone instead of telling the truth to his family, given that

AIDS is something that he and his community attribute to homosexuality. According to Kaufman,

[s]hame about sexuality in general, and more specifically about homosexuality, is now being displaced onto AIDS. Cultural disgust and shame about homosexuality are being transferred to AIDS and people with AIDS—who are equally repudiated whether or not they are homosexual. (49)

Indeed, Julian is too concerned about his own reputation as a Casanova to let it be stained by the possibility of his being a homosexual. Kaufman continues asserting that “AIDS is a stigma. An AIDS diagnosis is not only a sign of shame but a source of further humiliation through public revulsion” (48). Julian’s individual shame, then, becomes national.

Also related to national shame, the novel begins with a powerful and capturing moment, when Catherine Goggin is expelled from her hometown, and hence from her own family, for the kid she bears inside. The fact that she is pregnant at sixteen years of age (the problem here being that she is unmarried, not that she is too young) is the most shameful act a woman can suffer in Ireland at that time—and the same goes for her parents. In the novel, it is her mom who, after seeing her looking at her belly in the mirror, tells Catherine’s father, who likewise tells the local priest. The latter, who will also be revealed to have fathered two children himself,<sup>210</sup> denounces Catherine for her condition in front of the whole parish, beats her, and tells her not to come back again. Catherine’s family is now pitied for the ungrateful and sinner child they have—or had—but they are also respected for making the right choice.

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<sup>210</sup> Criticism to the Catholic Church is implied from the very beginning of the novel, and it is very powerful criticism indeed: “Long before we discovered that he had fathered two children by two different women [...], Father James Monroe stood on the altar of the Church of Our Lady [...] and denounced my mother as a whore” (5). In this sense, Boyne seems to excel at opening novels, as seen as well in the start of *A History of Loneliness*.

Catherine claims that every head turned her direction, “except for those of my grandfather and six uncles [Cyril’s], who stared resolutely forward, and my grandmother, who lowered hers now just as my mother raised her own in a see-saw of shame” (7). Studies show (Kaufman 11, 17; Lee *et al.* 453) that one of the physical signs of shame is blushing and the lowering of the head and eyes, therefore it is quite significant that it is Catherine’s mother the one showing more shame (for what is being done to her daughter or for the fact of being her mother?), since for Catherine herself it was a relief to let go of that toxic family and small-town community which restricted her capacities. Besides, “her whole face was not scarlet [...] but pale” (7), hence showing Catherine’s lack of a deep sense of shame but rather repulsion towards her world. For Catherine, therefore, this is a moment of community shame rather than individual shame.

Alice is another character who suffers shame due to the impositions of the Catholic Church. Alice and Catherine show some similar traits in the sense that they are both too rebellious for their time—Alice, like Catherine, is in control of her body and does not obey the church in terms of sexuality. The first aspect of shame she suffers is the fact that she is stood up at the altar by her first fiancé Fergus—something that she spends years trying to overcome. In a very selfish act by Cyril himself, she is stood up a second time, although this time she makes it as far as the reception after the ceremony. Alice is once again a shamed woman, for she is now “a married woman with a child and a missing husband” (555) who is unable to remarry—at least in the Ireland of the 70s and 80s. Her shame is national and institutional rather than individual, precisely because she is not the stereotypical Irish girl and does not feel she has done anything wrong, but she is made to feel guilty and ashamed by the society around her. Indeed, in all the cases seen above, the characters feel ashamed for how they may look to the eyes of the rest of their community, rather than because they feel they have done something wrong.

Alice's shame links with Cyril's sense of guilt. I would argue Cyril becomes a disliked character the moment he marries Alice and flees after the wedding, knowing that it would be hell on earth for her, having to go through the same experience twice. Even if he claims to be ashamed, I would suggest Cyril feels more guilt than shame, the former being a fault of the whole self and the latter a fault for a particular event.<sup>211</sup> He claims to be "extremely ashamed of what I did to you [Alice]" (549), "I certainly blame myself for the pain I had caused her" (402), but it feels more like guilt than shame.

The same goes for his silence towards Julian. Even if Julian is Cyril's best friend, he is not able to confess his true feelings for him until it is too late. Cyril believes that Julian would react as the Irish society had taught them, but he should have known better, since Julian has done nothing but showing that he does not adhere to the rules imposed by the Catholic Church. In this case, then, "it's what I haven't done. What I haven't said" (332). In this regard, Altuna-García de Salazar argues that Cyril "grows out of what cannot be said—as it reflects an oppressive outside reality—and has to address the notion of unsayability" (18). By the end of the novel, "Cyril has to overcome and undo discourses of silence and oppression that have conditioned his subjectivity and identity over the last seventy years in Ireland" (Altuna 18). Indeed, it is at the end of the novel, when his community eventually allows him to be true to himself, that Cyril comes with an explanation for his wrongdoing:

I can't excuse my actions [...] and nor can I atone for what I did to you, but *I am able to look back now, all these years later, and see how my life was always going to reach a moment where I would have to face up to who I was. Who I am.* Of course, I should have done it long before, and I certainly should never have dragged you into my problems, but I didn't have the courage or maturity to be honest with myself, let alone with anyone else. But on the other hand, my

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<sup>211</sup> See chapter 5.3. Guilt and shame.

life is my life. And *I am who I am because of what I went through back then*. I couldn't have behaved any differently, even if I'd wanted to. (549, emphasis added)

This quotation, along with the emphasised sentences, shows the link between identity, trauma, and narrative in the novel. Cyril, having looked back at his past, is able now to understand who he is and why his life has taken these twists and turns. His identity is shaped by his actions and silences, by what he does and does not do, hence the narrative of his life story helps him understand who he is and how he has reached the present moment. With his retrospective narrative, Cyril is trying to take the reader by the hand through his misfortunes and the story of his life, showing how both Cyril and Ireland itself have changed along the decades. Unlike Odran, by the end of the novel—and hence by the time he is writing—he has come to terms with his past and is able to confront it almost shamelessly, having accepted his guilt. He does not try to hide from the reader the most shameful aspects of his past, precisely because his faults in the past were born out of lies—and it would not make sense to continue that path in his narrative. Throughout his life, he has learnt that he needs to be true to himself and others, and so he is forced into reliability, into showing what really happened without leaving anything out.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> In *A History of Loneliness*, on the other hand, Odran has spent his life lying to himself and he does the same in his narrative.



## CHAPTER NINE

### CONCLUSIONS

“[Stories] are in the final analysis not objective representations of events but subjective reconstructions or interpretations of these very events. [...] Narratives are constructed, rather than discovered. What makes narratives important are not the events *per se*, but the subjective interpretations of those events in the light of the present search for meaning.”

*An Introduction to the Study of Narrative Fiction,*  
Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning.

Neumann and Nünning’s quotation seems to be the perfect introduction to this concluding chapter. Throughout this thesis, emphasis has been placed precisely on the ‘search for meaning,’ rather than on the events that mark it. As in life, what matters here is the interpretation of one’s journey rather than the journey itself or its final destination. Subjectivity, and hence, unreliability, is the thread that brings this whole study together.

Consequently, in this thesis dissertation I have carried out an in-depth exploration of unreliable narration, contributing to the existing literature in this field and dwelling on its application to the analysis of three contemporary Irish novels which, in spite of their popularity, had not received much attention from academic researchers yet. The novels selected, *A Son Called Gabriel*, *A History of Loneliness*, and *The Heart’s Invisible Furies*, exemplify the impact that the Irish and Northern Irish societies of the second half of the twentieth century have in the quest for identity and the development of the masculinities that their male protagonists pursue throughout their lives and recount in their life stories. The study of their narratives has shown which is the image these narrators have of themselves, how they tackle issues of trauma, guilt, and shame, and how all this is put down into words. Likewise, it has helped

determine different classifications of unreliable narration and focalization, as seen in the light of trauma, guilt, and shame.

In essence, the present thesis initially tied a thread around the entity of the unreliable narrator, and has followed it to see where it led. In the process, three knots have been neatly formed around the issues of narration, masculine identity, and trauma, guilt, and shame.

### 9.1. Unreliability and narration

To ponder on the connections between unreliability and narration, chapter four of this thesis has dwelled significantly on the theoretical works that deal with the figure of the unreliable narrator, alongside its different classifications or clues for its identification. But what impact does unreliability have in narration? How does a narrative change if confronted with unreliability? What are the narrative entities involved? To answer those questions, the existing literature has been applied to the analysis of the three chosen novels and their male protagonists. Gabriel, Odran, and Cyril have all been scrutinized under this lens, both as narrators and as focalizers. As a result, I have come upon different classifications of unreliable narration and focalization, contributing to the terminologies proposed by other authors like James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin (1999), Greta Olson (2003), Theresa Heyd (2006), or Vera Nünning (2015).

My analysis has shown that the narrators of the novels chosen are quite similar to but also significantly different from one another. Odran in *A History of Loneliness* is the one that differs more from the other two, albeit he bears some resemblance to Cyril in *The Heart's Invisible Furies* who, at the same time, is very similar to Gabriel in *A Son Called Gabriel*.

The response they elicit from the reader is quite similar in the three novels—they all inspire a sympathetic reader who understands their

motivations and their needs for their being (un)reliable. In James Phelan's terminology (2007), a bonding relationship is created between narrator, focalizer, and reader, given that the latter comprehends that the unreliability of both the narrator and the focalizer is unintentional and unconscious, so they should not be blamed for committing mistakes they cannot really avoid. This would much be the case of Gabriel, whose innocence and young age prevents him from being truly reliable, whereas Odran and Cyril are mainly (un)reliable because of their guilt and trauma. In this case, the reader also sympathises with them because the former can understand that the motivation for each narrator's narrative is their coming to terms with their past and the finding of their identity, although repentance is also a key element, especially so in Odran's case. The reader cannot condemn the narrators' faults and is asked to sympathise and be patient.

As a result, a distinction has been made between the *experiencing* self and the *experienced* self—or what has been called throughout this analysis *character-Gabriel/Odran/Cyril* and *narrator-Gabriel/Odran/Cyril*. This distinction has proved essential when dealing with the analysis of (un)reliability in these novels since the main struggle comes from the disparity between the narrator and the focalizer/character. In the three novels there is a clear difference between the person who tells (the narrator) and the person who sees (the character/focalizer), with regard to what is seen (focalized) (Bal 149). Odran and Cyril make constant references to the present moment when they are speaking, thus emphasising the retrospective nature of their accounts and delaying the revelation of some information they have in the present but did not have in the past. Gabriel, on the other hand, is not so intrusive as a narrator (he would be covert, in Chatman's terminology), in the sense that he does not participate too much in the narrative, and, consequently, the distinction between narrator and focalizer is harder to see in this novel. In this case the only symptoms of the retrospective nature of his narrative are that he is

narrating in the past tense and the language of the narrative, as well as the coherence of the story, is that of an adult. In all three cases, though, their main unreliability boils down to that retrospection.

Besides, all three narrators know more than the characters in their stories and, as a result, could have chosen to either explain what the rest of characters cannot, or even contradict characters' assumptions. Since they have not done so, these narrators are mainly unreliable by omission and delay. However, despite the difficulty of distinguishing between full unreliability and reliability, each of them has been attached a different label depending on the point of view they adopt in their narratives and/or the motives they have for acting as they do. As a narrator, Gabriel chooses character-Gabriel as main focalizer and does not comment on the narrative as much as Odran or Cyril do. Hence, unreliability in Gabriel's narrative resides not mainly in narration but in focalization. Consequently, Gabriel is what I have called a *covertly restricted narrator*. This proposed term includes Chatman's 'covert narrator' (1978) and Phelan's 'restricted narration' ("Reliable, Unreliable"), which are significant in Gabriel's narrative because he does not intrude the focalizer's perspective of the events and restricts therefore his narrative to reliable reporting. It is precisely because of his unobtrusiveness, or covertness, that he cannot be considered a fully reliable or unreliable narrator but needs to be met in between the two terms: his reporting would be reliable were it not for his lack of clarification of the focalizer's mistakes.

In Odran's case, it is guilt that makes him delay the narrative of some events and prevents him from telling the truth about the nature of his real (mis)understandings. In other words, Odran's guilt prevents him from being reliable, which turns him into what I have called a *guiltily self-deceiving narrator*. This includes Heyd's 'self-deception' (2006), present in the novel in Odran's willingness to conceal the implicating truth from himself first, and his reader second. In order to do so, the narrator, moved by his guilty conscience,

does not clarify the focalizer's misconceptions and leads the reader into an untrustworthy path.

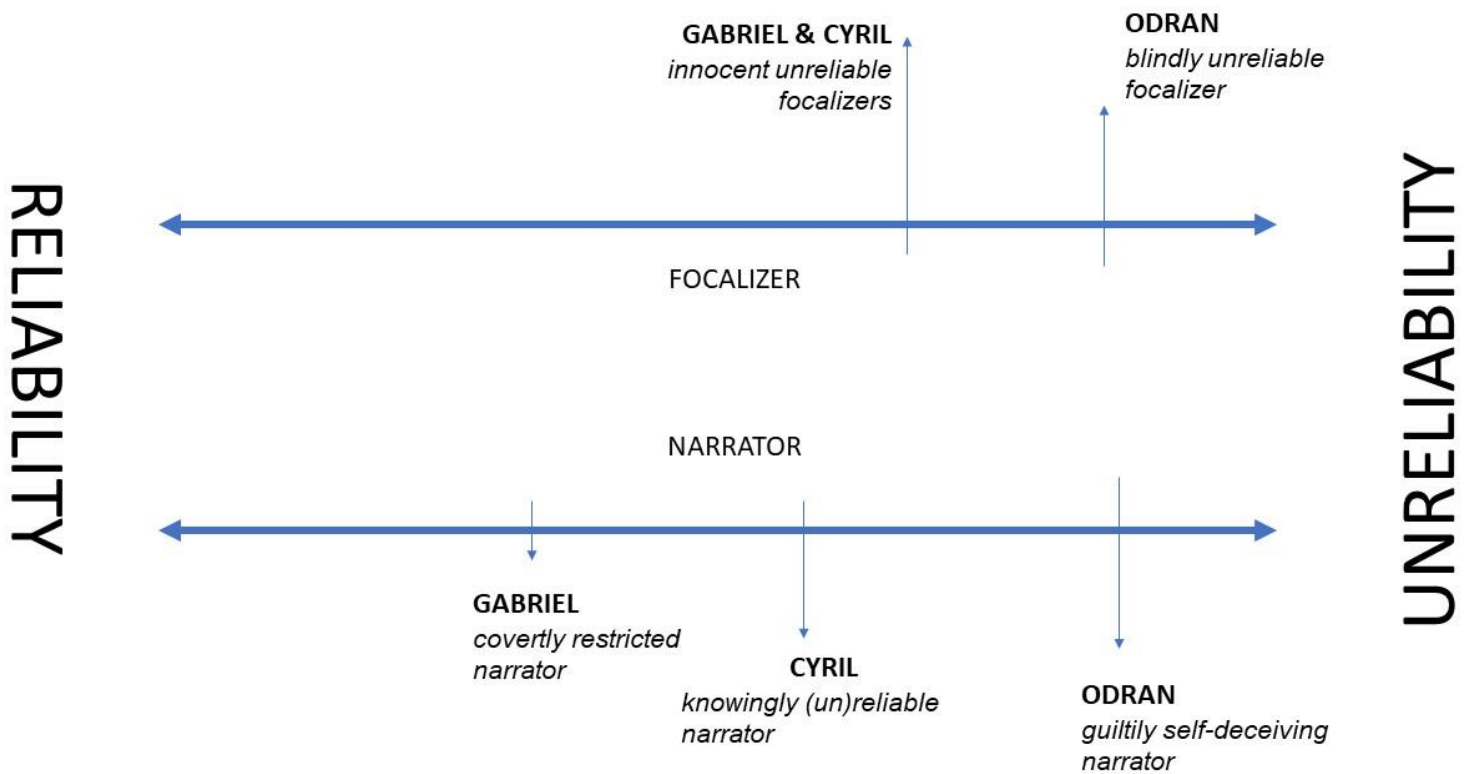
Cyril, on the other hand, is also moved by guilt and shame (imposed on him by society) but as a narrator he is mainly reliable, as I have proved in the chapter devoted to *The Heart's Invisible Furies*. His intention is not to deceive because, at the moment from which he is speaking, he has nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of. Nonetheless, one could argue, as I have, that he can also be considered unreliable because he omits and delays information, and commits mistakes due to his fallible memory, which he also acknowledges. I believe that, of the three narrators, Cyril is the one that is more clearly found in the space between reliability and unreliability—he is, therefore, a *knowingly (un)reliable narrator*.

As for the three characters/focalizers, they can all be considered unreliable but for different reasons, even if all of them are unreliable in terms of their mistaken ethics or evaluations. In *A History of Loneliness* we find what I have called a *blindly unreliable focalizer*. In Odran's case, his main fault lies in what he does not see or pretends not to see—in his misreading and underreporting. He is not able to properly understand what Tom's moves from parish to parish imply, although the narrator claims otherwise at the end of the novel. Therefore, character-Odran is unreliable first in his blindness and second in his claim to be so when he is not, as narrator-Odran clarifies at the end. The struggle here comes from the reader's different interpretations of what Odran really knew—I believe he knew about Tom (as he says at the end) but not about Aidan, thus he is blind about Aidan's real motives to be angry with him but lies about his not knowing about Tom's faults.

As focalizers, Cyril and Gabriel are more alike. They are both *innocent unreliable focalizers*, since the main aspect in their views is their misunderstanding of things around them due to their childlike naiveté. They are not children for the whole of the novel, nonetheless, but grow up in the

middle of it. Thus, these novels juxtapose Cyril's and Gabriel's evaluations and thoughts as children and as teenagers/adults. Significantly, their faults in terms of misunderstandings come from their ignorance about sexuality which, as has already been mentioned, is understandable when seen against their censoring socio-cultural background.

Thus, what we find in these novels in terms of narration is not fully reliable or unreliable narrators and focalizers but different positions along the (un)reliability spectrum. We may think at first sight that we are dealing with unreliable narrators, although more attention should be paid to unreliability in focalization. In the end, it is more often a matter of unreliable focalization rather than unreliable narration (see Graph 2).



Graph 2: narrators and focalizers of the novels along the unreliability spectrum.

To sum up, in the introduction to this dissertation I wondered whether unreliability was necessary for these narrators to tackle their life narratives. Simply put, it cannot be otherwise. In the case of our three narrators, narration is essential to understand the inner motives behind their narratives, and to comprehend the relation of narration with trauma, guilt, and shame. Childish unreliability in focalization seems to be the only option for Gabriel and Cyril, given that their innocence prevents them from seeing things from a different perspective. Their respective narrators are in charge of explaining and clarifying to the reader what the focalizer cannot understand or know at the time, but they choose not to in order to position the reader alongside the character.

The link between unreliability and narration is not exclusive to literature or to fictional narrators. The stories we all tell about ourselves in ordinary life are also subjective and often unreliable. Hence, the choice of unreliable narration in the three novels analysed draws their narrators closer to daily life accounts and, paradoxically, makes them more plausible and realistic.

## 9.2. Unreliability and masculine identities

Following the red thread of unreliability has also brought about some thought-provoking ideas regarding identity and, in particular, masculine identities. The study of narration and identity is relevant insofar as the protagonists of the novels chosen, being also their narrators, provide the reader with their own vision of themselves. I would argue the novels would have been much different if an omniscient, third-person narrator had narrated the stories. My interest was to see why the narrators tell the story that way instead of following a different path. Why focusing on some aspects while leaving others aside? What does that tell us about their sense of identity?

The three novels analysed are all quests for identity. Their protagonists are trying to find their true selves, to explore who they really were in order to understand who they really are. Their faults and mistakes in the past will serve to make amends in the present, to ask for forgiveness in some cases and to give voice to silent selves in others. In that sense, are their narratives their way of expressing their identities? The three narrators have been silent (or silenced) one way or another, thus resorting to their narratives is their only possibility of expressing themselves. A study of their narration is thus essential to understand who they are, which brings us back to their needed (un)reliability.

It has been seen throughout the analyses of the three narrators that they use the narratives as a way to find their identities, to come to terms with who they have become in later life. Hence, in *A Son Called Gabriel* the journey of Gabriel's adolescence—his personal *Bildung*—shows how he changes from a naïve kid, deeply influenced by his Catholic upbringing, which bans whatever kind of sexual education he might need, to an adolescent who has learnt about the reality around him and questions everything he knew since he was born. The Catholic teachings imposed on him from an early age made him reject his true self, making him think that he was an abomination, unworthy of love, respect, and acceptance. His evolution is then mirrored in his narrative, for he turns from an unreliable focalizer, as has been discussed, to a reliable and mature focalizer and narrator. His unreliability, therefore, diminishes as he grows up and begins to understand himself, and, most importantly, to find his true self.

Something similar happens with the narrators of *A History of Loneliness* and *The Heart's Invisible Furies*. They are also exploring their identities, but in their case it takes them their whole life—and the whole narrative—to come to terms with who they are. It is the actions and inactions of a lifetime that can decide what a person is in their old life. Thus, Odran and Cyril go through their



mistakes in an attempt at justification and forgiveness, to achieve the discovery of the self even if it has to be in old age. Like Gabriel, they are also seeking acceptance—Odran needs to be forgiven and respected again in his community but, most importantly, in his family; whereas Cyril has achieved in old age the recognition he needed throughout his life, and shows his struggles to pave the road for future generations.

Narration is once again significant in this regard. In the case of Odran, his unreliability is necessary throughout his narrative because he has not found himself yet. His wondering about his place in life, or his role within the Church, can only be approached through unreliability. How can he be truthful when he does not even know who he is? It is only when he admits to his deepest secrets that he can start being honest, not only to his audience but also to himself.

Cyril also uses his narrative to find himself, but his narrator is speaking from a safe place, so he does not need to resort to unreliability to tell his story. Unlike Odran, Cyril can tell his story chronologically and reliably, for his state of mind is not as chaotic. The narratives echo the protagonists' journeys: for two of them (Gabriel and Cyril), the road is paved and they can follow it without stepping away from it or falling into many obstacles; for Odran, however, the path is still uncharted, and it is only when he ventures into it that he can find which way to take.

Furthermore, if I was to analyse how the narrators present themselves, attention had to be paid to what might influence that representation. Chapter two has dealt with sociological issues regarding the Irish and Northern Irish societies of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first to explore the impact they have on the protagonists' lives and, therefore, narratives.

Indeed, the protagonists of the novels chosen are not only looking for their personalities as Gabriel Harkin, Odran Yates, and Cyril Avery respectively, but they also have to deal with other set of identities, namely their

sexual, national, and religious identities. Their religious identities seem to be in the middle of the triangle, located in between their national and sexual identities—in other words, these protagonists are Catholic because they are Irish, and they suffer from sexual repression because they are Catholic.

Clearly, Gabriel, Odran, and Cyril deal with their identities as Irish. Gabriel is the only one who questions it, in the sense that his situation, living in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, cannot be politically compared to that of Odran or Cyril. For Gabriel, being Irish implies being against the British, or so has he been taught, and that brings with it deep consequences when he falls in love with a British soldier. In the end, he chooses London over Ireland, a place where he will be accepted, bringing up doubts about his identity as an Irishman. Odran and Cyril also seem to reject their Irishness, as has been argued above. The Ireland they have known has only provoked shame and guilt in them, and it is not a place where they can be happy until the end of their lives.

Being Irish, as seen in chapter two of this dissertation, has been extremely linked to being Catholic. Gabriel, Odran, and Cyril have all been brought up in a religious environment that implemented Catholic doctrines, namely the repression of sexuality, the submissive role of women, or the sacred role of priests. None of them knows how to react when they encounter within them something different from what they have been taught all their lives—Gabriel and Cyril know that they are different from the rest (and they blame God for it), and Odran is forced into a life in the priesthood he has not chosen and falls in disgrace (in his eyes at least) for committing a mistake involving a woman and, most importantly, for keeping silence about it. Gabriel, Odran, and Cyril lose at some point the trust and faith they had in the Church when they see the deeper side of the institution—when they are rejected and denied being themselves, or when they see their lives lost for their devotion to the Church.

Therefore, their sexual identities are highly influenced by their Catholic upbringing. Sex was a subject never discussed at home or at school (Inglis, "Origins and Legacies"), which turns it into something wrong and negative. Consequently, they are forced to look for their sexual identities outside the home, in a dark and dangerous place that does not treat them gently. Gabriel and Cyril discover their sexuality at a young age and learn how to hide from it, in an attempt to reject it and bury it deep within them. They both try to have a relationship with a woman, denying their true sexuality, but neither of them is capable of making it last. They are seen, also by themselves, as criminals, monsters in search for a cure—until they meet someone who has gone through their same experience and teaches them to love themselves. Significantly, that can only happen outside of Ireland—at least until homosexuality is decriminalised in 1993.

Odran's sexual identity is not as important in the novel as those of Gabriel and Cyril. He does repress his sexuality from the beginning, and especially so when he joins the priesthood. The only connection he has with a woman, other than the female members of his family, comes from an Italian waitress he is infatuated with. She embodies everything that was banned from him, and her freedom juxtaposes that of the female characters he had known. The shameful event with the waitress stains his stay in Rome and increases his feelings of guilt and shame.

The three narratives, therefore, succeed in their attempts at finding identity and show that reliability is only possible when they have come to terms with who they are. Gabriel, Odran, and Cyril are evolving characters who do not take for granted what they have lived with all their lives but learn to see the truth for themselves, to even reject their community doctrines and find their true selves, whether that means being a homosexual or a regretful priest who has been unable to step up.

### 9.3. Unreliability and trauma, shame, and guilt

The narratives seem to mirror the oppression the characters feel, since, from a merely textual perspective, there seems to be a certain degree of slight censorship, postponement, or delay. There are some aspects that, just as they were censored by the Catholic Church and, hence, the Irish society, the narrators seem to keep away from their narratives—shameful events, traumatic memories, and guilty secrets. Narration, and unreliability in particular, seems to be the key to better understand the characters—it is not exclusively the events they undergo, but how they present them to the reader.

Gabriel has been seen to suffer from shame and guilt because of the man he really is. Driven by this religious upbringing, he believes himself to be abnormal when he explores his sexuality and finds something he had never experienced before. When he grows up to become a teenager, he directs his guilt towards the fact that he enjoys the company of men more than that of women, especially because he cannot be aroused by a woman, only by men. His guilt also implies shame upon his family, since they wished he was a priest and he is a gay man instead. Moreover, Gabriel also experiences traumatic episodes, namely when he is sexually assaulted by a priest at school. This is traumatic not only because of the episode *per se*, but also because it makes him direct the blame towards himself—he believes he deserves it on account of his homosexuality.

Cyril in *The Heart's Invisible Furies* experiences something similar, in the sense that he also sees himself as different from the rest of the boys around him and learns from an early age that what he is, a gay man, is wrong—according to Irish Catholic standards. Nonetheless, he does not feel as guilty as Gabriel for being a homosexual, since he eventually understands that that is who he is and there is no point in trying to change it. Cyril is forced to find comfort in the arms of strangers in dark alleys, until he flees Ireland and

reaches a society that does not judge him for who he is. The shame he felt in the first part of the novel (and of his life) is forced upon him by the Irish society of the time, and it is only when he leaves his homeland that he can find the peace he so much longs for—although the violent attack in NYC shows that gay men can never be truly safe.

Odran's traumas and guilt are not so much linked to his sexuality. First, he went through a difficult childhood marked by the death of his father and little brother, for which he blames himself. This is linked to the guilt he feels for the silence he kept about the sexual abuses he witnessed, or at least he was suspicious of. The episode in Rome also adds to his guilt and shame, given that he was driven by sexual matters rather than by his duty. Traumatic memories and a guilty conscience create chaos in his narrative, as seen in the back-and-forth structure of the novel and in the delay of important events or information he is not ready to share with the reader yet. It is only at the end of his life, and hence at the end of the novel, that he is able to admit to his faults and mistakes. In this sense, it is relevant that he admits this only to himself—he was the one who had to forgive himself, which is ultimately the purpose of his narrative.

Going back to my previous questions regarding the relationship between narration and affects of trauma, guilt, or shame, this dissertation has proved the necessity of narrating to heal from or overcome those issues. The three narrators use their narratives as a confession, as a coming to terms with oneself, as something necessary to continue living their lives in peace with themselves. It is when analysing our past that we understand our present and can begin to create a desirable future. Narration allows healing, but it is no easy task. Besides, given the importance of religion in the novels, it has also been seen how Catholic confession is used in the novels, sometimes ironically, to exemplify the characters' narration of their inner sins.

I have also proved the linkage of unreliable narration to affects like those mentioned, especially in the case of Odran. The structure of *A History of Loneliness* warns the reader of the state of mind of a narrator who is unable to tell the events coherently and in order. He lets the reader understand things for themselves, and it is only at the end that he admits to previous partial truths or lies. Unreliable narration, then, is very much present in this type of traumatic narratives.<sup>213</sup>

(Un)reliable narration has been then a necessary tool to convey both the emotions mentioned and the role played by the Catholic Church in Ireland. The protagonists' identities as Irish Catholic men are therefore of high importance when dealing with (un)reliability. If they cannot be true to themselves and to others, it is because of the high importance they concede to religious guilt—their morals as Catholic men are present in their understanding of guilt and shame. Being an Irish Catholic man (and in two of the novels, also a gay man) implies having to comply with those three identities—national, religious, and sexual. The core of the novels is the protagonists' struggle to fit those three identities together, and to overcome the guilt, shame, and trauma that they imply. In order to do so, narration is of paramount importance, and it has been shown how narration is affected by the said struggle.

#### 9.4. Further lines of research

The in-depth analysis of the unreliable narrator carried out in this thesis has laid bare the necessity for academics to further theorize on the notion of the unreliable focalizer, especially with regard to life narratives. I have hinted above at the nature of this figure as often seen in child narrators, or in narratives told by an aged autodiegetic narrator. The dialogue (or absence of

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<sup>213</sup> Another example of this can be Anne Enright's *The Gathering*.

dialogue) between the inexperienced character/focalizer and the aged narrator proves especially productive when approaching issues related to trauma, guilt, shame and memory.

As has been suggested in the course of this dissertation, the three novels analysed are not the only ones that focus on the influence that the Catholic church has had on issues of sexuality, guilt and shame. Hence, it would be interesting to study more examples of twentieth-century literature of the Republic and the North of Ireland to see whether this may be a trend in contemporary Irish fiction. How twenty-first-century fiction revisits these issues can also be worth considering. Likewise, since I am writing from Spain and I am aware that the religious and sexual situation in my country has been quite similar to that of Ireland, it might be worth comparing these issues in literatures from both places.

Besides, a similar analysis could be applied to Irish film and television. Along these lines, and given that director Ridley Scott's production company has bought the rights to adapt *The Heart's Invisible Furies* to a TV show (Quigley, 2017), it could be of great interest to see how the adaptation deals with the issues discussed in this dissertation.<sup>214</sup>

Finally, throughout this thesis I have dealt with the quest for masculine identities and the use of unreliable narration and focalization as a means to represent and cope with trauma, guilt and shame, especially with regard to issues related to (homo)sexuality, in Catholic Ireland. An analysis that would focus on female characters, while tackling analogous issues in contemporary Irish fiction, would also be enlightening, especially in narratives such as *The Heart's Invisible Furies* or *A Son Called Gabriel*, to see whether unreliable

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<sup>214</sup> In relation to the representation of masculinities in film, it will be very useful to consider the framework José Díaz-Cuesta has been using in his analyses of film texts. He has been using the four so-called sites proposed by Kirkham and Thumim applying them to a number of American texts, and, more recently, to Irish productions (Díaz-Cuesta 2018; 2019).

narration and focalization prove to be equally suitable narrative tools in the quest for female identities in twentieth-century Catholic Ireland.

Analyses like the one I have carried out in this thesis make me wonder about the reliability of anyone's accounts in real life, and, more importantly, the need for unreliability in order to cope with one's own identity, trauma, guilt, shame, or simply memory loss. Unreliable narration plays an important role in our lives, even if we may not notice it. At the end of the day, we all are constructing ourselves not only by what we do and feel, but also by our own narratives: what we tell the rest of people and ourselves about us.



## CHAPTER TEN

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### RESUMEN Y CONCLUSIONES EN ESPAÑOL

#### RESUMEN:

Esta tesis doctoral observa la narración no fiable y su aplicación a la literatura contemporánea de la República y el Norte de Irlanda. Tres novelas, *A Son Called Gabriel* (Damian McNicholl), *A History of Loneliness* y *The Heart's Invisible Furies* (ambas de John Boyne), han sido seleccionadas para tratar la (no) fiabilidad y su conexión con las masculinidades y los afectos del trauma, la culpa y la vergüenza. Estas narrativas muestran la necesidad que el narrador tiene de ser no fiable y cómo esto se proyecta en el papel, así como su representación del trauma, la culpa y la vergüenza causadas por las sociedades de la República y el Norte de Irlanda en los siglos XX y XXI.

Este estudio explora primero el contexto histórico y social de la República de Irlanda y el Norte de Irlanda especialmente desde los años 50 del siglo XX hasta hoy. Tomando como base las novelas seleccionadas, se muestran los cambios que estas sociedades atravesaron principalmente en cuanto a la secularización de los países y la sexualidad. La política es también relevante para tratar la relación entre católicos y protestantes en el Norte de Irlanda, una parte esencial de este análisis.

A continuación, el capítulo tres se centra en las masculinidades. Los tres protagonistas de las novelas son hombres y, dado que sus masculinidades son una parte clave de su identidad y su caracterización, un estudio de las masculinidades es necesario, especialmente basado en lo que significaba ser un hombre en los años 50 y lo que implica hoy en día. Este trabajo se centra en las masculinidades irlandesas para entender mejor a los personajes, así como en la paternidad para explorar las relaciones de los protagonistas con sus padres e hijos, para poder entenderlos como hombres.

El capítulo cuatro se centra en la narración, dado que mi análisis se basa en cómo el trauma, la culpa, la vergüenza e incluso la masculinidad afectan a la narración. Así, se presta atención a la figura del narrador para después pasar a la narración no fiable. Aquí se exploran las diferentes interpretaciones de esta figura narratológica con ejemplos sacados de la literatura contemporánea escrita en lengua inglesa. También se discuten otros temas relacionados como la focalización, la confesión católica o las narrativas de vida, dada la temática de las novelas seleccionadas.

El capítulo cinco está destinado a un análisis de los afectos del trauma, la memoria, la culpa y la vergüenza, dado que su comprensión es esencial para entender a continuación las ideas presentes en las novelas. Los cuatro afectos se tratan en cuanto a su relación con la no fiabilidad, así como con los roles de género, una vez más, con enfoque en las masculinidades.

Así, esta tesis presenta una combinación de esos cuatro capítulos (la sociedad irlandesa, las masculinidades, narración y las emociones mencionadas) en las tres novelas escogidas. Los capítulos seis a ocho se destinan a los análisis de *A Son Called Gabriel*, *A History of Loneliness* y *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, respectivamente. Finalmente, el capítulo nueve recoge las conclusiones de esta tesis, incluyendo una propuesta para una nueva clasificación de narración no fiable, extraída de las tres novelas.

**Palabras clave:** no fiabilidad, Irlanda, identidad, masculinidad, trauma, culpa, vergüenza.



## CONCLUSIONES:

“[Las historias] son en su análisis final no representaciones objetivas de eventos sino reconstrucciones subjetivas de esos eventos. [...] Las narrativas se construyen, en vez de ser descubiertas. Lo que hace importantes a las narrativas no son los eventos en sí, sino las interpretaciones subjetivas de esos eventos en cuanto a la presente búsqueda de significado.”

*An Introduction to the Study of Narrative Fiction*,  
Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning.<sup>215</sup>

La cita de Neumann y Nünning parece ser la introducción perfecta para este capítulo de conclusiones. A lo largo de esta tesis, el énfasis se ha puesto precisamente en la ‘búsqueda de significado’ más que en los eventos que la marcan. Como en la vida misma, lo que importa aquí es la interpretación del camino más que el camino en sí mismo o su destinación final. La subjetividad y, por lo tanto, la no fiabilidad, es el hilo que une todo este estudio.

Por consiguiente, en esta tesis doctoral se ha llevado a cabo una exploración profunda de la narración no fiable, contribuyendo a la literatura existente en este campo de estudio y reflexionando sobre su aplicación en el análisis de tres novelas contemporáneas irlandesas que, a pesar de su popularidad, todavía no habían recibido mucha atención de investigadores. Las novelas seleccionadas, *A Son Called Gabriel*, *A History of Loneliness* y *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, son ejemplos del impacto que las sociedades de la República de Irlanda e Irlanda del Norte de la segunda mitad del siglo XX tienen en la búsqueda por la identidad y el desarrollo de las masculinidades que los protagonistas persiguen durante sus vidas y que cuentan en sus historias de vida. El estudio de sus narrativas ha mostrado cuál es la imagen que estos narradores tienen de sí mismos, cómo se enfrentan a temas de trauma, culpa y vergüenza, y cómo ponen todo esto en palabras. Asimismo,

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<sup>215</sup> Traducción propia.

también ha ayudado a determinar diferentes clasificaciones de narración y focalización no fiable, vistas bajo el escrutinio del trauma, la culpa y la vergüenza.

En esencia, esta tesis empezó atando un hilo alrededor de la entidad del narrador no fiable y lo ha seguido para ver a dónde llevaba. En el proceso, tres nudos se han formado claramente alrededor de los temas de narración, identidad masculina y el trauma, la culpa y la vergüenza.

### 9.1. No fiabilidad y narración

Para reflexionar sobre las conexiones entre la no fiabilidad y la narración, el capítulo cuatro de esta tesis ha desarrollado las obras teóricas que tratan la figura del narrador no fiable, así como sus diferentes clasificaciones o las pistas para su identificación. Pero, ¿cuál es el impacto de la no fiabilidad en la narración? ¿Cómo cambia una narrativa si está expuesta a la no fiabilidad? ¿Cuáles son las entidades narrativas envueltas en ella? Para responder a estas preguntas, se ha aplicado la literatura existente al análisis de las tres novelas escogidas y a sus protagonistas masculinos. Gabriel, Odran y Cyril han sido examinados con este propósito, como narradores tanto como focalizadores. Como resultado, se ha llegado a diferentes clasificaciones de narración y focalización no fiables, contribuyendo a las terminologías propuestas por otros autores como James Phelan y Mary Patricia Martin (1999), Greta Olson (2003), Theresa Heyd (2006) o Vera Nünning (2015).

Mi análisis ha mostrado que los narradores de las novelas escogidas son bastante similares pero también significativamente diferentes los unos de los otros. Odran en *A History of Loneliness* es el que más difiere de los otros dos, aunque sí muestra cierto parecido a Cyril en *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, quien, a su vez, es muy similar a Gabriel en *A Son Called Gabriel*.

La respuesta que obtienen del lector es bastante pareja en las tres novelas: todas ellas inspiran un lector empático que entiende sus motivaciones para y sus necesidades de ser no fiables. Siguiendo la terminología de James Phelan (2007), se crea un vínculo afectivo entre narrador, focalizador y lector, dado que el último entiende que la no fiabilidad del narrador y el focalizador es intencional e inconsciente, por lo que no deberían ser culpados por cometer errores que no pueden evitar. Este sería el caso de Gabriel, cuya inocencia y corta edad impiden que sea verdaderamente fiable, mientras que Odran y Cyril son principalmente (no) fiables debido a su culpa y trauma. En este caso, el lector también empatiza con ellos porque puede entender que la motivación para la narrativa de cada narrador es saldar cuentas con su pasado y encontrar su identidad, aunque el arrepentimiento es también un elemento clave, especialmente en el caso de Odran. El lector no puede condenar las faltas del narrador, y se le pide que empatice y sea paciente.

Como resultado, se ha hecho una distinción entre el yo *experimental* y el yo *experimentado*; o lo que se ha llamado a lo largo de este análisis *personaje-Gabriel/Odran/Cyriel* y *narrador-Gabriel/Odran/Cyriel*. Esta distinción ha probado ser esencial cuando se trata con el análisis de la (no) fiabilidad en estas novelas, dado que el principal problema surge de la disparidad entre el narrador y el focalizador/personaje. En las tres novelas hay una diferencia clara entre la persona que narra (narrador) y la persona que ve (el personaje/focalizador), con relación a lo que se ve (lo focalizado) (Bal 149). Odran y Cyril hacen constantes referencias al momento presente desde el que hablan, enfatizando así la naturaleza retrospectiva de sus explicaciones y retrasando la revelación de cierta información que tienen en el presente pero que no tenían en el pasado. Gabriel, por otro lado, no es tan intrusivo como narrador, en cuanto a que no participa demasiado en la narración y, como consecuencia, la distinción entre narrador y focalizador es más complicada de

percibir. En este caso, los únicos indicadores de la retrospectiva de su narración es que lo hace en tiempo pasado y que el lenguaje de la narración, así como la coherencia de la historia, es el de un adulto. En los tres casos, sin embargo, su no fiabilidad se reduce principalmente a esa retrospectiva.

Además, los tres narradores saben más que los personajes en sus historias y, por lo tanto, podrían haber elegido explicar lo que el resto de los personajes no puede, o incluso contradecir las suposiciones de los personajes. Como no han hecho eso, estos narradores son principalmente no fiables por omisión y demora. Sin embargo, a pesar de la dificultad de distinguir entre completa no fiabilidad y fiabilidad, se ha fijado una etiqueta a cada uno de ellos dependiendo del punto de vista que adoptan en sus narrativas y/o los motivos que tienen para actuar como lo hacen. Como narrador, Gabriel elige a personaje-Gabriel como focalizador principal y no comenta sobre la narración tanto como Odran o Cyril. Así, la no fiabilidad en la narrativa de Gabriel reside no en la narración sino principalmente en la focalización. Como consecuencia, Gabriel es lo que he llamado un *narrador encubiertamente limitado*. La propuesta de este término incluye el 'narrador encubierto' de Chatman (1978)<sup>216</sup> y la 'narración limitada' de Phelan ("Reliable, Unreliable"), que son muy significativos en la narración de Gabriel porque no se inmiscuye en la perspectiva del focalizador y se limita por tanto a narrar los eventos de manera fiable. Es precisamente por su discreción que no puede ser considerado un narrador totalmente fiable o no fiable, sino que tiene que encontrarse en medio de los dos términos: su relato sería fiable si no fuera por su falta de clarificación de los errores del focalizador.

En el caso de Odran, es la culpa lo que le hace retrasar la narración de ciertos eventos y lo que le impide decir la verdad sobre la naturaleza de sus

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<sup>216</sup> En la traducción castellana de María Jesús Fernández Prieto (Alfaguara, 1990), el 'covert narrator' de Chatman se convierte en un 'narrador no representado.' Mi término del 'narrador encubierto' creo que ilustra de mejor manera la narración de Gabriel, en este caso.

propios malentendidos. En otras palabras, la culpa de Odran le impide ser fiable, lo que le convierte en lo que he llamado un *narrador culpablemente autoengañado*. Esto incluye el 'autoengaño' de Heyd (2006), presente en la novela en el deseo de Odran de ocultar la verdad primero de sí mismo y luego del lector. Para llevarlo a cabo, el narrador, movido por su conciencia culpable, no clarifica los errores del focalizador y guía al lector por un camino poco fiable.

Cyril, por otro lado, también se mueve por la culpa y la vergüenza (impuesta por la sociedad), pero como narrador es principalmente fiable, como he demostrado en el capítulo dedicado a *The Heart's Invisible Furies*. Su intención no es engañar, dado que, en el momento en el que habla, no tiene nada que esconder y nada de lo que sentirse avergonzado. Sin embargo, se podría argumentar que también puede ser considerado no fiable porque omite y retrasa cierta información (y también comete errores por su memoria falible). Personalmente opino que, de los tres narradores, Cyril es el que se encuentra más claramente en el espacio entre la fiabilidad y la no fiabilidad, por lo que es un *narrador intencionadamente (no) fiable*.

En cuanto a los tres personajes/focalizadores, todos pueden ser considerados no fiables pero por diferentes razones, incluso si todos ellos son no fiables en cuanto a equivocaciones en su ética o valoraciones. En *A History of Loneliness* encontramos lo que he llamado un *focalizador ciegamente no fiable*. En el caso de Odran, su principal error consiste en que no ve o finge no ver. No es capaz de entender correctamente lo que implica que Tom se mude de parroquia en parroquia, aunque el narrador admite lo contrario al final de la novela. Por lo tanto, el personaje-Odran es no fiable primero en su ceguera y después en su afirmación de serlo cuando no lo es. El problema está en las diferentes interpretaciones que el lector pueda tener sobre lo que Odran sabía realmente. Yo creo personalmente que él sabía la verdad sobre Tom (como admite al final), pero no sobre Aidan (por lo cual no puede

entender los motivos de este para estar enfadado con él), pero miente en su afirmación de no conocer los defectos de Tom.

Como focalizadores, Cyril y Gabriel son más parecidos. Ambos son *focalizadores inocentes no fiables*, ya que el principal elemento en sus perspectivas son sus malentendidos debido a su inocencia infantil. No son niños durante toda la novela, sino que crecen en la mitad de esta. Así, estas novelas yuxtaponen las evaluaciones y pensamientos de Cyril y Gabriel como niños y como adolescentes/adultos. De manera significativa, sus faltas en cuanto a sus malentendidos provienen de su ignorancia sobre la sexualidad, que, como se ha mencionado, es comprensible dado su censurador contexto sociocultural.

Así, lo que encontramos en estas novelas en cuanto a la narración son narradores y focalizadores no totalmente fiables o no fiables, sino diferentes posiciones a lo largo del espectro de la (no) fiabilidad. Podemos pensar al principio que estamos tratando con narradores no fiables, aunque tendríamos que prestar más atención a la no fiabilidad en la focalización. Al final es más una cuestión de focalización no fiable que de narración no fiable (ver Gráfico 2).

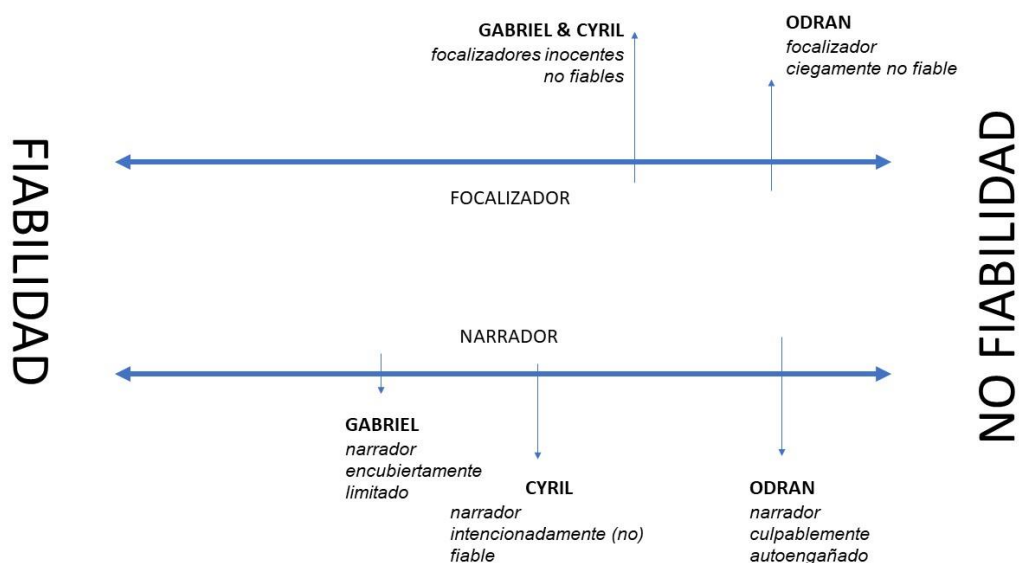


Gráfico 2: narradores y focalizadores de las novelas a lo largo del espectro de la no fiabilidad.

Para concluir, en la introducción a esta disertación me preguntaba si la no fiabilidad era necesaria para que estos narradores traten sus historias de vida. En pocas palabras, no puede ser de otra manera. En el caso de nuestros tres narradores, la narración es esencial para entender los motivos detrás de sus narrativas, y para comprender la relación de la narración con el trauma, la culpa y la vergüenza. La no fiabilidad infantil en la focalización parece ser la única opción para Gabriel y Cyril, dado que su inocencia les impide ver las cosas desde otra perspectiva. Los narradores están a cargo de explicar y clarificar al lector lo que el focalizador no puede entender o saber en el momento, pero eligen no hacerlo para posicionar al lector junto al personaje.

La unión entre no fiabilidad y narración no es exclusiva de la literatura o de los narradores ficticios. Las historias que todos contamos sobre nosotros mismos en nuestro día a día también son subjetivas y, a menudo, no fiables. Así, la elección del narrador no fiable en las tres novelas analizadas coloca a los narradores más cerca de las narraciones de la vida cotidiana y, paradójicamente, los convierte en más verosímiles y reales.

## 9.2. La no fiabilidad y las identidades masculinas

Seguir el hilo de la no fiabilidad también ha llevado a sustanciales ideas sobre la identidad y, en particular, sobre las identidades masculinas. El estudio de la narración y la identidad es relevante en cuanto a que los protagonistas de las novelas escogidas, que también son sus narradores, aportan al lector su propia versión de ellos mismos. Sostengo que las novelas habrían sido muy diferentes si un narrador omnisciente y en tercera persona hubiera narrado las historias. Mi interés está en ver por qué los narradores cuentan la historia de esa manera en vez de seguir un camino diferente. ¿Por qué centrarse en unos aspectos y dejar otros de lado? ¿Qué nos dice eso sobre su sentido de la identidad?

Las tres novelas analizadas son narrativas de búsqueda de la identidad. Los protagonistas están intentando encontrarse a sí mismos, explorar quiénes fueron realmente para entender quiénes son. Los fallos y errores de su pasado les servirán para arreglar las cosas en el presente, para pedir perdón en algunos casos y para dar voz a sus silencios en otros. En este sentido, ¿son sus narrativas su manera de expresar sus identidades? Los tres narradores han permanecido en silencio (o silenciados) de una manera u otra, por lo tanto, recurrir a sus narrativas es su única posibilidad de expresarse. Un estudio de la narración es esencial para entender quiénes son, lo que nos trae de vuelta a su necesidad de la (no) fiabilidad.

Se ha visto a lo largo de los análisis de los tres narradores que usan las narrativas como vehículo para encontrar sus identidades, para asimilar en quiénes se han convertido en la vida. Así, en *A Son Called Gabriel* el camino de la adolescencia de Gabriel, su *bildung* personal, muestra cómo cambia desde un niño inocente, altamente influenciado por su educación católica, que prohíbe cualquier tipo de educación sexual que pueda necesitar, a un adolescente que ha aprendido sobre la realidad que le rodea y se cuestiona todo lo que sabe desde que nació. Las enseñanzas católicas que se le han impuesto desde una edad temprana le han hecho rechazarse a sí mismo y pensar que era una abominación, indigno de amor, respeto y aceptación. Su evolución se refleja en su narrativa, dado que evoluciona desde un focalizador no fiable, como se ha mencionado, a un focalizador y narrador fiable y maduro. Su no fiabilidad, por lo tanto, disminuye a medida que va creciendo y empezando a entenderse y, más importante aún, a encontrar su verdadero yo.

Algo similar ocurre con los narradores de *A History of Loneliness* y *The Heart's Invisible Furies*. También están explorando sus identidades, pero en estos casos les cuesta toda su vida, y toda la narrativa, aceptar quiénes son. Son las acciones y las inacciones de toda una vida las que deciden en qué se



convierte una persona al final de su vida. Así, Odran y Cyril analizan sus errores en un intento de justificarse y ser perdonados, para descubrir quiénes son, aunque tenga que ser en la vejez. Como Gabriel, también están buscando su aceptación: Odran necesita ser perdonado y respetado de nuevo por su comunidad pero, más importante aún, por su familia; mientras que Cyril ha alcanzado en la vejez el reconocimiento que necesitaba durante su vida, y muestra la lucha que ha llevado a cabo para abrir camino para las generaciones futuras.

La narración vuelve a ser, una vez más, significativa. En el caso de Odran, su no fiabilidad es necesaria a lo largo de su narrativa porque todavía no se ha encontrado a sí mismo. Su cuestionamiento sobre su lugar en el mundo, o su papel en la iglesia, solo puede ser abordado a través de la no fiabilidad. ¿Cómo puede ser fiable si ni siquiera sabe quién es? Solo al admitir sus secretos más profundos puede empezar a ser honesto, no solo con su público sino también consigo mismo.

Cyril también usa la narrativa para encontrarse a sí mismo, pero su narrador habla desde un lugar seguro, por lo que no tiene necesidad de recurrir a la no fiabilidad para contar su historia. Al contrario que Odran, Cyril puede contar su historia cronológica y fiablemente, dado que su mente no es tan caótica. Las narrativas se hacen eco del viaje de los protagonistas: para dos de ellos (Gabriel y Cyril), el camino ya está pavimentado y lo pueden seguir sin salirse o sin encontrar demasiados obstáculos; para Odran, en cambio, el camino es inexplorado, y hasta que no se aventura en él no puede encontrar la senda que debe seguir.

Además, si mi intención era analizar cómo los narradores se presentan, había que prestar atención a qué puede influenciar esa representación. El capítulo dos ha versado sobre temas sociológicos relacionados con las sociedades irlandesas y norirlandesas de la segunda mitad del siglo XX y el

comienzo del XXI para explorar el impacto que tienen en la vida de los protagonistas y, por lo tanto, en las narrativas.

En efecto, los protagonistas de las novelas escogidas no solo están buscando sus personalidades como Gabriel Harkin, Odran Yates y Cyril Avery, sino que también tienen que lidiar con otras identidades, a saber, sus identidades sexuales, nacionales y religiosas. Sus identidades religiosas parecen estar en medio del triángulo, emplazadas en medio de sus identidades nacionales y sexuales. En otras palabras, estos protagonistas son católicos porque son irlandeses, y sufren represión sexual porque son católicos.

Claramente, Gabriel, Odran y Cyril tratan con sus identidades como irlandeses. Gabriel es el único que se la cuestiona, en el sentido de que su situación, al vivir en Irlanda del Norte durante el “Conflicto,” no puede ser comparada políticamente con la de Odran o Cyril. Para Gabriel, ser irlandés implica ir contra los británicos, o eso es lo que le han enseñado, y eso trae consigo grandes consecuencias cuando se enamora de un soldado británico. Al final, Gabriel elige Londres por encima de Irlanda, un lugar donde será aceptado, haciendo resurgir dudas sobre su identidad como irlandés. Odran y Cyril también parecen rechazar su identidad como irlandeses, como se ha mantenido más arriba. La Irlanda que han conocido solo ha provocado vergüenza y culpa en ellos, y no es un lugar donde puedan ser felices hasta el final de sus vidas.

Ser irlandés, como se ha visto en el capítulo dos de esta tesis, ha estado extremadamente unido a ser católico. Gabriel, Odran y Cyril han sido criados en un entorno religioso que implementaba las doctrinas católicas, a saber, la represión de la sexualidad, el papel sumiso de la mujer o el papel sagrado de los curas. Ninguno de ellos sabe cómo reaccionar cuando encuentran dentro de sí mismos algo diferente a lo que les habían enseñado durante toda su vida: Gabriel y Cyril saben que son diferentes al resto (y culpan a Dios por

ello) y Odran es obligado a llevar una vida en el sacerdocio que él no ha escogido y cae en desgracia (a sus ojos, al menos) por cometer un error en el que una mujer está involucrada y, más importante aún, por mantener silencio sobre ello. Gabriel, Odran y Cyril pierden la confianza y la fe que tenían en la iglesia cuando ven el lado más profundo de esta institución: cuando se les rechaza y deniega el poder ser ellos mismos, o cuando ven sus vidas perdidas por su devoción a la iglesia.

Por lo tanto, sus identidades sexuales están altamente influenciadas por su educación católica. El sexo era un tema que no se trataba nunca en casa o en el colegio (Inglis, "Origins and Legacies"), lo que lo convierte en algo malo y negativo. Por consecuencia, son obligados a buscar sus identidades sexuales fuera de casa, en un lugar oscuro y peligroso que no les trata con amabilidad. Gabriel y Cyril descubren su sexualidad a una edad temprana y aprenden cómo ocultarla, intentando rechazarla y enterrarla en el fondo de su ser. Ambos intentan tener una relación con una mujer, negando su verdadera sexualidad, pero ninguno es capaz de mantenerla. Son vistos, también por sí mismos, como criminales, monstruos en busca de una cura; al menos hasta que encuentran a alguien que ha pasado por su misma experiencia y les enseña a quererse a sí mismos. Significativamente, eso solo puede pasar fuera de Irlanda; al menos hasta que la homosexualidad deja de ser un crimen en 1993.

La identidad sexual de Odran no es tan importante en la novela como las de Gabriel o Cyril. Él reprime su sexualidad desde el principio, y especialmente cuando se une al sacerdocio. La única conexión que tiene con una mujer, aparte de los miembros femeninos de su familia, proviene de una camarera italiana con la que él está obsesionado. Ella personifica todo lo que había estado prohibido para él, y su libertad se yuxtapone al resto de los personajes femeninos que él había conocido. La vergonzosa situación con la camarera

ensucia su estancia en Roma y hace que aumenten sus sentimientos de culpa y vergüenza.

Las tres narrativas, por lo tanto, triunfan en sus intentos de encontrar la identidad y mostrar que la fiabilidad es solo posible cuando han aceptado quiénes son. Gabriel, Odran y Cyril son personajes que evolucionan y que no dan por sentado aquello con lo que han vivido toda su vida sino que aprenden a ver la verdad por sí mismos, incluso a rechazar las doctrinas de su comunidad y encontrarse a sí mismos: homosexuales o un cura arrepentido que no ha sido capaz de dar un paso adelante.

### 9.3. La no fiabilidad y el trauma, la vergüenza y la culpa

Las narrativas parecen reflejar la opresión que sienten los personajes, dado que, desde una perspectiva meramente textual, parece haber una ligera censura, aplazamiento o retraso. Hay algunos aspectos que, tal y como fueron censurados por la iglesia católica y, por lo tanto, por la sociedad irlandesa, los narradores parecen mantener fuera de sus narrativas: eventos vergonzosos, memorias traumáticas y secretos inconfesables. La narración, y la no fiabilidad en particular, parecen ser la clave para entender mejor a los personajes: no es exclusivamente sobre los eventos que sufren, sino cómo los presentan al lector.

A Gabriel le hemos visto sufrir vergüenza y culpa debido al hombre que realmente es. Movidio por su educación religiosa, se considera anormal cuando explora su sexualidad y encuentra algo que no había experimentado antes. Cuando crece y se convierte en adolescente, dirige su culpa hacia el hecho de que disfruta de la compañía de hombres más que la de mujeres, especialmente porque no puede ser excitado por una mujer, solo por hombres. Su culpa también implica vergüenza sobre su familia, dado que deseaban que fuera cura y es homosexual en su lugar. Además, Gabriel también

experimenta episodios traumáticos, principalmente cuando un cura en la escuela abusa sexualmente de él. Esto es traumático no solo por el episodio como tal, sino también porque hace que dirija su culpa hacia él mismo: considera que se lo merece por ser homosexual.

Cyril en *The Heart's Invisible Furies* experimenta algo similar, en el sentido de que también se ve a sí mismo diferente al resto de los chicos a su alrededor, y aprende desde pequeño que lo que es, un hombre gay, está mal (de acuerdo a las doctrinas católicas irlandesas). Sin embargo, no se siente tan culpable como Gabriel por ser homosexual, dado que él finalmente entiende que ese es quien es y que no tiene sentido intentar cambiarlo. Cyril se ve obligado a buscar consuelo en los brazos de extraños en pasajes oscuros, hasta que escapa de Irlanda y encuentra una sociedad que no le juzga por ser quien es. La sociedad irlandesa del momento impone sobre él la vergüenza que siente en la primera parte de la novela (y de su vida), y hasta que no sale de su país natal no puede encontrar la paz que tanto desea, aunque el ataque en Nueva York muestra que los hombres homosexuales no pueden estar nunca a salvo.

Los traumas y la culpa de Odran no están tan unidos a su sexualidad. Primero pasó una infancia difícil, marcada por la muerte de su padre y su hermano pequeño, por la que él se culpa a sí mismo. Esto está unido a la culpa que siente por el silencio que mantuvo sobre los abusos sexuales de los que fue testigo, o al menos de los que tenía sospechas. El episodio en Roma también se añade a su trauma y vergüenza, dado que le movieron motivos sexuales en vez de sus tareas. Las memorias traumáticas y una conciencia avergonzada crean caos en su narrativa, como se aprecia en la estructura de idas y venidas de la novela y por el retraso en la revelación de eventos importantes o información que no está preparado aún para compartir con el lector. Es solo al final de su vida, y por lo tanto al final de la novela, que es capaz de admitir sus fallos y errores. En este sentido, es relevante que esto

lo admite para sí mismo: él es el que tiene que perdonarse, convirtiéndose en el propósito de su narrativa.

Volviendo a mis preguntas sobre la relación entre la narración y los afectos del trauma, la culpa o la vergüenza, esta tesis ha probado la necesidad de narrar para curarse o superar esos asuntos. Los tres narradores usan sus narrativas como confesión, para hacer las paces consigo mismos, algo necesario para continuar viviendo sus vidas en paz. Al analizar nuestro pasado entendemos nuestro presente y podemos empezar a crear un futuro deseable. La narración permite recuperarse, pero no es una tarea fácil. Además, dada la importancia de la religión en las novelas, se ha visto también cómo se usa la confesión católica en ellas, a veces irónicamente, para ejemplificar la narración de los pecados de los personajes.

También he probado la unión del narrador no fiable a afectos como los mencionados, especialmente en el caso de Odran. La estructura de *A History of Loneliness* previene al lector sobre el estado de ánimo del narrador, que es incapaz de contar los eventos coherentemente y en orden. Deja que los lectores entiendan cosas por sí mismos, y es solo al final cuando admite verdades parciales o mentiras. La narración no fiable, entonces, está muy presente en este tipo de narrativas traumáticas.<sup>217</sup>

La narración (no) fiable ha sido una herramienta útil para trasladar las emociones mencionadas y el papel que jugaba la iglesia católica en Irlanda. Las identidades de los protagonistas como hombres irlandeses católicos son por lo tanto de gran importancia cuando se trata con la (no) fiabilidad. Si no pueden ser fieles a sí mismos y a otros es por la gran importancia que conceden a la culpa religiosa: sus valores como hombres católicos están presentes en su entendimiento de la culpa y la vergüenza. Ser un hombre irlandés católico (y, en dos de las novelas, también un hombre gay) implica

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<sup>217</sup> Otro ejemplo de esto puede ser *The Gathering*, de Anne Enright.

tener que cumplir con estas tres identidades: nacional, religiosa y sexual. En el centro de las novelas está la lucha de los protagonistas para encajar esas tres identidades, y para sobrellevar la culpa, vergüenza y el trauma que implican. Para llevarlo a cabo, la narración es de gran importancia, y se ha mostrado cómo esa lucha afecta a la narración.

#### 9.4. Otras líneas de investigación

El análisis en profundidad del narrador no fiable llevado a cabo en esta tesis ha dejado claro la necesidad de los académicos de teorizar más sobre la figura del focalizador no fiable, especialmente relacionado con las narrativas de vida. He indicado arriba la naturaleza de esta figura vista a menudo en jóvenes narradores, o en narrativas contadas por un narrador auto-diegético. El diálogo (o ausencia de este) entre el personaje/focalizador inexperienced y el narrador adulto se muestra especialmente productivo cuando se tratan temas relacionados con el trauma, la culpa, la vergüenza y la memoria.

Como se ha sugerido a lo largo de esta tesis, las tres novelas analizadas no son las únicas que se centran en la influencia que la iglesia católica ha tenido en temas de sexualidad, culpa y vergüenza. Así, sería interesante estudiar más ejemplos de la literatura del siglo XX de la República y el Norte de Irlanda para ver si esto puede ser una tendencia en la ficción irlandesa contemporánea. Cómo la ficción del siglo XXI revisa estos temas también puede ser merecedor de consideración. De la misma manera, dado que escribo desde España y soy consciente de que la situación religiosa y sexual en mi país ha sido bastante similar a la de Irlanda, puede merecer la pena comparar estos temas en las literaturas de estos dos países.

Además, un análisis similar se puede aplicar también al cine y televisión irlandeses. En estas líneas, y dado que la productora del director Ridley Scott ha comprado los derechos para adaptar *The Heart's Invisible Furies* a una

serie de televisión (Quigley, 2017), sería de gran interés ver cómo la adaptación trata con los temas mencionados en esta disertación.<sup>218</sup>

Finalmente, a lo largo de esta tesis he tratado con la búsqueda de las identidades masculinas y el uso de la narración y focalización no fiable como modo de representación y de lidiar con el trauma, la culpa y la vergüenza, especialmente en temas relacionados con la (homo)sexualidad, en la Irlanda católica. Un análisis con el foco en los personajes femeninos, a la vez que se abordan temas análogos en la ficción irlandesa contemporánea, también sería reveladora, sobre todo en narrativas como *The Heart's Invisible Furies* o *A Son Called Gabriel*, para ver si la narración y la focalización no fiables se muestran igualmente útiles como herramientas narrativas en la búsqueda de identidades femeninas en la Irlanda católica del siglo XX.

Análisis como los que se han llevado a cabo en esta tesis me hacen cuestionarme la fiabilidad de las narraciones de la vida cotidiana y, más importante aún, la necesidad de la no fiabilidad para lidiar con la identidad, el trauma, la culpa, la vergüenza o la pérdida de memoria. La narración no fiable juega un papel muy importante en nuestras vidas, aunque no seamos conscientes de ello. Al fin y al cabo, todos nos construimos a nosotros mismos no solo por lo que hacemos y sentimos, sino también por nuestras propias narrativas: lo que contamos al resto del mundo, y a nosotros, sobre nosotros mismos.

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<sup>218</sup> Relacionado con la representación de masculinidades en el cine, sería muy útil considerar el marco teórico que José Díaz-Cuesta ha estado usando en sus análisis de textos fílmicos. Ha usado los cuatro “entornos” propuestos por Kirkham y Thumin, aplicándolos a un número de textos estadounidenses y, más recientemente, producciones irlandesas (Díaz-Cuesta 2018; 2019).



