

**‘The Distant Skin’: A Deconstructive Analysis of Women  
and Polysemic Touch in the Writing of John McGahern and  
Anne Enright**



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The handprint is a powerful symbol of ‘the distant skin’; it represents an individual’s skin but is not that skin, it is an interaction with one’s skin, one’s identity, whilst maintaining a distance from the ‘real’.

**‘The Distant Skin’: A Deconstructive Analysis of Women and Polysemic Touch  
in the Writing of John McGahern and Anne Enright**



**Name:** Michelle Kennedy

**Student Number:** 0352462

**Award:** PhD

**Institution:** Mary Immaculate College

**Supervisor:** Dr. Eugene O’ Brien

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## **Abstract**

This thesis, by providing a deconstructive reading of the work of John McGahern and Anne Enright, elucidates the way in which the place, position and representation of women in modern Irish society is profoundly affected by personal, political, religious and even legal societal forces. The project attempts to utilise the work of both authors to access and reveal the ‘Real’ experience of Irish women, in particular emphasising the impact of physical, emotional and metaphoric touch upon both their bodies and minds.

By analysing the work of these writers through the lens of literary theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser, this work will attempt to chart the changing perception of women and the lived female experience in modern Irish society from the 1960s right up to the present day, elucidating both the covert methods by which Irish women are currently repressed or silenced within society, and the myriad of ways in which they rebel against such repressive forces.

In order to provide a comprehensive investigation of the lived experience of women in modern Irish society, this work aims to look at the ways in which women are touched physically, emotionally and mentally by societal forces. It will focus on such issues as self-identity and touching the inner self, violent or oppressive physical or sexual touch, the complex physical and emotional changes associated with the inner touch that is pregnancy, and finally the stigmas and difficulties facing Irish women who are deemed to be “Touched” by mental illness in Irish society.

These analyses and examinations are undertaken with a view to building upon previous socio-cultural and literary academic works in relation to the representation of women in modern Irish society, whilst simultaneously opening new debates and

discussions in relation to how the Irish female experience has changed in the advent of the twenty-first century.

## Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or part, by me or another person, for the purpose of obtaining any other qualification.

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my parents; words cannot express what you have given me,  
and to Pat, who has touched my life.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Eugene O' Brien for all the support, encouragement and time that he has afforded me over the past number of years. His patience, help and friendship have meant so much to me during this entire process and will never be forgotten. I also wish to express my thanks to the English Department as a whole for providing financial support, a stimulating environment, and a home away from home in which to complete my research. Thanks too to Dr McDonagh, Dr Laing, Dr Beville and fellow students Miriam, Donna, Deirdre, Kristy and Conor for numerous discussions over coffee and snippets of advice, many of which came just at the right moment. I would also like to thank Helen Gallagher and Jeannette Ferguson in the Postgraduate office for all of their help and advice over the past number of years.

I cannot move on without thanking my family for their undying patience and unswerving support for my work. To my mother, for proofreading my work for close to eight years now, for the numerous dinners, late-night phone calls, encouragement and complete faith that it would get finished. To my father, who provided support and advice, even from five thousand miles away, and to Pat, who lived through every minute of it, and mercifully, is still here, years later. And finally to Max, who will never read this, but who slept on my feet as I wrote through many late nights, a reminder that even the most basic touch can make all the difference.

Portions of this thesis, and other relevant research, have been disseminated at the following conferences and publications:

### **Conferences**

‘For a Woman Nothing Has to Die’: An Examination of Death, Funerals, and Resurrection in Irish society as seen through the novels of John McGahern and Anne Enright, to be presented at *AFIS 2014 France and Ireland: Celebrating Music, Words and Art*, National Concert Hall, Dublin, 23<sup>rd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

‘Being the Not Wife’: Representations of Secondary Relationships within an Irish Cultural Context as Evinced through the Literature of John McGahern and Anne Enright, at *AFIS 2013 Outside the Frame: Challenging Representations of France and Ireland*, Université de Haute Bretagne, 24<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> May 2013.

‘Noli Me Tangere’: An Exploration of Irish Interactions with the Female Body, at *The Gender Question: A MIC and UL Sibeal Postgraduate Symposium*, Mary Immaculate College, Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2013.

‘On the Other Side of the Mirror’: Recognition and Misrecognition of Irish Women in the Mirror in the Literature of Anne Enright, Brian Friel and John McGahern, at *Talking Bodies: Identity, Sexuality, Representation* at the University of Chester, 26<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

‘Isolated Fathers’: The Powerlessness of Powerful Fathers in the Works of John McGahern, at *A Way of Seeing: 50 Years of John McGahern in Print*, at Queen’s University Belfast, March 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> 2013.

‘The Expectant Presence’: An Exploration of the Bodily and Pregnant Presence in the Literature of Anne Enright, at *Gendered Spaces, Gendered Times*, a Sibéal

Annual Conference at University College Cork, Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> November 2012.

‘The Weird Sisters’: Representations of Madness in Irish Society in the drama of Brian Friel, at the *New Voices in Irish Criticism: Legitimate Ireland* conference, Queen’s University Belfast, 19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> April 2012.

‘Are We Not Men?’ The Effect of Cloning on Traditional Theories of Humanity and Personhood, at the *Emerging Voices in English Research Studies* English Postgraduate Research Conference at Mary Immaculate College, Thursday May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

### **Publications**

‘Noli me Tangere’: An Exploration of Irish Interactions With the Female Body’.

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‘Being the Not Wife’: Representations of Secondary Relationships within an Irish Cultural Context as Evinced through the Literature of John McGahern and Anne Enright’. Paper submitted for consideration for inclusion in the proceedings of *AFIS 2013 Outside the Frame: Challenging Representations of France and Ireland Conference*, 2013. (Acceptance pending)

‘Isolated Fathers’: The Powerlessness of Powerful Fathers in the Works of John McGahern’ in Raymond Mullen, Adam Bargroff and Jennifer Mullen (eds) *John McGahern: Critical Essays*, New York: Peter Lang, 2013, Vol 56, Reimagining Ireland Series, edited by Dr. Eamon Maher, pp.207-221.

‘Freeing The Smothered (M)other’: The Refocalisation of the Reluctant Mother in Modern Irish Society as Evinced Through the Works of Anne Enright’ in

*Otherness: Essays & Studies, Issue 3.2* (available for viewing at [www.otherness.dk/otherness-essays-and-studies-3.2/](http://www.otherness.dk/otherness-essays-and-studies-3.2/)).

‘‘Are We Not Men?’’: The Effect of Cloning on Traditional Theories of Humanity and Personhood’, in *Journal of Franco-Irish Studies*, No 2 Winter 2011, ‘France and Ireland: Cultures en Crise’ (available for viewing at <http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=jofis>).

Representations of Madness in Irish Society in the drama of Brian Friel’, in *Etudes Irlandaises*, Autumn 2012 issue: *Feminist and Women’s Issues in Contemporary Irish Society*, pp.113-125.

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## Introduction

‘Touch has a memory.’

John Keats

The Oxford Dictionary defines the verb ‘to touch’ as to alternately to ‘come into or be in physical contact with’; to ‘bring the hand or another part of the body into contact with’; to ‘have an effect on’; to ‘harm or interfere with’ or to ‘use or consume’ an individual or object (*OED*, 2012, p.773). This project seeks to explore these divergent, yet interconnected, definitions of touch, as a means of expanding the current Irish literary, social and political discourse centring on the place and position of women in modern Irish society through literary and cultural critique. Through an examination and critique of the representation and treatment of female characters in the work of John McGahern and Anne Enright, this thesis charts cultural and social changes in the representation of women in modern Ireland, exposing and evaluating both women’s relationship with their own bodies, and also women’s problematic identity, specifically in terms of how their lives are ‘touched’, not only by their families and communities, but also by legal, societal, religious and even economic changes. In a rapidly changing and modernising society, public and official documentation is often drawn upon in order to provide information relating to women’s role and agency in Ireland.

However, it could be argued that this particular method of analysis cannot provide definitive answers. This is because, to paraphrase the French theorist, Jacques

Lacan, official language, what he terms the symbolic order, will never fully enunciate the 'real' meaning of events, as there is always a gap between intention, agency and meaning. Thus, what he calls the 'Real', the true nature of events, always escapes public discourse because unconscious motivations, prejudices and repressions are never accessed. For Lacan, literature is a discourse which affords access to the elusive 'Real'. Therefore, in this work, the texts that will be explored in order to understand the position, agency and identity of women in modern Ireland, and the way in which their lives are shaped and touched by various societal forces, will be literary.

This thesis will explore the literature of John McGahern and Anne Enright in order to discover the 'Real' experiences of women traditionally repressed under the hegemony of a Church-State nexus that dominated the Irish public sphere, and the ways in which this has profoundly affected these individuals' connection with their own bodies, their sexuality, their relationships with others and the ways in which they are perceived socially. Eugene O'Brien, in his article 'Kicking Bishop Brennan up the Arse', argues that the reason the church has 'rarely come under sustained attack from the feminist movement' is that women are 'not interested in this last bastion of patriarchy' (O'Brien 2006, p.130). This point illustrates a need for research such as this to be undertaken. This study is original because it seeks to explore this last bastion of patriarchy by exploring the interplay between feminism and Catholicism in Irish culture, an interplay which is manifested in modern Irish literature. Similarly by focusing on the representation, agency and incarceration of female characters, and by extension that of women in modern Irish society, through the lens of some of the ideas of theorists such as Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, this project will analyse changes in the representation of female characters, and the covert methods by which certain

female groups are subverted by their own families, by communities, by the law, and even by the media within Irish society. This project will critique Irish literature and the deconstructive interplay of these societal forces and feminism in Ireland through several theoretical perspectives. It will employ the theories of Jacques Lacan, particularly 'the 'Real''; a Lacanian term referring to that which is beyond language, to provide the reader with an insight into elements of the identity and unconscious of Irish women which cannot be analysed in critical and social discourses.

By utilizing specific areas of the thinking of feminists such as Helène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, in conjunction with both the work of the two authors chosen and public, religious and legal documentation, this thesis will seek to chart the ways in which women, in both literal and symbolic ways, have been, and continue to be, silenced, marginalised and occluded in Irish society. It will also examine the ways in which Irish women can rebel against societal dictates and prescriptions aimed at silencing women and the female experience. A feminist reading of the work of Enright and McGahern aims to break the traditional silence surrounding the female experience, enabling previously repressed female discourses in Irish studies to emerge. Similarly this project will apply aspects of the theories of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault to evaluate the societal structures and institutions which exercise control over women, evaluating the repression of Irish women, and their various attempts to escape or circumvent this repression in Ireland. Finally, the traditionally influential position of the Catholic Church in Ireland necessitates the consideration of critical writings on Catholicism from the Catholic Hierarchy, from lay people, and from feminists within the church. These writings serve as examples of public discourse, through which the normative framework of modern Irish society can be explored. By comparing and conjoining this with the 'real', undisclosed discourse

accessed through imaginative literature, a close critique of women's position and identity in modern Ireland can be undertaken. Literature is uniquely suited to explore these issues as, through imaginative writing, the norms of official discourse, the Lacanian 'symbolic order', can be breached and the 'Real' made apparent. The aim of this study would be to offer a critique which can outline 'a latent meaning behind a manifest one' (Jameson 1981, p.50).

The work of McGahern and Enright lends itself well to this particular study for a number of reasons. As prolific, well-established Irish writers with a keen interest in, and focus on, Irish society and the way in which it has evolved from the 1960s to present times, the span of their collective work serves as a lens through which to comprehensively chart the changes in the place, position, representation and agency of women in an ever-changing society. Eamon Wall makes the point in 'The Living Stream' that an important element in 'McGahern's work in general, is the recovery of the lives of women' (Wall 1999, p.312). This thesis strives to demonstrate the significant importance of McGahern's work in its representation and recovery of the lives of women in twentieth-century Ireland, and the way in which this representation blends and coalesces with that of Enright, who similarly seeks to recover repressed female narratives in a modern Irish context. In choosing a male and female author through which to explore the representation of women, this study seeks to bring together divergent voices engaging in a discourse on similar subjects, thus demonstrating the multi-faceted ways in which women's experiences can be delineated. The autobiographical overtones of McGahern's work, particularly in *Memoir*, alongside Enright's publication of a number of non-fiction works and articles in addition to her fiction, enables this work to draw upon these authors' personal

memoirs and experiences, providing yet another method through which to access the 'Real' nature of women's experience in Irish society. As Rebecca Walker writes:

I prefer personal testimonies.... I believe that our lives are the best basis for feminist theory, and that by using the contradictions in our lives as what Zen practitioners have called the 'razor's edge,' we lay the groundwork for feminist theory that neither vilifies or deifies, but that accepts and respects difference. (Walker 1995, p.xxxvii)

## **Chapter Breakdown**

The opening chapter of this study will focus on the bodily presence of women in the writing of McGahern and Enright, and by extension on that of women in Irish society, from the 1960s to contemporary Ireland. It seeks to investigate the Irish female body through the medium of touch, evaluating the traditional Irish reticence in relation to touch and extrapolating this into the areas of relationships, both personal and societal. The first section, 'Comfort with the Body', will explore the ability of Irish women to touch the other, exploring touch as an expression of ease with the body of the other. Utilizing the biblical quotation '*Noli Me Tangere*' (do not touch me), as a starting point, it will explore the complicated and often tenuous relationship which Irish women have with touch and with touching the other. This exploration will then move forwards to explore the figure of the Irish women in the mirror. Utilising the mirror as a medium of metaphorically touching the self, it will explore the ways in which Irish women's relationship with their own body has evolved from the 1960s to the present day, and also how this is displayed in the novels and short stories of McGahern and Enright.

The second chapter will then move forward to explore elements of bodily touch in an Irish context, which are violent or inappropriate. Unfortunately, recent revelations in Ireland have taught us that despite the fact that the Irish are not as

tactile a nation as many others around the globe, violent or inappropriate touch has affected Irish people in profound and detrimental ways. Widespread corporal punishment and sexual abuse, both within families and institutions, are elements of recent Irish history which cannot be ignored or left unexplored. This section seeks to examine elements of violent and inappropriate touch in the works of McGahern and Enright, and to explore the consequences that these experiences have had on characters; on their ability to form relationships, on the comfort which they displayed with their own bodies and on their ability to touch others, both physically and emotionally.

The third chapter will move beyond generalised explorations of the body and touch, to a far more specifically gendered exploration of the nature of pregnancy as both a social and bodily construct. It will attempt to explore the female bodily experience of being pregnant, while remaining cognisant of the effects that traditionally patriarchal language, law and culture have had upon the way in which pregnancy is viewed and interpreted in Ireland. In this way, the incorporation of both Enright and McGahern's work is vital in order to enunciate the complex emotions and beliefs held on personal, communal, religious, national and even legal levels in this country. Enright's work deals extensively, and often in an intensely personal manner, with the bodily experience of being pregnant, with its joys and anxieties, and hers is a body of work which certainly widens the general debate concerning procreation in an Irish context. While McGahern does not engage with the pregnant presence in the same manner, his work is of equal value, highlighting, often in subtle ways, issues surrounding women's control (or lack thereof) in relation to reproductive rights; the effect that the banning of contraception had upon women's health and general well-being, and the social stigma attached to conceiving a child out of wedlock in twentieth

century Ireland. With this in mind this analysis will incorporate an examination of anxieties in relation to conception or the inability to conceive within an Irish cultural context, alongside explorations of the silence and occlusion which to this day surrounds various aspects of conception, pregnancy and childbirth in Irish society. This investigation will then consider the evolving nature of women's physical and social identity during pregnancy, and the often conflicting emotions which can arise when an individual is literally occupied by another life. It will explore the 'real' feelings and lived experiences of women who experience ambiguous or even negative emotions in the aftermath of pregnancy and childbirth. Arguably, they represent an arena of female experience which is largely occluded, and as such, is deserving of exploration. The final section seeks to consider the notion of the pregnant body as a public body. While it can be stated that women in some ways lose their personal social identity while pregnant, pregnant women also seem to be imbued with a public status and to become the object of public interest and appreciation whether they wish it or not. The wish to touch the pregnant body, and particularly the pregnancy bump, is a desire which needs to be explored, as do pregnant women's reaction to this often unwanted or unprovoked touch.

The final chapter of this thesis moves beyond the realms of physical and emotional touch to engage with the Irish euphemism of being 'touched', which is a way of avoiding classifying different forms of mental illness. The importance of this Irish colloquialism in daily social interactions cannot be underestimated. By labelling an individual as 'touched' in Irish society, that individual could be deemed abnormal, deviant, or even dangerous, without any consideration being made to understanding the nature of their mental illness or disorder. This chapter will explore mentally ill characters in the works of the two writers chosen, in order to assess their changing

place, position and reception in Irish society from the 1960s right up to the present day. As a nation that has emerged from a dark and damaging historical period, in which institutionalisation, and religious and state controls, bred chronic and devastating abuse, Ireland arguably has moved to distance itself from attempts to control or indeed occlude any particular group within society. Despite the fact that many physical spaces of institutionalisation are now closed, it could however be argued that for those deemed to be mentally ill or 'touched', a latent, yet perhaps no less powerful, lexical prison exists which in many cases, categorises, labels and marginalises mentally ill individuals in modern Ireland. This study aims to examine traditional methods of categorising and labelling mentally ill individuals, and the enduring nature of such tendencies as Ireland moves into the twenty-first century. It will posit that the dehumanising effect of labelling can have such a profound effect, that it can encourage mentally ill or depressed individuals to hide their distress and pain, in order to conform to societal definitions of 'sanity' and 'normality'. However, this investigation will also seek to highlight modern attempts to foreground the voice of the 'touched' in Irish society, and to enable, as Foucault contends, a restoration of reason to unreason (Foucault 1967, p.288). In particular, Enright's prolific engagement with issues surrounding mental illness acts as a medium through which to promote societal discourse centring on the place and position of the 'touched' in Ireland today, and also to allow the repressed voice of the mentally ill to be heard on a national, and even an international level. Whether speaking of her own personal experience of depression and her subsequent recovery, or the attempt of her female characters to live and cope with their mental distress and illness, she presents a more rounded picture of the realities of living as one of the 'touched' in Irish society.

While the scope of this thesis encompasses a wide range of personal, societal, religious and legal forces and issues which have affected, and continue to affect women in Ireland, there were a number of areas which could not be encompassed within the breadth of this current study. This work does not seek, for example, to provide an exhaustive comparative and contrastive analysis of the work of John McGahern and Anne Enright. As significant figures in the canon of Irish literature, this thesis seeks to utilise relevant segments of their work, and in particular their respective representations and treatment of female characters, as a lens through which to chart the changing place and position of women in Irish society, with particular respect to their relationship with their own bodies, the bodies of others and the body of social, religious and governmental dictates and mores that continues to shape women's daily lived experience. Furthermore, as a gendered analysis of women, this study was unable to undertake a study of the nature of the Irish experience of personal touch, inappropriate or violent touch or the experience of mental illness in modern Ireland from a male perspective. Any one of these topics would have provided an intriguing and pertinent study; however, the narrow focus of this work prevented a thorough engagement with these issues from a male perspective. Even from a gendered perspective, each chapter of this study represents only a selection of the innumerable societal, familial, religious and legal forces which affect the lives of women in Ireland.

The use of imaginative literature as a medium through which to access 'the Real', the unutterable in Irish society, provides a framework through which research which moves beyond previous socio-cultural studies of feminism and Catholicism in Ireland can be undertaken. Using Lacanian theory as a mode of societal critique is popular in literary theory but has not been undertaken to any great degree in Irish

feminist studies to date. Using these theories, and blending the critique of public discourse and the resurgence of the repressed in the literature chosen, I will echo and supplement existing socio-cultural and literary studies surrounding Catholicism in an Irish context, such as Eamon Maher's *'The Church and its Spire'* *John McGahern and the Catholic Question*, thus encapsulating the ways in which feminism and Catholicism intertwine to form a complex matrix of discrimination, rebellion, abuse, indifference and adaptation. The lack of critical writing in relation to female characters in John McGahern's work underlines the need for further feminist critique. This project draws and expands upon the exploration of Catholicism in John McGahern's work as outlined in Eamon Maher's publications and in Lori Rogers' *Feminine Nation*. It also engages with studies of history, myth and ritual in James Whyte's critical work, and with the study of John McGahern's early texts and influences in Denis Sampson's *Young John McGahern*. By moving beyond the scope of earlier critical works, this thesis will expand the current critiques of female characters in McGahern's fiction, and by linking his work with that of Enright, will clearly situate it at the forefront of feminist discourse within an Irish literary setting.

While the work of Anne Enright has attracted critical attention in the past number of years, in the form of isolated journal articles, to date there is only one monographic work edited by Claire Braken and Susan Cahill, entitled *Anne Enright*, (a multi-faceted study examining style, postmodernism, tradition and modernity, memory, gender and sexuality), that focuses solely upon her work. As a disseminator of Irish culture, and particularly female concerns and beliefs, her texts are worthy of critical discussion and exploration. This thesis critiques Enright's texts and female characters through the lens of feminist and other literary theorists, thereby outlining

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the representation, agency and identity of the modern woman in Catholic Ireland, and through an exploration of the 'Real', highlighting repressed feminine discourses.

## Chapter One – The Bodily Presence

A culture of life does not, in fact, exist.  
A culture of the body, a culture of the  
natural sensibility, a culture of ourselves  
as living beings, is still lacking. (Irigaray 2004, p.228)



(Artifacts Gallery 2003) Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist, Henry Asensio

## Introduction

It could be said that Ireland has traditionally been defined as a country and a population whose relationship and interaction with the body is both tenuous and complex. One could posit that both personally and culturally in Ireland, there has been a natural avoidance of discussion of, or indeed contact with, the body, and the female body in particular. This chapter seeks to explore this avoidance or repression of the female body, and the resultant complex representations of interpersonal touch within an Irish literary context, through the works of John McGahern and Anne Enright. However, before such an exploration can be undertaken, the socio-religious context of women, and in particular, women's bodies, in Irish society needs to be outlined. Cheryl Herr, in *The Erotics of Irishness* makes the point that:

one feature that almost no one mentions is the relationship between the Irish mind and any kind of Irish body. The identity-obsession marks a social repression of the body on a grand scale. As I see it, the loss occurs on both individual and collective levels. Ireland has literally eroded, in the sphere of representations that constitute social identity, a comfortable sense of the body; in traditional as well as in colonial and postcolonial Ireland, the body has frequently been associated representationally with danger. (Herr 1990, pp.6-7)

The ramifications of such a collection social repression and erosion of a comfortable sense and image of the body are extensive, affecting the way in which we as a nation view and interpret the human form to this day. When exploring the almost generic avoidance of the body outlined by Herr, multi-faceted reasons can be put forward, including historical, religious and societal dictates. These historical, social and religious motivations have combined, throughout the twentieth century, to present the body, and particularly the female body, as a site of transgression, danger and sin. These powerful and repressive images may no longer represent the views of the vast

majority of Irish people; however the remnants of these beliefs and images cannot but inform the way in which Ireland as a nation interprets the human form in the twenty-first century. As Ann Ferguson, quoting Tamsin Lorraine and Jacques Lacan in *Moral Responsibility and Social Change: A New Theory of Self*, points out:

Human bodies may be conscious, but we are not born with a formed consciousness of our bodies as discrete wholes. Therefore, part of the bodily experience of becoming a 'self-process,' of feeling an inner coherence, involves the development of one or more 'psychical body images' with which we identify (Lacan 1977, Lorraine 1990). A psychical body image is always an idealization or construction that goes beyond the actual fragmented bodily experiences from which we infer it. A self-process, furthermore, usually has more than one psychical body image. (Ferguson 1997, p.124)

Arguably, within a distinctly Irish context, historical, religious and social ideals and mores in relation to the body are fundamental in the construction of 'psychical body images' through which Irish people, and particularly Irish women, are forced to view their actual physical bodies. Rosita Sweetman, in the introduction to her book *On Our Backs*, makes reference to societal and historical forces that have shaped the traditional Irish response to the body, stating that:

Many men and women in Ireland live together as happily, or unhappily, as couples elsewhere in the world, but their history, religion and education system have produced unique problems which, coupled with the rude arrival of the outside world, have left many people confused. This confusion is being ignored; largely out of fear and ignorance. (Sweetman 1979, p.11)

By touching on similar taboos in Irish society, the works of John McGahern and Anne Enright can therefore be seen to shed some light on the complicated Irish relationship with the vexed area of interpersonal touch.

From the very formation of the Irish Free State, the female body, and more specifically the regulation of this body, became 'a literal mechanism for sustaining

political legitimacy within the newly established state' (McMullen 1996, p.38). In *Decolonizing Rosaleen*, Kim McMullen notes that throughout the twentieth century:

The private female body serves the body politic, and the state's legislative control of women's bodies in particular (but sexuality in general) – in censorship, reproductive rights prescriptions, economic discrimination [*sic*] against mothers and married women, and (until several months ago) divorce ban-becomes a cornerstone of national defense [*sic*]. (McMullen 1996, p.38)

Regulation of the female body became intrinsically bound up with the regulation of the state, and the moral and sexual welfare of the new Irish state became invested in the body of its female citizens. Clair Wills emphasises the 'way in which the female body is already inscribed in public life', when she states that the 'politics of the body is thus not a metaphor, or a substitute, for genuine national self-determination, but is bound up with it' (Wills 1993, p.69). In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler notes that:

There must be a body trembling before the law, a body whose fear can be compelled by the law, a law that produces the trembling body prepared for its inscription, a law that marks the body first with fear only then to mark it again with the symbolic stamp of sex. (Butler 1993, p.101)

In twentieth century Ireland, it was the female body that stood trembling before the law, compelled by both the law of the land, and the no less significant moral or religious laws and dictates, to be sexually discrete, or submissive and when presented in public, to conform to a rigidly-defined societal expectation of femininity. These prescriptions meant that the Irish female body became, as Butler maintains, 'indissociable from the regulatory norms' that governed its materialisation, the effects of which, as this chapter will illustrate, are in evidence today in modern Irish society (Butler 1993, p.101).

Bound up with historical beliefs in relation to the female body are religious depictions of, and pronouncements in relation to, the body. In such a predominantly Catholic country, religious beliefs and imagery surrounding the female body are a significant factor in the creation of Irish attitudes to women. While the influence and power of the Catholic Church in Ireland has waned significantly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, its beliefs and pronouncements in relation to the body are traditionally significant, and cannot be overlooked when assessing the place and power of the Church. In the Catholic Mass for example, there has been a recent lexical shift away from the body which is significant when charting representations and reception of touch in Irish society. With the introduction of the New Roman Missal between September and November 2011, a number of prayers and responses uttered during the Catholic Mass were altered. One of the significant changes was the replacement of the traditional response of 'And also with you', with a new response, 'And with your spirit' (Felipe 44). While the main reason for this was to adhere more closely to the direct translation of this phrase from Latin, the change is nevertheless significant in a symbolic manner. No longer is God deemed to be with, or indeed to touch you as a person or a bodily entity; the engagement henceforth is to be interpreted solely on a spiritual level. This, in a latent manner, reinforces the traditional notion of the body as site of transgression and uncleanness, and also stresses that it is through the spirit alone that we can connect with God. Jesus is described in John 1:14 as 'The Word' who 'was made flesh and dwelt among us', yet in modern Catholic society the word has distanced itself from the flesh (John 1:14). While this change has been introduced in numerous English-speaking countries, it could be argued that this has a particular consequence in the Irish Catholic psyche. In Ireland, with its traditional fear of the body, be it the body of the self or the body of

others, this change in the missal suggests a movement backwards in Irish society's interaction with the body.

Similarly, Biblical prescriptions concerning touch must be considered when studying attitudes to touch in modern Irish literature. Throughout the King James Bible, the word touch appears one hundred and sixty-seven times, and of these, at least sixty-two of these quotations refer to prohibitions against interpersonal touch or touching certain objects.<sup>1</sup> While too numerous to look at in detail here, these prohibitions generally centre on avoiding being posited as 'unclean' through physical interaction with certain people or items, be they prohibited foods, dead bodies (human or animal), or even other individuals believed to be unclean either because they suffer from a disease, are menstruating, have recently given birth, or are deemed sexually unclean. This almost obsessive attempt to maintain 'purity' through prohibitions against touch can be summed up by the edict which states 'touch not; taste not; handle not' (Colossians 2:21). It is interesting to note that in the majority of the fifty-six instances in the King James Bible where touch is permitted or enacted, this physical interaction represents a touch either seeking, or indeed providing, healing, forgiveness or sanctity.<sup>2</sup> Jesus touches, or alternately is touched by, the sick, the sinners and even the dead, and bestows upon them health, forgiveness and life. Alternatively, touching a holy object is also seen to sanctify or heal the sick. Again, the latent message in these biblical passages is that one must touch an individual or object deemed to be sanctified in order to avoid sin, sickness or even death. These prescriptions in relation to touch, when coupled with Irish social and state dictates, served to foster and promote societal discomfort and avoidance of touch in Irish society. For example the Department of Education's *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*, which was

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix one.

<sup>2</sup> See appendix two.

utilised in schools from 1966 until it was superseded in 1996, stated that during ‘his religious studies especially the pupil will have instilled into him the virtues of charity, honesty, self-sacrifice, purity and temperance’ (Department of Education 1986/87, p.165). Emphasis on purity, chastity and morality in the home, the school, the community and society at large created a fear and distaste centring on the body and touch which continues to affect the way we perceive and touch the bodies of others.

While such religious pronouncements are levelled at the body, regardless of gender, it can be said that religious imagery has traditionally affected the way in which the female body in particular has been viewed and interpreted in Irish society. In so far as the female body was controlled, politically and legally, as a means of solidifying power in a new and burgeoning Free State, it was also appropriated, regulated and restrained by the Catholic Church as a means of solidifying power and ensuring that the Irish populace adhered to moral (particularly sexually moral) dictates set down by that Church. Indeed, Anne Enright made direct reference to the attempt by the Church to maintain control over the female body in 2007, stating that the ‘most damaging thing that happened to Catholicism in Ireland was the legalisation of contraception, because the real religious wars are fought over the bodies of women’ (Enright 2007d, p.43). Through significant female biblical figures, such as the Virgin Mary and Eve, Irish women were presented with images of femininity that, arguably, have had lasting effects upon the Irish psyche and the way in which it views the female body. Elaine Showalter makes the point that feminist criticism ‘written in the biological perspective generally stresses the importance of the body as a source of imagery’ (Showalter 2000, p.314). In an Irish context, an exploration of the place and presence of the female body cannot be undertaken without consideration of the traditional Catholic imagery associated with the female body.

It would be impossible to assess religious influences on the female body without taking into consideration the widespread veneration of the Virgin Mary in Ireland. Arguably the most important and beloved female biblical figure in Irish society, the Virgin Mary was traditionally posited as a role model for Irish women, a figure to whom one could aspire and indeed turn to for comfort during difficult times. While not wishing to denigrate, in any way, Irish women's traditional belief in, and worship of Mary, it is important to examine how the veneration of a virgin mother exacerbated feelings of discomfort in relation to the female body, setting a standard towards which women needed to aspire, yet one which they could not bodily attain. While Mary the mother encapsulates many of the attributes valued by and in mothers, namely love, kindness, gentleness, unyielding support of and loyalty to her child, it is her perpetual virginity that is most lauded by the Church and presented as the feminine ideal. By presenting an image of motherhood that cannot be attained by any other woman, and which has come about without sexual intercourse, the Catholic Church and the figure of Mary herself, presents women's bodies as somehow lacking, as they, unlike Mary, must descend into sin in order to procreate. The very fact that the Catholic Church is unable to associate the mother of Jesus with sexuality, even for the purpose of procreation, sends a clear message to women regarding the sinfulness and transgressive nature of their sexuality and the female sexual body.

Another powerful religious image which could be interpreted as exacerbating a sense of discomfort with the body is the story of Adam and Eve as outlined in the book of Genesis. It is interesting to consider that it is only upon eating from the tree of knowledge that Adam and Eve feel ashamed of their nakedness and, as a result, attempt to clothe themselves with leaves and hide their bodies. The equation of knowledge, and perhaps by extension, intelligence, with a revulsion or shame about

the human body is a powerful subliminal message as to the transgressive nature of the naked body, which, when combined with additional elements of the Creation story in Genesis, serves to posit the body, and in particular the female body, as something to be controlled, negated and hidden. The creation of Eve in the book of Genesis is indicative of this. In Genesis chapter two God:

caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. (Genesis 2:21-22)

The fact that woman is created as an adult is interesting when exploring traditional notions of discomfort with the body. The fact that woman was not initially born, never grew up, or indeed faced puberty and maturation of the body is significant as it suggests an avoidance of the processes of the female body. Anne Enright touches upon this point in *What Are You Like?* when Rose considers a picture of Adam and Eve that has hung on the wall in her childhood home:

Eve was just born. She never had to grow up, never had to be a child, she didn't have to wait for her first period or watch her breasts to see if the left one would ever catch up. She just woke up in the garden with her finger stuck in Adams belly-button, and was madly in love. (Enright 2001, p.96)

Significantly, the creation of Eve from the body of Adam also locates the power of procreation to man and to the male body rather than to the female form. A male deity is seen to create the body of man, from which the body of woman is birthed. In addition to this, the creation of Eve as a grown woman symbolises a negation of the complex emotions surrounding the growing and maturing female body. Eve, as Christian mother to all woman-kind, stands in some respects as a traditional religious role model for women (in opposition to Mary), to remind them that their bodies are a

site of transgression and danger. Helen Sheehy emphasises this point in *Women's Spirituality* when she points out that:

Women often have difficulty in including their bodies in their experience of self. They have learnt to fear and hate them as it is often through their bodies that male aggression exploits them and it is precisely in their sexuality that patriarchy has conditioned them to see themselves as sinful daughters of Eve. (Sheehy 1991, p.4)

Through an exploration of the works of Anne Enright and John McGahern, this chapter seeks to examine traditional fears and taboos in relation to the female body, and to consider how Irish society's relationship with the female body has evolved as we move into the twenty-first century. Hallstein makes the point that 'in contemporary culture, we are living within a kind of body panic that is the confluence of key culture changes' (Hallstein 2011, p.113). Ireland has witnessed vast cultural, religious and social change in recent years, spawning an increasingly secular, multicultural, materialistic and media-driven society, which has affected the way in which the female body is viewed by society. By critiquing the works of these two writers, this chapter seeks to explore the unique 'culture of the body' which exists in Ireland and, in so doing, to expose 'Real' nature of the female body in contemporary Ireland (Irigaray 2004, p.228). This chapter asks if it is possible for women in modern Irish society to, 'acquire a feminine way of living one's body, a way of living physiologically' (Stone 2007, p.24).

Arguably, both Enright and McGahern succeed in altering 'the very terms that constitute the "necessary" domain of bodies', by widening the representation of the body in Irish literature, and by refocalising bodies which Irish society has traditionally occluded, be these naked bodies, abused bodies or even the pregnant bodies, placing

them, often uncomfortably under society's nose, in order to question the way in which we view, interpret and treat the body within modern Ireland (Butler 1993, p.xi).

## **Noli Me Tangere**

A fear or discomfort associated with touching a body, or indeed of being touched oneself, is evident throughout many of the novels and short stories of John McGahern and Anne Enright. These fictitious depictions, one could argue, provide an insight into the 'Real' Irish attitude to interpersonal touch, an attitude which was explored in an article published in 1995 by Remland, Jones and Brinkman, who cited the details of a study undertaken whereby:

video recordings of naturally occurring interactions in England, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece Scotland and Ireland were coded and analyzed to examine the effects of culture, gender and age on interpersonal distance, body orientation and touch. (Remland et al 1995, p.281)

When examining the frequency of use of interpersonal touch by culture, these researchers found that only 12% of a sample of Irish individuals and 17% of dyads observed in the Irish sample utilised interpersonal touch in a videotaped interaction (Remland et al 1995, p.290-291). It must be noted that these percentages were by no means the lowest in the study,<sup>3</sup> however, they do provide some insight into the frequency in which interpersonal touch is utilised in Ireland. The survey also points to the way in which Ireland is in many ways aligned with what Hall termed 'non-contact' cultures (Asians, North Americans, Northern Europeans) rather than with contact cultures (Arabs, Latin American, southern Europeans) (Remland 1995, p.281).

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<sup>3</sup> When assessing interpersonal touch where an individual was the focus Scottish (11%), English (8%), French (5%) and Dutch (4%) citizens utilised interpersonal touch less than the Irish (12%) and when dyads were the focus English (11%), French (8%) and Dutch (4%) citizens utilised interpersonal touch less than the Irish (17%). (Remland et al 1995, pp.290-291)

In 2007, Enright directly addressed the subject of touch and the body as a taboo within an Irish cultural context in her novel *The Gathering*. When the main protagonist, Veronica, ruminates on the biblical origins of her name, she unwittingly opens an internal debate on touch as a social convention in Irish society:

St Veronica wiped the face of Christ on the road to Calvary...I became quite fond of her; a figure leaning out of the crowd, both supplicatory and tender...We have lost the art of public tenderness, these small gestures of wiping and washing; we have forgotten how abjectly the body welcomes a formal touch. (Enright 2007a, pp.128-129)

Veronica laments the inability of the Irish to touch comfortably and tenderly in a public setting. The use of 'we' is significant in this passage, as Veronica is keenly aware that she, too, expresses discomfort about touching others in a public setting. At various stages throughout the novel, Veronica is unable to engage in public interpersonal touch, and at times exhibits deep resentment when touched by others. When flying home from England with her sister Kitty, in the wake of her brother Liam's suicide, Kitty becomes upset and emotional, yet Veronica remains aloof, looking 'out the window, while the air hostess kindly offers a brandy in her coffee and then charges five pounds sterling for it' (Enright 2007a, p.155). Veronica is intensely aware of her inability to show public tenderness or comfort to her sister, though she cannot outline the reasons behind it:

The man on the other side of her knows that someone has died. He wonders am I a social worker, or perhaps even a prison officer, and why am I not holding her hand. And I too wonder why I am not holding her hand, as I look down on the distant skin of the Irish Sea. 'We slept in the same room for twenty years,' I want to tell him. 'Isn't that enough for you, isn't it already above and beyond?' (Enright 2007a, p.155)

Veronica's inability to console her sister, to even hold her hand (what Liam Harte refers to as 'Veronica's aversion to human fleshiness'), is evidence of the complexity

of emotion that can surround even the simplest interpersonal exchange in an Irish context (Harte 2010, pp.196-7). Indeed in this passage, Veronica in a sense defines Irish cultural attitudes to interpersonal touch when she talks about the ‘distant skin’ of the Irish Sea (Enright 2007a, p.155). One could contend that Veronica, and by extension modern Irish society, possess a distant skin, one which maintains a physical, and at times emotional distance between individuals.<sup>4</sup> This distance is similarly apparent in McGahern’s novel *The Dark*. When Mahoney Junior visits his sister Joan at her first job, it is evident that she is deeply unhappy. Concerned, he takes her for a walk to find out the root cause of her unease:

‘She makes you feel bad about everything and I’m afraid of him.’ ‘How?’ ‘The first day,’ and she was breaking, ‘I was on a stool putting shoe-boxes up on the shelves and he put his hands right up my dress and that was only the beginning. Once he got me in the bathroom and it was horrible. I’m always afraid. And then he takes it out on you in other ways,’ and she began to cry violently. ‘No, you mustn’t cry, not in the street, wait, Joan, we’ll soon be out of the town.’ That much had to be slowly dragged, and when it came it was too much, it would be better to have waited, but how your hands hungered for their throats. (McGahern 2008b, pp.92-92)

While Mahoney Junior feels a deep sense of anger and injustice on behalf of his sister, and does indeed succeed in removing her from this dangerous environment, he is never seen to console her, to take her hand or touch her in any physical manner. Once again, both Mahoney Junior and Joan manifest the distant skin that Enright would later write about in her work.

Returning once more to *The Gathering*, it is evident that Veronica is painfully self-aware of the complexities surrounding interpersonal touch within the nuclear family. A distinct distance is apparent at certain moments between Veronica and her family, a tendency which is discernible when both Tom and her daughters attempt to

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<sup>4</sup> It must be stated that Veronica’s childhood experience of witnessing her brothers sexual abuse at the hands of Lambert Nugent may have affected her ability to touch and be touched comfortably by others.

utilise touch to comfort Veronica in the wake of her brother's death. On the night of Liam's wake, Tom attempts to comfort Veronica and show his love for her through sexual intercourse, an action which Veronica not only does not enjoy, but which disturbs her for some time and profoundly affects their own physical relationship in the weeks and months preceding Liam's death:

I slipped into bed and Tom was awake. And he was in love with me. There is really no point in going over his reasons: he loved me; he wanted to drag me back to the land of the living. And maybe, now that my soul was so soft, he wanted to leave his mark there too. My body was not soft, however. I wondered why he did not notice this. But I did all the moves, and I made way for him, and I did not tell him to stop. So I must have wanted it too, or something like it. (Enright 2007a, pp.218-219)

Tom's attempt to comfort his wife through sexual contact, and his wife's inability to voice her desire to avoid physical contact at that particular time, shows a distinct lack of understanding between the couple. In many ways, it is a terribly poignant and difficult passage, as it is a moment of absolute intimacy within which Veronica feels utterly alone. In many ways, this is the ultimate expression of Enright's distant skin, for although this couple are baring and sharing each other's skin in a moment of sexual intimacy, in Veronica's mind at least, they could not be more distant from each other.

Similarly at Liam's funeral Mass, Veronica expresses feelings of resentment and loneliness while in the midst of her own family. When her children attempt to hug, cling to or stroke their mother comfortingly, the touch of her family suddenly becomes overwhelming:

Tom...hands me in to the seat in front of him, and the girls follow me on the other side. 'All right?' he says, slipping his hand over mine, while Emily turns in to cling to me – or, if the truth be told, to stroke my breasts while pretending to admire (or console, perhaps) the covered buttons of my good, funeral coat. 'Leave your mother alone,' says Tom. Indeed. I have been so much touched these last few days. I cross

my legs over the memory of the sex we had the night of the wake. Or he had. And wait for the Mass to begin. Everyone wants a bit of me. And it has nothing to do with what I might want, or what my body might want, whatever that might be – God knows it is a long time since I knew. There I am, sitting on a church bench in my own meat: pawed, used, loved, and very lonely. (Enright 2007a, pp.243-244)

This passage is significant, as it questions the very nature of comforting touch. While Veronica accepts public embraces and touches from her closest family, they are rarely comforting for her, signalling perhaps the depths of the ‘distant skin’ of the Irish and the effect that sociocultural and historical precepts in relation to touch can have, even in modern Irish society. The very fact that she is unsure of what she wants, or of what her ‘body might want’, signals an uncertainty and discomfort in relation to touch, even from those closest to her. In many ways, this passage highlights the conflicting emotions and feelings surrounding interpersonal touch in modern Irish society, where we as a nation are trying to discover what our bodies might want.

It is interesting to note that Veronica is comforted by one particular touch in the novel. During Liam’s wake, Veronica is touched by an unknown individual, whom she initially mistakes for her husband Tom:

Tom’s hand is warm on the base of my spine. At least I think it is him, but when I crook my head around, he is not there. Who has touched me? I straighten up and look at them all. Who has touched me? I want to say it out loud, but the Hegartys and the Hegartys’ wives and the Hegartys’ children are some distance away from me: they shift, and talk, and eat on, unawares. (Enright 2007a, p.198)

Veronica never discovers the identity of the person who touched her on that occasion, but it is interesting to note that this particular exchange provides her with more comfort and solace than many of her physical interactions with her husband and children; perhaps it is because it is a distant touch, from someone unfamiliar. Later in the novel she acknowledges the importance of this unknown touch:

Actually, I do know what I want. I want whoever touched the small of my back in Mammy's kitchen to declare himself. To say, again, that everything will be all right. Because I felt someone's loving touch, and I was – but completely – reassured by it, before I turned to see that there was no one there. (Enright 2007a, p.244)

While ruminating on the complexities of touch in *The Gathering*, Enright moves beyond a generalised discussion of intimacy and touch, and introduces a gendered element to Veronica's musings:

I confused Veronica with the bleeding woman of the gospels, the one of whom Christ said, 'Someone has touched me,' and confused her again with the woman to whom He said, '*Noli me tangere*,' which happened after the resurrection. 'Do not touch me.' Why not? Why should she not touch Him? Thomas touched Him, Thomas was invited to put his hands inside His wounds. These things mattered to me very much, at the age of eight... (Enright 2007a, p.129)

Enright here draws a distinction between men being invited to touch, to be accepted and intimate, and women's apparent exclusion. Thomas in the Bible is invited to put his hands inside the wounds of Christ, to literally place his hands inside Jesus, a very intimate touch and gesture, in a public forum, in front of all of the disciples. However the women, to whom Jesus says '*Noli me tangere*', are refused the same right, also in a public forum, in front of all the women who came to Jesus' tomb. This distinction symbolises female touch as transgressive and dangerous, once again placing a hierarchical distinction between the sexes. In a similar manner, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead could be interpreted as a re-birth, albeit a rebirth which also circumvents the female body, as it comes from a tomb as opposed to a womb. Jesus, in this interpretation, no longer needs the female body in order to re-enter the world of the living, and thus the female body is avoided and occluded. This passage could also be examined through the question which Hélène Cixous poses in *The Laugh of the*

*Medusa*, ‘who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them?’ (Cixous 1976, p.885). In this Biblical passage, Jesus could be said to represent patriarchal society and the institutional church, traditionally comfortable when associating with other men, but which rejects, excludes or denigrates the feminine touch. Veronica’s question, ‘Why should she not touch Him?’, thus echoes Cixous by questioning the validity and authority of patriarchal religious dictates to place a value on, or indeed to denigrate the value of feminine touch.

The image of the female body as the site of transgression and danger, particularly in a theological sense is outlined by John O’ Donoghue, Anne F. Kelly and Werner G. Jeanrond who stated that:

A theology of women’s bodiliness has been totally lost in the rhetoric of patriarchal theology, with its inherent dualisms and negation of the body. The invisibility of women, in particular in leading liturgical assemblies, highlights the ambiguous attitudes to women’s bodiliness as incapable of mediating access to the sacred. (O’ Donoghue et al 1991, pp.701-702)

These traditional images of women and, by extension, women’s bodies as transgressive sites, as bodies divorced in many ways from the sacred, exacerbates a sense of discomfort surrounding the body, and in particular the female body in Irish society. Enright makes a direct reference to this in her novel *The Wig My Father Wore*, when the main protagonist Grace talks about her co-worker Frank’s attitudes in relation to women:

He always said that women’s bodies are treacherous, and full of holes. When you can’t put it off any longer they take you in and hold you, so when you flup your dick back out on the sheet, you have left yourself and all of you inside. In there. I told him that a woman’s body provokes a lot more anxiety if you happen to have one yourself. He didn’t believe me. (Enright 2007c, p.62)

This association of the female body, and principally the sexual female body, with transgression, temptation and sin is similarly evident in John McGahern's *The Dark*. While the novel is replete with images of the sexual female body, namely sexual fantasies which are the product of the main protagonist Mahoney Junior's burgeoning sexual desire, it is significant that Mahoney Junior never physically touches a woman, in a sexual or indeed any other social sense, throughout the novel. In his masturbatory fantasies, he touches the female body, and revels in the sexual pleasures it provides:

Touch the black hair with the lips, salt of sweat same as my own, let them rove along the rises of the breast. Press the mouth on the black bursting lips, slip the tongue through her teeth. Go biting along the shoulder over the straps to the dark pits again. She stirs to life. I have her excited, she too is crazy, get hands under her. (McGahern 2008b, pp.30-31)

However, by the novel's close, having chosen to renounce the priesthood as a career in favour of attaining the bodily pleasure about which he has so long fantasised, Mahoney Junior is seen as being unable to make bring these fantasies to fruition, and on his first outing to a dance where he would have the opportunity to get physically close to, or even touch a woman's body in a romantic or sexual manner, he shies away, and is unable to enter the dance hall:

A vision of the dance floor came to plague you, naked shoulders of the women, glitter of jewellery on their throats, scent and mascara and the blood on their lips, the hiss of silk or taffeta stretching across their thrusting thighs, and always their unattainable crowned heads floated past. And you stood on the pavement outside the lodge gates. This was the dream you'd left the stern and certain road of the priesthood to follow after, that road so attractive now since you hadn't to face walking it any more, and this world of sensuality from which you were ready to lose your soul not so easy to drag to your mouth either for that one destructive kiss, as hard to lose your soul as save it. Only in the mind was it clear. (McGahern 2008b, pp.177-178)

In a latent manner, Mahoney Junior embodies Jesus' assertion to Mary, *Noli me Tangere*, 'do not touch me', as he clearly exhibits fear and anxiety when considering

physically connecting with women. Certainly the wording of the above passage is revealing when considering the basis of his discomfort. Mahoney Junior sees physical connection with the female body as a 'destructive kiss', and significantly, as a way in which to lose the soul (McGahern 2008b, p.177). The connection here between the female body, transgression and sin is obvious. There is a direct and continual association of the sexual with the sinful throughout *The Dark*, and Mahoney Junior, on numerous occasions, demonstrates intense shame in relation to his sexual desire for the female body. When discussing the possibility of the priesthood as a career with Father Gerald, Mahoney Junior confesses his fear of being unworthy of becoming a priest because of his desire for physical, sexual contact with woman:

'Have you ever kissed a girl?' it came with the shock of a blow. 'No, father. Never.' 'Have you ever wanted or desired to kiss?' 'Yes, father,' the tears flowed hopelessly, just broken, he was cutting through to the nothingness and squalor of your life, you were now as you were born, as low as the dirt. 'Did you take pleasure in it?' 'Yes, father,' it choked out. 'You excited yourself, brought them into your mind. You caused seed to spill in your excitement?' 'Yes, father.'... 'Did you bring one woman or many women into these pleasures?' 'Many women, father.' 'Were they real or imaginary?' 'Both, father.' 'You don't think this vice has got a grip on you, you think you could break it?' 'Yes, father, I think I might.' 'This is the most reason why you're not sure, why you think you're not good enough, is it?' (McGahern 2008b, pp.72-73)

Father Gerald's definition of Mahoney Junior's sexual desire for the female body, and his resultant masturbatory fantasies, as a 'vice', once again latently posits the female body as a site of transgression, a body to be avoided and abstained from for fear of the temptation it would arouse.

This ascription of dangerously transgressive traits to the sexual female body is also examined in Enright's novel *The Wig my Father Wore*. Enright engages with personal, societal and national negation of the sexual female body through the disappearing body of the main protagonist Grace. Utilising a magic realist setting,

Enright outlines the story of Grace, a woman suffering from depression who is visited by an angel named Stephen, who comes to live with her for a time. Whilst Stephen is living with her, Grace begins to notice radical alterations to her body, alterations which she comes to realise are directly imposed and effected by Stephen:

On Saturday morning he runs my bath, as usual... So I look at myself and everything seems changed under the broken angle of the water – paler, new. My front no longer breaks the surface to look at me like a quiet brown frog. My nipples have faded and there is something wrong with my stomach. (Enright 2007c, p.125)

Crucially, the changes, for which Stephen's presence appear to be the catalyst, have the effect of stripping away the sexual female body. After her bath, Grace notes her altered self, no longer a mature, sexual female body and presence, but now a pre-pubescent, child-like figure:

For a moment, I do nothing, because of the slight, rising shock... O Jerusalem! The white breasts, uncomfortably high, the long, pubescent slope of the belly and my hands and wrists, my feet and ankles too slender to be much use anymore, with a sea-shell edge of pink where the bones protrude, a filigree of blue beneath the skin... (Enright 2007c, pp.125-126)

It is interesting to note that the bodily elements and personal attributes which Stephen takes from Grace are intrinsically connected to the feminine. When she tells Stephen that she wants her body back, she specifically yearns for certain characteristics, such as her 'mother's knees' and her 'Granny's hammer toes' (Enright 2007c, p.126-27). When combined with the loss of her breasts, the alteration of her vagina into what Grace terms 'something ineffably floral', and Stephen's attempt to remove her bellybutton, a pattern of negation of the feminine body emerges (Enright 2007c, p.127). The very fact that Stephen alters Grace's body by touching it is significant in terms of this chapter. Upon touching her breast, Stephen removes Grace's nipple, and in the moments after this radical alternation of her body, Grace considers 'the blind

innocence' of her left breast, 'its lopsided, sinister purity' (Enright 2007c, p.128). The wording of this passage suggests that Grace, if only sub-consciously, views her sexual body as a site of transgression or sinfulness, made pure now by the angel's transforming touch. However she is also seen to fight against this negation, attempting to prevent Stephen when he tries to touch, and thus remove, her belly-button:

As I stand there in dreadful one-eyed asymmetry and time drips on, his hand moves in gathering sweeps down my body to a place I value more highly – and I resolved that no matter what he did to my breast, he isn't going to touch my belly button.  
'If this all right?' he says.  
'No,' I say. 'No it's not all right'.  
'Yes'.  
'Stephen'.  
'It's not all right?'  
'Stephen.'  
'It's all right', he says. 'No, it is'.  
And his hand inches on to a little piece of my body's infinity...  
'It's mine,' I said.  
'Please?' his eyes were beautiful.  
'Fuck off', I said. (Enright 2007c, pp.129-130)

Whereas in *The Dark*, it was Mahoney Junior who latently manifested Jesus' assertion, *Noli me Tangere*, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, it is Grace who vehemently rails against interpersonal touch. Grace's attempted defence of her body from the touch of man can be interpreted as an attempt to preserve the sexual female form from negation and occlusion. Stephen, a male angel, could be perceived as the combined force of patriarchal society and religion who attempts to negate the powerful and sexual female body, and to reproduce an asexual body that no longer threatens patriarchal or religious power and influence. This can be linked to Cixous' assertion in *The Laugh of the Medusa* that women have been 'turned away' from their bodies:

shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we've been made victims of the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you'll give me mine. (Cixous 1976, p.885)

By exploring these characters throughout Enright's writing, an exploration of the influences and forces which give Irish women their sense of their own body can be undertaken.

In McGahern's fiction, discomfort in relation to interpersonal touch is similarly evident in *The Barracks*, when the main protagonist, Elizabeth, upon falling ill with breast cancer, feels an uneasiness associated with her body and with being touched. As she resigns herself to being examined by the local doctor and other medical professionals, she feels an acute discomfort in relation to displaying her body in front of others, even within such a medical context. Before her first physical examination by the doctor, she states that it was 'her body's sickness and not her soul's she was confessing now but as always there was the irrational fear and shame' (McGahern 2008a, p.81). Once again the reader can intone a connection between the body and sin, with Elizabeth viewing her bodily manifestation of illness as a 'sin' to be confessed to the doctor. Later, in hospital, she fears being touched by the nurses, exuding a sense of shame in relation to her physical form:

she stiffened with fear as the screens were pulled about the bed and then fear itself was displaced by the loathsome shame of having to expose her body to be handled and shaved and washed. (McGahern 2008a, p.119)

Elizabeth's overwhelming feelings of bodily discomfort are even more significant given her previous occupation as a nurse. She herself muses upon the significance of this when in hospital after her operation:

This nurse at her bedside felt no disgust or shame, she tried to tell herself; she had long become practised and indifferent, it was just another job in her day she could do well, as it had been the same once for Elizabeth in her days on the wards in London. So why should she be shamed because it was her own body this time – was she

shamed when this same body was excreted by her mother when it had strutted in the rouge of its youth? No, if she wasn't shamed then, neither could she be now, she has to accept all or nothing, she couldn't go away with the pretty bits and turn up her nose at the rest, and why should anyone be shamed by anything if they weren't shamed by everything! (McGahern 2008a, pp.119-120)

While Elizabeth could work with the bodies of others in a professional capacity in a calm and indifferent manner, her own personal experience of being viewed as a body fills her with shame and discomfort. Elizabeth interestingly touches upon the fact that this shame is learnt, and is thus not a natural reaction as she admits to feeling no shame when her body had 'strutted in the rouge of its youth' (McGahern 2008a, p.119). It is noteworthy that, although Elizabeth is aware of the fact that this shame is irrational and is, in fact, a learned behaviour, she is nevertheless unable to move beyond these feelings. She never develops a comfortable relationship with her own body and thus embodies what Enright would later come to term the 'distant skin' of the Irish (Enright 2007a, p.155). Not only does she feel detached from, and ashamed of her own naked body, she also feels distant from her own husband in the wake of her diagnosis, particularly at one point when she fears that he may want to see or even perhaps touch, her breasts:

She was near breaking again. She saw his eyes on her breasts in morbid fascination. No, he couldn't want to see them now, she cried within herself: the church in which they had married had proclaimed them one flesh, but no, no, no....People rotted apart. (McGahern 2008a, p.100)

The distance between Elizabeth and Reagan, and in particular, between their bodies, is emphasised in Elizabeth's quite shocking assertion that 'people rotted apart' (McGahern 2008a, p.100). However Elizabeth is not the only female character to feel a distinct distance and discomfort with her own body. In *Making Babies*, Anne Enright displays similar conflicted and shameful feelings in relation to her breasts, albeit in a different guise. Speaking of breastfeeding within an Irish context she states:

So I feed the child because I should, and resign myself to staying home. I never liked being around nursing women – there was always too much love, too much need in the room. I also suspected it to be sexually gratifying. For whom? Oh, for everyone: for the mother, the child, the father, the father-in-law. Everyone's voice that little bit nervy, as though it weren't happening: everyone taking pleasure on a perv-lite middle-class sort of way. Ick. 'The only women who breast-feed are doctor's wives and tinkers,' a friend's mother was told forty years ago, by the nurse who delivered her. I thought I sensed a similar distaste in the midwives, a couple of months ago, who were obliged by hospital and governmental policy to prod the child and pinch my nipple...It is probably easier for men, who like breasts in general, but I have always found them mildly disgusting, at least up close. They also often make me jealous. Even the word 'breast' is difficult. Funny how many people say they find public breast-feeding a bit 'in your face'. Oh, the rage. (Enright 2005, p.40)

The conflicted feelings articulated by Enright in this passage bring to mind Irigaray's assertion that any 'consideration of pleasure in breast-feeding seems...to be excluded, misunderstood, under silent ban' (Irigaray 1985a, p.16). This passage suggests that, at least in some cases, Irish women's experience of breast-feeding can become tainted, and thus less pleasurable, due to negative familial or societal views on this activity. This may account for the way in which Enright speaks of breastfeeding in the above passage, specifically about the distance that she places between her duty to breastfeed ('I feed the child because I should') and any pleasure or positive feeling that might be incurred as a result ('Ick') (Enright 2005, p.40). It is significant that, just over forty years after Elizabeth, Enright voices similar feelings of shame and disgust in relation to exposing the female breast in either a semi-public or public context. She muses upon and questions her own feelings and draws upon historico-cultural contexts in order to come to terms with the way in which she feels about her own body:

The country was awash with milk. Kitchens and bedrooms were hung with pictures of the Madonna and child. After the arrival of infant formula in the fifties, breast-feeding became more of a chosen, middle-class activity, but it was still common in the countryside, and was everywhere practised as a fairly optimistic form of contraception. Still, though general all over Ireland, breast-feeding was absolutely hidden. The closest the culture came to an image of actual nursing was in the icon of

the Sacred Heart, endlessly offering his male breast, open and glowing, and crowned with thorns. (Enright 2005, p.43)

Enright understands that these shameful feelings are in many ways, learned, and passed down even through generations. Considering the fact that in 2012, just over half of Irish mothers (fifty-six percent) initiated breastfeeding in comparison to eighty-one percent in the United Kingdom and ninety percent in Scandinavian States, cultural attitudes towards the breast and breastfeeding in general must be considered when examining the relatively low uptake of breastfeeding among modern Irish women (The Economic and Social Research Institute 2012). A sense of shame and embarrassment surrounding breastfeeding was articulated by McSweeney and Kevany when they stated in their book, *National Survey of Infant Feeding Practices in Ireland*, that ‘embarrassment about breast-feeding is a handicap in a society where rates of breast-feeding have fallen so low and where the breast as a sex symbol has been emphasised so much that it can be seen as immodest and unnatural, and even immoral to breast-feed’ (McSweeney and Kevany 1986, p.35). This sentiment is echoed in 2004 by Enright, who states ‘let us call it “nursing” and let us be discreet – it is still the best way I know to clear a room’ (Enright 2005, p.41). Melanie Bailey Mills makes the point that:

there is a problem when a lactating breast is morally stigmatized. Stigma is a social construction. For it to derive from ‘normal’ everyday life issues (mothers nurse, people have children) is neither fair, nor productive. (Bailey Mills 2008, p.216)

Elizabeth’s and Enright’s musings on conflicting emotions and theories surrounding exposure of the breasts or breast-feeding could all be linked to Freud’s assertion that there are ‘cases in which parts of a person’s own body...appear alien to him and as not belonging to his ego’ (Freud 2010, p.13). One could suggest that Elizabeth

displays a dislike of the breast because it is the source of her illness, whereas Enright displays a similar dislike because the breast is part of a metonymic structure which defines women as nursing mothers. In both instances, the touch which they experience is impersonal: the doctors and nurses touch the source of Elizabeth's illness; the baby and nurses touch Enright's breast as a source of food; however, in each case, the woman as woman is not being touched at all. This feeling of alienation from the body is something which Enright challenges in her writing, pushing the reader to question the basis of this alienation, and to foreground the complexities of interpersonal touch in Irish society. Enright's writing concerning discomfort with the body, and women's discomfort with their own body, in many ways embodies Cixous' call for woman to 'write herself', to:

write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. (Cixous 1976, p.875)

Enright brings the body, and particularly the female body, to the fore in her writing, empowering her female characters to explore, appreciate and, if necessary, to alter their own, and society's, perceptions of their bodies. She achieves this to a certain degree in her novel *What Are You Like?*, when Evelyn, step-mother to one of the main protagonists Maria, utilises her body as a tool in an argument with her step-daughter in the dressing room of a store, using the exposure of her body to make the girl uncomfortable:

‘Your father says hello.’

...

‘What's wrong with him?’

‘I don't think he's himself.’

‘Really,’ said Maria. ‘How can you tell?’ And Evelyn was suddenly fierce. She didn't know everything, this child. What it was like to sleep beside a man all your life and count the breaths he took in the dark. She pulled the dress off her any old how,

showing the long sad line of her cleavage, the armpits she had never shaved now sparse and grey. Maria looked away and Evelyn felt that she had won something small, at least. A sense of shame. (Enright 2001, p.68)

Unlike the previous passages, the exposure of the female body here is a calculated attempt to gain power within a social situation, and Evelyn, in this instance, re-appropriates the societal shame associated with exposing the body in public space, by utilising it to her advantage in order to dominate this social and familial exchange. This example exemplifies the potential of fiction to return the female body to women, through exploration, through re-familiarisation and through a re-introduction of women to the parts of their bodies which, in traditional Irish society were considered taboo and unspoken. By writing the bodies of women, Enright has embodied what Cixous heralded, that is a return of woman:

to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. (Cixous 1976, p.880)

Enright moves one step further in *What Are You Like?* in her representation of Anna, the mother of the twin protagonists of the novel, who died (or more specifically was allowed to die), in order that her daughters might be born safely. Enright allows Anna to speak directly to the reader from beyond the grave, and some of her pronouncements challenge traditional representations of the body in Irish society, and more importantly, the ways in which the body has been discussed and spoken of in Irish society to date. When Anna speaks of her existence after death she states:

I am in hell. This is what I see, this is what I see, I see the turd, I see the rope, I see my own private parts that I never saw and Berts' private parts that I never saw. I see them clearly. I shift them around the room. I give my husband breasts. I am not ashamed. I shit through the noose and I cry through my backside. I am in hell. I

rearrange my life in hell. Berts' member that is bigger than my own body... (Enright 2001, p.247)

In this rather shocking passage, Anna engages and toys with body parts and bodily elements which are considered to be most private and unspoken of in Irish society, and indeed by people in general. This dream-like passage mirrors, in many ways, Lacanian theories concerning the fragmented body, or the *corps morcelé*. Lacan states that:

the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an 'orthopedic' form of its totality—and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. (Lacan 2006, p.78)

Anna could be said to engage, in the above passage, in an attempt to identify and re-appropriate the body, utilising fragmented body parts in order to try to come to terms with, and move beyond, the shameful feelings concerning the body. She is aware of the constructedness of many of our predispositions about the body and about its role in society and culture. Her attempt could be said to embody Lacan's assertion in *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I*, that the fragmented body:

is regularly manifested in dreams...It then appears in the form of disconnected limbs or of organs exoscopically represented, growing wings and taking up arms for internal persecutions...' (Lacan 2006, p.78)

In many ways, Anna's rather shocking re-appropriation of fragmented body parts symbolises the attempt of Irish women to come to terms with and learn to view, touch and appreciate the body in a new light. It is significant that it is in death that she sees her 'own private parts' that she had never seen before, and those of her husband, that 'she never saw' (Enright 2001, p.247). This can be interpreted as symbolic of

traditional Irish society's discomfort with the body, particularly parts of the body deemed private or sexual, and often therefore sinful. By augmenting and changing these parts of the body (enlarging Berts' member and giving him breasts), Anna is releasing herself finally from the personal and societal strictures which have previously informed her interaction with the body. Enright's writing here has a distinct purpose according to Cixous's theory, namely that of giving woman 'back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal' (Cixous 1976, p.880). Many of Enright's characters place their bodies radically out to the world, to Irish in order to challenge the representation of the female body as negated and isolated. These representations serve to bridge a gap between what is deemed acceptable to speak and write about in relation to the female body and what is taboo. Whether Irish society will engage with, or reach out to touch these bodies, is the defining question.

### **On the Other Side of the Mirror**

A consideration of the place and position of the female body in Irish society would not be complete without an examination of the place and importance of the reflection of the female body in the mirror. Whilst the previous section of this chapter focused upon interpersonal touch, this section will focus on the female body before the mirror, a significant and recurrent image in the fiction of both McGahern and Enright. By studying each writer's treatment of the figure of the woman in the mirror, an insight can be gained into the complex personal and societal relationship Irish women have with the mirror, and by extension, with the ways in which they touch, understand and appreciate their own bodies through an image of those bodies. The section will attempt to show that, by alternately placing the female body before the mirror, or

indeed outside the mirror's gaze, these writers symbolically place Irish society itself before the mirror in order to examine the ways in which it reflects and represents the female body. Leo Rauch, in *Hegel's Phenomenology of Self-Consciousness*, makes the point 'the self is "infinite" in its self-reflection' (Rauch 1999, p.93). This chapter seeks to explore the infinite selfhood of Irish women before the mirror, and how this self-reflection and sense of self has changed radically from the latter half of the twentieth century to the present day, taking into consideration Verhaeghe's assertion that 'the experience of the psychoanalytic hall of mirrors is more difficult and much more threatening than the experience of the nosographic hall of horrors' (Verhaeghe 1999, p.81).

### **Eisoptrophobia – The Fear of One's own Reflection**

In McGahern's fiction, the mirror and, by extension, the idea of reflection, are seen to be appropriated to a greater degree by male rather than female characters, with women often being seen to avoid mirrors and their attendant self-reflection. In *The Barracks*, McGahern's first novel, mirrors are dominated by the reflection of Reagan, Elizabeth's husband, who is seen 'staring at his reflection in the big sideboard mirror' (McGahern 2008a, p.185), and shaving 'before the scullery mirror, the eyes blind with soap' (McGahern 2008a, p.202). While Reagan preens himself in front of the mirror on a number of occasions, it is significant that Elizabeth is never seen to gaze into the mirror at any time during the novel, remarking at a moment of extreme fatigue that she 'could not bear the look of her face in the mirror' (McGahern 2008a, p.42).

Female subconscious avoidance of the mirror is also evident in *Amongst Women*, when on Christmas Day, Moran eats 'alone in front of the big sideboard mirror, waited an apprehensively' by his daughters (McGahern 1991a, p.35). Once

again, man, and by extension patriarchal power, is reflected in the mirror's gaze whereas the women are seen to eat their dinner 'at the side table', again distanced and distancing themselves from the mirror (McGahern 1991a, p.35). This trope is again evident in *The Barracks*, when Reegan is seen to gaze into and be reflected in the mirror when he leads his family in the daily Rosary:

Reegan got his beads from the little cloth purse he always carried in his watch pocket. He put a newspaper down on the cement and knelt with his elbows on the table, facing the dark mirror. They blessed themselves together and he began:  
*'Thou, O Lord, will open my lips.'*  
*'And my tongue shall announce Thy praise,'* they responded. (McGahern 2008a, p.73)

The mirror, and the words of the Rosary, combine here as a concerted reflection of masculine power. By gazing into the mirror during this action, Reegan can perceive his primacy and position as head of the family, whilst hearing his family state that their tongues 'shall announce Thy praise' (McGahern 2008a, p.73). Whilst the words of course are directed at God as part of the Rosary, one could also contend that the family's simultaneous pronouncement, announcing the praise of a male deity, could bolster Reegan's ego and sense of superiority as the dominant father figure within the household. Avoidance of the mirror and the appropriation of its power is once again metaphorically repeated in McGahern's short story 'Swallows'. In this story, Bidy, the profoundly deaf housekeeper to a Garda Sergeant, panics when she narrowly avoids breaking a shaving mirror while trying to shoo hens from her kitchen:

'We'd have had seven years without a day's luck,' she shouted, as she fixed the mirror in the window.  
'Never mind the mirror,' he turned her around by the shoulders.  
'Never mind the mirror,' she shouted, frightened, to show him that she had read his lips. (McGahern 1988, p.125)

Defining the mirror as a 'shaving mirror' at once appropriates it as a masculine object, emphasising its utilitarian nature. Furthermore, the sergeant's order to Biddy, to 'Never mind the mirror', is significant (McGahern 1988, p.125). Symbolically, it can be viewed as an attempt by patriarchal Irish society to appropriate the power of the mirror, distancing woman from its gaze and from self-reflection. Biddy is subconsciously ordered to do that which Elizabeth Reegan instinctively does in *The Barracks*, which is to avoid gazing into the mirror. It could be said that Irish patriarchy, of which Moran and Reegan are but fictive examples, gain validation through observing their reflection in the mirror, in many ways through grooming and preening before the mirror, they achieve their Ideal-I, a reflected image of power, superiority and authority.

It is crucial to note that in McGahern's fiction, women who avoid the mirror generally appear to do so unconsciously. This sub-conscious avoidance provides an insight into women's view of themselves and of their bodies within Irish society. The question must be asked, why do these characters avoid their reflection in the mirror? Hegel states that the 'satisfaction of desire is...the reflection of self-consciousness into itself' (Hegel 1998, p.19). In many ways Elizabeth, Moran's daughters and Biddy all deny themselves the satisfaction of desire by subconsciously avoiding reflecting upon their image. While the reasoning behind this denial of desire remains unclear, perhaps the chronology of the novels offers some insight into this avoidance. *The Barracks*, published in 1963, *Getting Through* published in 1978 and *Amongst Women*, published in 1990, but set in the mid-twentieth century, all present female characters who are living in a distinctly patriarchal Irish society of the past, with women's economic, sexual and personal power and independence at this time limited

by the church, by the state and by society at large. With this in mind, one can refer to Spinoza's work which, as Butler states, explores:

the notion that a conscious and persistent being responds to reflections of itself in emotional ways according to whether that reflection signifies a diminution or augmentation of its own possibility of future persistence and life. (Butler 2004, p.235)

Many female characters in McGahern's literature avoid their reflection in the mirror because that reflection signifies the 'diminution' of the status of women in the Ireland of that time. Many female characters in the novels feature, as Irigaray argues, 'as commodities, despite their resistance...as mirrors of and for man (Irigaray 1985b, p.188). It is as if these women act as reflective surfaces for the men in their lives: they do not look in mirrors because they function as mirrors, as reflections of the ideal-I's of the male characters. In this sense, they represent a commodity of sorts, a commodity utilised by the representative men in their lives to bolster these men's sense of superiority and patriarchal power. An avoidance of the mirror could thus represent a refusal, on the part of these women, to engage with, or reflect upon, their image and their place in society. For each of these women, their future possibilities, what Butler terms their 'future persistence and life', is unclear (Butler 2004, p.235). Elizabeth, at the time of her avoidance of the mirror, faces a future clouded by disease and death. The Moran girls face an interminable childhood in servitude to their father when they avoid the sideboard mirror on Christmas Day, and Biddy, it seems, will spend her life in service to the sergeant as his housekeeper. By avoiding or ignoring the mirror, perhaps these characters are actively avoiding an acknowledgement of their present existence, fearing to reflect upon the possibility of future advancement. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler makes the point that 'if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon

escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred' (Butler 2004, p.3). With this in mind it is perhaps not surprising that women in McGahern's literature avoid an interaction with their reflection in the mirror. If, as Butler contends, they do not wish to be recognised within the social, cultural and familial norms with which they have always been surrounded, these female characters could attempt to escape the clutch of these norms, the active recognition of their limited sphere, through avoidance of the mirror and its attendant reflection of their current societal position.

The avoidance of the mirror could thus be construed as an escape mechanism for these female characters, to escape the realities of their place and position in mid-twentieth century Ireland. In fact, it is interesting to note that the only woman who revels in viewing her reflection in the mirror is the meta-fictitious character Mavis, in *The Pornographer*. A fictitious creation of McGahern's own fictitious pornographic protagonist, Michael, Mavis is seen to freely engage in sexual intercourse with her partner Colonel Grimshaw in a mirror-clad bathroom in one pornographic story. She notes that once the Colonel 'pulls the switchcord they can be seen in all the walled mirrors, and she watches herself move at the hips' (McGahern 1980, p.24). It is interesting that only a meta-fictitious female character, the creation of a male imagination, and thus freed from the realities of a life lived within patriarchal Irish society, has the ability to gaze directly and confidently into the mirror in McGahern's fiction.

### **The Beginnings of Reflection**

Misrecognition of the self-image in the mirror can be linked to passages in both John McGahern and Anne Enright's fiction. In McGahern's *Amongst Women*, on one

occasion, Maggie, Moran's daughter, does glimpse in the mirror, but instead of seeing her own reflection, she accidentally catches a glimpse of Moran 'in the shaving mirror, trouserless but with his shirt and socks on' (McGahern 1991a, p.40). This, once again, reflects Irigaray's assertion that:

just as a commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own. Her value infested-form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter: that is, her body. (Irigaray 1985b, p.187)

Maggie, in this instance, has no reflection in the mirror, rather she reflects the male body, and by extension patriarchal power. This is paralleled in ways in Enright's short story 'Men and Angels', when the main protagonist is visited by his wife's ghost. He notes, in his panic, 'that she could not be seen in the glass, though he saw himself there. Nor was she visible in the mirror' (Enright 2007b, p.107). Maggie, like the ghostly wife in 'Men and Angels', appears to have no reflection, as her image in the mirror has been replaced with that of her father. This inability of woman to see her own reflection or to be seen in the mirror, can be linked to Irigaray's assertion that historically, 'the feminine has functioned as an immanent other and mirror from which the subject of certainty abstracts himself in the reflection, hence, postulation of his being' (Pontoriero 2001, p.379). Thus, when these women gaze into the mirror, their own reflection is replaced or misrecognised as the reflection of their fathers or husbands; their own reflection is effectively negated. These female characters function as the 'immanent other and mirror' that bolsters and maintains the reflection of the patriarchal.

## **Considerations of Reflection**

Enright's work, in many ways, develops and expands that of McGahern in its representation and exploration of the female body before the mirror. Indeed Enright's work is replete with images of physical and metaphorical mirrors. With over one hundred and fifty five references to mirrors spanning right throughout her work, Enright's writing places the Irish woman firmly before the mirror. Her extensive engagement with the mirror is a significant element of her writing which Enright herself has remarked upon. When discussing the work of her former tutor, Angela Carter, Enright admits that 'if Carter's work stepped into the mirror, my own is an attempt to step back out again. But there is no doubt, I still meet her in the glass' (Enright 2011b, 39). Enright's treatment of the mirror in her fiction simultaneously initiates an in-depth exploration of the female body and an exploration of the possibility of accessing a true and individualistic self-reflection on the part of her female characters.

Throughout her novels, Enright places the female body before the mirror, exploring, admiring and openly discussing the image and identity of the reflected body before the mirror. Her work explores the complex relationship between the Irish woman and the mirror, emphasising the ways in which Irish women have moved more confidently in front of the mirror, exploring their own identity, yet simultaneously acknowledging the limitations that traditional societal mores and dictates have had upon the Irish woman's attempt to attain a unified and individualistic self-image in the mirror. Just as McGahern's female characters avoided the reflective gaze of the mirror because the reflected image represented a diminution of the status of women in Irish society, so Enright represents characters who seem to feel a discord between their inner sense of self and the self which is presented to them by the mirror's gaze,

prompting them to avoid, ignore, or dislike their reflections and mirrors in general. In *The Gathering*, the main protagonist, Veronica, notes that her grandmother, Ada is 'fond of her hands', but as 'for the rest of her body, she is not bothered to check, having long ago fallen out with the mirror' (Enright 2007a, p.251). For some characters, like Ada, the diminution of status that could be felt through the reflection of the aging body can be avoided by simply seceding from the mirror's gaze. Similarly, in the short story 'Della', the eponymous protagonist tries 'to see herself in the bathroom mirror', but she sees, 'instead Any Old Woman: someone whose kindness did not matter' (Enright 2009, p.128). Della feels a disjoint, a distance between the reflection that she sees in the mirror and the woman that she feels herself to be. Both Ada and Della unwittingly exhibit elements of Enright's aforementioned 'distant skin', not perhaps in relation to a resistance to touching the other, but rather in a psychological distance from their own bodies. The mental image that they have of how their body looks cannot withstand the mirror's gaze, and so these characters strive to maintain a distance between the body that they see in the mirror and their own mental image and interpretation of their bodies. One could posit that the purpose of the mirror for women in a materialistic, image-driven modern society is two-fold; it either bolsters a positive self-image, or serves to illuminate the ways in which the female body no longer conforms to societal ideals of beauty. The incredible power of the mirror in this regard is recognised by Grace in *The Wig My Father Wore*, who remembers crying in the bathroom after a family argument on Christmas Day:

When the door was shut I went over to smash the mirror. What was it that stopped me? My jumper in the mirror was a pinker shade of pink, but the jumper in the mirror had no smell. In the mirror it all looked the same, except that it could not feel. Perhaps that was why the mirror was there, to witness the act without pain. Whether or not I felt pain was another matter. Perhaps I did not. Perhaps the pain was in the mirror. I looked at my eyes in the mirror and I had the feeling, those eyes could see. I looked at the blood in the mirror and was afraid the glass itself might bleed. So I put

some blood on the mirror, a smear of solid red. It separated us out. I thought, now the blood is in the room. (Enright 2007c, p.111)

This passage painfully exemplifies the anxiety and fear that the mirror can provoke, not only in Enright's female characters, but by extension, in women in contemporary Ireland. Grace's attempt to somehow separate herself from her reflected image, by putting blood on the mirror, is a powerful attempt to reclaim an intrinsic identity which is unconnected to one's reflected bodily image. The fact that Grace utilises blood to attain separation from the reflected image is significant. In order to remind herself of the 'Real', of the reality of her own bodily identity in comparison to its socially constructed image within the mirror, she utilises a primary symbol of life itself, namely blood. Grace's primary fear in this passage is that 'the glass itself might bleed', which could be interpreted as a fear that the reflected image might become a reality, challenging or even superseding the bodily reality of Grace herself (Enright 2007c, p.111). In order to prevent this, Grace utilises her own blood, her own body to challenge the power of the reflected image. The final line, now 'the blood is in the room', can be interpreted as a challenge, with the female body standing defiant against a reflected image which can be threatening. This passage highlights, in many ways, the way in which the female body needs to maintain a comfortable distance from its reflected self-image.

While Enright's work does acknowledge the difficult relationship that women maintain with the mirror and their reflected image throughout their lives, it also explores more positive elements of this relationship. Through an in-depth and liberated exploration of the female body before the mirror, Enright's fiction provides an alternative, yet no less significant, portrayal of the female body before the mirror than that of McGahern, a portrayal which attempts to encourage Irish women, and

Irish society in general, to appreciate the reflected image of the female body and its importance and centrality in Irish society. The image of Anna Kennedy in *What Are You Like?* is a prime example of this attempt. This character undertakes an exploration of her body in front of a large eighteenth-century mirror that her husband has delivered to the house. Anna notes that, after its delivery:

I passed it back and forwards all day...One afternoon, I took off my clothes and stood in front of it...I looked at myself in the liver-spotted silver...and I did not know what to think. I don't know if I had seen my body before, full length. At school we washed under a shift, and when I was in digs, the long mirror was in the hall. (Enright 2001, pp.246-247)

The language which Enright uses in this extract is crucial to the exploration of the relationship between the Irish woman and the mirror. Like the female characters in McGahern, Anna begins her relationship with this mirror by avoiding it, passing it 'back and forwards all day' (Enright 2001, p.246). She acknowledges the importance of societal mores concerning modesty and exposure of the body; with her childhood experiences of washing under a shift and the denial of a personal mirror in digs informing her understanding of how and when she should view her reflection in the mirror. However, in the liberated moment when Anna sheds her clothes and stands before the mirror in the hall, she moves beyond traditionally acceptable limits of reflection in the mirror. The location of the mirror in the hall is a significant, and arguably a conscious decision by Enright, presenting Anna as an individual actively seeking a true exploration of her body, even within this quasi-public space, thus challenging acceptable modes and locations through which to view the naked body. She is engaging here in what Foucault terms 'an inspecting gaze', a first complete visual exploration of the body (Foucault 1980, p.155). Judith Butler makes the point that the 'idealization of the body as a spatially bounded totality, characterized by a

control exercised [*sic*] by the gaze, is lent out to the body as its own self-control' (Butler 1993, p.76). Here Anna attempts to take control of her body through the gaze even if, as she admits, she 'didn't know what to think' about it (Enright 2001, p.246). Enright here simultaneously acknowledges the limitations of Anna's gaze into the mirror, given the societal strictures of the Ireland of her generation, but at the same time her desire to move beyond these strictures by attempting to understand and define her image in the mirror. This is evident in Anna's attempt to verbalise her image, stating that 'I looked at Anna Kennedy starkers in the middle of the afternoon...and I could not find the words for it. Pink. White. Hill. Cunt. Move' (Enright 2001, p.247). The unveiling of the female body in its entirety before the mirror, and by extension before the self, can be interpreted as a challenge to the perceived shame in relation to aspects of the female body which is a reminder of, as Irigaray states 'the compromise and disavowal' of the female sex organs, which were traditionally viewed as 'defective, imperfect parts of the female body' (Irigaray 1985a, p.115). By revealing parts of the body traditionally hidden, Anna transforms the female body from 'a body in pieces' (what Lacan termed *le corps morcelé*), into the specular body, a morphological totality invested with a centre of motor control (Butler 1993, pp.79-80). Rather than dividing the female body into a body of pieces – parts considered to be decent and thus publicly viewable versus elements which are deemed private, and therefore hidden – the representation of Anna naked before the mirror unites the bodily elements within the mirror's gaze, providing Anna with a narrative through which to begin to explore her body. However, the fact that Anna describes herself in the third person in the above passage could lend a problematic element to Anna's challenge to the perceived shame of the naked body in Irish society. In many ways, by describing herself in the third person, she is separating the

image that she sees from herself as subject, an attempt which can be linked to Enright's recurring image of the 'distant skin of the Irish' (Enright 2007a, p.155). One could posit that Anna is unable to acknowledge this body as her own, rather she defines the images as other, 'Anna Kennedy' rather than 'me'. In this way, Enright simultaneously acknowledges the attempts made to challenge perceived ideals concerning the body in Irish society, but simultaneously concedes the innate difficulties associated with undertaking such a challenge.

Lacan's Mirror Stage, a theoretical developmental stage affecting infants who begin to recognise themselves in the mirror as a separate self in comparison to the other, is crucial here. Like the infant who utilises the mirror to create a unified sense of 'I', Anna utilises the mirror in order to familiarise herself with, and gain control of, a body that she has heretofore not seen in its entirety, reconstituting it as a whole rather than in pieces. For Lacan, the difference between *le corps morcelé* and the totalised image in the mirror constitutes a sense of lack, exemplified in Anna's statement: 'I did not know what to think' upon viewing her body for the first time (Enright 2001, p.246). Clearly Anna has not come to an unproblematic, unified sense of 'I' but, like the infant in Lacan's mirror stage, moves from a sense of 'insufficiency to anticipation' (Lacan 2006 p.78). This is similarly exemplified in Anna's description of herself in the third person; her reference to herself as 'Anna Kennedy' emphasising the split or distance between her reflected image and her own sense of self or mental self-image. The exploration of the body which she undertakes does not answer the question of the possibility of attaining a unified sense of the self through the mirror; rather it allows Enright to widen the process of discussion, exploration and appreciation of the female body within Irish literature and society. Moving forward from the avoidance of the mirror previously outlined, Enright's female characters look

in the mirror with a sense of anticipation, anticipation in relation to exploring the nature of their selfhood, even if this selfhood remains unreachable to them. Butler makes the point in *Undoing Gender*, that ‘if there are no norms of recognition by which we are recognizable, then it is not possible to persist in one’s own being...we have been foreclosed from possibility’ (Butler 2004, p.31). Enright’s female characters step in front of the mirror in order to question the problematic nature of self-recognition, and to pose the possibility of reconciliation between woman and her reflected self-image. Whereas McGahern’s female characters arguably shrink from this exploration, Enright’s characters engage in the process, a complex process which neither offers full revelation of the self nor which plunges the female body into the glass darkly.

While many of Enright’s female characters engage in this complex exploration, Maria in *What Are You Like?* can be viewed as a woman on a consistent quest to engage with the true nature of her selfhood in the mirror. At the outset of the story, Maria is seen exploring, not simply her body, but the very nature of her identity, in the mirror: ‘She looked at the mirror, cool and mute on the far wall. After a while, she went over to it and touched the glass. “What are you like?” she said...’ (Enright 2001, p.24). Maria is seen here to be engaging in a concerted attempt to reclaim her ‘distant skin’; to bridge the distance between her mental self-image and her reflection in the glass. As the novel progresses, Maria continues to engage with her mirror image, hoping to, in her words, ‘see herself – her real self – turning a corner and wave, and say hello’ (Enright 2001, p.55). At times she experiences moments of perfect clarity, simultaneously recognising and misrecognising her reflection. At one point she states ‘she had never seen herself so clearly. She looked like a perfect stranger, like a girl you would pass on the street’ (Enright 2001, p.36).

Later in the novel, while living in New York, Maria experiences a mental breakdown, culminating in acts of self-harm in front of the bathroom mirror. Maria's continual attempt to recognise her image in the mirror throughout the novel concludes in this scene in a fulfilment of her earlier professed wish:

The mirror is flat and cool against her skin. Maria can see this sheet of glass between the real blood and the reflected blood...She looks into her own eyes. 'Hello.' (Enright 2001, p.158)

Maria, perhaps only momentarily, bridges the psychological gap, the 'distant skin', between her mental and reflected self-images. However, whether this engagement will endure is questionable. Perhaps in this text, and throughout all her work, Enright is postulating the process of self-recognition as continual, as an introduction to the self, culminating in moments of intense clarity and blinding misrecognition that embody all life. Identity and reflection are thus seen in Enright's fiction as transitive, but, perhaps most importantly, they can also be construed as an embodiment of Irigaray's wish that through the speculum 'woman as subject' would have 'no other but rather reflects only herself in her specificity' (Pontoriero 2001, p.379), becoming in her own right 'the "object" to be investigated, to be explicitly granted consideration' (Irigaray 1985a, p.145).

In conjunction with such attempts to recognise and come to terms with the self and the body of the self, Enright's characters must also contend with metaphorical mirrors, namely other women with whom they compare or contrast themselves. For example, the figure of the doppelganger appears in *The Wig My Father Wore*. While working on the set of the television programme 'The Love Quiz', Grace interviews a potential female contestant, Edel for the show. Edel seems familiar to Grace and when

she voices a suspicion that this woman has previously been a part of the show, it leads to a startling revelation from the would-be contestant:

She looks up at me and I do not know what she sees. Nothing is my own anymore. She might see herself. She might see the pity I feel, for no reason at all. It is when I remember my own body, sad, sweet and blank, but I know what I wanted to say to her.

‘Have you...? You haven’t been on the show before?’

‘Sorry?’ she says.

‘I’m sure I’ve seen you on the show before.’

‘In the audience?’

‘No’. It was a bare moment.

‘On the show?’ she says.

‘Yes’.

‘Not me’.

‘Oh good. You’re not called Marie Keogh are you?’ I was not being polite. But although I had gone too far I never expected her to say:

‘Is that her name?’

So I wasn’t the only one. She herself was sitting watching the telly one night when she saw someone who looks just like her in the audience of *The Late Late Show*.

‘It must be somebody else so.’

But that was only the start of it. She also saw herself answering a question about European Union in a vox pop in Henry Street.

‘Maybe it’s someone who looks just like you’. (Enright 2007c, p.155)

This woman has looked into the television and has seen the mirror image of herself within it. It is interesting that Grace refers to her own body as ‘blank’, prompting her to question the contestant about her appearance as being familiar. Perhaps in a sense here, Enright is focusing on the blankness of the female body, a body which is coveted by society, but onto which are placed society’s prescriptions. Edel’s body too, is in many ways blank; she has become an everywoman, her unique qualities as a woman and a feminine body being misrecognised and equated with those of another woman. Crucially, even though both Edel and Grace admit that Edel is mistaken for, and looks exactly like, this doppelganger, Edel feels that her doppelganger is a superior being in many ways, having a vaster knowledge and better dress-sense than she herself has:

‘It’s not me’, she says. ‘Really. Ask my boyfriend. He saw me on Questions and Answers when I was away in Spain for two weeks. Talking about the Beef Tribunal. What do I know about the Beef Tribunal?’

....

Then she saw herself on the LoveQuiz. What really annoyed her was that this woman dressed better, even though they wore the same clothes. She accessorised.

‘I keep buying scarves’, she says. ‘But I can never wear them right’. (Enright 2007a, p.156)

This scene could point to the acknowledgement that for many women, all other women serve as alternative mirrors, images of relative perfection, particularly presented through the media, and often images that women feel that they cannot live up to or compete with. This in itself can lead to a misrecognition of a woman’s true reflection in the mirror, a reflection and beauty marred by constant uncertainty about whether the reflected image reflects the image of perfect womanhood, femininity and beauty.

This theory is also reflected in Enright’s own memoir about her experiences of pregnancy and motherhood *Making Babies*. Discussing various interactions with her daughter, Enright recounts a conversation about a dream that she had:

...one morning she announces a dream – a good dream. What was it about?

‘Barbie,’ she says, looking very coy.

‘Oh? And what was Barbie doing?’

‘She was reading me a book.’

Which is one of the things that I do, of course – my tendency to interpret the child mocked by an image of myself as a six-foot plastic toy. (Enright 2005, p.82)

It is interesting that in her dream, the child would superimpose the image of her mother reading to her with that of Barbie. Barbie is perhaps one of the most prolific, and in many ways controversial, toys in terms of communicating received ideals concerning body image. Mary Dorsey Wanless discusses the importance of the Barbie figure stating that:

She has clearly become an icon; she exemplifies female physical perfection in our society, perhaps globally. Unlike most dolls, she is not a baby to be mothered. She is not huggable, not squeezable, not comforting. She is hard, inflexible, plastic, unrealistic. Who would want to hug or love that? What woman with a 'real life' could ever hope to live up to her? (Wanless 2010, p.125)

Interestingly, despite the 'idealistic' body image presented by the Barbie doll, if Barbie was an actual woman: she would be 5'9" tall, have a 39" bust, an 18" waist, 33" hips and a size 3 shoe'... 'a BMI of 16.24 and fit the weight criteria for anorexia' (Slayen 2011). Because of this, she 'likely would not menstruate' and perhaps more frighteningly, if she were a real woman, Barbie would 'have to walk on all fours due to her proportions' (Slayen 2011). Given the significance, and cruelty, of the Barbie doll figure in exemplifying impossible female physical perfection, it is perhaps not surprising that Enright feels 'mocked' by the image of herself as a 'six-foot plastic toy' (Enright 2005, p.82).

Another character who feels mocked by her metaphorical mirror in Enright's literature is Mary, the wife of a philanderer in her short story 'The Portable Virgin'. Whilst Mary's husband has had affairs with a succession of women throughout their married life, his latest affair with a woman also named Mary, has a profound effect upon his wife. Like Edel in *The Wig My Father Wore*, Mary is confronted with the image of the doppelganger. The reflective doubling of names here perhaps causes Mary to begin to compare herself to this new Mary with whom her husband has temporarily replaced her in his affections. Mary, in many ways, looks down upon the woman with whom her husband is having the affair, describing her as a:

woman replete with modified adjectives, damaged by men, her body fitted into thinness so unnatural you could nearly see the marks of the knife. Intelligent? No. Funny? No. Rich, with a big laugh and sharp heels? No. Happy? Definitely not. Except when he was there. (Enright 2007b, p.82)

She attempts to change her appearance drastically in order to look like her husband's new Mary, telling the stylist at the hairdresser that she wants 'to go blond' (Enright 2007b, p.86).

'It's very thin...'  
'I know, I want it to break. I want it blonde.'  
'Well...' My stylist is shocked. I have finally managed to say something really obscene. (Enright 2007b, p.86)

What is perhaps so obscene is the very fact that Mary is willing to give up her individuality, the unique attributes of her body, in order to ascribe to her husband's current sexual ideal, or rather to an image of that ideal. Mary utilises her body here as a blank canvas onto which is placed her husband's impression of the female ideal, echoing Grace's description of her body as 'sad, sweet and blank' in *The Wig my Father Wore* (Enright 2007c, p.155). Mary's description of this physical change as a 'filthy metamorphosis' is revealing; Mary, the wife, intellectually understands that Mary, the mistress, has fallen victim to a form of modified femininity, which she feels does not, or cannot, make the woman happy; however she is willing to follow her metaphorical mirror down the path of body modification, solely for the purpose of pleasing patriarchal society. Shumaker elaborates on this point, stating that:

The wife's action implies her hope that, if she transforms herself into her opposite, her husband will not need the other Mary. The wife's epiphany is that all the women in the salon are her doubles, since they likewise awkwardly try to preserve youth. Like herself and Ben's mistress, they seek a Barbie-doll style of beauty that they hope will enrapture men. (Shumaker 2005, p.108)

It is interesting to note that in the gospel according to Luke, Jesus states at the Last Supper that 'this is my body which is given for you' (Luke 22.19). The women in the stories mentioned above, in a sense, mirror Jesus in this respect. Arguably, Irish women have given up their bodies, the total control of and happiness with their

bodies, to patriarchal Irish society. Other women, ideals and icons of female perfection and beauty, combine to both view women as a homogenous group which should espouse these values, simultaneously punishing them, or allowing them to punish themselves or each other, should these ideals not be bodily realised. Irigaray sums up this phenomenon in *The Sex Which is Not One*, when she states that:

so it is with women. Distinguished, divided, separated, classified as like and unlike, according to whether have been judged exchangeable. In themselves, among themselves, they are amorphous and confused: natural body, maternal body, doubtless useful to the consumer, but without any possible identity or communicable value; (Irigaray 1985b, p.188)

## **Conclusion**

From the evidence presented in this chapter, it is evident, that while Irish women are engaging in a more intimate, open and conscious manner with both their own bodies, and indeed the bodies of others in modern Irish society, the shadow of past legal and religious restrictions on the female body and labelling of that female body as transgressive and dangerous is still apparent in Irish society. However, this is not the only shadow which taints Irish people's responses and attitudes towards personal and interpersonal touch. The next chapter will explore the effect that physical and sexual abuse have had upon the way in which touch is interpreted in Ireland and the profound affect that this abusive touch and treatment has had upon individuals and their ability to engage physically with those around them. In the same way that legal and religious restrictions concerning the female body have left an imprint upon women's interpretation of the body and interpersonal touch, it is difficult, if not impossible, to divorce Ireland's history of corporal punishment and sexual abuse from modern day attitudes to touch.

## Chapter Two: Violent or Inappropriate Touch

'...history is violence'

(Derrida 2001, p.146)



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## **Violent or Inappropriate Touch**

Unfortunately, recent revelations in Ireland have taught us that despite the fact that the Irish have developed a ‘distant skin’, being, in many ways, less tactile than many other nations around the globe, violent or inappropriate touch has affected Irish people and the Irish nation in profound and detrimental ways. Widespread corporal punishment and sexual abuse, both within families and state or religious-run institutions, are elements of current Irish history which cannot be ignored, or left unexplored. Given that traditionally, Irish people have experienced difficulty expressing themselves in a tactile fashion, revelations concerning the widespread physical and sexual abuse of minors has arguably added a new dimension of discomfort to an already difficult societal issue. This chapter seeks to look at elements of violent and inappropriate touch in the works of McGahern and Enright, and to explore the effect that these experiences had on characters affected; on their ability to form relationships; on the comfort which they displayed with their own bodies; and on their ability to touch others, both physically and emotionally. Michel Foucault makes the point that:

...what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions. A relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks, it destroys, or it closes off all possibilities. (Foucault 2002, p.340)

This chapter seeks to explore the ramifications of widespread state, religious, societal and familial sanctioned relationships of violence on victims, their families and indeed modern Irish society, which has only been forced to engage directly with this issue in recent years. While many of the well-known references to violent or inappropriate

touch in the works of both novelists refer to men or young boys,<sup>5</sup> this chapter seeks to examine corporal, domestic, state-sanctioned and even public violence and inappropriate touch with respect to female characters in both writers work. While not wishing in any way to diminish the horrific treatment of men and young boys in Irish society, and indeed the importance of this focus to both writers throughout their work, the scope of this study does not afford adequate latitude to discuss the issue of violent and inappropriate touch in relation to both genders. Therefore this chapter will primarily focus upon physical and sexual violence and inappropriate touch upon the bodies of women. However in order to discuss incidences of violence and inappropriate touch in the works of Enright and McGahern, the social, religious and familial context of violence and sexual abuse in Irish society must be outlined.

It could be said that Ireland and Irish society has had a long and abiding relationship with violence. Born, in many ways out of violence, the Irish Free State emerged as a democratic, independent society, but one which would come to develop laws and institutions which would sanction widespread corporal punishment and arguably hide, or protect, perpetrators of physical and sexual violence against some of the most defenceless members of Irish society. John McGahern elaborated on these aspects of Irish society in an interview stating that:

Ireland was always a very violent society, and, like most things there, it was very hidden there as well. There was also much sexual frustration. The authority was paternalistic. God the Father in Heaven, the Pope in Rome, the father who said the Rosary each night in the house...All authority was unquestioned. Men and women lived mostly separate lives. Men dominated the outside and the women dominated the houses, if they were not cowed by violence. Many of my father's generation would have fought through the War of Independence and the Civil War, and were steeped in violence. (McGahern 2003, p.7)

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<sup>5</sup> I refer particularly here to images of domestic abuse and inappropriate touch in McGahern's *The Dark* and *Memoir*, and Enright's treatment of the sexual abuse of Veronica's brother Liam in *The Gathering*.

Whilst fighting for independence (during which much of the violence was seen and experienced by the Irish people at a local level), and once again with the outbreak of civil war, Irish society became embroiled in violence, yet it was a violence which was seen to have a clear aim and purpose. In the aftermath of this violence, it is difficult to imagine that an entire generation of Irish people could immediately move on unmarred and unaffected by the violence they had seen, experienced or even committed. McGahern expresses this in a latent yet powerful format in this passage from *Amongst Women*, when Michael Moran emphasises the difficulty which many people had in readjusting to life in peacetime Ireland:

For people like McQuaid and myself the war was the best part of our lives. Things were never so simple and clear again. I think we never rightly got the hang of it afterwards. (McGahern 1991a, p.6)

While one cannot connect these events distinctly to the widespread nature of physical and sexual abuse perpetrated in Ireland in the twentieth century, it would be a mistake to treat the violent beginnings of independent Irish society as insignificant when charting the complex relationship which Irish society has with violent touch. Jacques Derrida makes the point, in his essay 'Violence and Metaphysics', that the 'future, this beyond, is not another time, a day after history', rather 'it is present at the heart, a day after history', 'present...as a trace' (Derrida 2001, pp.118-119). In this regard, the modern day Irish State could be said to contain the 'trace' of its violent birth, a trace which arguably could influence the way in which Irish people, throughout the twentieth century have viewed and tolerated violence and violent behaviour.

This trace is evident in *Amongst Women*, when Moran tells his daughters, not long before he passes away, that the closest he 'ever got to any man was when' he 'had him in the sights of the rifle', and he 'never missed' (McGahern 1991a, p.7). This

quotation emphasises what Enright would later come to term the ‘distant skin of the Irish’, as Moran feels more connected to other men through violence than any other positive form of touch or interaction (Enright 2007a, p.155). It could be argued that the violence that he experience and committed during the War of Independence affected his capacity to bond with, trust and touch others, both literally and metaphorically. Throughout the novel, it is evident that it is through violence and/or domination that he cements his most enduring relationships.

It is important when exploring these traumatic elements of Irish society to emphasise the historical context of the place of violence in Irish society. While the extent to which physical violence was evident in Irish society is horrifying, in the light of modern societal considerations, the Ryan report notes that traditionally ‘such punishment was permissible and widespread in schools and homes’ (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse 2009, p.59). While this statement is meant in no way to diminish the horrific and damaging experiences of many men, women and children throughout the twentieth century in Ireland, it is important to note that corporal punishment were part of daily life in Irish society at this time and that, as the Ryan report states, people:

who lived during the time when corporal punishment was legally permissible in schools, and was acceptable in family circumstances, have no difficulty in deciding whether punishments that they experienced or witnessed were excessive. Teachers, parents and children knew what was acceptable, and were able to condemn excesses. They also knew what amounted to cruelty and brutality. (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse 2009, p.60)

In order to provide an accurate and realistic critique of violent touch in Irish society, it is important to be aware of the social context of violence in the home and school in twentieth century Ireland. As Foucault states:

those who resist or rebel against a form of power cannot merely be content to denounce violence or criticize an institution. Nor is it enough to cast the blame on reason in general. What has to be questioned is the form of rationality at stake...The question is: How are such relations of power rationalized? Asking it is the only way to avoid other institutions, with the same objectives and the same effects, from taking their stead. (Foucault 2002, pp 324-325)

It is the national, societal and familial rationality concerning violence and violent touch then which must be explored through the work of McGahern and Enright, and the ways in which a general acceptance of corporal punishment arguably led to a situation where cruelty and excessive violence could be hidden, ignored, or even silenced.

This situation is exemplified in *Amongst Women*, where McGahern, in a latent manner, points to the widespread nature of corporal punishment in the home. During one of Maggie's visits to Rose's family home, Rose's mother questions the girl about their father's suspected violent behaviour in Great Meadow, asking, 'Did he not beat ye?' (McGahern 1991a, p.34). McGahern notes that 'shame as much as love' prompts the child's denial when she states 'now and again when we were bold, but like any house' (McGahern 1991a, p.34). It is significant that the child's method of protecting her family from accusations of abuse is to state their similarity to 'any house' in the area (McGahern 1991a, p.34). This passage hints at the ways in which excessive corporal punishment could be hidden within a society where such behaviour was, at least to a certain degree, tolerated. In his report prepared for the Ryan Report, Diarmaid Ferriter stated that 'it was often the institution of the family which could mask a calculated savagery in its treatment of children', and this sentiment is certainly borne out in these extracts (Ferriter 2006, p.5). This communal toleration and legality of corporeal punishment is also evident later in the novel when Moran advocates the supervised beating of his youngest son, Michael, after the boy clashes with his father and runs away from home. Moran tells Shiela:

‘I have a plan for that boy,’ ...It was simple. They would bring Michael home and the whole house would help supervise a beating that Moran would administer. That way it would be properly done and they would be legally protected... (McGahern 1991a, p.117)

While Sheila, and by extension Moran’s daughters, refuse to aid him in his plans, thus avoiding violence on this occasion, the very fact that such an act could be committed by a family, under the confines of the law, is testament to the endemic nature of violence within Irish society.<sup>6</sup>

Enright’s work similarly testifies to the presence of corporal punishment and/or violent touch in Irish households. In *The Gathering*, for example Veronica notes the ‘nick in the wall, over by the door’:

where Liam threw a knife at our mother, and everyone laughed and shouted at him. It is there among the other anonymous dents and marks. Famous. The hole Liam made, after my mother ducked, and before everyone started to roar. What could she have said to him? What possible provocation could she have afforded him – this sweet woman? And Ernest then, or Mossie, one of the enforcers, wrestling him out through the back door and on to the grass for a kicking. (Enright 2007a, p.6)

While written as a quasi-comical episode, this passage displays the commonplace-nature of violence within the Hegarty household, a violence that was directed, not only at the children, in the form of corporal punishment, but also at their mother. The very fact that the general response of the children to this incident is to laugh indicates a nonchalance towards violence which is, in many ways, quite shocking. This nonchalance towards domestic violence and corporal punishment is again exhibited by Veronica when she muses upon her sister Kitty’s contention that she was beaten as a child:

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<sup>6</sup> This example does not refer to violence or inappropriate touch of women, however, it testifies to the endemic nature of, and legal sanction of domestic violence in Irish society at that time. Also it is a violent situation which is diffused by women, who refuse to supervise or aid in a beating led by their father.

Kitty always goes on about being hit as a child, though the fact is that she was a complete brat: she always came back for more, and she often got it; not just from me and Liam, who actually liked her, but also from Mossie – the-psychotic, who taunted and enraged her into a total Shirley Temple. (Enright 2007a, p.154)

In the Hegarty household, children direct violence towards their mother, siblings enforce order through the use of corporal punishment, and Veronica notes that their father ‘used to hit his children all the time, more or less’ (Enright 2007a, p.226). As a family unit, they appear to be continuously, and often violently, at war with one another: a familial microcosm, in many ways, of an often vicious and violent Irish society. They exemplify Michel Foucault’s statement that ‘a battlefront runs through the whole of society, continuously and permanently, and it is this battle front that puts us all on one side or the other...We are all inevitably someone’s adversary’ (Foucault 2003, p.51).

While corporal punishment was undeniably a normality within many Irish homes, it was also taken to excesses in some cases, a point which is borne out in the works of McGahern and Enright. McGahern’s novel *The Dark*, for example, is replete with instances of viscous corporal punishment, with Mahoney beating his children for the slightest infringement, and often for no reason at all. In one instance, ‘crazy to do someone after tripping over a bucket he’d left carelessly behind him in the darkness’, Mahoney physically attacks his daughter Joan, only releasing the girl upon the intervention of her brother:

...So you’re not satisfied, it’s not grand enough for you, is it not? Not for lying and throwing buckets out of your hand for people to kill themselves across.’ He swung her by the hair. Her feet left the ground. He started to swing her round by the dark hair, mouthing, ‘I’ll teach you to lie. Talk about people behind their backs. I’ll teach you to lie,’ and she was screaming...You couldn’t bear any more this time. ‘Stop it. Stop it, I tell you.’ Mahoney stopped as if struck, she fell in a heap on the floor,

though he did not lose his grip of the hair. 'What did you say?' (McGahern 2008b, pp.35-36)

The savage violence witnessed by the family prompts Mahoney Junior, Mahoney's oldest child, to intervene on behalf of his sister, an intervention which quickly turns violent. Mahoney hits the boy who tells him 'Hit and I'll kill you' (McGahern 2008b, p.36). Mahoney is far more perturbed by the fact that he is threatened by his son, than the pain and suffering that he has inflicted upon his daughter. In fact, when his son accuses him of savagery, telling Mahoney that you 'wouldn't swing a pig like that' he responds viciously and self-confidently, stating:

I'd swing anyone that way, you too. Pigs. The whole lot of you are pigs, a vicious litter of pigs. It's the whip I should have given the whole lot of you. (McGahern 2008b, p.37)

This scene is particularly interesting because of Mahoney's inability (or perhaps his deliberate refusal), to understand the brutality and criminality of his actions. While it is probable that Mahoney, and indeed other violent fathers in McGahern's work, have issues pertaining to self-control, aggression and violent outbursts, all of which exacerbated the level of violence and cruelty with which they punished their children, scenes such as the one described here also point to a particular rationale that surrounded corporal punishment in Ireland at that time. Mahoney's guilt-free, self-confident assertion that he would 'swing anyone that way', signals a feeling of entitlement; a feeling that his children are his to be punished as he deems fit. The prevalence of patriarchal violence within the home is emphasised by Joan when she states 'it'd be always like this, in this house' (McGahern 2008b, p.35). Indeed, this

pronouncement is in many ways prophetic, as in the remainder of McGahern's work, domestic violence and corporal punishment make a regular reappearance.<sup>7</sup>

This situation sadly mirrors a case that came before the Irish courts in 1968, where Vincent Dunphy was accused of killing his six year-old foster child, Mary Josephine Stephenson, who died following a severe beating. The *Irish Times* reported that, on the night that the child died, Dunphy had awoken her late at night in order to chastise her:

He [Dunphy] asked her why she had left her face cloth in the basin and not put it away. She got out of bed to do this. He took a towel off the bed and held it in a ball in his right hand. He struck her on the face. It was more a push than a blow. She staggered back and fell. Then she got up again and came towards him. He asked her why she pretended to be asleep and she said she had been asleep. Then he hit her again with the towel. This went on four or five times. About the fourth or fifth time she looked a bit groggy and she slumped to the ground. (*Irish Times* 1968a, p.11)

Dunphy's admission of beating the child that night, alongside his seemingly casual admission to Garda James Heenan that he would beat the child 'with his hand, and with a towel and also with a strap', supposedly because the child told lies and was uncooperative, displays an inability to comprehend the immorality and criminality of his actions towards a small child (*Irish Times* 1968b, p.10). Indeed despite the fact that the judge displays an abhorrence for Dunphy's treatment of the child at times during the trial, his charge to the jury before they were sent away to deliberate is telling. He cautions them to:

approach this case on the basis that the accused is a man who sincerely believes that physical punishment was the proper way to deal with any offences this child committed. Even if you hold the view that excessive punishment was used that, by itself, does not mean that he intended to do serious injury to the child. It does not follow from the fact that there was regular punishment that it was necessarily given

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<sup>7</sup> It could be said that the child's remark was prophetic on a national scale also, as for many years after, and arguably right up to the present day, physical, emotional and sexual violence remained and remain a normality within some homes.

with the intention of causing serious injury or what was done on this evening was something dangerous. It's a matter for you to decide but I think it is probable that when the child fell she struck her head, setting in motion a chain of events that resulted in her death. (*Irish Times* 1968c, p.11)

The wording here, coupled with the fact that Dunphy was convicted of manslaughter, not murder, and sentenced to just twelve months imprisonment, signals a societal unwillingness to condemn corporal punishment, even when it manifested in extreme cases. Again, the words of Foucault must be considered, 'what has to be questioned is the form of rationality at stake...How are such relations of power rationalized?' (Foucault 2002, pp 324-325). From the evidence presented, it would appear that corporal punishment, whatever its manifestation, was generally deemed to be the right of parents and that interference in this matter, be it legal or societal, was not the norm. McGahern himself highlights this insular system of punishment in *Memoir* when he states that:

The beatings, the cries, the shouts, the anger, lingered like shame in the house...Did he know that what he was doing was wrong, or care? He knew it didn't look well from the outside, but he kept the outside as far as possible at the same iron distance as he kept the past. (McGahern 2006, p.197)

While McGahern does admit that his father knew that the extremely violent nature of his brand of corporal punishment 'didn't look well', this did not outweigh his belief that he was entitled to punish his children in an extremely violent manner. It could be said that the 'relations of power' in twentieth century Ireland enabled certain parents to physically abuse their children without fear of interference or indeed lengthy criminal punishment. This rationale is also evident, albeit in a latent manner in Enright's novel *The Gathering*. At one point in the novel, Veronica muses upon her childhood memories, specifically her role in violently punishing her siblings for various transgressions. While she can and does feel remorse for physically chastising

them, there is a part of her that does not entirely lament her actions. Commenting on her sister Kitty's assertion that she was beaten as a child she states:

of course I feel guilty, when I think of it now, and I don't believe in hitting anybody, at all, ever, but I still find a twitch of something more than amusement when she is being a prissy little bitch like this. (Enright 2007a, p.155)

It is interesting that despite Veronica's assertion of guilt and that she is now anti-corporal punishment, the reader can also sense that she does not take Kitty's complaint seriously. Once again here, the child who received the punishment is largely unconsidered; the act of corporal punishment is interpreted as a normative act. Also crucially, Veronica does not refrain from confessing the part that she played in punishing her younger siblings. The guilt that she feels does not lead her to hide her part in the corporal punishment that took place in the house, again testifying to the normative rationale surrounding corporal punishment in twentieth century Ireland.

In modern Irish society, it is evident that beliefs and feelings in relation to corporal punishment in the home have shifted dramatically. Amid recent calls for corporal punishment to be legally banned within the home, it has become, in many ways, socially unacceptable to physically punish one's children, particularly in public. Enright addresses this issue briefly in her latest novel, *The Forgotten Waltz*, published in 2011. Whilst attending her sister's house party, Gina, the main protagonist, notes the actions of a mother who begins to discipline her child in the midst of a crowd of people:

The woman stooped...when she rose, it was with a small, suddenly buoyant child in her arms, and she was saying, 'Out of there, all right? Out of there!' The child looked around him, indifferent, more or less, to this abrupt change of scene. Three, maybe four years old: she set him down on the grass and went to hit him. At least, I thought so. She raised a hand to him and then suddenly back at herself, as though to clear a

wasp from in front of her face. ‘How many times do I have to tell you?’ (Enright 2011a, p.7)

While Gina does not dwell upon the woman’s actions any further, the scene is interesting and illuminates societal attitudes to corporal punishment in twenty-first century Ireland. One could posit that the woman very consciously prevents herself from physically punishing her child in a public setting for fear that her actions will be viewed negatively by those around her. The rapidity of this societal change, arguably over the last twenty to thirty years, is interesting to consider, particularly in the light of public revelations concerning child abuse in Ireland. Perhaps the intensity of the shift away from corporal punishment, of any kind, in the home could be linked to a wish to disassociate oneself from any such revelations. It may point to a need, on the part of parents, to distance themselves from Ireland’s arguably violent past.

### **Domestic Abuse of Women**

While McGahern and Enright’s work make reference to the corporal punishment, physical or sexual abuse of children, both writers also discuss domestic violence against women in their writing. Domestic violence has, and continues to be, a topic of grave concern in Irish society. The report of the National Crime Council entitled *Domestic Abuse of Women and Men in Ireland: Report on the National Study of Domestic Abuse*, published in 2005, states that ‘15 per cent of women (or about one in seven)...have experienced severely abusive behaviour of a physical, sexual or emotional nature from a partner at some time in their lives’, and that ‘213,000 women and 88,000 men in Ireland have been severely abused by a partner at some point in their lives’ (Watson & Parsons 2005, p.24). The report concludes that women:

are over twice as likely as men to have experienced severe physical abuse, seven times more likely to have experienced sexual abuse, and almost three times more likely to have experienced severe emotional abuse. (Watson & Parsons 2005, p.24)

Through their portrayal of domestic violence in their work, both Enright and McGahern provide an insight into the ways in which attitudes and responses to domestic violence have (and in some cases have not), changed. In his short story, 'Why We're Here', for example, McGahern has two neighbours, Gillespie and Mr Boles discuss Sinclair, the man from whom Gillespie purchased his house. They admit he was an unusual character, in many respects, and that the way he treated his wife, in their words, 'was nobody's business':

'In Valentia he met her, a girl in the post-office. He used to cut firewood in the plantation, I remember, and he'd blow a whistle he had when he'd enough cut. She'd come running with a rope the minute she'd heard the whistle. It was a fair sight to see her come staggering up the meadow with a back-load of timber, and him strolling, behind, golfin' at the daisies with the saw, shouting *fore*.' (McGahern, 1973, p.20)

This passage is significant in a number of respects. The phrase used to denounce Sinclair's treatment of his wife, namely that it was 'nobody's business', is an illuminating double entendre. In one sentence, the men condemn the man's actions, whilst latently admitting that it was not their place to interfere. This story also highlights the domestic of women who are geographically distanced from their family and support network. Thirty-five years after the publication of 'Why We're Here', in *Nightlines*, the National Crime Council's report on *Domestic Abuse of Women and Men in Ireland* suggested that there is:

an increased risk of abuse where the partners are isolated from close family and neighbourhood supports. The odds of having been severely abused...are 76 per cent higher for those born outside Ireland (most of whom are other Europeans) than for those born in Ireland...These findings suggest that integration into a close-knit community may play a role in preventing abuse. (Watson & Parsons 2005, p.25)

The correlation between McGahern's short story and this later research suggests that his work highlighted 'the real' experience of domestic abuse for women in mid twentieth century Ireland, women for whom leaving an abusive relationship was difficult, if not impossible. The inescapability of this type of situation is also evident in 'Wheels', another short story which appears in the *Nightlines* collection. The main protagonist remembers an argument one night, between his father and step-mother, when his father rejected his wife's sexual advances:

All remembered her near madness in the middle of her months as she felt the last years slip. 'Do I disgust you so much that you'll no longer touch me?' waking the sleeping house. 'For Chrisake don't you know there's children listening. I'm tired and shut up and let me get to sleep.' 'You should have stuck with your children to the grave.' The noise of the blow came, and she escaped into the fields, losing herself between the tree trunks till she'd grown cold and came in to sit numbly in a chair over the raked fire till morning. Perhaps she'd hoped he'd come, but he hadn't, stiff with anger at the shouted insult to his maleness, more bitter since it echoed his own bitterness at growing old. (McGahern 1973, p.13)

While it is unclear, from this passage, or indeed from the remainder of the story, whether this domestic abuse was a regular occurrence, Rose's actions upon being struck are significant. Her only way to distance herself from what has happened is to escape into the fields; however, this escape is only temporary, as she is driven back to the house by the cold. In many ways, this metaphorically expresses the position of many women who experienced abuse in mid-to-late twentieth century Ireland; women who were forced by circumstances to return to houses wherein they experienced violence because of attitudes of Irish society and the law, which afforded them little protection. Many women had no alternative place of refuge, and thus could not leave violent situations. It is significant that the only woman in McGahern's work who escapes a violent house is Katie, the maid in *Memoir*. McGahern states that 'in one of his rages', his father threatened Katie physically:

and she warned him that there would be consequences if he struck her and that she wouldn't stay on if things continued as they were. Nobody was going to dictate to him what he could do or couldn't do in his own house, he told her in his fury, and she could go whenever she wanted. She didn't want to leave, but eventually she had no choice. Pat came to take her home in the hackney car. (McGahern 2006, p.151-152)

Katie does escape violence in this case, however it must be stated that she was an employee in the household, not McGahern's father's wife, and so could escape and distance herself from the violence of the house far more easily.

Enright's work similarly makes references to domestic violence, albeit in a more modernised context. Her writing draws and builds upon the work of McGahern, by identifying domestic violence as a reality in modern Irish society, yet highlighting the ways in which women can extricate themselves from these situations. In her short story 'What You Want', the main protagonist recounts, in a matter-of-fact manner, her violent relationship with 'Séamas Molloy', who 'was a big man, he was the man in the whitest shirt' and she 'had to throw him out, finally, before the baby came to any harm' (Enright 2009, p.106). In this one phrase, Enright highlights the changes in Irish society, where a woman has the potential, not only to distance herself from a violent relationship, but to retain control of her home and her life in the process. In *What Are You Like?*, Anton, a former foster child who lived with Rose as a child, recounts the abuse experienced by his family at the hands of his father:

His father was a refugee, he said, from Czechoslovakia. The only women he could meet were public women, so he had married a barmaid, because no one else would let him in. She let him in as best she could, but he still hit her. And his English children, he wept over and thumped, as though they were history itself. He could not bear the distance between people in this country, he said. We are a family, he said. He said it to them in English, and also in Czech. He said it to the team of social workers who tried to stop him pouring a bottle of vodka over himself and setting it alight, as they took the children away. The kids sat in the car, staring at the waste of alcohol, wondering which one of them would get the blame when he realised it was gone. (Enright 2001, p.38)

This story highlights the positives and negatives of governmental intervention into domestic abuse cases.<sup>8</sup> While Anton states that the children were taken away from this violent situation, his mother is absent from this scene. Not only does she suffer physical abuse at the hands of her husband, she also loses custody of her children as a result of his treatment of them. From the evidence provided in the above passage, no effort is made to remove the mother from this threatening situation. In fact, at one point in the novel, a woman appears at Rose's door, claiming to be Anton's mother, and seeking access to her son. She is denied this and eventually is escorted from the premises by Rose's adoptive father. This scene, albeit brief, highlights the complexities of cases where women experience physical abuse in a familial situation. Again Enright is perhaps opening up such cases for discussion and critique, forcing the reader, and by extension Irish society, to consider the ongoing and life-changing challenges which some women, and families face as a result of domestic abuse.

Finally, in *The Forgotten Waltz*, Enright, again briefly, examines the issue of domestic violence. When Conor discovers that his wife Gina has been having an affair, their marriage breaks down and Gina prepares to move out of their house. When Conor prevents her from leaving, Gina initiates a violent exchange with her husband:

Poor, terrifying Conor. Stood there in the halogen glare with his hands clenched and his head thrust forward. I tried to move past him to get to the stairs, but he would not give way so I stood back and thumped him in the face, quite hard. I thought I would feel pain when I hit him but a kind of numbness spread from the impact, it was like hitting rubber – not just his cheek, but my hand, the whole room seemed numb. So I swung at him again, to see if that would bring the feeling back. Something messy happened, then. The suitcase was wrenched away from my grasp and, as I looked down, I was caught by the flat of Conor's hand across my chin. There was no pain, just a jarring dislocation; my brain moving faster than my skull. When I was steady again, I saw Conor had backed away from me and was standing against the wall, rubbing his hand. It was only then that my cheek started to sting. The delay worried

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<sup>8</sup> This scene is set in England, rather than Ireland, however I feel that it merits inclusion as it critiques modern intervention into domestic abuse cases, a topic which is relevant in modern Irish society.

me. My nerves were slow. Even when the hurt happened, I couldn't be sure that it was happening to me. And then I was sure. (Enright 2011a, pp.145-146)

While it is important to point out that this violent episode between Gina and Conor is an isolated incident, as they are never seen to be violent towards each other at any other time in the novel, it is an important scene to consider when exploring domestic violence in modern Irish society. This exchange is significant as Enright widens the discussion and critique of domestic violence, highlighting the fact that, in certain cases, women can be the instigators of domestic violence and that violence against men in the home, while not as prevalent as violence against women, is a reality in certain domestic situations. It highlights the capacity for violence within both genders.

### **Violence Perpetrated by Those with Societal Power**

While corporal punishment was evident in the domestic sphere in Irish society, it was similarly, if not more publically evident outside of the home, with violence being perpetrated, often entirely unchecked, by religious and state employed individuals and groups who held positions of power and authority in Irish society in the twentieth century. In his report contained within the wider Ryan Report, Diarmaid Ferriter makes the point that:

...any analysis of child abuse in twentieth century Ireland must take cognisance of the intersection of family, church and state and the extent to which a critical part of Catholic social teaching was continually being promoted – that the state had no right to interfere with the personal domain of the family when it came to perceived private issues of health and morality. (Ferriter 2006, pp.5-6)

Cheryl Herr similarly speaks of this intersection of family, church and state in the violent upbringing of many Irish children in twentieth century Ireland. She recounts stories told to her by Irish scholars who 'speak similarly of being bullied and

traumatized both at home and at school: beaten by schoolmates, beaten by priests, beaten by parents' (Herr 2003, p.134). However, it was not only in schools that such corporal punishment and physical abuse was evident.

It is crucial to note, in McGahern's work, that many scenes of domestic violence, in novels such as *The Dark* and *Memoir*, take place in the local Garda barracks. While this violence was certainly domestic, being perpetrated upon children by their father, the very fact that these father figures were also Garda Sergeants is significant. The violence took place, on certain occasions, when the sergeant was in full uniform, within a state-owned barracks, which symbolised the local bastion for law and order. In *Memoir* for example, McGahern describes an incident where his mother tries to protect one of his sisters, Margaret, from physical chastisement by their father:

She ran from the house, pursued by my father in full uniform...Margaret could not have been much more than three at the time. My mother did not so much move as just stand in his way as the child went past. He was in such a passion that he didn't pause, but drew out to send her spinning into the rhubarb beds. She did not fall but reached down into the rhubarb stalks for support before getting to her feet. My father caught the child before she reached the lavatory and lifted and shook her violently. She was too paralysed to kick or cry out, and eventually he put her down without further chastisement. (McGahern 2006, p.30)

Throughout *The Dark* and *Memoir*, it is crucial to note that not only were these children beaten by a parent, but simultaneously by one of the most powerful and socially important members of the community, an individual unlikely to be challenged or controlled by any other person within the local community. Michel Foucault makes the point that a 'relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks, it destroys, or it closes off all possibilities' (Foucault 2002, p.340). The fact that their father was the local Sergeant closed off all possibilities for these children; in the absence of their mother, they had no figure of authority to protect

them. They could not rely on the law for their protection, as it was a representative of that same law who was inflicting violence upon them. The respect afforded to members of the Gardaí ensured that the Sergeant was unlikely to be challenged in relation to his violent chastisement of his children. This violent intermixing of the family and the state created a relationship of power and violence which was insular, protected and in many ways, inescapable.

Violence perpetrated by state employees is also explored in Enright's *The Gathering*, when Liam, Veronica's brother, is arrested as a teenager. When he is released he tells his sister of the violent treatment that he received at the hands of the Guards:

The Gardaí had rung the house and the shame of it was so total, there was nothing left to be said. When I think of it now – such carry-on. Liam, in the kitchen, lifting his hair to show the dried patch of blood, and a streak of red from cheek to neck, where he had caught his face on the handle of the cell door. I remember it in vivid technicolour: his hair very black, and the streak very red, and eyes an undiluted blue. They just 'knocked him round a bit', he said, gave him 'a bit of a thump'. And I said, 'Don't be so stupid.' He looked at me. I think, now, that what I meant was that if they hit him then it must have been his fault. I also meant that, if pushed, I would disbelieve him even though what he said was, strictly speaking, true. If I am looking for the point when I betrayed my brother, then it must be here, too. I looked at the raised flesh on his cheek and I decided not to believe him, if there was any 'believing' to be done. That was all. I decided that he did not deserve to be believed. (Enright 2007a, pp.166-167)

This scene is crucial when critiquing relationships of power and violence in twentieth century Ireland. The fact that Veronica refuses to believe her brother, to sympathise, or indeed to provide any support in the wake of his violent experience, is testament to the silence which surrounded violence perpetrated by those with societal power. Veronica's assertion that 'if they hit him then it must have been his fault' emphasises the blame placed often placed on the heads of victims who come forward with stories of physical or sexual abuse at the hands of socially powerful or influential people

(Enright 2007a, p.166). The powerful and respected position of the Gardaí afforded them the protection to escape culpability despite the evidence on the boy's face of violence having been inflicted. Veronica's admission that this was the point where she betrayed her brother is perhaps, in truth, an expression of national guilt, for the betrayal of numerous children and young adults who were ignored, disbelieved and even marginalised upon voicing their experiences of abuse at the hands of those with societal power. Derrida makes the point in *Violence and Metaphysics* that speech 'is doubtless the first defeat of violence'; however when that speech goes unheard, violence continues to reign (Derrida 2001, p.146).

## **Violent Touch within the Education System**

State legalisation of corporal punishment under the Children Act of 1908, meant that physical punishment was legally permitted, within the Irish education system and within state and/or religious run institutions, and teachers, priests, nuns, and brothers were legally empowered physically punish a child. Corporal punishment in schools is referred to frequently in the works of John McGahern.<sup>9</sup> In *Memoir*, McGahern speaks of the culture of violence in Irish society, one that enveloped the home and school:

I have seen men my own age grow strange with anger when recalling their schooling: 'Often we wouldn't be able to hold tools in the evenings, our hands would be that black and swollen. They'd often pull across the legs or the arms and shoulders. How we learned anything was a mystery. Heading out to school each day was pure misery.' I am sure there were exceptions, but once anything is licensed it can grow monstrous and be scarcely noticed. The only recourse for parents then was to come to the school to complain or go to the priest, or threaten law, but that was rare. Authority's writ ran from God the Father down and could not be questioned. Violence reigned as often as not in the homes as well. (McGahern 2006, pp.17-18)

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<sup>9</sup> It must be stated at the outset that McGahern does provide a balanced view of teachers, citing examples of teachers who utilised violence to the extreme, but also teachers who used little or no physical punishment in the classroom, such as his own mother, Susan McGahern.

Michel Foucault makes the point that ‘the exercise of power can never do without’ either ‘the use of violence’ or ‘the obtaining of consent’, ‘often both at the same time’ (Foucault 2002, pp.340-341). In this light, McGahern’s comment in *Memoir* highlights the complicity of many parents in the physical punishment of their children in schools. Their silence, and unwillingness to complain, either to teachers or the priest, acts as a *de facto* consent for the violent chastisement of children. The necessity of this consent and silence for the maintenance of the power and violence in the education system is evident in McGahern’s novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. John Quinn, a local man with eight children is seen to visit the local school to complain about the violent punishment received by his two daughters. In front of the entire classroom, Quinn challenges the teacher in a levelled, yet threatening manner:

‘Sorry to be taking time away from the lessons, Mistress, but my two little girls came home crying from school yesterday evening. Their hands were so swollen they weren’t able to hold their spoons to eat the dinner. They were still crying when it was time for them to go to their bed. You might have noticed now, Mistress, that they weren’t at school today’. ‘Now, Mistress, if this ever happens again I’m afraid it’ll go a lot further than this and it could be that when the courts are finished with the case you could be looking for another position... Don’t as much as lay a hand on those little girls. (McGahern 2010, pp.36-37)

While John Quinn succeeds in this instance in preventing his children from being beaten in school, Jamesie is quick to note that, in the main, people ‘were afraid to speak out’ (McGahern 2010, p.36). John Quinn is quickly singled out as an exception, a man who bowed to no authority. His actions belie the dependence, of the education system, upon parents’ willingness to accept corporal punishment as a normality.

While many of these examples refer to Ireland of the 1960s and 1970s, it is important to note that the ‘abolition of corporal punishment did not occur in Irish schools until 1<sup>st</sup> February 1982’ and it was not until 1997 that physical punishment by

a teacher became a criminal offence (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse 2009, p.59). This is significant, as many people still living today in Irish society have experienced state-sanctioned violence in a school or other state or religious run institutions, and the question must be asked, what effect have these experiences had upon a generation of people, many of whom have no recourse to challenge those who perpetrated such violence against them?

In relation to religious and state-run institutions, reports such as the Murphy and Ryan reports have indicated the extent to which physical and sexual abuse was perpetrated upon women and children placed into the care of the Catholic Church and the State. In one of Enright's short stories 'Pillow', the main protagonist meets a girl called Brigid who 'said she was taught by Irish nuns in Nigeria', and held out a scarred hand as proof (Enright 2009, p.174). This fleeting admission of violent treatment is significant because of the non-verbal understanding that passes between the two women. The scarred hand is a universally understood signifier of corporal punishment, and this scene testifies to the close association of priests, nuns, and brothers with violence against children in modern society.<sup>10</sup> In *The Gathering*, Veronica remembers a day in her childhood, when she and her siblings run into a church for safety after being chased out of the local bus station for breaking into a parked bus:

we knelt up near the altar with the idea of pursuit at our backs, and after our hearts had settled we looked at each other, the need to laugh shifting even as we looked into a higher, more spiritual thing. So it was with a sense of pious elation that we gave thanks for our deliverance at the altar of St Felix by lighting a candle each and then, when we could find no slot for our pennies, lighting two or three more, until a priest

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<sup>10</sup> Children are also seen to be physically punished by the clergy in McGahern's literature, for example Canon Reilly beats a young student by the name of Walshe in McGahern's short story "The Recruiting Officer", for stealing money from the poorbox in the Church. While these examples refer to the punishment of young men rather than women, they do serve as indicators of the widespread nature of corporal punishment of young people by the clergy in religious and state-run institutions.

marked Kitty's upper arm with a ring of bruises, giving us, as he held on to her, a lecture on wickedness that was dense with rage. And I can not remember a single word of it, or what Ada later said about the state of Kitty's arm, though I do recall the thick, vivid quality of the priest's mouthing face, like undiluted fruit squash. (Enright 2007a, p.50)

In his book *Occasions of Sin*, Diarmaid Ferriter speaks of the tremendous power of the Catholic Church and the damage inflicted upon weaker members of society in part due to a profoundly deferential attitude in Irish society:

...souls, not bodies, were the intense preoccupation and this became overwhelming in a small catholic country with little tradition of church opposition and an exaggerated deference towards those deemed to be pillars of the community. There was a casual indifference to everyday violence that would not have been tolerated in other countries. The children enduring the thrashings were mostly poor and held in contempt, victims of an invidious snobbery in a country that liked to pretend it was classless. (Ferriter 2009, p.333)

It is important to note that while both writers address the issue of physical abuse by members of the clergy and religious orders in their work, it is, as the evidence in this chapter will prove, not the sole focus of their work. Either purposely, or indirectly, the novels and short stories of Enright and McGahern expose the violent nature of Irish society in the twentieth century and the way in which violence in the home, school and institution was widespread, accepted and in many ways occluded when it manifested itself in the extreme. Through their depictions of violent touch, in all its facets, both McGahern and Enright's work contributes to the refocalisation of violence in twentieth and twenty-first century Ireland, highlighting the way in which violent touch was endemic across all corners of Irish society, and exposing the rationale that permitted and even bolstered a pattern of violence at a familial, social and national level.

## The Occlusion of Violence in Irish Society

An exploration of violent touch in Irish society would not be complete without addressing the troubling issue of the occlusion of violence, be it familial or institutional, in twentieth century Ireland. Ferriter makes the point in *Occasions of Sin* that:

the extent of the sexual and physical assaults on children cannot be explained away by maintaining that the country was too poor and ignorant; there were much more calculated and sinister forces at work and a deliberate abdication of state responsibility. (Ferriter 2009, p.333)

In the wake of revelations of endemic institutional violence against women and children in Magdalen Laundries and state-and/or religious-run children's homes, coupled with the aforementioned evidence of endemic and often uncontested corporal punishment in the home, it is evident that the relations of power that existed within Irish society in the twentieth century ensured that this violence was ignored, hidden and silenced for the most part. State and legal protection of corporal punishment, traditional respect and an unwillingness to question the clergy or other persons of authority created an insular rationality, wherein authority lay unchallenged. In a situation such as this, violent behaviour could be hidden without difficulty, a situation which has had terrible consequences for numerous Irish women and children. This rationale exemplifies Foucault's assertion that the 'State is not...in itself an autonomous source of power', it is 'nothing else but the effect, the profile' (Foucault 2008, p.77). The state's unwillingness or inability to seek out or challenge endemic violence in the home, the school or the institution, is perhaps indicative of a wider societal inability or unwillingness to challenge the same violence. The 'deliberate abdication of state responsibility' outlined by Ferriter, is perhaps the deliberate

abdication of responsibility on the part of all Irish society (Ferriter 2009, p.333). This situation is highlighted by Rose in Enright's novel *What Are You Like?*, when she discovers that her biological father, who gave her up for adoption at birth, yet kept her twin sister, is still living at the same address:

...Rose was violently insulted...by this incredible country – where people could be found in the phone book, just like that. Where people did the most appalling things, and shut their mouths, and stayed put. (Enright 2001, p.222)

While Rose's father is not guilty of any violent transgression, Rose's statement could be said to be an indictment of Irish society's response to endemic violent or transgressive behaviour.

McGahern's work on many occasions exemplifies the ways in which familial and institutional violence was concealed and silenced. Eamon Maher makes the point, in *The Church and Its Spire*, that because 'of his experience of living with a tyrannical father, McGahern was more sensitive than most to the misery endured in many Irish homes, a misery made all the worse for being kept secret because of a blind eye being turned to what was happening' (Maher 2011, p.20). In *Memoir*, McGahern recounts his father's attempts, and arguable success, in occluding the violence in the family home. In the aftermath of the death of their mother, McGahern states that he and his siblings 'had no defence against the sudden rages, the beatings, the punishments, the constant scolding' (McGahern 2006, p.29). This violent behaviour did not go unnoticed by the other Guards in the barracks, a point which McGahern addresses directly:

All of this was taking place in or around the barracks which was never without a guard, day or night, but he was their superior at a time when any authority went unquestioned. It speaks of how bad it became that a number of times over the years the three guards came to him in a deputation to say that if the cries and beatings

didn't stop they'd be forced to report him or take some action. Then there was always a cessation for a time before the violence resumed again. He was never reported. (McGahern 2006, pp.198-199)

Once again, an unwillingness to challenge a person of authority ensures that violence is allowed to continue. Interestingly in the aftermath of the children's mother's death, Katie, the housekeeper, had attempted to protect the children from their father's violence. McGahern notes that:

As well as keeping the house and bringing up the baby, Katie had, to some extent, fallen into my mother's role of trying to protect us from our father's rages. This was done passively and carefully, whooshing us out of his way, scolding us herself to divert his attention, comforting us, allowing her disapproval to show; but Katie had a poor position compared to our mother. (McGahern 2006, p.151)

However upon her return, after being summarily dismissed by Francis McGahern, it is interesting to note that new conditions had been imposed upon her, specifically in terms of her access to the children. The children were overjoyed at her return but 'quickly discovered that it was to make no great difference' to their lives:

The big living room was made more orderly and clean. There was always a fire in the small range. Meals were more regular. We had clean changes of clothes, but we remained even more firmly under our father's rule. This must have been part of the arrangement for her return. She had complete charge of Dympna and Frankie, but, regarding us, it must have been made clear that she was not in any way to attempt to interfere with his authority. Secretly, she comforted us in many small ways after we were beaten, but no longer made any attempt to protect us from his rages. When he was beating and scolding us, she bent over her own tasks, or turned away, or went outside. (McGahern 2006, p.161)

Once again, it is evident that persons in positions of power and authority could use their position to exert pressure on those around them, ensuring complicity and/or silence in relation to violent behaviour.

However silence and occlusion is also evident in relation to the victims of domestic violence and/or institutional abuse. In *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, Rutledge remembers a violent incident in the food hall in college, when the dean of students viciously beats a boy serving food for knocking a tray of food:

In the face of his fury it was thought that the boy broke the rule of silence to try to excuse the accident. The beating was sudden and savage. Nobody ate a morsel at any of the tables while it was taking place. Not a word was uttered. In the sobbing aftermath the silence was deep and accusing until the scrape of knife and fork on plate and the low hum of conversation resumed. Many who had sat mutely at the tables during the beating were to feel all their lives that they had taken part in the beating through their self-protective silence. (McGahern 2010, p.17)

Once again, silence is evident in the face of extreme violence, yet this silence is invoked for self-protection from a similar punishment. The complicit silence, and the guilt that followed the onlookers for the remainder of their lives, arguably makes the onlookers another set of victims in this violent episode.

In both *Memoir*, and *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, there are examples of characters who disguise, or even attempt to forget, the abuse and violence that they have experienced throughout their lives. In *Memoir*, McGahern recounts an incident where his father beat him without warning or reason:

My face was so bruised and swollen that I could not move out for days. He was anxious that I should not be seen in the shape I was in, even solicitous. I could have moved out if I had wanted to, and there was nothing he could have done, but in this concealment we were agreed. I would have had to admit that he had given me this beating, and I would have been ashamed to admit that I possessed such a father. (McGahern 2006, p.191)

McGahern here aids his father, in a way, by hiding the evidence of his abuse. The shame of facing the local community seems to have discouraged McGahern; however, it is also possible that McGahern realised that help would not be forthcoming from the

local community, who would, in the main, be unwilling to challenge the Sergeant about what would be perceived to be a family matter. Perhaps, in this case, he felt it pointless to publicise his bruises.

Perhaps the most moving instance of hiding of abuse concerns the character of Bill Evans in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, a character who lives rigidly in the present, refusing to discuss or remember his childhood, in large part due to the abusive treatment he experienced throughout his life. Brought up in religiously-run orphanages, and then sent out to work for a physically abusive farming family, Bill arguably spends the majority of his life in fear of violence. When questioned about his childhood by Ruttledge, Bill becomes increasingly agitated:

‘Weren’t you in a place run by Brothers and priests before they sent you to the first farm?’...A troubled look passed across Bill Evan’s face as swiftly as a shadow of a bird passing across window light and was replaced by a black truculence. ‘Before the priests and Brothers weren’t you with nuns in a convent with other small boys? Weren’t you treated better when you were small and with the nuns?’ This time there was no long pause. A look of rage and pain crossed his face. ‘Stop torturing me,’ he cried out. Taken aback by the violence and ashamed now of his own idle probing, Ruttledge answered quickly, ‘I’d never want to do that. (McGahern 2010, pp.17-18)

Bill, in a sense, represents those victims who hid their abuse, even from themselves, attempting to repress and forget terrible memories and try to live in the moment. His plea to Ruttledge to ‘Stop torturing me’ is indicative of the pain and suffering inflicted upon victims who are forced to recount their stories repeatedly, reliving the violence again and again. Additionally, Bill Evans, and other victims, remained quite powerless in Irish society, traditionally having little recourse to the law or the courts should they experience violence in the institutions. Perhaps Bill’s silence in relation to the treatment he endured is his only way of coping with the unfair treatment that he has received, as the possibility of justice is, in many ways, denied him.

## Child Sexual Abuse or Inappropriate Touch

In the work of McGahern and Enright, there are a number of references to the sexual abuse, sexual harassment, or inappropriate touch of female children. In *The Leavetaking*, Isobel, Michael's girlfriend and later wife, admits that her father touched her inappropriately when she was a child:

When I was twelve and living with my father outside New York, one night he came into my bed and masturbated against me. I asked him about it in the morning but he denied it. He said I must have been dreaming. I knew he was lying but I hid it from myself. Then, shortly before I married, as most young girls do, I fell in love with him. He encouraged me, but because it was a guilty love I hid that too. I felt my whole wedding day was a betrayal of my father, though he had arranged it all (McGahern 1984, p.117)

The fact that Isobel is an American citizen is interesting when critiquing her allegations of sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Isobel is able to freely discuss her experience of abuse, she does not attempt to conceal it. Despite her initial attempt to block out her experience as a child, she later attends counselling and appears, as the novel progresses, to have come to terms with her childhood trauma. This differs markedly to McGahern's short story 'Sierra Leone', in which the story's protagonist engages in a sexual relationship with Geraldine, the paramour of a much older man named Gerry. When he asks Geraldine how she first came to meet Gerry, she tells him that:

'My father was mixed up in politics in a small way and he was friendly with Jerry; and then my father died while I was at the convent in Eccles Street. Jerry seemed to do most of the arranging at the funeral. And then it seemed natural for him to take me out on those halfdays and Sundays that we were given free.

'Did you know of his reputation?'

'Everybody did. It made him dangerous and attractive. And one Saturday halfday we went to this flat in an attic off Baggot Street. He must have borrowed it for the occasion for I've never been in it since. I was foolish. I knew so little. I just thought you lay in bed with a man and that was all that happened. I remember it was raining. The flat was right in the roof and there was the loud drumming of the rain all the

time. That's how it began. And it's gone on from there ever since.' (McGahern 1988, p.139)

Geraldine's first sexual experience with her then quasi-guardian, Gerry, appears to have been of a highly inappropriate nature. One could posit, from her description of their relationship, that she had been groomed from girlhood for Gerry's sexual gratification. Her first sexual experience takes place at a young age, at a time when she was completely ignorant of the physicality of sex, and it is interesting that she provides no details of this encounter. While it is true that she recounts this tale to her lover, Geraldine appears to block out or suppress the details of this primal sexual encounter. No doubt this experience was traumatic for a girl who thought that 'you lay in bed with a man and that was all that happened'; however Geraldine does not provide any details of the sexual experience, nor, it seems, does she appear to realise, or at least voice, the sexually abusive nature of this encounter (McGahern 1988, p.139). It is also interesting that the protagonist in the story does not question the abusive nature of Gerry's conduct, or its effect on the young Geraldine. It is perhaps indicative of the silence which often surrounded incidences of sexual abuse in Irish society, and of its tacit acceptance.

This silence is also evident in Enright's novel *What Are You Like?*. On the day of her first holy communion, Maria, Berts' daughter, is taken to the Zoo after Mass. After becoming separated from Berts and Evelyn, Maria needs to go to the toilet and, being unable to find Berts, becomes agitated:

Maria is afraid that she will have an accident, but if she goes to look for Berts she might cry and wet herself at the same time. But she is having an accident anyway. She fluffs up her skirt really quick and sits in a trough full of plants. Then she watches the bald lioness. When the place is empty, she takes off her pants. Maria puts on her gloves and walks away from the cage; a little clot of lace left behind her in the ferns. At the door, a man she didn't see bends over her and says, 'You're a dirty little thing, aren't you?' He holds on to her shoulder and roots in his pocket for something

that Maria is afraid of. But when he finds it, it is a two-shilling piece, which he gives her for her bag. 'Say a prayer for me, now.' (Enright 2001, pp.30-31)

This scene, and the events which take place in its aftermath, are significant. The interaction between man and child was highly inappropriate, yet upon finding Berts and Evelyn, Maria tells them nothing of the incident which took place. Moreover, when Evelyn discovers, later that night, that Maria has no underwear, both she and Berts initially appear to express concern asking her 'Who were you talking to?' However, when Maria assures them that she spoke to no-one that they would deem suspicious, they are happy to let the subject drop (Enright 2001, p.33). This incident again shows the almost normative silence surrounding inappropriate sexual behaviour in Irish society. Maria's silence, perhaps maintained through fear of punishment for going to the toilet in a public place, is compounded by her parent's willingness to leave the question of her missing underwear unanswered. While Maria was not sexually assaulted in the strictest sense, it could be argued that she was sexually harassed, and this scene highlights the traditional Irish rationale of muteness in the face of uncomfortable and difficult issues and questions relating to sexual matters. Enright, in outlining scenes such as this, could be said to highlight what Michel Foucault terms 'one of the meanings of human existence', that is 'never to accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious, or immobile' (Foucault 1988, p.1). By highlighting such incidents, Enright's work challenges the reader, and Irish society, to openly discuss, explore and critique instances of sexual abuse or inappropriate touch, and to challenge the traditional response of occlusion and silence, a response which had arguably rendered sexual abuse an untouchable, unmentionable topic in Irish society.

The scene outlined in *What Are You Like?* is reminiscent of another incident in Enright's short story 'Little Sister', where the main protagonist remembers a childhood incident whereupon she and her little sister, Serena, were approached by a stranger on the street who proceeded to indecently expose himself to them:

That was one incident. There was another incident when she was maybe eight and I was twelve when a man in plaid trousers said, 'Hello girls,' and took his thing out of his fly. Maybe I should say he let his thing escape out of his fly, because it sort of jumped out and curled up, in a way that I now might recognise. At the time it looked like giblets, the same colour of subdued blood, dark and cooked, like that piece of the turkey our parents liked and called 'the pope's nose'. So we ran home all excited and told my mother about the man in plaid trousers and the pope's nose, and she laughed, which I think was the right thing to do. By the lights of the time. (Enright 2009, p.160)

While the protagonist maintains that her mother's reaction was 'the right thing to do', the fact that she did not explain to her daughters that the act of indecent exposure was inappropriate is, in many ways, quite shocking. The young girls' excited rendition of their view of 'the pope's nose' is indicative of their complete lack of sexual knowledge and understanding, which would, in some ways, make them even more vulnerable to a sexual predator. Their mother's reaction again indicates the untouchable nature of inappropriate sexual behaviour or abuse in Irish society, characterised here by an unwillingness to discuss and explain issues surrounding sex, sexuality and indeed inappropriate sexual touch to children. It could be said that the air of silence surrounding these issues may have prevented children from telling their parents, or other authority figures, when they were touched inappropriately or sexually harassed, like Maria in *What Are You Like?*. Arguably, the sisters in Enright's short story 'Little Sister' only tell their mother so freely about their experience because they do not understand the inappropriate sexual nature of what the man has done.

Finally, in Enright's novel, *The Gathering*, the main protagonist, Veronica, recounts her shocking discovery of the sexual abuse suffered by her brother at the hands of her grandmother's landlord and acquaintance Lambert Nugent. Her unflinching testimony demonstrates the suffering that was endured, by both Veronica and her brother, not just as a result of the abuse that was perpetrated, but also because of the fact that the abuse remained hidden and undiscovered by their family, as it was never discussed by the siblings, and went unpunished by the law. In the aftermath of Liam's death by suicide many years later (an event act no doubt influenced, at least in part, by his traumatic childhood experience), Veronica recounts the abusive incident that she witnessed, as a young girl, in her grandmother's home:

What struck me was the strangeness of what I saw, when I opened the door. It was as if Mr Nugent's penis, which was sticking straight out of his flies, had grown strangely, and flowered at the tip to produce the large and unwieldy shape of a boy, that boy being my brother Liam, who, I finally saw, was not an extension of the man's member, set down mysteriously on the ground in front of him, but a shocked (of course he was shocked, I had opened the door) boy of nine, and the member not even that, but the boy's bare forearm, that made a bridge of flesh between himself and Mr Nugent. His hand was buried in the cloth, his fist clutched around something hidden there. They were not one thing, joined from open groin to shoulder, they were two people that I knew, Mr Nugent and Liam...Mr Nugent is leaning back slightly, his hands are set square on either knee. I think it may be a false memory, because there is a terrible tangle of things that I have to fight through to get to it, in my head. And also because it is unbearable. Mr Nugent is leaning back in the chair, his chin is tucked in to his neck, his face pulled hard back with satisfaction, or pain. He looks like an old farmer getting his feet rubbed. I don't know why his pleasure should be the most terrible thing in the room for me. The inwardness of it. The grimace it provokes like a man with a bad fart making its way through his guts, or a man who hears terrible news that is nonetheless funny. (Enright 2007a, pp.143-144)

Perhaps one of the most significant differences between instances of inappropriate touch of or by women in the work of McGahern and Enright is the detailed descriptions which Enright uses to describe these experiences. Unlike Isobel and Geraldine's experiences of inappropriate touch, the description of Serena and her sister's encounter with the indecently-exposed stranger, and indeed Veronica's

description of the abuse that she witnessed, are prolonged and minutely (often uncomfortably), detailed. Perhaps this comparative difference signals a change in the traditional Irish response to allegations of sexual abuse or inappropriate touch.

Veronica's frank confession to the reader stands in marked contrast to the silence and occlusion of inappropriate sexual acts and abuse which characterised many allegations made in the twentieth century. It is indicative of a more open attitude to sexuality in modern Irish society, where Irish people are, in general, more comfortable discussing sexual matters, even perhaps extending to recounting inappropriate sexual encounters or abuse,<sup>11</sup> coupled with an intrinsic need to adequately explain the true nature of what has been suffered by abused individuals in Ireland. Foucault makes the telling point that:

as soon as people begin to have trouble thinking things the way they have been thought, transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult and entirely possible. (Foucault 2002, p.457)

Veronica's admission, if viewed as a product of a profound societal shift in the way in which sexual abuse or inappropriate touch is regarded, discussed and explored, can be seen as a very urgent, yet extremely difficult, admission on the part of a young woman, seeking to abolish the silence surrounding her brother's sexual abuse, a task, which as the novel moves forward, proves to be increasingly difficult on a number of levels.

While Veronica's detailed account of the abuse that she witnessed may point to a more open attitude to the discussion of sexual matters and even of sexual abuse, her testimony also highlights the prevailing silence surrounding Liam's sexual abuse,

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<sup>11</sup> It must be stated that although McGahern's descriptions of inappropriate touch of young girls is less detailed than that of Enright, his description of the sexual abuse of Mahoney Junior in *The Dark* is uncomfortably detailed.

and her complicity in hiding what happened to her brother during the months that they stayed with their grandmother Ada, in Broadstone. Despite the graphic nature of the scene that she witnesses, Veronica never mentions attempting to tell Ada, her parents, or indeed any other adult, about what she has seen. In fact, the shock of what she witnessed seems to lead her to block out all memory of the abuse. This is evident when she asks her brother, upon his release from the police station, if he was ‘messaging with’ Natalie, a young girl in the neighbourhood. Veronica notes that:

he gives me a look from a distance that I do not know how to cross. I do now. Now I know that the look in Liam’s eye was the look of someone who knows they are alone. Because the world will never know what has happened to you, and what you carry around as a result of it. Even your sister – your saviour in a way, the girl who stands in the light of the hall – even she does not hold or remember the thing she saw. Because, by that stage, I think I had forgotten it entirely. (Enright 2007a, p.172)

Veronica, in a sense, initially shares the burden of Liam’s secret when she stumbles upon Nugent abusing him in Ada’s house, saving him, momentarily, from the isolation and silence of this hidden trauma. However, Veronica’s occlusion of what she witnessed, once again convinces Liam that he is alone, that ‘the world will never know what has happened’ to him (Enright 2007a, p.172). It is only upon Liam’s death that Veronica truly remembers and acknowledges what happened in the house that day, and realises the damage that the occlusion of this truth had upon her brother:

We used to laugh about things: fooling priests, and little boys’ bollocks, and ‘Come here and sit on my knee, little man,’ and English choirboys and gay men’s backsides, and anything really to do with innocence and bums, though nobody mentioned – now that I pause to list all this – nobody mentioned your langer, or your wire, or getting your mickey licked. Now why is that? Why did we think it was all hilarious, but only in certain, almost ritual, ways?...If I believed in such a thing as confession I would go there and say that, not only did I laugh at my brother, but I let my brother laugh at himself, all his life. This laughing phase lasted through his cheerful drinking, and through his raucous drinking, and only petered out in the final stinking stage of his drinking. (Enright 2007a, p.167)

While it is evident, both to Veronica and to the reader, that the abuse suffered in his childhood had a profound and detrimental effect upon Liam, Veronica's personal account of Liam's death and its aftermath reveals that she, too, has been profoundly affected by the scene that she witnessed in Broadstone.

Given that, as stated earlier in the chapter, Veronica has difficulty engaging in interpersonal touch, one could state that this traumatic experience at a formative age could have had an effect upon her ability to be tactile with others. Her struggles surrounding her sexual relationship with men throughout are perhaps testament to this. Throughout the novel, Veronica's sexual relationships with men, including her husband, are spoken of in problematic and often antagonistic and violent, language. Musing upon her sexual relationship with her husband, Veronica states that:

I say I have slept with 'men' but you know that is a sort of affectation, because what I mean is that when I sleep with Tom, that this is sometimes what he is like, yearning on the pull-back and hatred in the forward slam, and, 'What are you looking at?' he says, or a weird sarcasm at dinner with friends about coming, or me not coming, though you know I do come – at least I think I do – realising then, later, that what he wants, what my husband has always wanted, and the thing I will not give him, is my annihilation. This is the way his desire runs. It runs close to hatred. It is sometimes the same thing. (Enright 2007a, pp.144-145)

Veronica's problematic sexual relationship with her husband must be viewed through the lens of her traumatic childhood experience. The question must be asked, is Veronica's sexual relationship antagonistic and quasi-violent, or has her brush with sexual abuse altered her perception of interpersonal sexual touch? It is possible that the scene which she witnessed as a child has sub-consciously affected the way in which she views sexual encounters, and that her instinct towards self-protection has drawn her to interpret her sexual relationship with her husband as a battleground, one in which her body and her very existence is at stake.

However it is interesting to note that there is no concrete evidence throughout the novel that Veronica's husband is ever sexually antagonistic towards her, or that he attempts to annihilate her through sexual intercourse. While he is certainly guilty of not correctly interpreting her sexual desire (or lack thereof) on the night of Liam's wake, his actions do not seem to be deliberately intended to hurt or abuse his wife. Indeed, there are a number of moments within the novel when Veronica's husband shows tenderness and care towards his wife. At one point in the novel, he questions Veronica about where she has been all night, (she has, in fact, spent the night driving to Broadstone, recounting memories of her time with Liam at Ada's house). Being either unwilling, or unable to discuss where she has been and the reasons why, Veronica strives to distract her husband by performing impromptu fellatio on him:

I put my hand gently against his shirt front and the gesture is so graceful, even as I watch it, that it leads me, quite easily, to the buckle of the belt, which I tug with my other hand, and so, by softly pushing him away while pulling him forward, I contrive to blow my husband, in our own kitchen. On a school day. This is real, I think. This is real. Though I am not sure that it is, actually. When we are done, Tom plants a dry, thoughtful kiss in the middle of my forehead. (Enright 2007a, p.151)

His actions here demonstrate confusion, tenderness and perhaps love, however they do not reflect the quasi-violent perception that Veronica has of their sexual relationship. It is interesting to note that, towards the novel's close, Veronica admits a desire to reconnect sexually with her husband stating:

I want to make love to my husband again. Because, for every time he wanted to undo me, there was love that put me back together again – put us both back together. (Enright 2007a, p.260)

The question must be asked, does Veronica's decision to finally tell her family of the abuse suffered by her brother enable her to bridge the gap between her 'distant skin' and that of her husband, to shed a combative skin and begin anew?

Also it could be argued that, despite her poor memory of the event, Veronica's witnessing of Liam's abuse, and the siblings' shared knowledge of the crime committed in their Grandmother's home, engendered a close bond between the siblings, to the exclusion perhaps, of the remainder of their family unit. Upon Liam's death, Veronica comes to the realisation that she is the only family member to understand the truth of what happened, and the real circumstances that caused Liam's eventual suicide. By breaking this silence, and choosing to tell her secret to the remainder of her family, Veronica can begin to bridge the 'distant skin' that has separated her from them until this point.

### **Inappropriate Touch and Sexual Abuse in an Irish Context**

Just as physical abuse in twentieth century Ireland has undoubtedly had a deep effect on upon Irish society, including people's attitude to touch and interpersonal interaction, so revelations concerning sexual abuse and inappropriate touch, both in a familial and institutional context, have had a profound effect upon modern Ireland, where sexual abuse has been, and continues to be, a grave and troubling issue. However the rationale, definitions and attitudes concerning sexual abuse and inappropriate touch have changed significantly from mid-twentieth century Ireland to the present day. Through the work of McGahern and Enright, this chapter seeks to explore Irish experiences of sexual abuse and inappropriate touch, in order to chart ways in which contemporary attitudes, definitions, and responses to this topic have changed, or indeed in part remained the same, as those in mid-twentieth century

Ireland. The chapter will seek to demonstrate how widespread allegations of sexual abuse, both in familial and institutional contexts, have altered, radically and irrevocably, Irish conceptions of interpersonal touch, and the way in which these allegations and experiences have exacerbated what Enright terms the traditionally 'distant skin' of the Irish (Enright 2007a, p.155).

In its analysis of violent touch, this chapter will focus primarily on the sexual abuse, or inappropriate touch, of women. While it is clear that sexual violence affects, a smaller, yet no less significant proportion of men in Irish society, once again the scope of this project does not allow sufficient space to critique sexual abuse in relation to both genders. While both Enright and McGahern explore the sexual abuse and inappropriate touch of boys at some length in their writing, this chapter seeks to explore the arguably less critiqued sexual abuse of women in their work. Liam Harte makes the point, in 'Mourning Remains Unsolved: Trauma and Survival in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*', that:

some of the most memorable and affective portrayals of child sexual abuse in contemporary Ireland have been in fictional form, from Dorothy Nelson's groundbreaking *In Night's City* (1982) through Jennifer Johnston's *The Invisible Worm* (1991) and Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1996) to Patrick McCabe's phantasmagoric *Winterwood* (2006). (Harte 2010, p.187)

McGahern and Enright fall quite distinctly into this category, outlining the trauma and the profound, and often life-long, ramifications of sexual abuse and inappropriate touch, by bringing to the page, often in an uncomfortable manner, the fears, self-loathing and depression that victims of sexual trauma in Irish society have felt and indeed continue to experience. John McGahern's description of sexual abuse and inappropriate touch in works like *The Dark*, exposed, as Eamon Maher states, 'many of the skeletons lurking in the cupboard of the hidden Ireland of his time' (Maher

2011, p.20). Long before the much-publicised revelations concerning child sexual abuse, McGahern's work brought the 'real' sexually abusive experiences of many children, and indeed women, to the public eye. Enright's literature, in our current post-revelatory period, builds upon the work of McGahern. Her work, at certain points, looks backwards to sexual abuse inflicted upon children in mid-to-late twentieth century Ireland, a time in which, as her protagonist Veronica states in *The Gathering*, 'people used to be mixed up together in the most disgusting ways' (Enright 2007a, p.35). It is interesting to note that in Enright's novel *What Are You Like?*, Rose, musing upon her own conception, imagines it in violent sexual terms:

Rose had been dumped by a mother, not because she was interesting or tragic, but because she just couldn't help it. Never mind the clouds, the cliffs, and the rain. She was conceived in a shed, born in a ditch. She was started in a priest's fumbling, or an old uncle pulling down his fly. She was made with a difficult soft grunting: a young woman crying silently, as if she were somewhere else in the room. (Enright 2001, pp.135-136)

This one quotation eloquently, and uncomfortably, summarises the violence and trauma which is undeniably part of Ireland's sexual history. However, her work also explores and critiques attitudes to, and instances of, sexual abuse and inappropriate touch in a modern Irish context, allowing a comparison to be made between attitudes to sexual abuse and how they have changed over the last fifty years. Foucault makes the point that:

The government of men by men – whether they form small or large groups, whether it is power exerted by men over women, or by adults over children...involves a certain type of rationality. (Foucault 2002, p.324)

When applied to child sexual abuse in an Irish context, this statement highlights a societal rationale that, in many ways, enabled the sexual abuse of women and children

to take place, often unchallenged. Hierarchical power relations, a reluctance to question authority figures, or indeed family members, alongside an insular attitude which encouraged people to ‘mind their own business’, exacerbated a situation where vulnerable individuals could be abused in domestic and institutional settings. McGahern also makes a connection between Ireland’s repressive sexual climate in the twentieth century and the physical and sexual abuse that followed. Speaking of endemic violence in school in *Memoir*, he makes the point that ‘one of the compounds at its base was’:

sexual sickness and frustration, as sex was seen, officially, as unclean and sinful, allowable only when it too was licensed. Doctrine separated body and soul. The soul was eternal and belonged to God. The body that carried it was unclean, prone to sin and disease, and would die... (McGahern 2006, pp.17-18)

It is significant that by attempting to create a ‘distant skin’ between individuals in Irish society, Catholic attitudes to sex and the sexual body (which, it could be argued, became amalgamated by the wider Irish populace), could be said to have intensified situations where women and children were at risk of physical and sexual violence. This is outlined by McGahern later in *Memoir*, where he muses upon his father’s violent nature, equating violence and sexual feeling or frustration:

As I have intimated, I suspect there was something sexual in his violence, because the blows could flare up on nothing, and afterwards it was hard to trace them to a cause. (McGahern 2006, p.190)

However, it would be a mistake to state that this rationale has changed, even in the wake of the much-publicised revelations in relation to child sexual abuse. The National Crime Council’s report of 2005 states that on average ‘one in 12’ women have experienced sexual abuse in Ireland, with women being ‘seven times more likely

to experience sexual abuse' in their lifetime than men (National Crime Council 2005, p.24). Similarly in its 2011 report, the Rape Crisis Network Ireland reported that ninety percent of perpetrators of sexual abuse were known to the survivor, forty-seven percent of perpetrators of child sexual abuse were family members and twenty-one percent of perpetrators of sexual violence against adult females were partners or ex-partners (Rape Crisis Network Ireland 2011, p.5). Sexual abuse is clearly an enduring trauma in Irish society and as such must be explored and critiqued.

### **Inappropriate Sexual Touch or Abuse of Women**

Throughout their work, both McGahern and Enright explore and critique the sexual abuse or inappropriate touch of women. These writers provide an insight into how such transgressive touching of women was personally, socially and legally defined in mid-to-late twentieth century Ireland, and into how these definitions have altered as Ireland moves into the twenty-first century. In her introduction to the 2009 report *Rape and Justice in Ireland*, Fiona Neary, the then Executive Director of the Rape Crisis Network Ireland, stated that it is only:

relatively recently that Ireland has come to recognise the reality of sexual violence. Largely due to the women's movement, Rape Crisis Centres and victims speaking out, we are beginning to appreciate the scale of crimes of sexual violence in Ireland, within institutions, families and social settings. (Hanly et al 2009, p.1)

McGahern and Enright aid in this attempt to re-focalise sexual violence in an Irish context, by representing victims of sexual trauma in their work, and indeed by highlighting the myriad of ways in which women can be victimised, not simply by sexually violent strangers, but also by family members, friends, acquaintances and authority figures. In McGahern's work, it is interesting to note that the vast majority of perpetrators of inappropriate touch or of the sexual abuse of women are

known, in some way, by the victim. This correlates with research conducted as recently as 2009 where, in a study of one hundred victims of rape, ‘two-thirds of the participants were raped by someone known to them’, be it a friend, acquaintance or a current/ex-partner (Hanly et al 2009, p.6).

In *The Dark*, McGahern discusses the inappropriate touch of women by authority figures, as Mahoney Junior’s sister Joan admits to being indecently fondled and assaulted by her employer Mr Ryan. When her brother questions her about her happiness in her new employment, she admits that:

‘The first day,’ and she was breaking, ‘I was on a stool putting shoe-boxes up on the shelves and he put his hands right up my dress and that was only the beginning. Once he got me in the bathroom and it was horrible. I’m always afraid. And then he takes it out on you in other ways,’ and she began to cry violently. (McGahern 2008b, pp.92-93)

It is interesting to note that, despite her admission of such inappropriate treatment, her brother allows her to return to the house where the abuse occurred that evening, with the promise that they would both leave the very next morning. Also while she is rescued from this abusive situation by her brother, Mr Ryan is not legally prosecuted or publically accused of indecent behaviour; in fact, even Mahoney Junior does not confront Mr Ryan with Joan’s accusations. The boy muses upon the anger expressed by the Ryans when he informs them of Joan’s impending departure, and wishes that life could be simpler, with less cause for argument:

You went the same road back, rage seething, and failure. People had to go among people, they needed other people, yet they couldn’t be easy, all the little hatchets that came up. Wouldn’t it be better for them to stay alone in the fields and rooms, and let the world come or pass in whatever shape it would? Why couldn’t the Ryans listen to you tell them that Joan was leaving and no more, instead of driving knives at you, and why had you the same urge to knife them back?...All the strength, the will to go on, was drained by the quarrel and what she’d said, nothing but anger and dust and

despair, always the same after all these useless conflicts with your father or here. (McGahern 2008b, pp.95-96)

Mahoney Junior's desire to live life beyond the boundaries of confrontation and anger, to a degree represent the hardship and constant struggle that he experiences while living under his father's tyrannical roof. However, it could also speak to a national desire to live unburdened by anger, argument and confrontation, leading to the occlusion, silencing or even disbelief of many allegations of sexual abuse within twentieth century Ireland.

The equation of sex with violence, control and power is cemented in McGahern's short story 'The Beginning of an Idea'. In this story, the main protagonist Eva, an aspiring writer, leaves her job in the theatre and moves, for a time, to Spain. While living in the holiday home of some friends she makes the acquaintance of Manolo, 'a local *guardia*' who tells her of the difficulties that he and his wife face due to the illegality of contraception (McGahern 1988, p.24). Eva agrees to bring in contraceptives from abroad; however when Manolo arrives to the house to collect the condoms, he brings the *jefe* of the local *guardia* with him and they threaten Eva with prison unless she lets them use the contraceptives with her:

'Still, Manolo and myself have agreed to forget it if we can try them out here,' his oily eyes fell pointedly on the package on the table but the voice was hesitant. 'That's if you don't prefer it Spanish style,' he laughed back to Manolo for support, and started to edge round the table.

They were drunk and excited. They would probably take her anyhow. How often had she heard this problem argued. Usually it was agreed that it was better to yield than to get hurt. After all, sex wasn't all it was cracked up to be: in Paris the butcher and the baker shook hands with the local whore when they met, as people simply plying different trades.

'All right. As long as you promise to leave as soon as it's done,' her voice stopped him, it had a calm she didn't feel.

'Okay, it's a promise,' they both nodded eagerly, and they reminded her of mastered boys as they asked apprehensively, 'with the...or without?'

'With.'

The *jefe* followed her first into the room. 'All the clothes off,' was his one demand, and she complied. She averted her face sideways while it took place. A few times

after parties when she was younger hadn't she held almost total strangers in her arms?...Manolo rushes out of the room when he had finished. They kept their word and left, subdued and quiet. It had not been as jolly as they must have imagined it would be.

She showered and washed and changed into new clothes. She poured herself a large glass of cognac at the table, noticing that they must have taken the condoms with them, and then began to sob, dry and hard at first, rising to a flood of rage against her own foolishness. (McGahern 1988, p.27)

The very fact that both of Eva's attackers are members of the local police force is again significant, and is analeptic of *The Dark*. Eva has no recourse to help, support or justice, and, despite the fact that she does take some degree of control of this violent and degrading situation, at the end of the story she is left alone and weeping, blaming herself, in some respects, for trusting Manolo. While this story does not take place in Ireland, nor is Eva herself Irish, the story does provide an insight into the sexual abuse of women within an Irish context. Eva is seen throughout the story as a strong, determined character who is confident in her sexual dealings with men. She rejects her lover, Arvo, when he refuses to leave his wife, and on her journey to Spain, she rejects the sexual advances of the poet Severi, stating 'I've had enough of sleeping...I want to be alone for a time' (McGahern 1988, p.21). Had she been attacked by a stranger when in Spain, one could suggest that she would have taken action to gain legal recourse. However, the positions of power held by her attackers provides them with an immunity of sorts, allowing them to conceal the attack, or worse, sanction it in a perverse way as within the remit of their power within the community.

This situation parallels Mahoney Junior's interactions with his cousin Fr Gerald in *The Dark*, when the boy comes to visit the priest, with the view to joining the priesthood. On the first night of the boy's stay, Fr Gerald visits his bedroom during the night, and despite the fact that Fr Gerald does not abuse the boy, the discomfort and fear of Mahoney Junior at the inappropriate touch is palpable:

His hand closed on your arm. You wanted to curse or wrench yourself free but you had to lie stiff as a board, stare straight ahead at the wall, afraid before anything of meeting the eyes you knew were searching your face. (McGahern 2008b, pp.70-71)

Once again, the threat of abuse is met with the necessity for capitulation, the feeling that escape or recourse to help is impossible because of the power and stature of the potential abuser. This situation mirrors research undertaken by the National Rape Crisis Network Ireland in 2009 which found that:

where the complainant is attacked by a stranger in a public place and reports her rape immediately she is more likely to have her case prosecuted than the far more common rape which is committed in a private place by someone known to the victim and where the delay in reporting is greater than an hour. This means that the less likely form of rape is more likely to be prosecuted and the much more common form is less likely to be prosecuted. (Hanly et al 2009, p.2)

Nowhere in McGahern's work is this clearer than in his novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, where the issue of marital rape and chronic sexual abuse is explored through the sexually violent relationship between John Quinn and his first wife Margaret. On the morning of their wedding, John Quinn, who was undeniably attracted to Margaret, at least in part, by the potential acquisition of her family's farm, publically assaults and rapes her, in full view of her parents and on-looking wedding guests:

'They reached the top of the slope where the rock field slopes down to the shore...'They stood for a while in full view....John Quinn put the blanket he had brought down on the rock. Margaret looked as if she was trying to break away but he could have held her with one hand. It was over before anybody rightly knew. He lifted the blue dress up over her head and put her down on the blanket. The screech she let out would put your heart crossways. John Quinn stood between her and the house while he was fixing his trousers and belt. He must have been afraid she'd try to break back on her own but she just lay there on the ground. In the end he had to lift her and straighten her dress and carry her in his arms. The mother and father stood there like a pair of ghosts. Not a word was spoken. 'Once the rush to get away started,

you never saw the like. A few went up to the old pair before leaving but most just cut for the road. What could they say? It was clear that Margaret didn't even want to face back to the house after what had happened. By the time he carried her into the yard the whole place had emptied. (McGahern 2010, pp.33-34)

This scene is significantly important in a number of ways. While the validity of this incident, and indeed of all of the stories concerning John Quinn, must be considered in the light of neighbourhood gossip, the character of John Quinn, as presented in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, serves as a significant symbol of the traditional power of the husband in terms of sexual rights in Ireland. Until 1990, under Irish law, marital rape was not considered to be a crime within Irish society. Jamesie, in his retelling of this well-known local story, states that John Quinn's actions testified to a blatant attempt to assert authority over Margaret and her extended family, an authority which, in this one brutal action, would be made clear to the entire community:

'There's a method in everything John Quinn does. It's all thought out. In those days when a man married into a place he had little shout. He was expected to take a back seat. Some were not much more than servants. From the minute John Quinn took the reins into his hands on the way from the church till he brought Margaret as far as the rock, he was showing who was going to be boss and that everything was going to be under him from that day out'. (McGahern 2010, pp.34-35)

Eamon Maher both asserts this point, and builds upon it, stating in "*The Church and Its Spire*" that 'Quinn knew that once he had attained the status of husband he was in an unassailable position in the eyes of the church and the local community' (Maher 2011, p.166). This scene, in many ways, shows the limits, or perhaps lack thereof, of the power, both legal and sexual, which husbands could traditionally assert over their wives under Irish law.

While the reality of this passage has been questioned, it does serve a particular purpose in this regard. In the aftermath of the attack, not one word of rebuke is spoken

to John Quinn, and the response of the wedding guests is to silently leave the house, effectively and symbolically abandoning Margaret to her fate. Margaret's parents too, remain silent in the face of the sexual abuse of their daughter, passing away a short time later, once again, in a sense, abandoning Margaret to her squalid life with Quinn. The silent and evasive reaction of the wedding guests, and even the bride's parents, to this brutal attack, may appear shocking by modern standards; however, one could argue that is not without foundation. In reality, the police could not have been called to this scene because technically what John Quinn did was, at that particular time under Irish law, was within his rights as a husband. J. L. Hernann makes the point in *Trauma & Recovery* that:

The contradictions between women's reality [of rape] and the legal definitions of that same reality are often so extreme that they effectively bar women from participation in the formal structures of justice. Women quickly learn that rape is a crime only in theory; in practice the standard for what constitutes rape is set not at the level of women's experience of violation but just above the level of coercion acceptable to men. (Herman 1997, p.72)

It could be said that Margaret Quinn represented, and continues to represent, a subsection of women in Irish society, women who, while perhaps not sexually assaulted or raped in public, nonetheless suffered degrading and horrifying treatment at the hands of their husbands or partners, treatment which they understood as rape and sexual assault, but which the law refused to acknowledge as such. She could be said to represent those women who are known to be abused within the home, but whose abuse is ignored or silenced, by their families and their community at large.

This is exemplified in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, when Jamesie freely admits to the Ruttledges that local gossip abounded concerning the sexual

violence in Margaret and John's relationship; and that his chronic abuse of his wife was common knowledge:

It was said he didn't let Margaret wear knickers in the house so that he could do her there and then whenever he wanted, against the table or the wall and all the better if it was in front of the old pair...One morning Johnny was out with the gun he saw her walking in her nightdress in her bare feet in the dew before it was fully light to see if the coolness would ease the pain. In the end the schoolchildren didn't want to pass the gate on their way to school because they were frightened by her cries. (McGahern 2010, p.35)

Even worse than the silence in relation to such chronic abuse, is perhaps societal pardons or defences of the men who abuse these women. John Quinn appears as figure of awe and fun for many of the local people, and Jamesie admits that they 'laugh over his cavortings and carry-on' with women in the aftermath of Margaret's death, forgetting, as he states, 'the full story' (McGahern 2010, p.35). Not only does Quinn remain unpunished by the law for his actions, but neither is he ostracised nor socially condemned in any way, by the community for his actions. Their reaction to his violent sexual actions throughout the novel is indicative of the traditional inclination to stay out of other people's business and private lives in Irish society.

When Quinn's second wife passes away, he endeavours to marry again, eventually finding a willing bride at the Knock Marriage Bureau, who appears to be unaware of his sexual history. When the local people are invited to the wedding, they are once again inadvertently made participants and spectators in John Quinn's sexual power-play. At the wedding feast, Mary tells the assembled table that:

'John Quinn has taken her upstairs.' 'Where?' 'To the son's bedroom. He got Liam to give him the keys. No. She didn't want to go. They say she didn't know right what was happening but you can be sure she knows by now. Kate and me saw it with our eyes. They were all laughing like donkeys when he lifted her in his arms as if she was a child'. (McGahern 2010, p.170)

The other characters, indeed the wider community, discuss this scenario and realise the violent sexual nature of what is happening; however, no character raises the subject of intervention. It is considered a private family matter and once again, under terms of the law, John Quinn is 'entitled' to possess his wife sexually:

'Maybe she won't allow ... she won't let him?' 'O-ho,' Mary laughed. 'He'll do it with soft sweet-talking and if that doesn't work, he'll do it with strength. Only for Knock and the Church were mixed up it would have been done long before. It must have killed him to wait this long.' 'Maybe she's just dying for the hog,' Patrick Ryan said provocatively, coarsely. 'On an occasion like this?' Kate asked coldly. 'It's better for herself if she wants it,' Jamesie said quietly. 'Whether she likes it or not she'll have to open the door.' 'She'll get the rod,' Bill Evans said suddenly. 'Good man, Bill,' Mary said, and a quiet descended. (McGahern 2010, p.170)

The prevailing attitude amongst the group is that John Quinn's new wife is devoid of choice in her sexual life, whether they agree with this position or not. This hypocritical position is also evident when his wife leaves him after only a week of marriage, returning to the safety of her own family. In the aftermath of vain attempts to assert his marital rights, Quinn tells a group of local people assembled in the pub that he has moved on, and that he has:

...taken to writing ladies again. This time we can have no blessing of church but we'll have our own blessing and the blessing of good neighbours which may turn out even luckier.' Some managed to remain wonderfully straight-faced. Others assured him how glad they were to see him home and that he shouldn't blame himself in any respect whatsoever. Nobody in the wide world could have done more or tried harder to rescue what turned out to be a sinking ship. In fact, when everything was considered fully and turned over, he had been a veritable martyr to the cause. Extending out from John Quinn, the net of hypocrisy and lies had become as consistent as truth, encircling him. (McGahern 2010, p.195)

It is clear that despite three unsuccessful marriages, the communal silence concerning abuse in the home spares John Quinn from public accusations or condemnation in relation to his violent sexual actions.

Nevertheless the ‘hypocrisy and lies’ meted out by the locals in the bar could also point to an unacknowledged sense of guilt and complicity on the part of the local community (McGahern 2010, p.195). This net of hypocrisy and lies protects them from the understanding that they too share in the guilt of John Quinn’s crimes, through their silence and their inability or unwillingness to reach out to Margaret Quinn. Again while the veracity of Quinn’s sexual violence is unclear throughout the novel, it is evident that the local community believe it to be true, and therefore their reaction is perhaps even more shocking. The reaction of the community, as written by John McGahern, reflects the occlusion and ignorance of sexual abuse within families and institutions in communities across the country in the mid-to-late twentieth century, where people perhaps chose to engage in a ‘net of hypocrisy and lies’ rather than face the horrific truth of what members of their own community were doing to their wives or partners (McGahern 2010, p.195).

Moving away for a moment, from the silence, and from the unwillingness to report, and indeed convict, sexual abuse against women in twentieth century Ireland, the changing societal and legal definition of sexual assault, rape and inappropriate touch must be explored in order to assess how the sexual abuse of women has been, and continues to be, viewed in Irish society. It is evident throughout McGahern and Enright’s work that definitions of, and personal and societal reactions to, sexually abusive incidents have, in some ways, radically altered as Ireland moved from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, yet in others, they have remained disturbingly similar.

For example, an equation of sex with coercion or violence is seen in the short story 'A Ballad', when a character named O'Reilly is accused of forcing his girlfriend Rachel to perform fellatio on him in public, during a social night out with friends: "O'Reilly got Rachael to take his lad in her mouth," Ryan said. "Then he wouldn't let her spit it out" (McGahern 2009, p.28). Societal shock and condemnation is evident in the figure of Cronin, a young man who shares a room in the boarding house where O'Reilly stays. Returning home after the night out in which the coercive sexual act took place, Cronin tells the other men in the boarding house of the gravity of the abusive act, stating that 'O'Reilly should be run out of town...What he made that girl do tonight no poor girl should have to do, and in front of people too' (McGahern 2009, p.26). While the narrator and Cronin are obviously shocked at O'Reilly's actions, once again no effort is made to punish O'Reilly, or to report him for his actions. In fact, O'Reilly makes no effort to hide what he has done, telling Cronin publicly in the breakfast hall the following morning that:

'You know nothing about women...Women like to do that. Only they have to pretend that they don't. Let me tell you that all women take a poor view of a man who accepts everything at its face value'. (McGahern 2009, p.27)

This incident correlates with Irish law which until the Criminal Law (Rape) (Amendment) Act in 1990 defined rape as 'unlawful sexual intercourse with a woman who at the time of the intercourse does not consent to it', and stressed that at the time of the incident, the sexual partner/perpetrator 'knows that she does not consent to the intercourse' or is 'reckless as to whether she does or does not consent to it' (Office of the Attorney General 1981). Only after the implementation of the Amendment Act in 1990 was legal provision put in place to prosecute sexual assault, which is defined as 'penetration (however slight) of the anus or mouth by the penis' or 'penetration

(however slight) of the vagina by any object held or manipulated by another person' (Office of the Attorney General 1990). Despite the fact that O'Reilly subjected his girlfriend to a humiliating and public sexual assault, like John Quinn, he was, by the light of Irish law at that time, not guilty of sexual assault. Before 1990 it seems that legally, in Ireland, sexual assault, (exclusive of penetrative rape), did not exist in Irish society. This fact correlates with Catherine MacKinnon's assertion that 'rape, from a woman's point of view is not prohibited; it is regulated' (MacKinnon 1983, p.651).

Enright's texts, while similarly engaging with inappropriate sexual touch and sexual abuse, in some ways move beyond the concerns outlined in McGahern's texts, engaging with modern definitions of inappropriate touch and offering examples of how characters respond to these situations. Inappropriate touch is explored fleetingly in *The Wig My Father Wore*, when, at an office party Marcus, Grace's work colleague, attempts to compliment his co-worker Jo by telling her 'You're clever. You're in touch. You are the country at large' (Enright 2007c, p.71). Her response is illuminating:

'You don't know the fuck who I am...The nearest I ever came to being the country at large was getting raped by a rich bastard. Him and the tax man. A barrister. Now there's a thing. He'd never heard of consent. Forget it. I like my job. (Enright 2007c, p.71)

Jo's response can be interpreted simultaneously on a personal and national level. One could argue that this response signals Jo's understanding that her own personal attack is part of a wider national network of attacks. The fact that she identifies being raped as an indicator of 'being the country at large' is testament to the large and ever-growing community of women who have faced, and continue to face sexual violence within Irish society (Enright 2007c, p.71). Evelyn, in *What Are You Like?*, similarly

highlights the endemic nature of sexual violence in Irish society. Whilst applying her lipstick in front of the mirror, Evelyn notes that if she was:

allergic to anything these days, it was probably the radio. Hundreds of people talking over the airwaves about being ignored, or hit, or loved, or raped. Evelyn had never met a woman who was raped but they were queuing up on Radio Eireann. Raped at seventy, raped at seven. Ireland was packed with men with the strangest lumps in their trousers and still Evelyn couldn't go out the door without a bit of lipstick on. (Enright 2001, p.66)

The fact that Evelyn admits being allergic to the radio, meaning in essence that she is allergic to the repeated allegations of sexual violence in her own country, again points to the difficulty in shedding silence and occlusion as traditional methods of dealing with allegations of physical or sexual abuse in an Irish context. This passage also questions the hypocritical nature of women's place and position in Irish society when, despite the repeated reports of sexual violence against women, Evelyn still 'couldn't go out the door without a bit of lipstick on' (Enright 2001, p.66).

The endemic nature of sexual violence is similarly evident in *The Gathering*, when Veronica outlines a disturbing incident which she experienced while abroad:

a man followed me through the back streets of Venice, many years later, with his erection in his hand, I ducked into a church as though inviting something worse – instead of which, I got nothing: empty seats, mould on the wall, a piece of paper stuck under a muddy oil painting, with 'di Tintoretto' written in biro...I bent my head and prayed...that it would leave me, the choking sense that this was the way I would die, my face jammed in filthy gabardine, of navy or black, a stranger's cock in the back of my throat and what, what, what?...I knelt and watched Germans and English come in and figure out the lire box and switch heaven on, while at my back the Italian with his erection lingered at the open door of the church, or not. (What was he going to do with it anyway?) At any rate he failed to cross the threshold, and when I finished my desperate, atheistical praying jag, I turned and found that he was gone. Which was fine. Except that now, when I walked the streets, he was everywhere. (Enright 2007a, pp.50-51)

This closing line of this scene emphasises the ongoing threat of sexual violence or inappropriate touch which women face. While this scene is not set in Ireland, it does highlight both the threat of sexual violence in modern society, and also, in a latent way, the feelings of fear and anxiety that can threaten to overwhelm women who have experienced sexual violence, rape or inappropriate touch, when they attempt to resume their daily lives in the aftermath of such an attack.

### **Occlusion of Inappropriate Sexual Touch**

While it is clear that sexual abuse and inappropriate touch has been, and continues to be, a horrific and life-altering societal problem that has touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of Irish people, the widespread occlusion, silence and disbelief surrounding such incidents has exacerbated the trauma experienced by the victims. What might be termed the systemic silence has profoundly affected their relationships with their families, their partners, their church, and even with the law that, in many cases, failed either to protect them from the abuse that they suffered, or to punish those responsible. Michel Foucault makes the point that:

Relations of power are not in themselves forms of repression. But what happens is that, in society, in most societies, organizations are created to freeze the relations of power, hold those relations in a state of asymmetry, so that a certain number of persons get advantage, socially, economically, politically, institutionally, etc. And this totally freezes the situation. That's what one calls power in the strict sense of the term: it's a specific type of power relation that has been institutionalized, frozen, immobilized, to the profit of some and to the detriment of others. (Foucault 1988, p.1)

This point could be said to aptly describe Irish society for a significant part of the twentieth century, where the deferential attitude to authority figures, coupled with the silence surrounding sexual abuse and inappropriate touch, allied to inadequate laws to protect vulnerable women and children from abuse, ensured that power relations were

frozen, to the profit of the abusers and the detriment of victims. McGahern and Enright, through their work, highlight such injustices, and furthermore, force the reader, and by extension Irish society, to face its own complicity in the abuse of women and children throughout the twentieth century. Whilst neither defending, nor forgetting the horrific abuse meted out at the hands of priests, nuns and brothers, their work underlines, as Eamon Maher asserts, 'the fact that the priests and male and female religious were not the only ones with responsibility for the many crimes perpetrated against children and indeed women in the past' (Maher 2011, p.18). They highlight the trauma and fear experienced by those abused in the home, in their community; by those abused by friends, acquaintances, partners, husbands and state employees in positions of authority, victims whose abusers were often known to them; and by victims whose abusers were often unreported and unpunished for the actions.

For example in McGahern's novel *The Dark*, as mentioned previously, Joan was inappropriately touched and sexually assaulted by her employer Mr Ryan. When Mahoney Junior tells his cousin, Fr Gerald, of the abuse, and his intention of taking his sister out of this abusive environment, the priest's primary concerns are the production of proof of the alleged assaults, and also that the Ryans would not be confronted with such allegations:

'She's coming home with me tomorrow'. 'She's coming home with you tomorrow', he lifted his face, puzzled and ironic emphasis on every word. 'She wasn't happy there. She wants to come with me tomorrow'. 'This news is quite sudden I must say. How is she not happy?' 'They interfered with her'. 'Who?' 'Ryan did'. 'How did he interfere?' 'Sexually'. 'You have proof of this?' 'No, but she told me. She'd hardly want to tell lies...Why didn't this come out before?' 'She was frightened. She was afraid to tell'. 'Did you attack the Ryans with this?' 'No. I told them she was leaving with me tomorrow. I gave no reasons'. 'For that relief much thanks at least'. (McGahern 2008b, pp.98-99)

Fr Gerald's withdrawal of public support for Mahoney Junior and Joan when Mahoney goes to collect the girl from the Ryans' shop, is indicative of his attempt, as Maher points out, to 'avoid scandal and maintain an unblemished exterior' (Maher 2011, p.61):

'You're on your own now,' he said. 'There's going to be no pleasantness over Joan's going like this and I can't seem to get involved. I have to remain in the parish. I'm their priest'. 'It's alright, father. I didn't expect you. You were very kind to drive me in. Thank you, father'. 'Good-bye. God guard you'. (McGahern 2008b, p.103)

Mahoney Junior's response to the priest's withdrawal of support is significant here. The very fact that, at sixteen years of age, this young boy understood that he would receive no support from this tremendously powerful authority figure, one who was a member of their own family, is indicative of the power of the 'cult of silence' within Ireland at this time. Joan is effectively abandoned by the one person in the community, save the local Guard, who could, without impunity, challenge Ryan about his treatment of the young woman. However, Fr Gerald chooses silence and occlusion, a tactic which, interestingly, Mahoney Junior expects. In this respect, his final salute to Mahoney Junior: 'God guard you', could be read as an ironic statement, as God's representative in the community refuses to guard the safety of Mahoney Junior's sister, or indeed Mahoney Junior himself in the confrontation that was to follow. This parallels the case of the Spanish police in McGahern's short story 'The Beginning of an Idea', who have the power to challenge and prosecute individuals who touch women in an inappropriate manner, yet it is they who are guilty of perpetrating rape, leaving their victim with no resource to help from powerful authoritarian institutions.

This situation is similarly mirrored in *Memoir*, when McGahern recounts his sister Rosaleen's experience of sexual abuse in the workplace:

From the start, the draper made sexual advances. 'He could not keep his hands to himself.' She preferred housework because she was in the comparative safety of the wife's domain. For a long time she suffered in silence. I was closer to Rosaleen than to any of the other girls, and she wrote me at the school in Carrick where the letter couldn't be intercepted. (McGahern 2006, p.186)

McGahern, like Mahoney Junior, takes Rosaleen away from this abusive environment. However, upon their return home, their father expresses concerns about Rosaleen's allegations:

He made a show of welcoming Rosaleen home, but quickly sought me out alone. 'What's she doing?' 'She's come home.' 'What's she going to live on here? Fresh air?' 'She was being abused.' I saw by his face that I couldn't have said anything more damaging, and he didn't want to hear. 'Have you proof?' 'I have her word.' 'That'd go a long way in court.' 'It's enough for me'. (McGahern 2006, pp.191-192)

McGahern's father's reaction here is complex and one could argue multi-faceted. In the same vein as Fr Gerald, it could be argued that McGahern's father is concerned by the lack of evidence to support his daughter's claims. Rosaleen is not afforded a space in which to articulate her own personal experience, and her father's doubt in relation to the veracity of her claims (when combined with his powerful societal position as Sergeant), is indicative of traditional patriarchal authoritarian structures, which often silenced or disbelieved the voices and traumatic experiences of victims, particularly if the accused was a powerful member of Irish society. However, McGahern also notes the profound effect that these revelations have had upon his father, and the defensive reaction of not wanting to hear about her trauma. In this light, Joan's father's reaction could signal unacknowledged guilt for placing his daughter in a situation where she was sexually assaulted. The fact that Joan's experience never appears to be mentioned

or discussed after this is testament to the silence and lack of acknowledgement of such incidences, not only upon the victim, but also upon their extended family.

McGahern's work highlights the commonplace nature of the silencing and occlusion of sexual abuse in twentieth century Ireland. Enright's work similarly explores the effects of silencing and disguising sexual abuse and trauma. Her work highlighted the failure of Irish society to protect its most vulnerable members, a failure which was directly addressed on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 1999, when the Irish Government apologised to victims of child abuse, and Bertie Ahern, the then Taoiseach, made a statement to the victims stating:

On behalf of the State and of all citizens of the State, the Government wishes to make a sincere and long overdue apology to the victims of childhood abuse for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue. (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse 2009, p.1)

It is significant that Ahern apologies, not only on behalf of the Government and the State, but also on behalf of 'all citizens of the State' (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse 2009, p.1). This admission of responsibility implicates all strata of Irish society, signifying a collective guilt in the failure to protect vulnerable members of our community, and indeed to intervene when abuse was suspected or known to be taking place. Her novel *The Gathering* provides an in-depth and often harrowing insight into the ramifications of both sexual abuse and its occlusion, through the microcosm of Veronica Hegarty, her brother Liam and their extended family. Liam Harte makes the point in 'Mourning Remains Unresolved: Trauma and Survival in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*' that:

The social topography under scrutiny in *The Gathering* is one heavily obscured by cultural amnesia, concealment and denial. Through her tormented and amnesiac central protagonist, Enright addresses the prodigious array of psychic, somatic, and

cultural ramifications of hidden child sexual abuse in modern Ireland, the fact of which is shown to be symptomatic of a pervasive devaluation and victimization of vulnerable individuals by church, state and society. (Harte 2010, pp.188-189)

This pervasive sense of shame is articulated by Veronica, when she muses upon her own feelings of shame and guilt for not revealing her brother's childhood abuse at the hands of Lambert Nugent. She states that:

...my brother blamed me for twenty years or more. He blamed me for my nice house, with the nice white paint on the walls, and the nice daughters in their bedrooms of nice lilac and nicer pink. He blamed me for my golf-loving husband...He treated me like I was selling out on something, though on what I do not know...My brother had strong ideas about justice, but he was unkind to every single person who tried to love him...after a lifetime of spreading the hurt around, he managed to blame me. And I managed to feel guilty. Now why is that? This is what shame does. This is the anatomy and mechanism of a family – a whole fucking country – drowning in shame. (Enright 2007a, p.168)

Veronica could be said to be suffering from survivor's guilt. *The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology* defines survivor's guilt as a 'feeling of guilt for surviving a tragedy in which others died, often associated with a sense of having been partly responsible for what happened' (Colman 2009, p.746). Whilst Liam's death did not occur during or immediately after the sexual abuse that he experienced as a child, his dependence on drink, isolation from his family, depressive tendencies and eventual suicide can be linked directly to these childhood experiences. Veronica acknowledges this fact when she tells the reader that 'the seeds of' her 'brother's death were sown many years ago' (Enright 2007a, p.13). In the aftermath of Liam's suicide, Veronica is, in essence, the only survivor of a trauma, and his death sparks intense feelings of guilt which Veronica struggles to control.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed it could be said that Veronica's survivor's guilt is representative of the survivor's guilt that has gripped Irish society; the shame that has ensnared a society who realise their own complicity in the abuse that took place.

Whilst the impact of sexual abuse on Liam in *The Gathering* is tragically all too obvious, the impact of Veronica's discovery of Nugent's abuse of Liam, and her silence in relation to what she witnessed, becomes apparent as the novel moves forward. *The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology* defines Survivor Syndrome, as:

a pattern of responses often seen in survivors of terrible ordeals, the most important symptoms being anhedonia, chronic anxiety, depression, dyssomnias, nightmares, and in many cases survivor guilt. (Colman 2009, p.746)

It is interesting to note that Veronica suffers from many, if not all of these symptoms in the aftermath of her brother's suicide. She is unable to engage in sexual intercourse with her husband, an activity which up to that time she had found pleasurable; she becomes anxious when touched by family members; and she clearly suffers from depression and cannot sleep at night. Enright's novel also shows the deep-seated trauma that can resurface years after the abusive incident. Veronica admits that, after witnessing Lambert Nugent abuse Liam, she 'had forgotten it entirely' (Enright 2007a, p.172). However her attempt to suppress the incident that she witnessed fails, and with the revelations of child sexual abuse in the late twentieth century, Veronica's memory is triggered:

Over the next twenty years, the world around us changed and I remembered Mr Nugent. But I never would have made that shift on my own – if I hadn't been listening to the radio, and reading the paper, and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people's homes. It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too. (Enright 2007a, pp.172-173)

Veronica is profoundly disturbed by her recovered memories, yet she does not discuss these memories with the remainder of her family, or indeed with a counsellor. While Veronica's narrative throughout the novel is an acknowledgement of the need to come to terms with and vocalise the pain, suffering and confusion evident in recalling, and

dealing with, traumatic memories, she never actually openly discusses the abuse that she witnesses with a living soul. At one point during Liam's wake, she begins to open a dialogue about Lambert Nugent with her mother, perhaps in the hope of divulging the abuse; however, at the end of the exchange, she refrains from telling her the truth:

At the door, I do not look at her as I say, 'Do you remember a man in Granny's?' 'What man?' She was expecting a question. And she doesn't like this one. 'No man in particular. Just a man in Granny's, used to give us sweets on a Friday. What was he called?' 'The landlord?' 'Was he?' 'We always called him the landlord,' she says. And she gives me a most direct look. 'Why?' 'Because he was.' And, fussed of a sudden, she lifts the covers and swings her legs out over the side of the bed, the unreadable body under her nightie sliding this way and that as she pushes herself off the edge of the mattress and starts to wander about. She goes to the door of the wardrobe and opens it, and shuts it again. She doubles back to the bed, then squints at the top of the wardrobe, in case there might be something up there. 'I don't know,' she says. 'What are you saying to me?' 'Nothing, Mammy.' 'What are you saying to me?' I look at her. I am saying that, the year you sent us away, your dead son was interfered with, when you were not there to comfort or protect him, and that interference was enough to send him on a path that ends in the box downstairs. That is what I am saying, if you want to know. 'I just liked the sweets, Mammy. Get back into bed, now'. (Enright 2007a, p.213)

This passage emphasises, not only Veronica's inability to come forward with the truth surrounding Liam's abuse, but it also intimates that Veronica's mother has some pre-existing fear or feeling of foreboding concerning Lambert Nugent. The agitation that she expresses when Veronica raises the subject of Ada's landlord is so visceral that the question must be asked, whether in fact Veronica's mother had some knowledge of Nugent's abusive tendencies? While this question can never be definitively answered, any awareness on her part would only serve to highlight the cycle of silence and occlusion that often surrounded sexual abuse in an Irish context.

Despite the decision that she makes, at the end of the novel, to inform her family of the abuse inflicted upon her brother, the novel concludes before the reader hears her divulge her life-long secret. This silence differs sharply to Isobel's openness concerning her own sexual abuse in McGahern's *The Leavetaking*. Isobel openly

admits to her boyfriend Michael that her father touched her inappropriately when she was a child:

When I was twelve and living with my father outside New York, one night he came into my bed and masturbated against me. I asked him about it in the morning but he denied it. He said I must have been dreaming. I knew he was lying but I hid it from myself. Then, shortly before I married, as most young girls do, I fell in love with him. He encouraged me, but because it was a guilty love I hid that too. I felt my whole wedding day was a betrayal of my father, though he had arranged it all...Without the analysis I would never have worked past those taboos. It was not so much acquiring a life as getting rid of a false life. I could begin again, without the lies and violence. I could begin. (McGahern 1984, p.117)

The description of the sexual abuse and its aftermath in *The Leavetaking* and *The Gathering* differs in one particular respect, namely in the way in which it was dealt with. Isobel seeks professional help from a psychiatrist in order to openly discuss her abuse, to deal with her childhood trauma, and in her own works, to ‘begin again, without the lies and violence’ (McGahern 1984, p.117). Liam, in *The Gathering*, never speaks of his abuse (as far as Veronica is aware), to anyone, and combination of silence and trauma consume him. Derrida makes the point, in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ that the ‘limit between violence and nonviolence is perhaps not between speech and writing but within each of them’ (Derrida 2001, p.127). This is particularly apt when looking at Isobel, Liam and Veronica’s approaches to dealing with their respective traumas. Isobel, seeking professional advice, utilises speech as a method of release from her traumatic memories. Veronica does not seek help or indeed speak aloud about her experience; however, her nightly ritual of writing arguably serves as a type of self-appointed therapy, allowing her to express her feelings concerning her childhood memories, and to work through the issues that are weighing her down. In fact by the novel’s close, Veronica expresses similar feelings to those expressed by Isobel, in particular a desire to ‘begin’ again (McGahern 1984,

p.117). After fleeing, in a moment of chronic anxiety, and perhaps depression, to England, where she remains overnight, Veronica makes the decision to break the cycle of silence and occlusion which has destroyed Liam and which threatens to destroy her:

I know what I have to do – even though it is too late for the truth, I will tell the truth. I will get hold of Ernest and tell him what happened to Liam in Broadstone, and I will ask him to break this very old news to the rest of the family (but don't tell Mammy!) because I can not do it myself, I do not have the arguments for it. (Enright 2007a, p.259)

She, like Isobel, expresses a desire to begin anew, stating that she does not want 'a different destiny' or indeed 'a different life' (Enright 2007a, p.260). Instead she wants 'to be able to live it, that's all...to wake up in the morning and fall asleep at night...to make love to my husband again' (Enright 2007a, p.260). One could say that her self-contained writing therapy has provided her with an outlet for her pain, her suffering and her guilt, leading her to a point where she feels that she can divulge her trauma to a member of her family.

Her decision to begin again, therefore, represents a breaking of the silence which she has hidden within for the duration of the novel. Liam, however, who utilises neither speech nor writing, moves beyond the 'limit between violence and nonviolence' by drowning himself, in a sense washing himself clean, in the most permanent sense, of the abuse, the trauma and the memories which he has carried in silence for years (Derrida 2001, p.127). It is interesting to note the cultural differences too between Isobel and the Hegarty siblings. Isobel is American by birth, and this raises the question as to whether she more likely to engage the services of a trained psychiatric professional than the Irish siblings who refuse to trust another person with their secret? Given the traditional Irish response of silence or occlusion in the face of

trauma, it is perhaps unsurprising that Veronica and Liam did not seek counselling to enable them to open up about their experiences.

This tendency is also referenced to in McGahern's short story 'Peaches'. The main protagonist and his wife, who have a fraught and fractious relationship, discuss the possibility of utilising therapy in order to work through their difficulties. The man's wife (who remains nameless but is described as having 'a heavy foreign accent' (McGahern 1970, p.88)) advocates that either she, or indeed both of them, should attend an 'analyst' in order to gain insights into themselves and to make the 'relationship much better' (McGahern 1970, p.101). While her husband states that she should go if that is her wish, he refuses to consider attending himself, stating that 'if he'd to go to an analyst he'd return to the Catholic church and go to confession, which would at least be cheaper' (McGahern 1970, p.101). The divergent cultural backgrounds of these two characters are interesting to consider, when examining their attitudes towards seeking professional help in order to work through their difficulties. The man's wife, like Isobel, is open to the possibility of seeking the help of an analyst, whereas her husband prefers that they should continue in their fractious marriage, without admitting to the outside world that they have difficulties. The man's choice of confession as an alternative to therapy is also significant. Given that this is a religious ceremony shrouded in secrecy, the man's equation of therapy with confession highlights his wish for secrecy, and a very Irish fear that by breaking the silence and seeking help, their marital problems will become public knowledge. The very term 'confession' also signifies blame or contrition for some act committed, latently emphasising the man's association of therapy with being blamed, or with having to apologise for acts committed, rather than as a safe and professional space in which to work through difficulties in a calm and reasonable manner.

Finally, the lack of clarity that Veronica has concerning the abusive events that she witnessed in Broadstone as a child, is worthy of exploration. Veronica admits the difficulty that she has in distinguishing the real events of that time at the very beginning of the novel, stating that:

I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother's house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event. I feel it roaring inside me – this thing that may not have taken place. (Enright 2007a, p.1)

Carol Dell'Amico states that Veronica's unreliability concerning the abusive events that she witnessed is a deliberate attempt by Enright to:

point to the problem of certain groups' invisibility within the discipline of Irish historiography, the process of Irish national imagining, and in Irish society in general. Invisibility, in various permutations, is *The Gathering's* central trope...The instance of child sexual abuse that lies at the heart of this book acknowledges the nation's saddest instance of forgetting. (Dell'Amico 2010, p.63)

This is an interesting comment through which to critique instances of occlusion of sexual abuse in Irish society. One could, in fact, argue that this novel not only indicates a national attempt to forget, but perhaps even a personal instance of occlusion of sexual abuse on the part of Veronica.

Evidence presented throughout the novel indicates the possibility that Veronica herself has experienced sexual abuse at the hands of Lambert Nugent; however, it is not a possibility to which she will consciously admit. It is sub-consciously expressed in a nightmare which Veronica experiences at one point during the novel:

...on the other side of me is the welcoming darkness of Lambert Nugent. I am facing into that darkness and falling. I am holding his old penis in my hand. But it is a very

strange picture. It is made up of the words that say it. I think of the 'eye' of his penis, and it is pressing against my own eye. I 'pull' him and he keels towards me. I 'suck' him and from his mouth there protrudes a narrow, lemon sweet. This comes from a place in my head where words and actions are mangled. It comes from the very beginning of things, and I can not tell if it is true. Or I can not tell if it is real. But I am sickened by the evil of him all the same, I am sweltering in it; the triangles of blackness under his sharp cheek-bones, the way his head turns slowly and his eyes spin, slower still, in their sockets, towards the light of the opening door where my grandmother stands...I can not move. In this memory or dream, I can neither stop it, nor make it continue. Whatever comes out of his mouth will horrify me, though I know it can not harm me. It will fill the world but not mark it. It is there already in the damp of the carpet and the smell of Germolene: the feeling that Lamb Nugent is mocking us all; that even the walls are oozing his sly intent. The pattern on the wallpaper repeats to nausea, while hot in my grasp, and straight and, even at this remove of years, lovely, Nugent's wordless thing bucks, proud and weeping in my hand. (Enright 2007a, pp.221-222)

This vivid night terror could be interpreted as a return of the repressed, as evidence of Veronica's own abuse by Lambert Nugent. However its veracity is questionable, and questioned even by Veronica herself, who admits that she 'cannot tell if it is true' or 'if it is real' (Enright 2007a, p.222). In her attempt to make sense of the memories that have resurfaced in the wake of Liam's death, Veronica admits that:

I know that my brother Liam was sexually abused by Lambert Nugent. Or was probably sexually abused by Lambert Nugent. These are the things I don't know: that I was touched by Lambert Nugent, that my Uncle Brendan was driven mad by him, that my mother was rendered stupid by him, that my Aunt Rose and my sister Kitty got away. (Enright 2007a, p.224)

Her confusion and inability to remember her own trauma (if it did indeed take place), could represent an attempt to distance the self from the trauma which has been experienced; an attempt to distance the body from the physical violation which has taken place. Brison makes the point that:

the trauma survivor experiences a figurative dismemberment – a shattering of assumptions, a severing of past, present, and future, a disruption of memory. Piecing together a self requires a working through, or remastering of, the traumatic memory that involves going from being the medium of someone else's (the torturer's) speech to being the subject of one's own. (Brison 1999, p.48)

It could be said that Veronica has experienced a figurative dismemberment from her childhood memories, a dismemberment which is arguably predicated, at least in part, on a self-protective instinct which understands the societal difficulties of being labelled as a victim in Irish society.

Veronica makes the point in relation to her brother's difficult behaviour in the aftermath of his abuse that 'We looked at the likes of Liam and had a whole other story for it, a different set of words. *Pup, gurrier, monkey, thug, hopeless, useless, mad, messer*' (Enright 2007a, p.163). Harte makes the point that, in this one admission, 'Veronica zones in on one of the cruxes of child sexual abuse, the way in which victims are simultaneously robbed of their subjectivity and condemned to a life of indelible social stigmatization' (Harte 2010, p.197). I would contend that, to avoid stigmatization as a victim, Veronica buries her memories of abuse, hiding them, even from herself. In this sense, her attempt to bring to light the abuse of her brother by Lambert Nugent, could mask a sub-conscious need to voice her own traumatic experience. As Cheryl Herr states; 'the work of healing is, as we know, bound up with repressed materials' and that 'recovering what has been silenced, is hard work' (Herr 2003, p.134). If this be the case, then the question must be asked whether indeed if Veronica has experienced the abuse from which she has distanced herself, will she subsequently need to engage with, to work through, to re-master her traumatic memories in order to maintain a stable, mentally positive and socially capable sense of self? Judith Butler makes the point in *Bodies That Matter* that:

If prohibitions in some sense constitute projected morphologies, then reworking the terms of those prohibitions suggests the possibility of variable projections, variable modes of delineating and theatricalizing body surfaces. (Butler 1993, p.64)

Perhaps by interrogating her childhood experiences, Veronica can move beyond the prohibitions that she feels prevent people, within Irish society, from testifying to their abusive experiences. By doing so, it is possible that Veronica can find a new way of living with her own body, of bridging the gap between her memories and the truth, and between her body and the bodies of others.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter highlights the profound and lasting effect of corporal and sexual abuse on all aspects of the lives of Irish individuals, and in particular on their ability to touch and connect in a meaningful manner with others in the wake of their traumatic experiences. The widespread nature of corporal and sexual abuse, combined with the extensive media coverage of successive allegations and convictions concerning horrific abuse of women and children in homes, schools and religious-run institutions has arguably irrevocably altered the way in which Ireland as a society views and interprets the word 'touch'. What this chapter similarly highlights are the diverse responses that individuals have in the wake of such traumatic experiences. Without judgement or criticism, both authors explore the joys and sorrows of individuals who, in the wake of such trauma, move on with solitary lives. These are characters who, like Veronica, work through the trauma and attempt to rebuild physical relationships with others, and indeed those individuals who never fully rebuild or move beyond the pain and suffering that they experienced, and, like Veronica's brother, can no longer live with these experiences. In this way, these authors, rather than prescribing a method of dealing with these terrible crimes and abuse, acknowledge the individual nature of each person's suffering, and as a result the diverse ways in which people cope with, and try to move beyond, their experiences. The next chapter will similarly focus on complex responses to interpersonal touch, by exploring pregnancy as both a

social and bodily construct. While pregnancy is often extolled as a universally positive experience for women, this chapter will examine both the joys and anxieties of such a close interpersonal connection with and touch from another living being, during. It will highlight the profound change in women's physical and social identities both during and in the wake of pregnancy, and also the difficulty in maintaining a stable and unified sense of self when one must share one's body, in the most intimate fashion, with the touch of the growing life of another.

## Chapter Three – The Pregnant Presence

To be pregnant is to be vitally alive,  
thoroughly woman, and distressingly inhabited

Anne Buchanan & Debra Klingsporn



(deviantART 2010)

## Introduction

Issues and beliefs surrounding pregnancy and the pregnant body have featured prominently in the history and culture of the Irish nation. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, significant legal cases such as the X case, the Kerry Babies, and referenda and amendments in relation to abortion, have brought the pregnant female body, and public reactions to that body, to the fore in modern Ireland, revealing the socio-cultural and religious, as well as the legal, status of pregnancy and the pregnant body in modern Ireland. Indeed, Timothy J. White makes the point that from the very advent of the Irish Free State, the Church's power was such that 'secular political leaders deferred to ecclesiastical leaders in making policies that related to public morality' (White 2006, p.238). These policies included those which regulated the pregnant body within Irish society, and would lead to contentious debate and discussion of the legal regulation and control of the pregnant body right up to the present day. Diarmaid Ferriter in *Occasions of Sin* states that:

Some of the legislative initiatives and public pronouncements relating to policing the morals of Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s are well known: fiery Lenten pastorals, the censorship of films and literature deemed to be obscene; the outlawing of the importation of contraceptives...Others are less well known:...worries about the high levels of infanticide, mostly as a result of sex outside marriage...(Ferriter 2009, p.102)

These legal attempts to control Irish sexuality, and by extension the pregnant body, were coupled with similar edicts within the Catholic Church. For example, until the 1960s: 'many women who gave birth could only return to the church after they received a blessing from a priest. This 'churching' took place five or six weeks after the birth, purportedly so that the "sin of childbirth" could be washed away' (Guidera

2012). This ceremony was based upon precepts laid down in the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament which stated that:

A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding. (Leviticus 12:2-12:5)

Attitudes and beliefs concerning the Immaculate Conception also served to affect the way in which women's bodies and reproductive organs have been viewed by society at large. Rosita Parker discusses the significance of the image of the pregnant Madonna in her book *Torn in Two*, when she states that:

The guilt-inducing effect of the inability to live up to the maternal ideal is all too familiar. Indeed, the Madonna image of maternity has become a cliché. But, though we may mock it, demystify it, reframe it, turn our backs on it, deconstruct it, we cannot dismiss it. It is too deeply embedded in our psychocultural life to be eradicated. (Parker 2010, p.35)

Julia Kristeva bolsters this point when she states, in *Stabat Mater*, that the Virgin Mary is a woman whose female 'sexual organ had been transformed into an innocent shell which serves only to receive sound' (Kristeva 1985, p.142). This transformation, and its accompanying association of procreation with innocence, has affected the way in which pregnancy, the pregnant body and more particularly, the transgressive pregnant body has been viewed in twentieth and even twenty-first century Ireland.

Laws restricting access to information relating to sexual matters; the ban on contraceptives and information about contraceptive methods, coupled with religious ceremonies such as churching, served to posit sexuality and pregnancy as unclean and sinful, thus attenuating open and frank conversation regarding these matters. The

widespread ignorance that this caused in relation to basic anatomical knowledge about sexual congress and pregnancy is evident in Rosita Sweetman's non-fiction book *On Our Backs: Sexual Attitudes in a Changing Ireland*. Throughout the interviews in this book, it becomes evident that there was a chronic lack of knowledge about pregnancy amongst young people in Ireland at the time. In the very first interview which appears in the book, a sixteen year old girl named Betty voices her confusion and horror about the realities of giving birth:

‘I used to think they had to cut your stomach open to get the baby out. My Ma said she found me in a head of cabbage. I never knew the baby came out of *there*’.  
(Sweetman 1979, p.19)

Betty's inability even to name the part of her body from which a baby would emerge, testifies to a distance and disinterest which many Irish people exhibited in relation to their sexual and reproductive organs. In a later interview, Dr Robert Brennan, senior lecturer in obstetrics at the Royal College of Surgeons, and Consultant Gynaecologist at the Rotunda, deplored what he termed a ‘wide base of ignorance’ amongst young people in Ireland in the late seventies in relation to sexual matters and pregnancy: ‘They didn't know much about sexual anatomy and physiology, about coitus; they knew less about fertility control and virtually nothing about venereal disease’ (Sweetman 1979, p.60). The fact that Ireland's youth displaced such an overwhelming ignorance of sexual matters and pregnancy is indicative of the prevailing silence in relation to sexuality and pregnancy in the Ireland of the mid-to-late twentieth century.

It could be said that pregnancy was seen to be a taboo subject, even between women, who felt that such bodily experiences could not be voiced. Anne Enright touches on this issue in *What Are You Like?*, when Anna remembers the fears and ignorance she had felt about pregnancy and giving birth in twentieth century Ireland:

They came wrapped in woollen shawls that were yellow, or white. I wanted to know what it felt like, but all they said was: 'Fourteen hours and a D and C,' or, 'They let her go twenty-three – can you imagine it.' Or nothing was said at all, because we were shy about these things. (Enright 2001, p.244)

This silence and occlusion, interestingly, was not simply confined to the settled community within Ireland. The Savi Report on sexual abuse and violence in Ireland in 2002, outlined an interesting tradition amongst Irish Traveller women. Sexual matters, 'including telling children about reproduction, were described as topics that are not easily discussed by Travellers':

a generation ago some Traveller women camouflaged their pregnancies even from their spouses. Some of the women present recollected being punished as children for mentioning that a woman was 'expecting' (i.e. pregnant). Such incidents as these would not occur today. (McGee et al 2002, p.210)

While it is made clear in the above quotation that these attitudes have changed in recent years, these testimonies, coupled with public, legal and religious discourse, reveal the extent to which pregnancy and the pregnant body was silenced and obscured in Irish culture.

The anxiety concerning the silence surrounding pregnancy in Irish society can also be linked to scandals such as the death of Anne Lovett and her new-born infant, as well as the Kerry Babies scandal, where perceived societal and familial condemnation caused women to hide their pregnancies with disastrous consequences for both woman and child. Fifteen year old Anne Lovett:

was found on a bitterly cold January day in 1984 by three boys who noticed her red schoolbag lying at the entrance to the grotto of the Blessed Virgin on a small hill outside Granard, with a pair of scissors she had brought with her to cut the umbilical cord of her new-born baby. The baby boy, who everyone claimed not to know she was carrying, was lying on a moss-covered stone beneath the statue. She died shortly

afterwards in hospital from irreversible shock brought on by haemorrhaging and exposure. (Ferriter 2009, p.524)

Her death prompted a public outcry,<sup>13</sup> causing Gay Byrne's radio show to devote three of its programmes to reading letters sent by listeners detailing stories of 'clandestine childbirth, clumsy self-abortion, brutal husbands or incestuous fathers' (Ardagh 1994, pp.178-9). The tragic death of the teenager prompted a brief, but illuminating, view of the reality of the heretofore occluded pregnant presence within the Irish state. This tragic case was still fresh in the minds of the Irish public when the Kerry Babies scandal came to light in three months later:

in April 1984, the stabbed and badly beaten body of a baby boy was found washed up on a beach in Cahirciveen, County Kerry. The grisly discovery sparked a countywide investigation that reverberated throughout the nation...The reference to 'Kerry babies' refers to two babies found within fifty miles and one week of each other: the baby washed up on the beach in Cahirciveen, and Joanne Hayes's baby, discovered on her farm in Abbeydomey, County Kerry. Joanne Hayes, the woman at the center of the garda investigation, became a feminist symbol of what happens when a woman transgresses the codes of moral and maternal behavior established by the Roman Catholic Church and the Irish state. Hayes, an unmarried woman, became pregnant by a married man. She gave birth at home to what she claimed was a stillborn child. Although forensic evidence confirmed that Hayes was not the mother of the baby discovered at Cahirciveen, nor was there evidence that she had murdered her own baby, nonetheless she was vilified by a government tribunal as a woman of loose morals and as a baby killer. (Maguire 2001, pp.337-8)

The treatment of Joanne Hayes by the Irish legal system exemplified the status of the pregnant presence in Ireland as only acceptable within the norms of marriage, and within legal and religious prescriptions. Both of these cases demonstrated the silence and fear of exclusion which arose from conceiving in a manner which violated societal dictates and norms, even during the mid-1980s, and they displayed the

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<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that the case was not brought to national attention until five days after Ann and her baby had been buried. A local resident brought the tragedy to the attention to the national media. The overwhelming silence in relation to Lovett's tragic death for almost a week could point to an almost automatic communal silence in relation to any case in which social mores are transgressed within Irish communities at that time.

necessity to conceal or deny pregnancy outside the confines of marriage in order to escape social condemnation or ostracism from their community, or worse, being incarcerated in a Magdalen Laundry. As Smith states, ‘the existence of sites of confinement’, such as the Magdalen Laundry’, functioned as a constant reminder of the social mores deemed appropriate in Catholic Ireland and of the consequences awaiting transgressors of those standards’ (Smith 2008, p.xiv).

Finally, debates and referenda in relation to abortion, the right to life of the unborn and the right to life of the pregnant mother have sparked some of the most contentious and controversial discussions in relation to pregnancy, and to the pregnant body, in Irish history. A divisive and anger-filled campaign led finally to the passing of the eighth amendment to the Irish Constitution in 1983, which recognised ‘the right to life of the unborn...with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother’ (Department of the Taoiseach 2012). Ferriter makes the point that ‘the impact of the original 1983 referendum was the cynicism it engendered about the capacity of Irish politicians to deal honestly and effectively with issues which directly affected women’ (Ferriter 2009, p.473). This opinion is in many ways borne out by the reluctance of the government to revisit this issue until 1992, when in the aftermath of the X Case,<sup>14</sup> the Government proposed three amendments to the constitution, the failed twelfth amendment, which proposed to allow abortion in limited circumstances where the life of the mother is at risk, and the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments which passed successfully, allowing the ‘freedom to travel between the State and another state’ to procure an abortion and the ‘freedom to obtain or make available, in the State...information relating to services lawfully available in another state’ (Department of the Taoiseach 2013, p.154). It is interesting to note that no woman

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<sup>14</sup> The X Case centred on the right of a 14 year-old pregnant victim of rape to travel to England to obtain an abortion. She was prevented from doing so by High Court injunction, until this decision was overruled by the Supreme Court.

was allowed to speak during statements made in the Dáil in relation to the X Case on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1992. John Bruton drew attention to this situation in the opening remarks of his statement stating that ‘I should like at the outset to reiterate my regret that this debate is so confined and that other Members of this House — in particular women Members — will not be able to take part in it’ (Houses of the Oireachtas 1992). Once again, it appears that the Irish government was unable to engage in an open and honest debate, which included all of its members, on the issue of abortion.

A hiatus on this issue for the next 21 years was broken by public outcry in the wake of the death of Savita Halappanavar in October 2012, leading to a renewed public debate on the issue of the right to abortion in Ireland. Pressure was put on the Government to deal with this issue, leading to the signing of the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013, an act designed:

to protect human life during pregnancy; to make provision for reviews at the instigation of a pregnant woman of certain medical opinions given in respect of pregnancy; to provide for an offence of intentional destruction of unborn human life; to amend the Health Act 2007; to repeal sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861; and to provide for matters connected therewith. (Houses of the Oireachtas 2013, p.5)

While attitudes towards, and education and knowledge in relation to sexuality, pregnancy and legal protection for the pregnant mother have improved in twenty-first century Ireland, it is necessary to explore the particular position of the pregnant body within Irish society and Irish culture. Despite the advent of secularisation in Ireland, it is important to examine the legacy of religious and political collusion in the control of the pregnant presence from the advent of the Irish Free State right up to the present day. Mary Condren underlines this point in her book, *The Serpent and the Goddess*, when she states that:

In reality, patriarchal religion in its contemporary secular expression still provides the working strategies of state power even in anti-Christian or post-Christian societies under the guise of being the formal rationality of the social order. Long after Christian theology has ceased to be the major intellectual force in the Western world, secular versions of patriarchal consciousness have become equally powerful. (Condren 2002, p.185)

In the late twentieth century, traditional representations of pregnancy and the pregnant body have come under scrutiny by French feminist writers, such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, who have critiqued depictions and beliefs concerning pregnancy which have emanated from patriarchal or religious convictions or dogma. Kristeva points to the almost automatic association of femininity with maternity in *Stabat Mater*, when she states that:

...we live in a civilization in which the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is subsumed under maternity. Under close examination, however, this maternity turns out to be an adult (male and female) fantasy of a lost continent: what is involved, moreover, is not so much an idealized primitive mother as an idealization of the – unlocalizable – relationship between her and us, an idealization of primary narcissism' (Kristeva 1985, p.133).

Irigaray bolsters this point in *The Speculum of the Other Woman*, when she states that 'culturally, socially, economically valorized female characteristics are correlated with maternity and motherhood' (Irigaray 1985b, p.25). However, in *This Sex Which is not One*, Irigaray challenges this automatic relation, citing a control over motherhood as an important milestone for women which can enable them to embrace their individuality:

The woman, for her part, owing to her seclusion in the 'home', the place of private property, has long been nothing but a mother. Today, not only her entrance into the circuits of production, but also – even more so? – the widespread availability of contraception and abortion are returning her to that impossible role: being a woman. (Irigaray 1985a, p.83)

French feminist writers have also challenged feminists, and indeed the wider community, to examine pregnancy and the pregnant body in an alternative manner, both as a social and bodily construct. Kristeva critiques the feminist response to a 'call for a new representation of femininity', stating that feminism 'sidesteps the real experience' of pregnancy, and as a result 'maternity is repudiated or denied by some avant-garde feminists, while its traditional representations are wittingly or unwittingly accepted by the "broad mass" of women and men' (Kristeva 1985, p.133). She challenges the wider community to move beyond denouncing:

the reactionary role that mothers have played in the service of 'dominant male power'. It is necessary to ask how this role relates to the bio- symbolic latencies implicit in maternity; and having done that, to ask further how, now that the myth of the Virgin is no longer capable of subsuming those latencies, their surfacing may leave women vulnerable to the most frightful forms of manipulation, to say nothing of the blindness, the pure and simple contempt, of progressive activists who refuse to take a closer look at the question. (Kristeva 1985, p.150)

It is with this challenge in mind that the focus of this chapter turns to representations of pregnancy, and the pregnant presence, in the work of John McGahern and Anne Enright. The treatment of this issue by the novelists offers a close and powerful introspection on pregnancy as a social and bodily construct in a particularly Irish setting, from the 1960s to the present day. Both writers, in varying but equally important ways, bring social, cultural, economic and personal issues relating to pregnancy and childbirth to the fore in their novels, illuminating both traditional beliefs and concerns in relation to procreation, and also shedding light on the ways in which these beliefs and concerns have changed (or indeed remained the same in some cases), as Ireland strides forward into the twenty-first century.

McGahern's novels and play focus on pregnancy as a cultural concept, voicing concerns relating to the inability to procure contraception and the strain that this

situation placed upon many Irish women. He also looks at the difficulty of giving birth to a baby 'out of wedlock' in twentieth century Irish society; at the pain of being unable to conceive, and at the silence surrounding such issues. Through his writing, and interestingly, often through what is not directly said through his work, McGahern provides the reader with an insight into the social and cultural politics surrounding pregnancy in twentieth century Ireland.

Correspondingly, albeit in a different manner, pregnancy and motherhood are life experiences and issues which are explored recurrently throughout the works of Anne Enright. Through her examination of the pregnant body, and the figure of the new mother, and her exploration of the effect of pregnancy and birth on the mother, on family, on community and indeed on Irish society in general, Enright has both touched upon some of the issues that McGahern explores, and extended this exploration to include pregnancy and motherhood in twenty-first century Ireland. Importantly, Enright has also expanded the representation of the pregnant woman and mother in Irish literature by focusing on the bodily experience of pregnancy. A mother herself, Enright utilises writings focusing on her own experience of pregnancy, alongside the pregnant characters in her novels and short stories, to explore the physicality of pregnancy, adding an interesting dimension to writings relating to pregnancy in Irish society. Enright in a sense, by focusing on the bodily experience of being pregnant, has resubmitted the pregnant body to Irish society at large for exploration, discussion and debate, making the body itself the focus, as Irigaray states making 'visible...what was supposed to remain invisible' (Irigaray 1985a, p.76). By making this previously hidden or occluded body visible, and by placing the somatic experience of the private sphere within the ambit of the symbolic

order of the public sphere, a more nuanced representation of the pregnant presence can be put forward to the reader.

The works of Anne Enright not only present and explore traditional images of women who are fulfilled and empowered by the experience of pregnancy and motherhood, but more importantly, these works explore the anxieties and difficulties experienced by the 'other mother' in Irish society, namely reluctant or ambivalent mothers; those who do not choose motherhood; or those who, through motherhood, experience feelings of loneliness, occupation, a loss of physical or social identity or even post-natal depression. Enright's fiction provides a space for this reluctant or smothered (m)other to be visualised and represented, by outlining the complexities of emotion that surround pregnancy and motherhood as an experience, and by voicing some of the taboo concerns and feelings experienced by pregnant women and mothers in modern Irish society. In doing so, Enright's representation of the female pregnant body can be seen as an attempt to, as Irigaray puts it, 'resubmit' the female pregnant presence within an Irish societal paradigm (Irigaray 1985a, p.76). Irigaray posits that by resubmitting herself, woman can 'try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it' (Irigaray 1985a, p.76).

This chapter will focus on the movement from pregnancy as a social construct to pregnancy as a bodily construct through the texts, and will examine the anxiety surrounding reproducing, and indeed not reproducing, in Ireland. It will explore the notion of the pregnant body as public property, and evaluate the contentious theme of control over the pregnant body in a traditional Irish sense, exploring physical, emotional and, indeed, societal control over the pregnant body which has emerged in recent decades. The silence surrounding elements of pregnancy and post-pregnant life is also an issue which is crucial from an Irish perspective. From a social standpoint,

this chapter will engage with the issue of the 'perfect mother' as a site of social conflict, and also with how becoming pregnant and starting a family now engenders a complicated process of social juggling by mothers who are expected to have it all, and yet who can be seen to endangering their child's emotional and/or social development if they do. Finally, the chapter will explore the influence of pregnancy and the pregnant body on men, particularly the father of the expectant baby. It will discuss the feeling that some men can feel left out of the intense bodily connection that pregnancy affords the mother, and how that can affect their connection with the baby at varying stages of pregnancy and post pregnancy.

### **Pregnancy as a Social Construct**

Within the works of John McGahern and the novels of Anne Enright, there is a very evident shift from the focus on pregnancy as a social construct to pregnancy as a bodily construct. The temporal shift of the novels and plays, primarily from the 1960s to Irish society of the present day, provides the reader with an insight into the changing manner in which pregnancy, and the pregnant body, is viewed and perceived by Irish society at large in recent decades. In McGahern's writing, pregnancy is most often viewed, not primarily as a bodily construct, but rather as a condition with profound social ramifications. Issues such as conceiving out of wedlock, infertility and the attached stigma, and clandestine births with the attendant consequences for both mother and child, are all concerns explored by McGahern. His work thus mirrors and illuminates societal and cultural issues surrounding the pregnant presence which dominated Ireland throughout the twentieth century and, indeed, right up to the present day.

Conceiving a child out of wedlock is a recurrent issue in McGahern's texts, with no less than five characters becoming pregnant, or having a baby, out of wedlock in his play, novels and short stories. What is interesting to note in each of these cases is that the women themselves do not directly articulate shame about their condition; they do show fear, apprehension, but not shame on a personal level. It is the actual or perceived condemnation of family and the community or society at large that causes feelings of fear and apprehension in these women for transgressing social boundaries. The reality is that in Irish society, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a significant proportion of women became pregnant out of wedlock,<sup>15</sup> and brought up children in a country where acceptance of these children and their mothers was problematic at best. Diarmaid Ferriter notes in *Occasions of Sin* that 'there was little ambiguity when it came to the operation of moral judgements in relation to illegitimacy', with the idea of 'moral policing' becoming well established (Ferriter 2009, p.59). Mothers of illegitimate children were often shunned, forced to move away from their communities, or even placed in institutions, because of, or in order to avoid, the stigma of pregnancy out of wedlock. This stigmatised reaction to a pregnant presence which did not conform to societal dictates can be linked to Kristeva's assertion in *Stabat Mater* that 'the maternal body is the place of a splitting, which...remains a constant factor of social reality' (Kristeva 1980, p.238). Through her ability 'to insure reproduction of the species', Kristeva presents 'the woman-subject' as 'more of a filter than anyone else – a thoroughfare, a threshold where "nature" confronts "culture"' (Kristeva 1980, p.238). In a very literal manner, women pregnant outside of marriage in twentieth, and arguably twenty-first century Ireland

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<sup>15</sup> By the end of the twentieth century 'births to unmarried mothers stood at 30 per cent of the total, rising from 1,600 in 1921 to over 15,000 in 1998' (Ferriter 2009, p.523). This percentage has in fact risen slightly by 2013. The CSO Vital Statistics First Quarter 2013 report...revealed that 36.5% of all births were registered outside of marriage (Telford 2013).

became the threshold where nature, or the pregnant body, confronted conservative Catholic Irish culture.

This can be linked to Althusser's theory of Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses which he outlines in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Althusser terms Repressive State Apparatuses as containing 'the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the courts, the prisons etc.', institutions which 'function by violence' – at least ultimately' (Althusser 1971, pp.142-143). Ideological State Apparatuses, alternately, 'function by ideology' and include such institutions as the family, the Church, the school, the press, television, radio and literature (Althusser 1971, pp.143-145). This theory is important when analysing the control of the pregnant presence in an Irish context, as it can highlight the ways in which ideology and repression worked simultaneously to demarcate the negative influence brought to bear by the unmarried mother, and then to isolate these women or even incarcerate them in governmental and religious institutions. McGahern draws attention to this in his work *The Pornographer* when Michael asks Josephine:

'Does your family know anything yet?'

'No. And I don't intend to tell them. If they did find out, they'd hold their big middle-class conference. A course of action would be decided on. And they'd arrive *en masse* to take over the show. I'd be whisked home or into a convent or something. Boy, would they be thrown. Nothing like this ever happened in the family before'. (McGahern 1980, p.188)

This fear of familial and societal condemnation leads Josephine to exile her pregnant selfhood in England, away from the oppressive gaze of Irish society, after Michael insists that they cannot be married. The wife of the doctor whom Michael consults about this unplanned pregnancy, understands this need to escape from Ireland and Irish society, saying: 'Dublin is too small a place for her to have the child, with her kind of family' (McGahern 1980, p.113). This sentiment is reiterated by the nurse

with whom Michael later becomes involved, who states that if she were to fall pregnant and the man was married or refused to marry her, she would throw herself in the Liffey (McGahern 1980, p.174). Her main reasoning for this was her inability to imagine facing 'into my family that way' (McGahern 1980, p.212). The Ideological State Apparatus of the family and the Church are used here to simultaneously instil feelings of guilt and fear in Josephine, prompting her to conceal her pregnancy. Interestingly the fear of incarceration, in a convent or perhaps mental institution or Magdalene laundry is also mentioned, suggesting the looming figure of the Repressive State Apparatus behind the ideological imperatives. One could argue here that McGahern is alluding to, if only in a latent manner, the manner in which Repressive State Apparatuses, such as the Government and the police, colluded with the church and sometimes even the families of these women, in order to place them in institutions, thus removing their perceived 'bad influence' and stigma from their communities and families.

This fear and uncertainty concerning the ramifications of pregnancy out of wedlock for Irish women is clear in McGahern's short story 'A Ballad', when the main protagonist discusses the fate of a local beauty, Rachel, who has fallen pregnant out of wedlock. The father is O'Reilly, the site engineer, who shares a lodging house with the main protagonist. Both the main protagonist and Ryan discuss Rachel's options, as it becomes apparent that O'Reilly is not immediately anxious to marry her:

'What will Rachel do if O'Reilly ditches her?' I asked as we drove back. 'What does any girl do? She has to nail her man. If she doesn't...' (McGahern 2009, p.29)

Ryan emphasises the importance of legitimising the relationship before the birth of the baby. It is interesting in this story that Ryan cannot seem to bring himself to

articulate the ramifications that might occur if Rachel is unsuccessful in ‘nailing her man’. These ramifications perhaps, are so universally recognised, that they do not need to be spoken aloud to be understood.

It is interesting to note that in McGahern’s short story ‘Eddie Mac’, Annie May, the housekeeper for the local Protestant family, falls pregnant with Eddie’s baby; however it is Eddie who seeks sanctuary in England, and Annie May is left to face her small rural community as an unmarried mother. When Annie tells Eddie that she is pregnant, he ruminates on the implications of her revelation:

He had been through this before. There was only one difference between this time and the other times. All the other times it was the girls that had to stir themselves and make for England. This time he would have to disappear into England. (McGahern 2009, p.78)

It is interesting that he feels that in this instance that he is the one who will be shamed by his actions, and not Annie. He thinks about what his employers the Kirkwood family will say when they learn the truth about his stealing cattle and his abandoning of Annie after giving her an understanding that they would be married:

‘His poor father worked here. He was a boy here, grew up here, how could he go and do what he has done,’ old William would say. (McGahern 2009, p.80)

However, when he thinks of Annie and her predicament, he feels certain that the Kirkwoods would ‘no more think of putting her out on the road than they’d be able to put a dog or a cat out’ (McGahern 2009, p.80).

This prediction is seen to have been accurate when Annie May and the Kirkwoods’ tale is continued in later years in the short story ‘The Conversion of William Kirkwood’, where the reader can see that Annie May was not ostracised by her Protestant employers, indeed, she was helped and included within their household.

When her initial reaction was to tell them of her plans to go to England to have her baby, old William persuaded her to stay stating:

‘Why should you have to go to England where you’ll know nobody? You did no wrong. Stay and have the child here. We don’t have to care what people think. We’ll be glad of the child. (McGahern 2009, p.121)

The positive reaction of the Kirkwood family to Annie’s pregnancy, and the protection that they afforded her by including and accepting her into their family, a highly influential family in the community, enabled her to bring up her child in an environment where she did not face the shame or ostracism to which many other women in her position were subjected. The question must be raised, as to whether the fact that the Kirkwoods were a Protestant family had an effect on the way in which they treated Annie May when she fell pregnant out of wedlock.

It could be argued that, in this short story, McGahern is providing an oblique social commentary on the way in which Catholic Ireland treated single mothers, utilising these Protestant characters as a counterpoint. It is interesting to note that McGahern uses the phrase ‘*We don’t have to care*<sup>16</sup> what people think’ (McGahern 2009, p.121). It could of course refer to the Kirkwoods simply choosing not to care what the wider society thinks of the situation; however, it could also latently refer to the fact that as Protestant members of the community, they are arguably far enough removed from the community at large that they neither require its praise, nor its censure, for the decisions that they make. The Kirkwoods can utilise their ‘distant skin’ to their advantage, avoiding any societal pressure that may have been brought to bear on any other family in the area. This interesting ambiguity could be used to raise questions in relation to the control and peer pressure exerted (or in the Kirkwoods’

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<sup>16</sup> Own emphasis added.

situation, not exerted) over individuals and families within a community setting, perhaps making it difficult for individual members to defy societal dictates in order to support a member of the community deemed to be transgressing, such as unwed mothers at that time.

Perhaps what is being implied in McGahern's works is that the unmarried pregnant body constituted a site of transgression, engendering shame and fear within communities and the wider society traditionally in Ireland. As a transgressive presence, the unwed mother was controlled through RSAs and ISAs such as the Church, the courts, family or community isolation, exclusion or institutionalisation. In many cases, this unruly pregnant body was hidden from view, distanced from society, and therefore from consideration in mid-to-late twentieth century Ireland. This perspective has strong links to the Kerry Babies and the Ann Lovett scandals, where fear of discovery of pregnancy out of wedlock, and the possible consequences of such a discovery, led to the deaths of mothers, infants and the clandestine burial of babies. From the evidence presented, it could be said that the pregnant body is used in McGahern's text as a site of personal, familial and societal tension. The collusion of the family, community, the church, and the courts to control, and to an extent occlude, the unruly pregnant presence is evinced by Maloney in *The Pornographer* when he states:

'I'll get a pram made in the shape of a coffin, miniature handles, crucifix, brown varnish, the lid at an angle of forty-five degrees to keep out the rain, a white hand grip for pushing, big wheels and small wheels'.

'You'll go to London, and see the baby off the assembly line like any modern father. The three of us – why, the four of us – will go to Paris, put the baby into the morality play of a pram, and go for our evening stroll in the gardens. Isn't that a stroke of genius?' (McGahern 1980, p.127)

The pram, and by extension the body which holds the baby, has long been the site of struggle in Ireland's morality play. The pregnant body is presented to the reader as a social construct, one which is judged in terms of its conformation or non-conformation to ideological and societal dictates and norms. Women who became pregnant within the bounds of wedlock were deemed acceptable and, within the novels, as in Irish society perhaps, they were largely unspoken, having fulfilled the traditional role of motherhood through societal convention – they were an absent presence, necessary but not significant in any discussions within the public sphere. The combination of powerful RSAs and ISAs in traditional Irish society created a very rigid notion of 'the "necessary" domain of bodies through rendering unthinkable and unliveable another domain of bodies', those that did not 'matter in the same way' (Butler 1993, p.xi). McGahern explores all of these issues throughout his work, providing the reader with a well-rounded and highly nuanced view of the complexities surrounding the pregnant presence as social construct in mid-to-late twentieth century Ireland.

Enright's work also examines the pregnant presence as a social construct, albeit with an alternative focus to that of McGahern. While Enright does explore the social conditions that control, to a degree, the pregnant presence in twenty-first century Ireland, these social conditions are more closely linked to economics and the workplace than to societal dictates and norms. Rather than focusing on the pregnant body as the site of societal anxiety, she chooses instead to focus on it as the site of personal anxieties, concerns of prospective mothers and fathers about becoming pregnant in twenty-first century Ireland:<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> It must be stated that, as a mother herself, Enright brings an experiential knowledge of the pregnant body to her writings, an advantage which McGahern, because of his gender, does not have.

in the twenty first-century we also know that the hand that rocks the cradle also pays for the cradle, or a fair amount of it, and that, for many people, babies are a luxury that they cannot yet afford. (Enright 2005, p.2)

In an Ireland traumatised by economic collapse, rising unemployment and financial uncertainty, one could argue that the traditional need to control the unruly pregnant presence has been supplanted by concerns centring on a woman's economic ability to have a child, and on her balancing of motherhood with having a successful career, and with making a contribution to the economic success of her family. This can be seen in Enright's short story 'Shaft', where the pregnant woman in the elevator silently worries about her unborn child as a stranger reaches out to touch her bump:

I wanted to say to him, *Who is going to pay for it?* Or love it. I wanted to say, *Who is going to love it?* Or, *Do you think it is lonely, in there?*...I swallowed and opened my mouth to speak and the lift stopped, and he set his hand down. He touched all my hopes. (Enright 2009, p.146)

Enright here engages with the daily realities facing many mothers in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. She attempts to articulate what Rosita Parker describes as the 'disjunctions between the lived experience of mothering and the sometimes contradictory yet usually prescriptive or normative ideals that mediate mothering' (Parker 2010, p.2).

In 1985, Julia Kristeva claimed in *Stabat Mater* that:

Those interested in what maternity is for a woman will no doubt be able to shed new light on this obscure topic by listening, with greater attentiveness than in the past, to what today's mothers have to say not only about their economic difficulties but also, and despite the legacy of guilt left by overly existentialist approaches to feminism, about malaise, insomnia, joy, rage, desire, suffering, and happiness. (Kristeva 1985, p.147)

Enright's fiction attempts to do that by shedding light on, and expressing the opinions of, many different mothers and pregnant women, and by viewing motherhood through

both their positive and their negative experiences. For example, Enright engages with the modern social anxiety of the mother's right, and often need, to work after child birth. She explores the complexities of the competing theories and opinions which abound on this issue:

What we are not agreed on, what we cannot agree on, is whether, and to what extent, a child is damaged when the mother doesn't spend all her time with it in those first twelve months. We can't agree on it because we can't, many of us, stay at home. We don't have the money. We don't have the patience. But also because we sense that the debate is overblown...(Enright 2005, p.108)

In the same way that McGahern focused on the familial and societal guilt placed upon the unruly pregnant body in their works, Enright here tackles the societal guilt placed upon the mother if and when she decides to return to work. In *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, she discusses this guilt directly, citing Dr Jay Belsky's work as one source used 'from time to time to give all the working mothers of the world a fright':

He is big on the damage that *may* (his italics) be done to children if they are placed in 'non-maternal care' during their first year – which is to say, if there are other goes back to work full-, or even part-, time. (Enright 2005, pp.107-108)

Such scientific research can be viewed in this context as a new Ideological State Apparatus, positing the possible damage that a working mother can do to a child by simply pursuing a career, a guilt which is rarely if ever placed upon working fathers to anything like the same degree.

However, Enright also highlights the struggle which some mothers face if they do not wish to continue to work outside the home when they have children. In *The Forgotten Waltz*, Aileen, mother to Evie, struggles to balance a career and motherhood when Evie becomes ill:

Meanwhile, the au pair did not so much leave as flounce out, and although they needed another, and urgently, Aileen stalled at the idea of ringing the agency again. She took half days off work, and sometimes made Seán take the other half, she rang neighbours and got babysitters in. The childcare, which had been until then a smooth enough affair – at least as far as he was concerned – became insoluble. It was as though she did not want it to work, he realised, one day when the handover went astray, and she ended up screaming down the phone at him: *You said two o'clock but you meant three o'clock. How many lies is that? How many lies are there, in a whole fucking hour?*

The guilt and the worry had overwhelmed her, she said later. She just wanted to stay with Evie, all the time.

And Seán said, 'She's fine.' (Enright 2011a, p.192)

The very fact that Aileen could not admit her wish to remain at home immediately could point to feelings of guilt about being unable to cope with balancing a career and caring for her daughter. Similarly, the reaction of her husband Seán to her voicing her wish to stay home is illuminating. Her concern is not directly acknowledged by him, instead he simply informs her that their daughter is 'fine'. This has the effect of negating Aileen's concerns, and treating them as if they are insignificant. Aileen, in many ways, is a character who represents the quintessential modern working woman; she is a wife, a mother and a working woman, arguably a woman who, in modern Irish society, could be labelled as 'having it all'; yet by the end of the novel, she is separated from her husband and feels immense guilt for having a job outside the home. Enright, throughout her work, succeeds in presenting the aporia wherein mothers are deemed to be guilty of some transgression whether they choose to work outside the home or not. Rosita Parker seconds this point, noting the impossibility of living up to an imaginary maternal ideal:

...all mothers have to negotiate their lived experience of motherhood with the maternal ideal. It is an indication of the oppressive effect of the ideal that we start to believe that some mother somewhere is managing to achieve it: a mother who is not in paid employment, a mother with more money, a mother with fewer children, a mother with a more supportive partner, a mother from another ethnic background etc. (Parker 2010, p.41)

Enright dismisses the validity of this social construct of the maternal ideal, stating that ‘the unassuageable hunger for the mother cannot be allowed to run society, even if the people who suffer from it are over thirty years old’ (Enright 2005, p.109). In the same way, she recognises that the over-emphasis on the pregnant body as social construct blinds Irish society to the reality of the bodily pregnant presence:

In discussions about reproductive choice, it seems to me that we do not know what we are talking about, or that different people are talking about different things, and the experience of pregnancy, because it is so difficult to describe, is skipped or ignored. (Enright 2005, p.12)

### **Pregnancy as Bodily Construct**

It could be said that for the greater part of the twentieth century, Ireland as a nation has been obsessed with the pregnant body as a societal construct and has, until recently, ignored the same pregnant body as a bodily construct. In many ways, the pregnant body became a national obsession only when it transgressed social boundaries, such as during the abortion debates and referenda, or in landmark legal cases such as the X Case and the Kerry Babies case, as already noted, and indeed when tragedies such as the death of Ann Lovett and her baby came to light. There has been an obsession surrounding almost the socially ‘dangerous’ pregnant body, yet traditionally Irish society has been silent, in many ways unable to speak about the physical pregnant body. This is expressed latently in McGahern’s works, when he engages with the pregnant body, but in many ways can only do so on a societal level or from the male perspective. However, the lack of focus or engagement with the physical pregnant body throughout his works is indicative of the lack of engagement with, and perhaps even fear of, the body, and more particularly, the pregnant body,

within Irish society of the mid-to-late twentieth century. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler discusses Žižek's view that:

every discursive formation must be understood in relation to that which it cannot accommodate within its own discursive or symbolic terms. This traumatic 'outside' poses the threat of psychosis and becomes itself the excluded and threatening possibility that motivates and, eventually, thwarts the linguistic urge to intelligibility. (Butler 1993, p.192)

The pregnant body, as a physical being, could be said to represent this 'traumatic outside', thus posing a threat to social hegemonic cohesion. Access to contraception, debate and referenda in relation to abortion and even the newly ratified *Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013*, radically altered the once-strict control over the pregnant body within Irish society. These advancements similarly threatened the religious dictates commonly utilised to control the pregnant presence, such as '*Humanae Vitae*, the papal encyclical published in 1968, that reiterated the Vatican's opposition to artificial birth control' (Ferriter 2009, p.364). However perhaps the greatest threat which the pregnant presence posed to Irish society was in its new-found manifestation and status within the national consciousness. It can be argued that for much of the twentieth century, the pregnant body, and more particularly the transgressive pregnant body, became the unspoken presence, viewed comfortably as a social construct. The pregnant body was acceptable only within societal norms, and in general transgressive pregnant bodies, alongside contentious issues such as contraception, abortion and illegitimacy, were silenced, hidden and in many ways occluded. It raises the question in Irish society of which 'bodies come to matter—and why?' (Butler 1993, xii).

Enright's novels attempt to answer this question by representing a clear shift in the focus from the pregnant body as simply a social construct, to its now being that

of a simultaneously social and bodily construct. In so doing, an exploration of the physical pregnant body has begun. Christine Battersby makes the point, in *The Phenomenal Woman*, that in our culture, ‘female identities are fleshy identities’ (Battersby 1998, p.9). Enright’s writing embraces the fleshy identity of the Irish woman, as her books abound with images of the pregnant body, detailing its changes, its appearance and its effect upon the expectant woman, upon the father, upon the family and indeed, upon society at large. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler discusses the theory, based upon Kristeva’s work in *Desire and Language*, of ‘the displaced repetition of the materiality of the lost maternal body’ (Butler 1993, p.70). In a focus on the social aspects of pregnancy, without specific reference to the pregnant female body, the material body arguably becomes lost or displaced, a situation which Enright’s novels somewhat rectifies by replacing the maternal body within a societal gaze, bringing the ‘distant skin’ of the pregnant presence to the fore.

Enright uses both her own personal experience of pregnancy, alongside the experiences of her fictional characters, in order to directly engage with pregnancy as a bodily construct. While the majority of her work is fictional, in 2004, Enright published *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, a record of her own personal experience of being pregnant, of giving birth and of rearing her children in modern Ireland. Stating the importance of *Making Babies*, in the Sunday book review of the *New York Times* in 2012, Judith Newman stated that Enright is a ‘poet of the gross, explicating our newfound repulsion and fascination with a body no longer completely under our control’ (Newman 2012). However *Making Babies* is not Enright’s only non-fiction work in which she refers to modern Irish responses to the pregnant body. In *What’s Left of Henrietta Lacks*, Enright comments on the fact that the focus on the pregnant body in Irish society is coupled with a distinct lack of engagement with the

actual physical pregnant body: ‘the pregnant body has been through a lot of law courts but I have never seen it properly discussed or described’ (Enright 2000, p.2). When considering a focus on the female body, the importance of Enright’s gender and experience of pregnancy cannot be understated. In fact, she directly acknowledges the importance of this perspective in *Making Babies*, stating; ‘I was reared with the idea that, for a woman, anatomy is destiny, so I have always paid close attention to what the body is and what it actually does’ (Enright 2005, p.2). In conjunction with this focus on the importance of the body, Enright is at pains to point out the silence of the mother in Irish society to date in relation to pregnancy and having children:

What I’m interested in is not the drama of being a child, but this new drama of being a mother...about which so little has been written. Can mothers not hold a pen? Or is it just the fact that we are all children, when we write? (Enright 2005, p.42)

In writing *Making Babies*, Enright challenges the theory put forward by feminist academic Susan Rubin Suleiman in ‘Writing and Motherhood’ that mothers ‘don’t write, they are written’ (Suleiman 1985, p.117). Through this text, and through her representation of her pregnant female characters, Enright provides a voice for the pregnant body, in all its complexities and representations. Whether describing her own experience of pregnancy, or writing about pregnant characters and/or mothers in her novels and short stories, Enright is at pains to describe what it is to be pregnant, and to set out the actual experience of it and how it affects one’s very identity. This is evinced clearly in *Making Babies* when she realises that:

motherhood happens in the body, as much as the mind. I thought childbirth was a sort of journey that you could send dispatches home from, but of course it is not – it *is* home. (Enright 2005, p.47).

Enright's texts explore the complexities of the female pregnant body and reactions to it. She explores the positive experiences of women, who, like herself, feel a sense of fulfilment through pregnancy and childbirth: 'when I first had a child, I was so delighted, I wanted to say, "Do whatever it takes"' (Enright 2005, p.14). She also identifies with the confusion which women can feel about their self-identity upon falling pregnant; 'I don't know what I am. Am I twice as nice? Am I twice as alive now as I ever was?' (Enright 2000, p.2). Her elucidation of the complexities of the changing female body parallel Kristeva's assertion in *Motherhood According to Bellini*, that:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. 'It happens, but I'm not there.' 'I cannot realize it, but it goes on.' Motherhood's impossible syllogism. (Kristeva 1980, p.237)

Enright's texts similarly explore more complex and negative feelings associated with pregnancy, such as feelings of occupation, loneliness and fear:

What is it like being pregnant? 'It is like having an alien inside you,' a woman said to me, many years ago. 'No really, it is.' She had three. We do not choose, sometimes, to be occupied by this other creature, and this is one reason why women find pregnancy unsettling. It is assumed that our bodies will 'know', even if we don't, what pregnancy is like and what it is for: that we are, on some cellular level, wise, or even keen on the reproductive game. But I do not know how such cellular knowledge might happen, or where it might inhere. (Enright 2005, p.11)

This exploration of the complexities of the pregnant body and experience can be linked to Butler's discussion of Žižek's argument that 'the "subject" is produced in language through an act of foreclosure (*Verwerfung*)':

What is refused or repudiated in the formation of the subject continues to determine that subject. What remains outside this subject, set outside by the act of foreclosure which founds the subject, persists as a kind of defining negativity. The subject is, as a result, never coherent and never self-identical precisely because it is founded and, indeed, continually refounded, through a set of defining foreclosures and repressions that constitute the discontinuity and incompleteness of the subject (Butler 1993, pp.189-190)

One could say that in representing a multiplicity of images, both positive and negative, about the pregnant body, Enright is trying to move past the limited Irish signifier of the 'pregnant woman' in order to open the term up to a more complex bodily and emotional interpretation. By attempting to include elements of the pregnant bodily presence which have traditionally been repressed and placed outside the subject, Enright's work seeks to expand the traditional representation of the pregnant woman in Irish literature. By exploring the Irish woman's relationship to her new pregnant self, what Enright terms her 'motherandchild' presence, and the reaction of family and society to this new entity, Enright's works have significantly widened the exploration of the body, and particularly the female body, within a distinctly Irish paradigm (Enright 2005, p.20).

While she admits how problematic it is to identify and define the pregnant body, Enright does open a discussion on the pregnant body that moves away from a traditionally Irish association of the pregnant body as a social construct:

A pregnant woman does not know what she is. She has been overtaken. She feels sick but she is not sick, she lives underwater, where there are no words. The world goes funny on her; it is accusing when she is delighted, and applauds when she feels like shit. (Enright 2005, p.20)

In doing so, Enright's representation of the female pregnant body can be seen as an attempt to, as Irigaray states, 'resubmit' the female pregnant presence within an Irish societal paradigm (Irigaray 1985a, p.76). Irigaray posits that by this process of

resubmission, woman can 'try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it':

It means to resubmit herself...to 'ideas,' in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. (Irigaray 1985b, p.76)

Enright, in a sense, by focusing on the bodily experience of being pregnant, has resubmitted the pregnant body to Irish society at large for exploration, discussion and debate, thereby making the body itself the focus, through making visible that which had previously been occluded. The point could be made that by doing this, Enright is moving beyond Plato's discourse in relation to the female bodily form in *Timeaus*. At one point in *Timeaus*, Plato likens the mother to 'the receiving principle', stating that:

the mother and receptacle of all created and visible, and in any way sensible things, is not to be termed earth, or air, or fire, or water, or any of their compounds, or any of the elements out of which they are composed, but is an invisible and formless being which receives all things. (Plato 2010, p.544)

By positing the woman/mother as a receptive vessel, Plato here in some ways denies her ability to achieve a true and distinct form, and also seems to deny the woman any sense of subjective agency. This negation of the female form by Plato is commented upon by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter*, when she laments that the woman/mother as 'receiving principle' 'has no proper shape and is not a body' (Butler 1993, p.40). One could argue that this also typifies the way in which the pregnant body, and in particular the transgressive pregnant body, was traditionally delineated in Irish society. By making this previously hidden or occluded body visible, numerous issues and themes centring on the anxiety of reproduction have been raised.

## To Be Or Not To Be Pregnant, That Is The Question

In the works of McGahern and Enright, there is a strong focus on the anxieties associated with reproduction and the pregnant body. These anxieties, and the way in which they are expressed by pregnant women themselves, by the fathers of their children, by their families and by society at large, provide the reader with an insight into how Irish society interacts, or perhaps is unable to interact, with the pregnant presence. It could be argued that the first anxiety that many modern Irish women face in relation to pregnancy is the choice over whether they should have children or not, and if so then what is the correct time in their lives to have a baby. The way in which the two writers deal with women's anxieties about whether, and when, to start a family or have another baby, can be seen to be indicative of the way in which Irish society has changed in relation to reproductive choice from the mid-twentieth century right up to the present day.

It is notable that in comparison to the direct engagement which Enright displays in relation to the complex personal and social anxieties which women feel over the decision to become pregnant or not (an issue which will be discussed at length later in the chapter), the works John McGahern do not engage as directly with, or refer to, these issues. In fact, one of the few occasions in these works where this issue is latently referred to is in *The Leavetaking*, when Patrick Moran's mother was warned by doctors to avoid pregnancy in order to prevent the spread of the cancer from which she suffered:

...she'd been warned that under no circumstances must she get pregnant. There was a risk that if any of the cancer still remained in the opening of the ductal glands it would pour into the whole bloodstream. (McGahern 1984, p.65)

The anxiety over becoming pregnant is both overwhelming, when one considers the possible health ramifications, but also in a sense, something unconsidered, or perhaps not considerable by Patrick's mother, when confronted with her husband's need for sexual intimacy:

'Is it all right?' he drew her to him.  
'It's a dangerous time.'  
'I'll be careful,' starved for sexuality he could not hold back.  
She turned to him: it was her duty. (McGahern 1984, p.65)

In this passage, Patrick's mother becomes the embodiment of Plato's receptacle, denied subjective agency, as she accepts sexual intercourse and the attendant risk of pregnancy without question. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Patrick Moran admits in the novel that he imagined 'the night that she conceived', thus essentially denying us access to the true emotion and perhaps anxiety felt by his mother (McGahern 1984, p.65). By not allowing Patrick's mother to speak directly to the reader, her voice, her feelings and her fears about the possibility of becoming pregnant, and the connection that that pregnancy would have to the cancer currently ravishing her body, are effectively silenced. Perhaps the mediation of this scene through the imagination of Patrick latently signals the inability of Irish society at the time, to engage with these issues, should they be voiced directly through a female persona.

Despite Patrick's admission that he imagined the setting in which his sibling was conceived, the wording utilised in the above quotation by McGahern is analytically significant when considered in an Irish historical and social setting (McGahern 1984, p.65). At a time when contraception was illegal, outlawed by both the state and by the Church, women's reproductive choice was curtailed, and

reproductive choice, in any capacity, was not a consideration for the vast majority of Irish women. The fact that Patrick's mother turned to her husband, as was 'her duty', situated the control over sex and choice within intimate relationships within the patriarchal sphere, thus in many ways removing a woman's choice over whether to try for a baby or not at any particular time (McGahern 1984, p.65). At this particular time in Ireland's history, when the anxiety over whether to have children or not was considerable, Patrick's mother's imagined reaction to the possibility that she may become pregnant is vitally important. Patrick imagines his father as uneasy in the wake of their lovemaking and worries about the possibility that she will fall pregnant, whereas he imagines that his mother turns 'into the quiet fatalism' of 'the will of God' (McGahern 1984, p.65). Again, it seems here that the female character occludes her own anxiety, subsuming it within her religious faith. However, it must be asked whether her condition is due to the will of God, or to the will of the Church as an institution at that particular time? In the same way that Mary was deemed to be the receptacle of the Holy Spirit, and the immaculate carrier of the son of God, so women could be seen as the receptacle of sex, and thus destined to bear the consequences of such a union. Anne Enright alludes to this particular Irish paradigm in *Making Babies* when she states:

Growing up in Ireland, we didn't need aliens – we already had a race of higher beings to gaze deep into our eyes and force us to have babies against our will: we called them priests. It is great being Catholic. (Enright 2005, p.5)

It could be argued that in the mid-to-late twentieth century, the powerful combination of Church and State condemnation of contraception, coupled with patriarchal power within the Irish home and within the bedroom, aided in silencing anxieties that married Irish women may have felt about whether or not to have

children. Even the laws in Ireland at the time reinforced the power of patriarchy within the marital bedroom. For example marital rape 'did not become a crime until January 1991 after the introduction of the Criminal Law (Rape) (Amendment) Act 1990' (Gartland 2011). In a briefing note prepared for the then-Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Seán Doherty in 1981, in advance of a Dáil debate on the Criminal Law (Rape) Act 1981, it was stated that:

the reason most usually advanced to justify the husband's immunity was that the wife on marriage gives a general consent to intercourse with her husband, 'so that the husband can never be regarded as having intercourse without her consent'. (Gartland 2011)

Therefore, when considering the lack of direct engagement with the issue of anxiety over the decision to have children in the works of McGahern, it is important to note that it is precisely this lack of engagement which is key to the reader's understanding of this issue in relation to mid-to-late twentieth century Ireland. Enright cleverly parodies this notion of automatic acceptance of pregnancy by a woman in *The Wig My Father Wore*, when Grace says:

... I was in love, whatever that meant, with a man who rang one Saturday morning and asked me to have his child. Certainly, I said. In Ireland we have babies just like that. We have them all the time. So I got on a plane and flew across the Irish Sea to a hotel bedroom where I took off my clothes and lay down on a candlewick bedspread and crooked my knees, and said 'I love you' and he said 'I love you' and swung his slow bollocks down to me, full of the miracle of creation. (Enright 2007c, p.57)

Perhaps the fact that Grace does not become pregnant on this occasion could be construed as a latent manifestation of the impossibility of deciding on the production of new life without an anxiety of some kind.

In this, and many other examples, Enright engages with the personal and social anxieties which modern Irish women face when thinking about starting a

family. While Enright arguably has the advantage, being a mother herself, and of being able to detail her own experiential knowledge of pregnancy and its incumbent joys and anxieties, experiences which, as a man, McGahern is denied, nevertheless, the evidence presented above points to additional reasons as to why McGahern's work engages less with the social and personal anxieties which Irish women face when deciding on whether to become a mother than does Enright. The anxieties discussed and debated in Enright's work can be viewed, in an Irish context, as a relatively modern phenomenon, rising from many arenas, such as a relaxation of Church and State control and condemnation of contraception; the advent of the women's right's movement and their strong and direct campaigns for the legalising of contraception (and with it the legalising of women and indeed couple's choice in relation to the timing and number of children they would have); and the movement of women into the workforce in greater numbers.

Irish society has changed radically in many ways over the past decades, and attitudes in relation to pregnancy and families are an intrinsic part of this change. This can be seen through Enright's fiction where pregnancy is not considered a given any more, and where women are often seen agonising over the merits of having children, and about the effect that having a child will have on their lives, bodies, careers, husbands, families and their place in society. Enright outlines these anxieties in *Making Babies* when she states:

I see them wondering, Does he love me and do I love him? and Will I have to give up smoking? and What about my job? and I don't want to be that fat woman in the supermarket, and What if it is autistic and Don't they cry all the time? and I want to say, 'It's fine.' More than that, when I first had a child, I was so delighted, I wanted to say, 'Do whatever it takes.' (Enright 2005, p.14)

In this quotation, Enright touches on some of the prominent issues and anxieties facing modern Irish women as they decide whether or not to have children? This is mirrored by Lerner's assertion in *The Mother Dance: How Children Change Your Life*:

I would not advise any woman to slide haphazardly into mother-hood. It's not a good idea to close your eyes, hold your nose, and jump. There are things to be considered, not the least of which are how a baby fits into your own life plan and whether or not you feel prepared to rear it. Indeed, there are countless questions to reflect on if you are contemplating having children. For example, what are your short- and long-term work and career goals? Where do you most want to invest your time, talent, energy, and money? What is the condition of your marriage, if you have one, and your overall support system? What are your fantasies about what you will gain or lose from having a baby? How much responsibility are you ready to take on? How will you and your partner decide how much time each of you will spend on child care? Are you prepared, if necessary, to care for a child with a severe emotional or physical disability? The list goes on and on. (Lerner 2001, p.13)

What is interesting to note within an Irish context is that women have moved from a point, as previously outlined in McGahern's writing, where potential mothers did not consider these factors, to a point where they are now often encouraged to plan their reproduction, in order to have time to advance their careers, or to provide them with the space in which to feel emotionally and financially ready to have children.

Gina, Enright's main protagonist in *The Forgotten Waltz*, for example, directly states the impossibility of her and her husband having a family as:

Apart from anything else, how were we supposed to pay for it? The mortgage was two and a half grand a month, the childcare would be another grand on top of that. A new house – because you can't rear children in a lopsided box – would be hundreds upon hundreds of thousands more. So it didn't matter what Conor wanted, or what I wanted... (Enright 2011a, p.147)

Enright herself similarly touches on her own feelings in relation to planning pregnancy in *Making Babies* when she states:

I was reared in the seventies, by a woman who had been reared in the thirties, and we were both agreed that getting pregnant was the worst thing that could happen to a girl. My mother thought it would ruin my marriage prospects and I thought it would ruin my career prospects (same thing, really, by the different light of our times)... I could not get pregnant, I thought, until I had 'gotten somewhere' ... (Enright 2005, p.13)

The use of contraception and pre-planning in relation to starting their family, implies, in the words of Irigaray, 'the possibility of *modifying women's social status*, and thus of modifying the modes of social relations between men and women' (Irigaray 1985, pp.83-84).

### **The Anxiety of Not Reproducing.**

While, as stated previously, there are numerous anxieties surrounding the act of reproduction within Irish society, it is clear that there is also a plethora of anxieties concerning the inability to have children. Christine Battersby makes the point that 'whether or not a woman is lesbian, infertile, post-menopausal or childless, in modern western cultures she will be assigned a subject-position linked to a body that has perceived potentialities for birth' (Battersby 1998, p.16). Both McGahern and Enright deconstruct the traditional assumption that all women wish to be mothers, and the personal, social and cultural anxieties which Irish women experience when they do not, or cannot ascribe to this role. Judith Butler refers to this painful issue in an interview published in *Radical Philosophy*, stating:

It's a practical problem. If you are in your late twenties or your early thirties and you can't get pregnant for biological reasons, or maybe you don't want to, for social reasons – whatever it is – you are struggling with a norm that is regulating your sex. It takes a pretty vigorous (and politically informed) community around you to alleviate the possible sense of failure, or loss, or impoverishment or inadequacy – a collective struggle to rethink a dominant norm. (Butler 1994, p.34)

McGahern and Enright both focus on the way in which Irish society, rather than alleviating what Butler terms ‘the possible sense of failure, or loss, or impoverishment or inadequacy’, instead instils and intensifies these feelings when a woman does not, or cannot, conceive (Butler 1994, p.34). In particular, they both focus upon the way in which reproductive issues are generally blamed on women, with little or no consideration that any other factors (such as the potential fathers), could be the cause. This is seen in *The Barracks*, in the opening pages, when Guard Casey’s wife is introduced to the reader. Rather than being provided with a physical description of Mrs Casey, or even a description of her primary attributes, Mrs Casey is introduced simply as ‘childless’:

Casey’s wife was childless and when barrack orderly fell to his turn and he had to sleep nights in the dayroom, on the official iron bed between the phone and the wall of the lock-up, Una would often have to go to sleep with her, for she couldn’t be got to stay alone in the house on these nights. (McGahern 2008a, p.11)

Positing Mrs Casey as ‘childless’ in this opening chapter is highly significant. It is important to note that the particular construction of this sentence implies that Casey’s wife is childless, not Casey himself. The sentence construction here would seem to lay the entirety of the blame for the couple’s lack of procreation at the feet of Mrs Casey, rather than at those of her husband, suggesting that the female body is somehow lacking, rather than the male. Indeed, as the novel progresses, it is evident that Mrs Casey is belittled and condemned, particularly by the wives of Guards Mullins and Brennan, who ‘never lost a chance to make her feel her childlessness, parading their own large families before her like manifestoes’ (McGahern 2008a, p.50). Socially, it seems, they feel that she is inferior due to her inability to reproduce, and as a result they seem to revel in intensifying her feelings of loneliness and loss.

While Elizabeth too, is technically childless, having none of her own biological children, being stepmother to Reegan's children spares her from their condemnation:

They never tried this with Elizabeth: she was too detached: her age and years in London gave her position in their eyes; and with Reegan's three children she hadn't the appearance of either the leisure or money that could rouse their envy. (McGahern 2008a, p.50)

Interestingly, Mrs Casey's attempt to replicate Elizabeth's situation by adopting a child from 'the Home', thus freeing herself from the social ostracism that she has experienced, is thwarted by her husband, who perhaps feels unable to accept a child to whom he is not biologically connected:

I was at Ned to adopt one out of the Home but he wouldn't hear of it. They'd have bad blood or wild, their father's or mother's blood, he said. (McGahern 2008a, p.167)

It is interesting that when Mrs Casey confides her worries to Elizabeth, the latter maintains that 'her own situation didn't seem so desperate when it was confronted with such as this' (McGahern 2008a, p.167). It is revealing that a woman, terminally ill with cancer, would feel that her own situation pales in comparison to a childless woman trying to survive and live happily in her own community. It points to the degree to which not being a mother or being unable to have children brought with it an inherent loss of social identity in twentieth century Ireland.

Later in his career, McGahern again explores the propensity to apportion blame to women in the event that a couple is unable to conceive, in *The Leavetaking*. Patrick's mother faces condemnation and judgement from her husband, his mother, and the wider community for not falling pregnant immediately following her marriage:

She was always glad when her mother-in-law decided to remain some days behind in the barracks with her son, for...what she pursued her most with was why she wasn't pregnant, she was young woman yet. When this was given another twist by her husband, 'You know I don't mind, Kate, but people are wondering about why you're not expecting yet,' she felt quite hunted and it was with relief she discovered herself pregnant at the end of the second long school holiday in the barracks. They'd be satisfied now... (McGahern 1984, p.47)

Her personal happiness about becoming pregnant becomes subsumed through satisfying the familial and societal need for her to be pregnant. McGahern's careful use of language here is important. His use of the words such as 'pursue' and 'hunted', in the above passage, is indicative of how threatening it was for women to be constantly questioned about their fertility, either by their husbands, their extended family or by the community at large.

Finally, this topic is lastly touched upon in McGahern's final novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, when Patrick Ryan questions the main protagonist Ruttledge about his and his wife's childlessness:

'Do you miss not having children?' Patrick Ryan asked aggressively as if sensing the evasion.  
'No. You can't miss what you never had. It's not as if there aren't enough people in the world.'  
'Was she too old when you started?'  
'No, Patrick. She wasn't too old,' Ruttledge said quietly but with an edge of steel. (McGahern 2010, p.56)

Immediately Patrick's assumption is that Kate is to blame for the couple's not having children, and Patrick's questioning could alternately be interpreted as society's questioning and judgement of the couple for choosing not to have children. The traditional assumption that a married couple will elect to have a family, and the societal condemnation and/or judgement should they decide not to do so, is attacked by Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa*. She states that pregnancy 'cannot be traced back...to some form of fate':

If there's a risk there's not an inevitable trap: may women be spared the pressure, under the guise of consciousness-raising, of a supplement of interdictions. Either you want a kid or you don't-that's your business. Let nobody threaten you; in satisfying your desire, let not the fear of becoming the accomplice to a sociality succeed the old-time fear of being 'taken'. (Cixous 1976, p.890)

It could be intimated that the Ruttledges simply chose not to have children, however, McGahern never extrapolates any further about the exact reasons, and so the reader is left wondering. Perhaps McGahern is being purposefully obtuse about their reasons here, echoing Cixous' statement that wanting or not wanting a child is 'your business' (Cixous 1976, p.890).

Enright's novels and short stories similarly explore the anxieties of women who do not, or cannot, conceive in twenty-first century Ireland. Her works act as a counterpoint to those of McGahern, providing an insight into how societal opinions in relation to childlessness have changed, or indeed remained the same. The pressure put upon women to choose a life with children rather than one without, is outlined by Enright in her first novel *The Wig My Father Wore*. Grace, the main protagonist, ruminates about her mother's beliefs on motherhood as she strips the wallpaper in her home:

'A house needs children,' said my mother. She wanted to say that only a baby understands a carpet, that walls need to be written on, to keep them in their place. She wanted to say that there is no luck in it, but she is a modern woman and kept her mouth shut. Even so, her reproductive glee and Oprah's egging on follow me about the room so I strip the walls of the tatty, acid chintz and find the newspaper that was used for lining underneath. (Enright, 2007c, p.85)

Grace's mother's reproductive glee symbolises a societal reproductive glee which encourages women, at times voraciously, to become mothers.

In her short story 'Fat Girl Terrestrial', Enright explores the anxieties relating to not reproducing, namely the familial pressure which is brought to bear upon women, who, having reached a certain age, have not married and have no children. The main protagonist Bridget, is single at the beginning of the story, and through she has a successful career, owns her own apartment and is financially comfortable, she is, in her mother's eyes, incomplete without a child:

Once a week she visited her elderly mother who had a medical pragmatism about sex. If Bridget did not find a husband soon then her insides would wither away and have to be removed...in her mother's eyes Bridget was far too fat for casual sex. She was, however, with her apartment, her job, and her motherly laugh, a Fine Catch. So there was a chance that some lonely and sensible man would save her womb from ossification in the grateful boredom of the marriage bed. (Enright 2007b, p.134)

Once again, the onus here is on Bridget to find a husband who would 'save' her by enabling her to have a baby. In *The Wig My Father Wore*, Grace agrees, on the spur of the moment, to conceive a child with a man with whom she is in love. However despite her wish to conceive, she is shocked and frustrated when she finds she is not pregnant with his child:

I was quite surprised to find that my body had deserted me in its finest hour, that it had slammed the door and pissed off home. What had been a space was now a rope, twisted through my guts and moored to my heart, which would not let it go...So after this dry birth, my cells taught me how to forget him, one day at a time, and my eyes would not cry for me and my womb remained tactful and serene. 'Bitch', I said... (Enright 2007c, p.58)

Interestingly, Grace blames her womb, her reproductive system, for not becoming pregnant. No consideration is given to the possibility that other factors may have been to blame. Similarly in Enright's later novel *What Are You Like?*, Anna reminisces on the way in which she agonised about being pregnant when she married initially:

I was always pregnant. I was never pregnant. I walked from room to room, ambushed by all these things. The past and the future were as big as they ever were, with nothing in the middle, except this empty, waiting house, my blank body in the centre of it, like a gap in the middle of a hole. (Enright 2001, p.246)

The description here of the body as 'blank' emphasises a lack, a perceived inadequacy on the part of the female for not falling pregnant.

Finally, in Enright's latest novel *The Forgotten Waltz*, the main protagonist, Gina, feels an intense sense of guilt, upon leaving her husband, as she feels that she is taking the very possibility of a child away from him:

When he was asleep, I stood up, leaving the shape of myself on the duvet, and I walked out of the room. I took my bag, and the suitcase of clothes, and I took the thing he wanted most – a little boy, maybe, as yet unmade; a sturdy little runaround fella, for sitting on his shoulders, and videogames down the arcade, and football in the park. (Enright 2011a, pp.146-147)

While Gina is primarily to blame for the break-up of their marriage, by having an affair, it is interesting that guilt in relation to conceiving or not conceiving persists in the novel, even when the couple were not actively trying to have a child. Through these characters, Enright builds upon and moves beyond the works of McGahern, in terms of a female perspective, providing the reader with a deeply personal account of the way in which societal, familial, and importantly personal pressure affects women who choose not to or cannot have children.

However, alternately in Enright's novels, she also acknowledges that for some women, there is little or no anxiety surrounding not reproducing or choosing not to have a family in modern Irish society. In *Making Babies*, she admits that 'most women are more interested in sexual love than the act in the maternal variety, they want a man more than they want children, or at least they want it *first*' (Enright 2005,

p.14). However, like McGahern in *The Barracks*, she also acknowledges that there is a clear societal distinction between women who have babies, and those who do not:

I spent most of my thirties facing a glass wall. On the other side of this wall were women with babies – ‘mothers’, you might call them. On my side were women who simply *were*. (Enright 2005, p.13)

This extract points to a clear division of women based upon their choosing to (or indeed being able to), engage in reproduction or not. Enright touches upon this subject again in *The Gathering*, when Veronica talks about her sisters’ attitudes to starting a family:

Most of the girls are genetic culs-de-sac and who would blame them, though Midge had six – she had them early and she had them often; her first coinciding with Mammy’s last (it’s not a competition, you know)... (Enright 2007a, pp.185-186)

While this comment postulates a new attitude to modern Ireland, where women can choose to have babies or not without succumbing to societal recrimination, nevertheless, when both writers’ works are considered, one cannot ignore the anxiety that women experience in this whole area. However, McGahern and Enright’s works function to open the debate centring on reproduction in Ireland, aiding to achieve what Cixous strives for in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, namely to ‘demater-paternalize rather than deny woman, in an effort to avoid the co-optation of procreation, a thrilling era of the body (Cixous 1976, p.890). Cixous call to ‘let us defetishize’, is a call answered by writers such as McGahern and Enright, who open a debate about normative values centring on reproduction in Ireland (Cixous 1976, p.890).

## The Transgressive Pregnant Presence

Linked the exploration of the anxiety of not reproducing in Ireland is the anguish and anxiety of miscarrying an illegitimate baby. Many women who gave birth to stillborn babies, or babies who died immediately following birth, chose to hide that baby and bury it themselves, rather than to involve their family or the authorities in the matter. The condemnation feared by these women, from family, community, church and state, in many ways forced them to subvert and occlude their stillbirths and/or miscarriages. McGahern himself lamented this situation stating, in the introduction to the play that:

...the sad lusting after respectability, sugar-coated with sanctimoniousness and held together by a thin binding of religious doctrine and ceremony, combined to form a very dark and explosive force that, generally, went inwards and hid. (McGahern 1991b, p.vii)

The concealment of a pregnancy that did not conform to societal norms, of which the Anne Lovett and Kerry Babies cases are just two examples, is an issue which is explored by McGahern in his play *The Power of Darkness*. The primary family unit in the play is the King family: Peter, his daughter Maggie and her stepmother Eileen, who murders her elderly husband Peter to avoid being disinherited by him. The newly widowed Eileen proceeds to marry her lover Paul, a labourer on the King farm; however, Paul soon engages in an intimate relationship with her step-daughter Maggie. This relationship results in Maggie becoming pregnant with Paul's child, a circumstance which has far-reaching implications both for Maggie and for her extended family. When another farm labourer, Paddy, asks Eileen if Maggie is soon to be married, Eileen responds:

Eileen: (*With feeling*) I wish she was. If she's not married soon it will be too late.  
Paddy: Wasn't there a marriage arranged?

Eileen: There was but it fell through. I fear they smelled a rat. People are no fools.

Paddy: Oh, there could be a rat in that stack all right. That's the kind of rat that (*Mimics a baby's cry*) when it comes out of the stack, could be awkward. (McGahern 1991b, p.28)

Once again in this passage it is evident that the transgressive pregnant presence is somewhat occluded, with both characters choosing to speak indirectly about Maggie's pregnancy, and the effect that it is having on her reputation in the community and on her marriage prospects.

The necessity of binding Maggie's transgressive pregnant body with the cloak of respectability that marriage offers is evident when Eileen speaks to Paul after Maggie's wedding, telling him 'There were times this morning I thought we'd never get Maggie to the church, but it is all tied, sealed and delivered by now' (McGahern 1991b, p.40). A marriage, which has been arranged in haste to Mikey Coyne, provides Maggie with one of the few ways to legitimise her pregnancy within her community, namely by pretending that the baby is that of her new husband. However, in the final scenes of the play, Maggie suffers a miscarriage on the night of her wedding, a miscarriage which must be hidden at all costs from the groom, his family and the community at large, in order to protect her reputation and the marriage. However, in a re-working of the traditional tale, McGahern interestingly places the male, Paul, in the position of concealing the miscarriage. Eileen tells him that 'You and Maggie had your fun. Now you'll have to get rid of the fun' (McGahern 1991b, p.41). Paul's mother Baby and Eileen charge Paul with concealing the foetus, by burying it on the farm:

Eileen: What will I say to them in the house?

Baby: Tell them women's business and the excitement of the day, and it's probably nothing, but that the doctor said she had to be quiet till he sees her again. They're that drunk they'll believe anything.

Eileen: I'll do that as long as this gentleman does his part. Take your bundle.

Baby: (*Thrusting it into his arms*) Get it out of sight quick.

Paul: is it alive?

Baby: How could it be alive the way it came into the world? Take it! We have to be quick. Every minute it's here we're in danger. Leave it in some gripe, the sheets can be burned after.

Paul: What if we're found out?

Baby: How could you be found out? In your own house. On your own land. We have no time to waste on this talk.

Paul: I'll not do it. Do it yourselves if you want...

Eileen: You better take it. If you don't take it I'll spill the whole beans. Then we'll see how your tenderness will fare. I'll only keep quiet as long as you do your part. (McGahern 1991b, pp.41-42)

Though Paul does indeed bury the baby on their land, he is unable to continue to conceal the event, and his guilt and remorse lead him to confess all to the wedding party in the house:

Paul: Forgive me, good people. Now I'll go and confess before God.  
(*Father and son exit towards the house. The tumult rises louder from the wedding party as Paul's confession proceeds in the house. Cries of 'seize him, terrible, God will forgive,' amid general mayhem, wakes Paddy out of the straw.*). (McGahern 1991b, p.52)

Men, in this play, are seen to be far less capable of concealing social transgressions than women. Baby, Paul's mother, makes a statement which perhaps provides an insight into why women are, or appear to be, more capable of concealment than men. When Paul questions Maggie's ability to rise out of bed and go with her husband in the wake of the miscarriage, Baby replies 'She'll be able. Women are able for a lot more than the men. They have to be' (McGahern 1991b, p.47).

Arguably Maggie has more at stake than Paul, as she has more to lose if the concealment is found out. The women in the play understand this; they realise that Maggie's reputation, and by extension the reputation of the family, are at stake, and so their resolve is much firmer than that of Paul. Paul chooses to confess to the crowd, whereas arguably even if she wanted to, Maggie cannot. Maggie, Baby and Eileen can be viewed, in this context, as a representation of Irish women who were forced,

through societal convention, to conceal miscarriages and stillbirths which occurred outside of societal norms. Baby speaks of the frequency of these situations when Paul, shocked and guilt-ridden in the aftermath of concealing the foetus asks:

Paul: What did we throw into the gripe, Mother?

Baby: An accident. Nothing. Something that happens every day in hospitals, and out of them. (McGahern 1991b, p.47)

This statement stands testament to the silence and occlusion of mothers who fell pregnant outside of societal norms in mid-to-late twentieth century Ireland. The voices of Paul, Baby and Eileen, the decisions they make in the wake of Maggie's miscarriage and the feelings which they express during the concealment – fear, anger, sadness, guilt, resolve and weakness – represent the complex feelings and immensely difficult situations into which some Irish mothers were forced, that necessitated, at least in their minds, the concealment of the birth or miscarriage of a baby. The direct manner in which McGahern tackles this highly contentious and often occluded issue in Irish life, forces the reader to engage directly with the situation in which women like Maggie were placed, repositioning the transgressive pregnant presence as part of the national debate. This transgressive pregnant body returns, as Cixous states, 'from afar, from always: from "without,"...from below, from beyond "culture"' (Cixous 1976, p.877).

### **Anxieties in Relation to the Change in the Body and Identity**

Another anxiety that concerns women in relation to the decision to have a baby is the changes to their bodies and identities that will be faced during pregnancy. Enright touches upon the issue of bodily change and the loss of identity during pregnancy in *Making Babies* when she states:

If Kafka had been a woman, then Gregor Samsa would not have turned into an insect, he would not have had to. Gregor would be Gretel and she would wake up one morning pregnant. She would try to roll over and discover she was stuck on her back. She would wave her little hands uselessly in the air. (Enright 2005, p.17)

This point emphasises the degree to which a woman's body is transformed during pregnancy, and the resultant loss of control over that body which must be faced in order to bring life into the world. In the same way in which Samsa's radical physical alteration is uncontrolled and uncontrollable, so women who fall pregnant face an alteration to their body and their body image. In a modern world, where society and media privilege the slender, fit and aesthetically beautiful female form, the pressure on women to remain sexually attractive at all times is intense. In her article 'She Gives Birth, She's Wearing a Bikini: Mobilizing the Postpregnant Celebrity Mom Body to Manage the Post-Second Wave Crisis in Femininity', Dr Lynn O'Brien Hallstein highlights the women's concern 'about how pregnancy fundamentally challenges the contemporary slender, sexy ideal for women's bodies' (Hallstein 2011, p.120). Indeed, she comments on the way in which the pregnant body is now seen as a 'fat' body in relation to the slender ideal (Hallstein 2011, p.120). It can be argued that, despite the fact that, for most women, pregnancy is a beautiful and intensely fulfilling period in their lives, it also entails significant bodily change that can affect the way in which a woman views herself, her relationships with those around her, and the way in which she is viewed by society at large. Pregnancy thus represents a challenge to women's physical and social identities. One could argue that motherhood can be considered an 'otherhood' in Irish society, with pregnancy as a state of being which profoundly affects the way a woman is identified by family, community and society in general. It is the bodily changes which pregnant women, like Gregor, experience,

which posits them as other in society and profoundly affect the way in which they interact with society.

The bodily change which a woman experiences during pregnancy is an issue with which Enright directly engages throughout her work. She challenges the stereotypical notion that all women and, by extension, women's bodies, naturally accept and embrace pregnancy and the changes that it brings to the body:

It is assumed that our bodies will 'know', even if we don't, what pregnancy is like and what it is for: that we are, on some cellular level, wise, or even keen on the reproductive game. But I do not know how such cellular knowledge might happen, or where it might inhere. (Enright 2005, p.11)

In her short story 'Shaft', the main protagonist, a pregnant woman, ruminates upon her husband's response to her voicing concerns about her changing body:

'It's perfectly natural,' he says, when I tell him the trouble I am having with the veins in my legs... But sometimes I think he means, *We're just animals, you know*. And sometimes I think he means, *You in particular. You are just an animal*. (Enright 2009, p.145)

Both the husband and the wife's response to her anxiety are important to consider. The husband's statement that these changes are 'natural' implies to the pregnant woman that her anxieties are groundless, and that these bodily changes should be accepted happily. This response, though most likely well-meant, has the effect of negating the pregnant woman's anxiety and fear about her changing body image. The pregnant woman interprets her husband's response as reducing her to a mere animalistic other. One could argue that she feels subjectively defined by her new body, and that her discomfort about her body image is affecting the way in which she views her relationship with her husband.

This is echoed in *The Forgotten Waltz* when Gina refers to Fiachra's heavily pregnant wife as his 'Fat Flower' (Enright 2011a, p.90). It is interesting to note that Gina is never sure of the woman's actual name, 'Dahlia, or Delia, or Delilah', because in reality this woman has been reduced to an unidentified pregnant body, 'Fiachra's Fat Flower' (Enright 2011a, pp.84:90). By assigning Fiachra's wife this derogatory title, Gina negates her very identity, much in the same manner as the woman's husband in 'Shaft' negates and brushes off her concerns about her body. By positing her as a flower, an object incapable of communication, Enright further emphasises Fiachra's wife's loss of social identity, as well as her isolation from the rest of the partygoers and from Gina, who treats her as a figure of fear and awe throughout the scene. In this way Fiachra's wife could be linked, once again, to Gregor Samsa. When Gregor turns into an insect in *The Metamorphosis*, he is rendered unable to communicate with his family or indeed wider society. While pregnant women have the ability, of course, to communicate with their family, friends and the wider society, what this passage highlights is the way in which a pregnant woman's communication with the world is in many ways attenuated by the very fact of their pregnancy.

In 'Shaft', Enright also engages with the way in which the pregnant body is viewed by society and how this view challenges the self-identity of the mother. While sharing the lift with an American man, the pregnant woman becomes aware of his increasing interest in her body. His intense focus on her body, but more particularly on her stomach elicits a powerful emotional response from the woman:

I would prefer it if he looked at me, that's all – the American. Even if I was sliding down the mirrored wall in front of him, even if I was giving birth on the floor. I would prefer it if you looked at the person that I am, the person you see in my eyes. (Enright 2009, p.144)

The American's intense focus on the woman's stomach, in reality upon the child that she is carrying, can be seen to negate the woman's own self-identity. She has become what Enright defines as 'motherandchild' presence, and her identity has undergone a dynamic shift (Enright 2005, p.20). To be no longer considered as a solitary identity, but instead to be seen as a dual one, profoundly affects a person's previous self-image, forcing them to create a new identity which incorporates the new life within. The focus of the pregnant woman's plea shifts in this extract. She begins by wishing that 'he', the American, would look beyond her bump at the person that she is, but significantly she ends the quote by pleading to an unnamed 'you'. Though the woman is angry that the man (he) cannot see beyond her bump, in reality she is arguably angrier at society in general (you) for collectively engaging with her primarily as 'motherandchild' presence (Enright 2005, p.20). Enright's very specific choice of personal pronoun in this passage enables her to utilise a personal and intimate experience between two people as a way of opening a discussion centring on societal reactions and reception of the pregnant woman, and the ways in which women feel a distinct loss of societal identity when pregnant.

While it can be stated that women, in some ways, lose their personal social identity while pregnant, these women also seem to be imbued with a public status and public interest and appreciation, whether they wish it or not. Cixous, in *Laugh of the Medusa*, makes reference to this, citing 'the power' with which a pregnant woman 'seems invested' because:

it has always been suspected, that, when pregnant, the woman not only doubles her market value, but-what's more important-takes on intrinsic value as a woman in her own eyes and, undeniably, acquires body and sex. (Cixous 1976, p.891)

The wish to touch the pregnant body, and the societal obsession with the pregnant female form, and particularly the pregnancy bump, is a desire which needs to be explored, as do pregnant women's reaction to this often unwanted or unprovoked touch. It is interesting that in all of McGahern's work, only in *The Pornographer*, does a character, Michael, attempt to touch the pregnant body of Josephine. This could indicate that a societal and even quasi-sexual fascination with the pregnant female form is a relatively new concern in Irish society, but it is a concern which needs to be discussed. Feelings of anger and frustration, in relation to bodily control and the national obsession with the pregnancy bump, were expressed in an anonymous email from a pregnant woman to the *Gerry Ryan Show* in 2009. The woman wrote:

'Hi Gerry, I'm twenty-seven weeks pregnant and I've noticed that when you're pregnant, here in Ireland anyway, nobody greets you to your face anymore. They greet your bump. You get 'hi, how are you', while they look directly, not at your face, but at your bump' (The Gerry Ryan Show 2009).

Interestingly, in response to the woman's concerns about being socially imbibed as 'a pregnant woman' rather than simply 'a woman', and society's fascination with the pregnancy bump, Gerry Ryan asked 'is it because women become different creatures when they are pregnant?' (The Gerry Ryan Show 2009). This comment, and in particular the classification of pregnant women as 'creatures' by a national broadcaster, is indicative of how society can suggest that women's identity can change during pregnancy, leading to a situation where women crave a societal re-identification with themselves as subjects and individuals, and not simply as carriers of unborn progeny. Both the pregnant woman in 'Shaft', and the anonymous emailer on the *Gerry Ryan Show*, attempt 'not to submit to a desubjectivized social role, that

of the mother...which confines us to a mere function' (Irigaray 1991, p.42). In *The Bodily Encounter with the Mother*, Irigaray asks 'Have fathers ever been asked to renounce being men? Citizens? We do not have to renounce being women in order to be mothers' (Irigaray 1991, p.43). The pregnant woman in 'Shaft' and the anonymous emailer, in their own ways, are attempting to understand and circumvent societal pressure to renounce their identity as woman in order to appropriate their identity as mother.

This crisis of identity can be closely linked to Lacan's conception of the form of the body as given to a person as a *gestalt*, 'that is, in an exteriority in which...this form is more constitutive than constituted, but in which, above all', appears to a person as the contour of their stature (Lacan 2006, p.76). The fact that, in Lacanian terms, the *gestalt* is more constitutive than constituted is significant when one considers the changing identity of the pregnant woman. While it is clear that the woman's body changes irrespective of outside forces during pregnancy, it could be argued that the way in which she is viewed, and in which her new bodily form is interpreted, both by the woman herself and by wider society, can be deemed constitutive. While admittedly, Lacan's *gestalt* traditionally refers to a misrecognition of a unified self in the mirror, a misrecognition necessary in the process of subject formation, this study seeks to extrapolate this Lacanian theory into a social context, by utilising the figure of the Other as a societal mirror. This 'motherandchild' presence (Enright 2005, p.20) has been constituted by community, by Irish society, by the media, by the courts and to an extent by the church, and so upon becoming pregnant, women arguably are given a new *gestalt* through which to interpret their new role in life as pregnant woman. Enright touches upon this point in 'Shaft'. When the pregnant woman realises she is being watched, she instantly modulates her

behaviour to what she feels is expected of her as a pregnant woman: ‘I blinked a bit and smiled my most pregnant smile, all drifty and overwhelmed’ (Enright 2009, p.142). This identity, though transient, has a considerable effect on the woman’s self-identity. If, as Lacan suggests, the *gestalt* symbolises the ‘mental permanence’ of the I, then the effect of pregnancy and motherhood on the self-identity of women cannot be overlooked (Lacan 2006, p.76). Lacan points out that this *gestalt* is:

replete with the correspondences that unite the/with the statue onto which man projects himself, the phantoms that dominate him, and the automaton with which the world of his own making tends to achieve fruition in an ambiguous relation. (Lacan 2006, pp.76-77)

In the same way, the *gestalt* of the pregnant body could be said to be created from the internal and external maternal forces that shape our society, including personal, familial and societal projections of pregnancy. Irish society, therefore, can be seen to create the ideal Other *gestalt* towards which a pregnant woman aspires, which is an important point to consider when discussing self-identity amongst pregnant Irish women.

### **Feeling Occupied**

While Anne Enright’s novels, short stories and own memoirs of pregnancy in *Making Babies* feature women having very happy and comfortable experiences, she also explores alternative reactions and feelings relating to pregnancy. Far from presenting a unified picture of pregnancy as a positive experience for all women, Enright’s writing exposes the feeling of inescapability and occupation which some women experience during this time. Judith Newman points out that in *Making Babies*, Enright illuminates ‘the darkest corners of pregnancy and early motherhood – places that are

often as funny as they are hideous' (Newman 2012). Upon asking a woman 'What is it like being pregnant?' in *Making Babies*, the woman's response was "'It is like having an alien inside you'". Enright acknowledges the complexities of this profound experience, stating that 'We do not choose, sometimes, to be occupied by this other creature, and this is one reason why women find pregnancy unsettling' (Enright 2005, p.11). These feelings of occupation can be linked to Hélène Cixous' assertion in *Sorties* that 'woman is always on the side of passivity' (Cixous 2000, p.265). Whether becoming pregnant is a choice or not for a woman, once pregnant, a woman, in certain ways, loses control over the changes that her body will undergo. She becomes a passive passenger in a rapidly changing body, occupied by a being over which she has little or no control. Rozsika Parker reinforces this point, stating that prior to birth, 'one negative image a woman maintains of the foetus is often that of "parasite"' (Parker 2010, p.235).

It must be stated that this feeling of occupation is not always construed as a negative feeling. In 'What's Left of Henrietta Lacks', Enright talks frankly of her own pregnancy, stating; 'There is a part of me now that is entirely happy. I sit and listen to my own blood, or to someone's blood' (Enright 2000, p.8). Again this feeling of occupation is evident, although Enright as the occupied body seems perfectly content with her situation. What is significant is her voicing of these anxieties, and her presentation in her work of the complexity of the anxieties in relation to reproduction, along with her exploration of often conflicting opinions, beliefs and worries that occupy the minds of the pregnant or potentially pregnant woman. By outlining the positive and, more importantly the negative feelings associated with feelings of occupation during pregnancy, Enright once again makes visible the 'other mother' in

Irish society, the smothered mother who can feel, at times, overwhelmed by the residence of another life inside her.

### **Pregnancy as Consuming the Body**

Another anxiety which is touched upon in both McGahern and Enright's fiction is the notion of pregnancy as a consuming force. Closely related to the issue of the illegality of contraception, this issue was arguably a real and intense fear for many Irish mothers right up to 1979 and the introduction of the Health (Family Planning) Act which legalised the sale of contraceptives for 'bona fide' purposes 'for family planning purposes or for adequate medical reasons and in appropriate circumstances' (Office of the Attorney General 1979). The lack of availability of contraception prior to this meant that, for some women, pregnancy represented a real and significant danger to their health. These fears manifest themselves in the literature of McGahern in *The Leavetaking* and in *Memoir*. In both this novel and memoir, Patrick Moran's mother and McGahern's own mother are, in a sense, consumed by pregnancy, as their pregnancies intensified the spread of the cancer from which they each suffered. Both women were warned that 'under no circumstances' must they get pregnant; however, the illegality of contraception during the time period in which these books were set resulted in a situation where both mothers could not protect themselves from the risk of pregnancy without refusing intercourse to their husbands (McGahern 1984, p.65), something which, as we have seen, was both socially and legally expected. In the end, both women were literally consumed by a combination of pregnancy and disease. McGahern's work strongly echoes the case of Sheila Rodgers which Mary Holland outlines in an open letter to John Taylor on May 30<sup>th</sup> 1990:

Sheila Rodgers was married with two young children when she was diagnosed as having breast cancer. She was put on a course of treatment and at the same time taken off the contraceptive pill. Nobody seems to have advised her about alternative methods of contraception and she became pregnant. The treatment for her cancer was discontinued as it might endanger the embryo; at the same time, the effect of the pregnancy was to accelerate the spread of the cancer through her whole body. If she had lived in Britain, given the fact that she already had two children, the pregnancy would almost certainly have been terminated. This was not, of course, discussed. Instead, after several months of dreadful suffering which reduced her at times to screaming for some form of pain-killer she gave birth to a baby girl who died almost immediately. A few days later, Sheila herself died in great pain. (Holland 2004, p.84)

This real life event cruelly parallels in reality the fictive point which McGahern makes in *The Pornographer*, when Michael makes an observation upon peering into a hospital ward where his aunt is being treated:

All were women in this ward and they all had cancer. It was like being in the middle of a maternity ward in the night, and all those women were waiting to give birth, to their own death. (McGahern 1980, p.175)

This fear of being consumed by pregnancy and disease is similarly explored in many of Enright's novels. In *What Are You Like?* Berts' wife Anna develops a brain tumour while pregnant, and much in the same way as in *The Leavetaking* and *Memoir*, her family, the medical profession and Irish society in general, allow her body to be consumed by pregnancy and disease:

It was then that Berts told her about his wife on the bed, the child filling her stomach and the tumour filling her brain. How they wheeled her down to the operating theatre, her pelvis surging and her face blank. How they took out the child and turned off the machines, and waited. (Enright 2001, p.14)

Berts admits to himself that 'he would do the same again, if he had to', stating that the 'baby would live and that is what babies are for. She would die, because people do' (Enright 2001, p.7). This statement represents an individual expression of the traditional national ideology in Ireland. Anna's consumption by pregnancy and

disease is seen as a natural and unchangeable event, with the mother being sacrificed for the sake of the child. Mary Condren makes the point in *The Serpent and the Goddess* that:

Men become heroes within a male universe where the taking or the risking of life is at issue, but women's life-risking in childbirth meets with no such acclamation. Women are, nevertheless, expected to act heroically – even at the possible sacrifice of their own lives. Their heroism, far from being an act of will (like that of the male heroes and warriors), is an act compelled by law – so that not even at the point of death in childbirth can women any longer be admitted into the realm of the rational; not even then are they permitted to have any choice in the matter. (Condren 2002, p.206)

Anna, and by extension, Irish mothers of her time, are seen in a sense, to be living incubators, an identification and representation which profoundly affects their ability to be viewed as distinct identities, separate from their babies. Anna is viewed primarily as a pregnant woman, and only secondarily as a medically-ill woman. This enables Berts, the doctors and by implication Irish society, to posit her as an Other identity, one which can be denied treatment for the sake of the baby. This othering of the pregnant woman is evident in the fact that Anna is not consulted about this decision. Berts himself is aware that his wife is sacrificed, despite the fact there 'wasn't a part of his wife that had wanted to die. There wasn't a single cell of her that had wanted to die' (Enright 2001, p.10).

Enright's representation of Anna in *What Are You Like?* can be seen, therefore, as an individualistic exploration of a national ideology of Othering the mother. Article 41.2 of the Irish constitution, which recognises the special position of the woman in the home, can be seen to posit woman and mother as a distinct other in Irish society, an other that is in need of protection and regulation. Similarly, article 40.3 subsection three of the constitution's acknowledgement of the 'right to life of the unborn...with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother', situates the body of

the mother as distinct and other in relation to Irish women's bodies in general (Department of the Taoiseach 2012). This othering of the body and identity of the mother by Irish society can be seen in these instances to aid in the control and regulation of the pregnant body. While the *Protection of Life during Pregnancy Act* 2013 arguably serves to protect women at serious medical risk from being sacrificed for the sake of their unborn child, it will take time to assess the significant changes, if any, that will be brought about by this Act.

In *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, McGahern once again engages with the anxiety of being consumed by pregnancy. John Quinn, upon his first visit to the Rutledge household, makes a disturbing comment about his first wife Margaret, stating that she 'died under' him 'after bringing eight children into the world' (McGahern 2010, p.28). It is clear, as has been discussed, that Margaret's life with John Quinn was far from happy, and the characters in the novel repeatedly state that she faced continual sexual abuse throughout her married life. This factor must be considered when her mental state and death are analysed. However, her continual pregnancies must also be considered when analysing her failing health and ultimate death. Jamesie highlights the physical effect that multiple pregnancies had upon Margaret:

Margaret had the eight children, and then she got bad. One morning Johnny was out with the gun he saw her walking in her nightdress in her bare feet in the dew before it was fully light to see if the coolness would ease the pain... (McGahern 2010, p.35)

Margaret becomes little more than a reproductive machine, a means through which John Quinn could acquire land and progeny. As such, she becomes consumed by her ability to reproduce. Enright also focuses on this issue in *Making Babies*, when she remembers:

the women I knew when I was young who were pregnant all the time. I did sums: the mother of a school friend who had twenty-two pregnancies, eleven of which had come to term. She would look up from her plate, surrounded by bottles of pills, and say, 'Oh...Hello...' as though trying to figure out if you had come out of her or someone else. Her husband was mad about her, you could still see it, and her children, with the exception of the eldest boys, were complete strangers. (Enright 2005, p.24)

In this case, the focus shifts from woman being bodily consumed by pregnancy to their being mentally consumed by it. This is an issue with which she continues to engage in *The Gathering*. Veronica's mother in this novel has become mentally vacant, and Veronica and her siblings feel that her multiple pregnancies were a main cause of this forgetfulness. Veronica states that her mother 'had twelve children', the 'holes in her head are not her fault' (Enright 2007a, p.7). Thus, Veronica's mother loses her identity to pregnancy to a certain degree. Veronica acknowledges this when she states:

...she seems to disappear, and when I look, I see only the edges. I think I would pass her in the street, if she ever bought a different coat. If my mother committed a crime there would be no witnesses – she is forgetfulness itself. (Enright 2007a, p.3)

Multiple pregnancies have stripped Veronica's mother of her stable sense of self, positing her as a vague and fragmented Other, both to her children, and indeed, to Irish society. Indeed, Veronica's mother is perhaps the ultimate testament to how motherhood can become 'otherhood', as her very existence and identity within the home and society can be seen to have been utterly transformed by pregnancy.

### **Loss of Social Identity**

While it is clear that Enright's novels deal with the issue of loss of bodily identity, the quotations above clearly demonstrate the ability of her work to also engage with the

issue of the loss of social identity for pregnant women within a distinctly Irish paradigm. Enright is quick to acknowledge that, upon becoming pregnant, a woman's social identity, and the way in which she is treated by society at large, changes radically. Enright describes pregnancy in this sense as:

a non-place, a suspension, holiday from our fallible and compromised selves. There is no other time in a woman's life when she is so supported and praised and helped and loved. But perhaps it is not 'she' who gets all the attention, but 'they'; this particular, mutant, double self – motherandchild. (Enright 2005, p.20)

Once again, it could be argued, that the pregnant woman must surrender her previous identity in order to take up this new identity of 'pregnant woman'. Enright alludes to this fear of loss of identity in *Making Babies*, when she states that 'I could not get pregnant, I thought...until I "knew who I was", until I was in some way, more thoroughly myself' (Enright 2005, p.13). This statement highlights the struggle between a woman's sense of self as an individual, and the challenge that this sense of identity comes under in the wake of becoming pregnant.

In both McGahern and Enright's novels, specific aspects of the loss of social identity of the pregnant woman are explored. In *The Leavetaking*, when Patrick's mother becomes pregnant for the first time, her husband 'hardly ever stayed any nights', 'finding excuses to return to the barracks' (McGahern 1984, p.47). This pronounced avoidance of the pregnant presence posits the pregnant woman as a pariah of a sort, as an identity which must be avoided. This action, further socially isolating an already socially isolated individual, denies Patrick's mother her social identity as wife. This avoidance and isolation of the pregnant body brings to mind the practice of 'churching' (as already mentioned) where the new mother was ostracised from the church for a time after the birth of a child because she was deemed 'unclean'.

Similarly, Patrick's father's isolation and ostracising of his pregnant wife could speak to a notion of the pregnant body as, to an extent, unviewable, perhaps because it was a bodily public proof of sexual intercourse. In fact, the pregnant body is rarely encountered in McGahern's fiction, characters have been or become pregnant, but their pregnant bodies are not generally focused upon, perhaps latently outlining this fear or occlusion of the pregnant body.

Enright also explores the way in which pregnant women can feel a profound loss of social identity in her novel *The Forgotten Waltz* when, as already noted, the main protagonist Gina refers to Fiachra's heavily pregnant wife as Fiachra's 'Fat Flower' (Enright 2011a, 90). Whilst there is no question surrounding the validity of the identity of any other guest at the party, by denying Fiachra's wife her name, her very identity, as presented to the reader, is solely interlaced with that of her pregnant body. When Fiachra's wife attempts to communicate her anxieties to Gina, the latter's response is revealing:

She pulled me in over her belly – literally pulled me by the cloth of my top – and said, in a low voice:  
'Why is my husband talking to that girl?'  
'What?' I said. 'Would you give over.'  
'No really,' she said. 'Does he know her?'  
She was crying. When did that start?  
I said, 'Would you like something to eat, maybe?' and she said, 'Oh. Food.'  
Like she had never thought of doing *that* before. (Enright 2011a, p.83)

Gina simply refuses to engage with the woman's concerns, instead brushing them aside whilst simultaneously trying to distract her by fulfilling a bodily need. The pregnant woman, like Samsa, has thus become the Other in society, a being with whom communication and identification are problematic. It is significant that soon after this exchange, Gina remarks that she wanted to 'get away' from Fiachra's wife, 'but it didn't seem possible' (Enright 2011a, p.83). The pregnant woman has thus

become an inescapable, yet unnameable, presence in the room, a being that the other guests cannot escape from, yet one with whom they do not wish to engage.

In Enright's novels, she also explores the often unspoken anxiety, shared by both men and women, that a baby will bring a radical, and not always positive, change to the physical and emotional relationship between the mother and father. This anxiety centres on the assumption that the perception of one's partner, wife or husband, will intrinsically change in the aftermath of the birth of a baby. There is a fear that a husband or wife will no longer be primarily construed as a supportive life partner, providing emotional, physical and sexual care and love to their husband or wife, but rather will be seen as a parent, with emphasis clearly placed on the relationship with the child, and this can challenge a couple's collective social identity. Such a scenario is clearly outlined in *The Forgotten Waltz*. Fiachra and his wife are expecting their first child, and at a Christmas party at Seán's house, Fiachra voices his concern about the possible change in his physical relationship with his wife after the birth of the baby:

'First year – no sex,' Fiachra was saying into his wine glass. 'Isn't that what they say?'

'Ah, stop it,' said Seán. 'You won't know yourselves.'

Behind us, the woman slept, while the baby – I don't know – smiled, or sucked its thumb, or listened and knew better... (Enright 2011a, p.91)

Seán's reaction to Fiachra's admission of fear is indicative of the ongoing inability in Irish society to discuss taboo subjects such as sex and intimacy, even amongst friends. Fiachra's concerns are subsumed, and he is reminded once again that he is expected to feel one hundred per cent happy about the coming of the baby, and that to an extent, doubts about this are as taboo as the discussion about sex. This dismissal of anxieties resulting from a fear of changes to a couple's relationship is also highlighted from a

woman's perspective in *The Forgotten Waltz*, when Fiachra's wife latently expresses jealousy and insecurity when she sees her husband talking to another woman:

She pulled me in over her belly...and said, in a low voice:  
'Why is my husband talking to that girl?'  
'What?' I said. 'Would you give over.'  
'No really,' she said. 'Does he know her?'  
She was crying. (Enright 2011a, p.84)

Gina's reaction to Fiachra's wife's obvious fears centring on the happiness and strength of her and her husband's relationship during the pregnancy is one of disregard. Her anxieties (be they well-founded or not) are pushed aside as Gina obviously tries to distract her with a mixture of platitudes and food. Once again, the anxiety about the relationship is subsumed, not engaged with. The question must be asked, would Gina have engaged with this woman in the same way had she not been pregnant?

Enright herself returns to the lack of discussion in relation to anxieties and difficulties facing couples in the aftermath of starting a family faces in *Making Babies*, when she notes that is increasingly difficult to find a mother or father who will engage in a discussion centring on the question 'When does the sex thing, you know... get back on track?' (Enright 2005, p.60). She asks the men and in return receives only 'melancholic silence' (Enright 2005, p.60). She comes to the realisation that:

No one wants to talk about sex, but they were all talk about shit. Endlessly. The shit that came out both ends at once, the shit that came out the neck of the babygro, the hard round shit and the shit that is soft and green. There is nothing new parents don't know about the substance. It makes me wonder why human beings bother with disgust, and whether we will ever be disgusted again. (Enright 2005, p.60)

This point illustrates the difficulty which new parents, and particularly new mothers, face when they attempt to engage in a discussion about the loss of physical intimacy in the wake of a pregnancy. It emerges, to a degree, as a distasteful subject, as if the joy of having children should not be marred by complaining about one's sex life. Enright herself feels the power of this taboo when she returns to her doctor for a check-up after the birth of her first baby:

I have never heard anyone discussing how long the pain is supposed to last. So I draw upon however many ghastly generations of suffering have preceded me and...I smile hugely and say that everything is fine, wonderful, marvellous. I don't want to piss on the parade, and besides, it is true: I am extravagantly happy – messy, creaky, bewildered, exhausted, and in pain, but happy, hopeful, and immensely refreshed by it all. (Enright 2005, p.53)

These passages highlight the anxieties that women (and men to a degree), face in the wake of pregnancy in terms of their social identity and in terms of maintaining meaningful, loving and mutually fulfilling relationships with their partners.

One could argue that these passages, and characters, concerned with changes to their sexual habits and sex lives in the aftermath of childbirth, highlight the need for increased discussion in relation to the intersection of sexuality and pregnancy in Irish society. Traditionally, in Ireland, as in many other countries, the prevailing public and particularly religious opinion on sexual intercourse was that its primary function was for the procreation of children. This focus on the societal product of sexual intercourse left no room for an open and honest debate on the importance of personal pleasure during sex to the stability and happiness of couples, or indeed, as seen from the passages above, for any real discussion of the sexual difficulties experienced by couples after the birth of a baby. It is indicative of the fact that, even in twenty-first century Ireland, there are subjects which cannot be publicly discussed and debated without experiencing the 'melancholic silence' of which Enright spoke

(Enright 2005, p.60). By openly discussing taboo issues such as these, and more particularly by relating her own personal experience of such difficulties, Enright opens the debate about the way in which pregnancy is viewed within Irish society, highlighting the plural signification of the word pregnant in Ireland in the twenty-first century, which must now incorporate new societal and bodily considerations.

### **The Pain of the Non-Connection**

A further subject that could also be considered taboo and silenced in relation to pregnancy in Ireland is the fear of not bonding with the baby once born. Societal norms and stereotypes centring on mothers and babies presuppose a naturally close and comfortable bond between mothers and babies. As a result, women who have difficulty connecting initially or naturally with their baby after giving birth, either because they are suffering from postnatal depression, or simply because bonding takes longer for them, feel abnormal and unable to voice their concerns and feelings. Lerner discusses this in *The Mother Dance* stating that:

Whatever our personal circumstances, however, the fantasy about how a mother is supposed to feel haunts almost every mother. Because the myth of the 'good mother' denies the power of real-life ambivalence – of love and hate – mothers feel ashamed of acknowledging their 'unacceptable feelings' and their limits...When taboo feelings can't be acknowledged, not even to our own selves, a mother's self-regard is likely to plummet. (Lerner 2001, p.250)

Thus, maternal ambivalence is deemed both personally intolerable and socially unacceptable, impelling women suffering from these ambivalent feelings to remain silent on this issue, and forcing them into painting a picture of a maternal relationship which is always healthy and more importantly 'normal'. In *Torn In Two*, Parker discusses society's inability to accept maternal ambivalence stating that:

Society's wariness of maternal ambivalence, fuelled perhaps by infantile fears of loss, defended against by the idealisation or denigration of mothers, provides a context which inflates maternal guilt, rendering ambivalence at times unmanageable. (Parker 2010, pp.24-25)

By provoking profound guilt, and by extension muteness, in women in relation to this issue, reluctant or depressed mothers are smothered into silence and are defined clearly as other within an Irish paradigm.

McGahern's writing engages to a degree with the fear and anxiety associated with not bonding with one's children in his first novel *The Barracks*, albeit not in a biological context. In the novel, the main protagonist, Elizabeth, agonises continually over her place as step-mother to her husband's children. The fact that she is not their biological mother appears to haunt her throughout the novel, fuelling a fear of rejection that perhaps she would not have felt as keenly had she been the children's biological mother. Her abiding fear is of doing something which will provoke the children's anger and resentment, thus turning them away from her:

'You must do your lessons now,' she commanded firmly...She was afraid her firmness would harden them against her till Sheila raised great dark eyes and asked her how to do a problem that she began to read out of the Arithmetic. (McGahern 2008a, p.62)

Any comment which Elizabeth perceives as a slight against her relationship with the children affects her profoundly, shaking her self-confidence as mother-figure in the household. For example, when given the opportunity to go to a wedding in Dublin, Elizabeth agonises over the decision to go, and is encouraged to go by one of the children, Willie. Willie ill-advisedly attempts to reassure Elizabeth that the family can cope in her absence by telling her: 'Didn't we manage for ages before you ever came':

It fell as natural as a blessing. 'Didn't we manage for ages before you ever came?' And they'd manage too, if she was gone. She stood with the shock. She must have been holding something for she remembered not to let it fall. Then she broke down. (McGahern 2008a, p.35)

This scene emphasises the extent to which Elizabeth's self-worth is intrinsically tied to the connection she feels with the children, and to her role as a mother and caregiver in the household. It is significant that within the first two opening pages of the novel, Elizabeth discloses that the children have no intrinsic connection to her, and, as a result, reveals her intense isolation within the family:

She was nothing to these children. She had hoped when she first came into the house that they would look up to her as a second mother, but they had not. (McGahern 2008a, p.8)

As the novel primarily presents Elizabeth's point of view, it is impossible for the reader to know if her perception of her relationship with the children is accurate or not; however, in a sense, this is unimportant. Perhaps in his particular presentation of Elizabeth's point of view, McGahern cleverly demonstrates how unimportant the truth is in relation to these feelings. Had the children truly felt a closer bond to Elizabeth than she realised, she could not recognise it, and in this way, McGahern provides the reader with a glimpse into the depth of depression, fear and anger that can result when a woman feels that she cannot establish a close bond with her children. In an era when issues such as post-partum depression were not openly discussed, or accepted as a serious medical condition, *The Barracks* provides an insight into the loneliness and isolation felt by some women within their own families, and indeed their reluctance to speak of this openly.

Enright's work builds upon that of McGahern in this area, providing further insight into instances of women feeling unconnected from their children in Modern Ireland. In *Making Babies*, Enright, through an intensely personal description of her own experience of motherhood, opens up this issue and voices some of the more unacceptable feelings that mothers can experience, if only fleetingly, after giving birth. Directly after the birth of her first child, Enright notes that the baby 'opened her eyes for the first time...blinked and found my eyes. It was a very suspicious, grumpy look, and I was devastated' (Enright 2005, p.37). In this one sentence, Enright challenges the normative view that every mother must look at their baby and feel an instant bond and connection. Parker makes the point that this instantaneous bond is presupposed as women 'carry babies for nine months within a culture which represents the postnatal mother-child social relationship as if it replicated the intrauterine state of antenatal union' (Parker 2010, pp.43-44). While many (and arguably most), women do instantly bond with their baby, Enright's work challenges Irish society to recognise the complicated emotions surrounding the birth of a baby, and to engage with the myriad ways in which a woman can bond with their child. Later in the novel, Enright goes on to outline some of the more unacceptable feelings that she has in relation to the baby:

Once, maybe twice a day, I get an image of terrible violence against the baby. Like a flicker in the corner of my eye, it lasts for a quarter of a second, maybe less. Sometimes it is me who inflicts the violence, sometimes it is someone else. Martin says it is all right – it is just her astonishing vulnerability that works strange things in my head. But I know it is also because I am trapped, not just by her endless needs, but also by the endless, mindless love I have for her. It is important to stay on the right side of the love like this. For once, I am glad I am an older mother. I don't panic. I put a limit on the images that flashed across my mind's eye. I'm allowed two per day, maybe three. If I get more than that, then it's off to the doctor for the happy pills. (Enright 2005, p.54)

Once again, Enright engages with what can be regarded as a taboo subject within Irish society, specifically the expressing feelings of ambivalence towards one's own child, particularly when they are an infant. Parker similarly refers to such maternal emotions in her book *Torn in Two*, emotions which 'the dominant cultural representations of motherhood render unacceptable, and which mothers themselves experience as both painful and unforgivable':

I refer to the fleeting (or not so fleeting) feelings of hatred for a child that can grip a mother, the moment of recoil from a much-loved body, the desire to abandon, to smash the untouched plate of food in a toddler's face, to yank a child's arm while crossing the road, scrub too hard with a facecloth, change the lock against an adolescent, or the fantasy of hurling a howling baby out of the window. (Parker 2010, p.5)

Through the frank interaction between Enright and her husband about these ambivalent and violent feelings, she opens the subject of maternal ambivalence for public discussion. By voicing these emotions in both her memoirs of pregnancy and in her fictional works, Enright gives such feelings a reality, emphasising their existence, no matter how occluded they are, in modern Irish society. Similarly, these works emphasise the fear which some mothers have that expressing, or indeed having, these feelings in either a familial or public setting, will forever classify them as a 'bad' mother. Furthermore, by admitting to personal feelings of maternal ambivalence, Enright continues to narrow the gap in the distinction between mother and 'other mother' in Irish society. Again, the distinct dichotomy is challenged by the reality that even content and happy mothers must often contend with negative and confusing emotions during the initial stages of motherhood.

For some women, the fear and anxiety centring on these fleeting feelings is compounded by post-natal depression. Once an unmentionable subject and illness which women suffered through in silence and ignorance, post-natal depression is now

recognised as a legitimate and difficult condition, profoundly affecting a woman's ability to bond and connect with her baby. Enright engages with the feelings and anxieties of postnatal depression in *Making Babies* when she speaks to a woman with postnatal depression about her son:

'I wasn't feeding him fast enough and he knocked the spoon out of my hand, and the look he gave me was absolutely evil.' This woman has postnatal depression – but still, what was that look? I want to know. I want to know what message passed between the baby and his depressed mother. (Enright 2005, p.147)

Enright voices the pain and loneliness of women with postnatal depression, who feel alienated and unconnected from their baby. Like the reluctant mother, women suffering from post-natal depression can be posited as 'other mothers' by Irish society. This type of problematic motherhood does not correspond to the conventional societal view of motherhood as a positive and joyful experience, and so, in order to protect the coveted positive image of motherhood, these 'other mothers' must be excluded, silenced and occluded. This extract also calls into question the validity and weight that is accorded to the statements or anxieties of women who suffer from postnatal depression. When the woman insists that the child's look was 'absolutely evil', the writer's instant reaction is to focus on the fact that the woman was suffering from postnatal depression. This automatic focus on postnatal depression as both an explanation for the woman's statement, and as a marker of her identity, instantly posits her as Other, and in many ways negates her anxiety, reducing it to a mere symptom of her condition.

In *The Gathering*, Enright makes an oblique reference to the possible consequences of postnatal depression. While it is never stated that the Veronica's mother suffered from this illness, there are similarities that can be drawn between her behaviour and the suffering and symptoms of postnatal depression. Her inability to

remember her children's names on occasion, (signalling perhaps a difficulty in bonding with her children), and the toll that multiple pregnancies have had upon her mental health, are but two examples. Veronica outlines her mother's difficulties when she states that:

I don't know what they called these episodes. Single women had 'breakdowns', but in those days married women just had more babies, or no more babies. Mammy got going again, anyway, with Alice in 1967... and right after that came Ivor and Jem. I suppose the unfairness of twins might have provoked her final bout of 'nerves'. Certainly there were always tranquillisers in there among the Brufen and warfarin on her saucer of pills, and she has been, as long as I have known her, subject to the shakes, and inexplicable difficulties, and sudden weeps. (Enright 2007a, pp.46-47)

The very fact that Veronica cannot identify or classify her mother's illness/difficulties is indicative of the extent to which such issues were negated in mid-to-late twentieth century Ireland. Veronica's mother is viewed as Other by her children from their youth, her depression creating an emotional distance between her and her offspring which is never really bridged. Similarly, in *The Gathering*, Enright explores, if only in a latent manner, the capacity of mothers, when suffering from postnatal depression or other unbearable stresses, to contemplate or indeed to commit an act of violence against a child. In one scene in the novel, Veronica and her brother Liam tell stories about their childhood. In the midst of these stories they focus upon the death of their brother Stevie as a baby, stating that:

My older baby brother Stevie – the one who died when he was two – 'She did it,' said Liam. 'She put a pillow over his face,' and we'd laughed our heads off. 'Well, come on, she was pregnant all the time. All the time.' 'Wouldn't you?' (Enright 2007a, p.94)

While the story is most likely intended by the characters to be a darkly humorous mocking of their mother, it must be considered within the context of the novel and in

relation to Veronica's mother's life. When one considers Veronica's mother's multiple pregnancies, and their obvious effect on her mental health, it could be said that her children are aware of, and voice, her capacity to be overwhelmed by the combination of her maternal responsibilities to an ever-growing brood of children, and her attempts to maintain her mental health and well-being.

Through this tongue-in-cheek passage, Enright raises the ugly spectre of the capacity for maternal violence in the face of extreme anxiety and/or depression, a capacity which remains intolerable and to a certain extent occluded within modern Irish society. Their mother's questionable mental well-being could be considered as the reason why the Hegarty children developed a mantra in childhood of 'Don't tell Mammy':

If something broke or was spilt, if Bea did not come home or Mossie went up to live in the attic, or Liam dropped acid, or Alice had sex, or Kitty bled buckets into her new school uniform... None of the messages relayed: the whispered conference in the hall, *Don't tell Mammy*, because 'Mammy' would – what? Expire? 'Mammy' would worry. Which seemed fine to me. It was, after all, of her own making, this family. It had all come – singly and painfully – out of her. And my father said it more than anyone; level, gallant, *There's no need to tell your mother now*, as if the reality of his bed was all the reality that this woman should be asked to bear. (Enright 2007a, p.9)

Veronica's father's strident assertion that 'There's no need to tell your mother now', automatically positions Veronica's mother as the smothered (m)other in the family, overburdened with her responsibilities as care-giver to an ever-growing brood of children, and isolated from them all by the depression and anxieties that threaten to overwhelm her (Enright 2007a, p.9). While it is never overtly stated that Veronica's mother suffered from postnatal depression, it is nevertheless strongly implied. At the very least, Enright explores the loneliness that can accompany motherhood, which is far from the stereotypical view. She refers to this in *What Are You Like?*, when Evelyn ruminates on the complexities of motherhood. She:

had wanted to make a go of her children, to make friends of them, but they were all strangers to her still. If you thought about it, it was the loneliest job of them all. (Enright 2001, p.76)

### **Paternal Non-Connection**

Throughout the works of McGahern and Enright, the extent to which men feel included or excluded from the experience of pregnancy and bonding with their children is explored. Margaret Mead, as far back as the 1930's, made the point that 'mothering was an inherent biological role whereas fathering had to be socially taught' (Sweetman 1979, p.13). This gap between an inherent biological connection with the mother, and the social and cultural bond of the father is investigated by all three writers. Enright voices the male feeling of exclusion in *Making Babies*, when she looks at her husband and recognises 'the wan feeling that men get, after a baby is born' (Enright 2005, p.57). She notes that in the aftermath of a baby's arrival there is renegotiation of 'this new, triangular love, with its lines of affection and exclusion' (Enright 2005, p.57). It is an issue which is explored in the short story 'Until the Girl Died', when a wife ruminates over the ramifications of father's feeling of exclusion from the bond between mother and child:

They feel 'excluded', fathers; isn't that what the articles say? They have the weight of the world on their shoulders, and after a while – I'm convinced of this – they start to resent you, maybe even to hate you. Then, one day, they love you madly again and you realise – slowly, you realise – that they have been up to something. (Enright 2009, p.5)

This feelings of fear and resentment as a result of a perceived or real exclusion of fathers is a theme which McGahern also explores throughout his novels. Many fathers in McGahern's fiction feel excluded from the family unit in a way, and the violence

and utter control that they display within the household extends from a feeling of vulnerability. It could be seen as a displacement and a return of the repressed. In *The Dark*, the father, Mahoney, is seen to be isolated and excluded by his children. This is arguably the children's only weapon against their violent father, but as can be seen by the passage below, it is an effective weapon which affects him profoundly:

They all got beatings, often for no reason, because they laughed when he was in foul humour, but they learned to make him suffer – to close their life against him and to leave him to himself.

'I'm told nothing in this house, never. I might as well be a leper but who's bringing you up alone without help, who's earning the bread,' he'd complain. (McGahern 2008b, p.11)

Through this isolation, the children are siding emotionally with their mother, or with the maternal, rather than with Mahoney, and by extension, the patriarchal law of the father. This isolation could be seen to exacerbate Mahoney's anger, once again pointing to a deep-seated insecurity which requires total dominance and control within his own house.

In *The Leavetaking*, Patrick's father similarly has difficulty in bonding with his son, displaying anger and cruelty in the wake of the birth of the child. Patrick describes how 'when the child was born, used to the attention of the two women and finding himself supplanted, he was furious':

'The child is being ruined. Every time he opens his mouth one or the other of you run to him.'

'Then you were ruined,' his mother told him sharply.... He got milk, bottles, a little copper burner, a saucepan and clock and locked himself in the room with the child that was once me. He was nothing if not demonstrative, 'The child will have to learn regular feeding times, not be ruined with spoiling every time it cries.'

The mother fretted downstairs. The violence paralysed her. It was the grandmother and the father who struggled. The child seemed less and less her child. (McGahern 1984, p.47)

The action of removing the child, if only temporarily, from his mother and grandmother's care, symbolises an attempt to break or shake the bond between mother and child, perhaps so as to assert the bond of the father with the child as paramount. It also points to a deep-seated insecurity of sharing his bond with his wife and mother with this new life that has come into the world. Once again he reasserts his dominance two years later, when he cut the child's hair against the wishes of the child's mother:

...that small failure of domination she saw him revenge two years later, 'With those curls you have the child growing up imagining it's a girl,' and both the women wept as they watched the gold curls fall from the shears onto the newspaper under the chair on the cement. (McGahern 1984, p.48)

In other McGahern novels, this issue is explored through in a more latent fashion.

In *Amongst Women* for example, Moran cannot control his daughter's fertility. This is one of the few elements in their lives that he is entirely unable to govern or dominate. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Moran 'became afraid of his daughters' (McGahern 1991a, p.1). He is not displaced by an infant, but he is in a sense displaced by his daughter's bodies and their bodies' potential for reproduction. Moran is continually obsessed and concerned about family in the novel, yet the family line cannot continue without his daughters' reproduction (and his sons'). Even though his daughters continue to return to Great Meadow, two of them have, by the end of the novel, married and had children of their own, extending the family in a way over which Moran has no control. This action, in itself, signals a shift in power between Moran and his daughters, as previously Moran would decide upon whether a new person would enter the family or not, the prime example being his decision to marry Rose Brady.

It could also be linked to Freud's assertion that women suffer from 'penis envy' (Heller 2005, p.46). If, according to Freud's theory, woman is castrated, and denied the penis, could it not also conversely be stated that man, in a sense, also experiences a type of castration, being denied a womb and by extension, the unique experience of carrying a new life within? If castration is signified, in this sense, in terms of loss, then must not the 'loss' of the womb for men be considered as akin to the 'loss' of the penis for women? Perhaps this accounts for Moran's inability to bond with his grandson upon his first visit to Great Meadow:

To Maggie's intense disappointment Moran evinced little interest in his grandson. Only with great pressing did he agree to be photographed with the baby in the front garden. 'Who wants to look at an old thing like me?' he complained and there was no teasing in the complaint. (McGahern 1991a, p.147)

It is also interesting to note Sheila's reaction to any attempt by Moran to assert dominance over her children, or to displace her bond with them while she is at Great Meadow. In a heated exchange with Moran about the children's boisterousness, she lashes out at his attempt to assert dominance:

'You'd think those children were brought up in a field,' he roared at her during one visit when their uninhibited playfulness got on his nerves.  
'Well, they'll go back to that field,' she met him angrily, rounded up the children and left. (McGahern 1991a, p.169)

The fact that Sheila 'never again brought her children to the house except for a very brief visits', testifies to her ability to isolate Moran and his patriarchal influence from the bond between mother and child (McGahern 1991a, p.170). This is in stark contrast to the mother's passive reaction to the violence and intimidation in *The Leavetaking*.

Finally, Enright similarly explores the ways in which women too can feel excluded from the father-child bond in *Making Babies*. She describes the

disconcerting feeling she experiences when the baby looks at her from her father's arms:

The baby sits in her father's arms and looks over at me, like a stranger, walked in off the street. Oh, that blank stare. It makes me laugh, and go over to her, and take her back from him.

Silly baba.

When I have her safe, I look at Martin, and sometimes I recognise the wan feeling that men get, after a baby is born. I spend the next while renegotiating this new, triangular love, with its lines of affection and exclusion. I try to make it whole. The thing I have to remember is that love is, in general, a good thing (though it often feels terrible, to me). I can see why people panic about all this: the panic about their partners being lost to them, but they panic about their babies being lost to them. Men, mostly – but not just. Whoever is most the child in the relationship is the one who is most displaced.

I think that means me.

So, for a while I try to be, and am, that 'Mother' thing – the one who holds everyone, even myself, and keeps us safe. The container (the old bag, my dear, the old bag). (Enright 2005, p.57)

The biological connection that the mother experiences when carrying the foetus during pregnancy is so vital and interconnected, that after the birth of the child, the mother can feel a sense of loss, isolation and loneliness. The perceived blank stare that Enright's daughter displays to her mother disconcerts her, emphasising the fact that they are now separate individuals, not longer a unified presence. The previous intensely private and interconnected dualistic identity which the pregnant woman experienced, what Enright terms the 'motherandchild' presence (Enright 2005, p.20), has been replaced by two separate and distinct identities, which could posit the mother as Other in relation to the new life which she has brought forth. Their relationship modulates from one in which the foetus is literally a part of the self, to a more separate engagement with an infant which, after childbirth, has its own distinct identity and subjectivity in society. In the aftermath of this profound change in this relationship, the mother could arguably see herself, and be seen by society, as a new Other, an Other to this being that once was part of the self, but which now has

separated distinctly and permanently. By admitting, in the above passage, that childbearing brings with it an exclusionary element, which effect both mothers and fathers, Enright widens the representation of parenthood, again acknowledging that the accommodation of an infant into a household and a relationship has a profound effect upon both men and women.

Enright resituates the possibility of exclusion to encompass both the fears of the father and those of the mother. She also touches upon the stereotype of the 'mother as construct', the ideal image of the mother who binds the family together. This extends to the way in which the mother is perceived by an infant, which Enright admits at times, can be disconcerting and frustrating:

The world is a circus and I am her trapeze, her stilts, her net. Not just mother, also platform and prosthesis. I'm not sure I feel like a person, any more. I think I feel a little used. (Enright 2005, p.60)

Enright explores the reality of a baby's complete access to the mother in the initial stages of life, in comparison to the father (who in many instances must return to work after the first weeks of a child's life), and how this complete access affects a mother's perception of her place, and of her importance in the child's life:

The baby falls in love with her father. Her father is *over there*. Her mother, on the other hand, is simply here. She crawled over me like some well-loved cushion, she meets my gaze and holds it for the longest time: she looks *into* me, but she looks *at* her father. He is a wonderful object, and watching him makes her radiant with pleasure. (Enright 2005, p.145)

In this sense, a mother (rightly or wrongly) feels excluded from this other bond between father and child. In running from the mother to the father, Verhaeghe postulates that 'the child leaves the Real for the Symbolic' that 'the Real has to be conquered by the Symbolic' (Verhaeghe 1999, p.212). This battle between the 'Real'

body of the mother and the symbolic order of the father could be said to add to the tension which Enright exhibits in the above passage.

By assessing this shifting identity of mother and child in the initial stages of development, Enright examines the way in which familial and cultural dictates can contribute to feelings of loneliness and otherness that a mother may experience. Enright analyses these influences in *Making Babies*, when she discusses how family and friends commented on who her baby looks like. When she was told that she's 'the image of her father', Enright's response is to state that 'I'm not a woman,'... 'I'm a photocopier'' (Enright 2005, p.60). This reaction and choice of words is significant. By associating giving birth with the act of photocopying, Enright explores the theory of producing an Other which is in many ways a copy of the self. The fact that the baby was associated, or considered to be identical to her father, serves to further portray the mother as Other, a vessel through which to bring forth a copy of the self, but not necessarily the female self.

### **The Pain of Connecting**

While acknowledging that the fear of not connecting with a child is an overwhelming one, the authors studied similarly engage with the intense, unbreakable connection which ensues from having a child. Enright voices this fear in *The Forgotten Waltz*, when Aileen looked into her daughter Evie's eyes and discovered 'fear in a form she had never known before' (Enright 2011a, p.202). Aileen's fear is predicated upon her anxiety that 'Evie could die at any moment' (Enright 2011a, p.202). Enright here gives voice to the insecurity of the new mother (and indeed father), who experiences a new connection to their baby that is so strong that it outstrips any previous anxiety and love. She emphasises this in *Making Babies* when she states:

Babies demand your entire self, but it is a funny kind of self. It is a mixture of the 'all' a factory worker gives to the conveyor belt and the 'all' a lover offers to the one he loves. It involves, on both counts, I fear, a degree of self-abnegation. (Enright 2005, p.177)

Enright, throughout her work, engages directly with the idea of connection with the baby, simultaneously outlining the positives and the negatives of such a powerful relationship. In *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*, she outlines the pleasure of submitting to such a connection:

I also know now, as...the pleasures of such submission – to the uncaring fists and the uncaring smile of your own heart's child. I will let you out of my womb, but not out of my arms. I will let you out of my hands, but not out of my head. (Enright 2003a, p.206)

In her short story, "The House of the Architect's Love Story", Enright engages with the more negative and isolating elements of such a connection:

It is a quiet child with red hair...It would be a mistake to say that I loved her. I *am* that child. When she looks at me I feel vicious, the need between us is so complete, and I feel vicious for the world, because it threatens the head that I love. (Enright 2007b, p.57)

Here the connection between mother and child is so powerful, that it, in effect, threatens the mother's interaction with society and the world at large.

McGahern, too, indirectly touches upon this point in *The Pornographer*. It is perhaps a fear of connecting in such a profound way to another life that prevents Michael from meeting his child in this book. His insistent and repeated assertion that 'under no circumstance would' he 'agree to see the child', could be viewed as a fear of connection, and in Michael's case, a fear of an unwanted connection (McGahern 1980, p.225). However, it must be stressed that, as a father, Michael is able to make

this clean break and deny the connection through the biological, physical and geographical distance between him and the baby, methods which are not available to Josephine. This is also evident in Enright's novel *What Are You Like?*, when Berts is able to justify separating his twin girls in the aftermath of the death of his wife. Deciding that he cannot cope with caring for two babies, he names one baby Maria, and patently refuses to name the second, abruptly announcing to Sr. Misericordia that he 'can't take them both' (Enright 2001, p.87). Much in the same manner as Michael, Berts refuses to connect with one of his daughters. Moments after being shown his babies for the first time, Berts makes a clear distinction between the baby that he names, and with whom he allows himself to connect emotionally, and the baby that he does not. Berts is very clear in the novel about the nature of his bond with the daughter he chose to keep, stating that he 'loved her by choice. He made the choice to love her. That was important. That was all' (Enright 2001, p.4). Berts' emotional and bodily distance from the babies while his wife was pregnant perhaps makes this type of emotional bond easier to form. The mother does not have this option, and so this fear and anxiety in relation to connecting with the baby is something with which she must engage. Josephine herself recognises this in *The Pornographer*, when she and Michael argue over the possibility of adopting the baby after its birth:

'It's all right for you to say that. That way your little mistake will have been farmed out, got rid of. You hadn't to leave Dublin. You don't have to carry the child around in your body all these months, cry over it, worry over it. And then after all that just hand it over to somebody else as if it were a postal parcel'. (McGahern 1980, p.184)

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that through a representation of the multifaceted nature of the emotions surrounding pregnancy and motherhood, McGahern's and Enright's works

embody and emphasise Kristeva's point in *Stabat Mater* that, 'the weight of the "non-said" (*non dit*) no doubt affects the mother's body':

first of all: no signifier can cover it completely...a mother-woman is rather a strange 'fold' (*pli*) which turns nature into culture, and the 'speaking subject' (*le parlant*) into biology. (Kristeva 1985, p.149)

Both McGahern and Enright provide the reader with provocative, and often controversial, images of the pregnant body, thereby challenging Irish society to consider new interpretations of the pregnant presence in Ireland, and highlighting the plural signification of the word 'pregnant' in contemporary Ireland. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous makes the point that through writing, woman can be torn away:

from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any...for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing ... (Cixous 1976, p.880)

McGahern and Enright, through an exploration of feelings of self-reproach, fear and ambivalence in relation to pregnancy in their work, aid in the exorcism of feelings of profound guilt in relation to the inability to conform to societal and cultural ideals of motherhood. In *Sorties*, Cixous warns that:

There is no such thing as 'destiny', 'nature', or essence, but living structures, caught up, sometimes frozen within historicocultural limits which intermingle with the historical scene to such a degree that it has long been impossible and is still difficult to think or even to imagine something else. (Cixous 2000, p.268)

Enright's novels attempt to challenge the historicocultural limits of motherhood and pregnancy within Irish society, allowing for a more complex, but arguably more realistic, expression of the emotions, identities and experiences surrounding

pregnancy and motherhood in modern Irish society. Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*, sums up the complexities of such emotions and experiences stating:

My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence, the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves and blissful gratification. (Rich 1977, p.21)

While this work, to date, has explored social and bodily responses to physical touch, be it of the self, or the other, the final chapter of this thesis will move beyond these considerations, to explore the universally understood Irish euphemism ‘to be touched’ which means to be mentally ill. The importance of this Irish colloquialism cannot easily be dismissed, and the labelling of mentally ill individuals as ‘touched’ can have a profound effect upon the way in which these individuals are viewed, respected and even interacted with on a daily basis in Irish society. Just as many women feel that they are interpreted, viewed, respected and touched differently during pregnancy, so too are mentally ill individuals often interpreted, viewed, respected and touched differently in the wake of being labelled as ‘touched’.

## **Chapter Four: Female Madness – Engaging With ‘The Touched’**

There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to see what is reaching towards him, and to be able to recognize or at least classify it. Man always tends to avoid physical contact with anything strange.  
(Canetti 2003, pg.25)



(Shutterstock 2014c)

## Female Madness ‘Engaging With the Touched’

The final chapter of this thesis moves beyond the realms of physical and emotional touch to engage with the Irish notion of being ‘touched’ or being mentally ill in Irish society. The term ‘touched’, specifically utilised in relation to mental illness, originates from the belief that an individual, suffering from a mental illness, is somehow ‘touched’ by God or some divine power. Daniel Vitkus makes reference to this point in his journal article ‘Madness and Misogyny in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*’, when he states that:

the representation of madness in art is often linked to a creative energy and to the possession of a divine insight, prophecy, or inspiration-the fool or madman, who is ‘touched’ by God. (Vitkus 1994, p.67)

This chapter will explore mentally ill characters in the works of the two writers, in order to assess their changing place, position and reception in Irish society from the 1960s up to the present day. In an era which champions the emancipation and equality of the female, McGahern and Enright explore the ways in which women, particularly those suffering from mental illness or disturbance, can become marginalised, ostracised and, in some instances, blotted out by modern Irish society. In *Madness and Civilisation*, Michel Foucault makes the point that ‘from the fifteenth century on, the face of madness has haunted the imagination of Western man’ (Foucault 1967, p.15). It could be argued that mental illness and madness has had, and indeed continues to have, a profound effect on the psyche of twentieth century Irish society, leading to instances of marginalisation, occlusion and institutionalisation of those deemed to be ‘touched’ or mentally ill.

Methods of categorisation, control and treatment of those deemed to be mentally ill, or ‘touched’, in Ireland in the twentieth century reveals an apparent

societal need to distance oneself from those deemed to be unstable, mentally ill or even simply incapable of adhering to societal norms or dictates. One of the most popular, and indeed common ways, of dealing with these societal outcasts in the twentieth century, it seems, was incarceration, or committal, within Ireland’s psychiatric hospitals. Damien Brennan makes the point in ‘A Theoretical Exploration of Institution-Based Mental Health Care in Ireland’, that the demand for places in psychiatric hospitals in Ireland ‘grew annually’ in the twentieth century, ‘reaching a high point in 1956, when there were 21,720 patients in residence. Ireland, at this time, had the highest rate of psychiatric hospital bed utilisation in the world’ (Brennan 2012, p.287). Whilst the number of patients in ‘psychiatric hospitals and units had fallen to 4,321’ by 2001, these figures still constituted a rate per 100,000 of the population of 119 compared to 62 in England, 74 in Wales, 179 in Scotland and 70 in Northern Ireland (Walsh 2012, pp.93-94). Whilst no longer holding the dubious honour of the highest rate of psychiatric hospital bed-utilisation in the world, it is evident that institutionalisation still features quite prominently as a method of treatment for mental illness in Ireland when compared to some of its nearest neighbours. It must be stated that this thesis does not seek to question the need for, or use of, psychiatric institutions, hospitals and wards in the treatment of mental illness and the ‘touched’; rather, this study seeks to investigate Irish societal responses to the mentally ill, from the mid-to-late twentieth century, and in contemporary Ireland. The high rate of institutionalisation, in this sense, provides an insight into personal, cultural and national responses to the mentally ill, responses which often led to the marginalisation, categorisation and ostracism of those deemed to be ‘touched’. Foucault makes the point that:

A society expresses itself positively in the mental illness displayed by its members, whether it places them at the centre of its religious life, as is often the case amongst the primitive peoples, or whether it seeks to expatriate them by situating them outside social life, as does our culture. (Foucault 2011, pp.104-105)

The work of both McGahern and Enright, in variant yet no less significant ways, demonstrates the ways in which Irish society has traditionally situated those deemed to be mentally ill outside social life, highlighting the injustice wrought upon these individuals, and the devastation of their sense of self and their identity within their communities. As Anne Enright states, ‘looking at what happens to people, and how you can come undone...that’s very much the job of the novelist’ (Enright 2002, p.236). Through the proliferation of their work, these novelists have, both in latent and more direct ways, brought issues surrounding mental illness to the fore, bringing engaged, sympathetic and empathetic voices to an issue which has long remained hidden in Irish society. Their work reflects, in many ways, what Lacan reminds the reader, in short that ‘madness is a phenomenon of thought’, and enables the repressed voices of the ‘Touched’ to be brought to the fore in Irish society (Lacan 2006, p.132).

### **The Categorisation of the ‘Touched’**

An analysis of the place and position of mental illness in Irish society would not be complete without acknowledging and exploring the profound effects which categorisation, or societal labelling, has upon the way mentally-ill individuals are viewed, treated and understood within mainstream Irish society. In *Madness and Civilisation*, Foucault makes the point that:

We have yet to write the history of that other form of madness, by which men, in an act of sovereign reason, confine their neighbors [*sic*], and communicate and recognize each other through the merciless language of non-madness (Foucault 1967, p.ix)

It could be argued that the categorisation of the ‘touched’ in Irish society, a categorisation engendered not only by society, but indeed by the State through governmental legislation, served as a lexical prison for individuals suffering from a range of mental illnesses or disabilities. The legislation surrounding the treatment of individuals suffering from mental illness in Ireland provides an insight into societal attitudes in relation to mental illness and its definition. The Mental Treatment Act, 1945, which interestingly was not revised or replaced until the introduction of the Mental Health Act of 2001, is a significant document through which to trace the categorisation of mental illness in twentieth century Ireland. Mental Health Ireland, in its leaflet outlining the new Mental Health Act of 2001, explains the shortfalls of the original 1945 Act, stating that:

the criteria governing detention is very broad and ill-defined. For example, mental illness or mental disorder is not legally defined. Also, a person can be detained indefinitely as a person of unsound mind. The term ‘person of unsound mind’ is not defined in the 1945 Act. (Mental Health Ireland 2012, p.2)

It is evident here that through vague and imprecise definitions of mental illness, the burgeoning Irish State could categorise a wide range of people as being ‘of unsound mind’ (Mental Health Ireland 2012, p.2). Arguably the State here utilised ‘the merciless language of non-madness’ to classify mentally-ill citizens, and perhaps even rebellious or eccentric characters, as being of unsound mind, as opposed to citizens who conformed to State and societal dictates which seemed to be the arbiters of what constituted a sane, or sound, mind (Foucault 1967, p.ix). Foucault makes reference to this phenomenon when he speaks of the propensity to label such people ‘without exact semantic distinction’ as ‘insane, alienated, deranged, demented, extravagant’ (Foucault 1967, p.66).

The statement made in the quotation above, namely that under the 1945 Act, a person could ‘be detained indefinitely as a person of unsound mind’, is critical when considering the categorisation of the mentally ill in contemporary Irish society (Mental Health Ireland 2012, p.2).<sup>18</sup> One could make the point that being defined or labelled as mentally ill, of unsound mind, or as ‘touched’ in Ireland results in an indefinite detention, whether it be a physical detention within an institution or treatment centre,<sup>19</sup> or, perhaps more disturbingly, an indefinite societal detention which simultaneously categorises and isolates mentally-ill individuals to the margins of mainstream Irish society. Ireland of the twentieth century could be defined as a State based on, what James Smith terms, an ‘architecture of containment’ (Smith, 2007, p.xiii). Smith makes the point that ‘Ireland’s architecture of containment encompassed an assortment of interconnected institutions, including mother and baby homes, industrial and reformatory schools, mental asylums, adoption agencies, and Magdalen Laundries’, all sites of confinement that served as a constant reminder of the social mores deemed appropriate in Catholic Ireland and of the consequences awaiting transgressors of those standards (Smith 2007, pp. xiii-xiv).<sup>20</sup> While this physical architecture of containment was undeniably a reality in Ireland in the twentieth century, with confinement in mental institutions playing its own role in this tragedy (as evidenced from the startling figures concerning institutionalisation in the

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<sup>18</sup> While the Mental Health Act 2001 has introduced more precise definitions of mental disorder, mental illness, intellectual disabilities and dementia, the very fact that the previous 1945 legislation was in place for fifty-six years necessitates a consideration of the impact of such legislation on the way in which people suffering from mental illness, intellectual disability or dementia were perceived and treated by Irish society.

<sup>19</sup> A situation which is perhaps more applicable pre 2001, when a person could still be detained indefinitely should they be deemed to be of unsound mind. Societal marginalisation or imprisonment however, is arguably a more common form of indefinite detention in modern Irish society.

<sup>20</sup> While Smith’s book primarily examines the Magdalene Laundries, it can be argued that this latent threat was similarly utilised in respect of various types of institutions. For example, threats such as that of ‘being sent away’, being ‘sent to the Gorman,’ to Clonmel or Ballinasloe, were universally understood as signifiers used to posit the threat of containment or confinement within a psychiatric institution.

mid-1950s), this chapter seeks to explore the similarly powerful linguistic architecture of containment within Irish society. It hopes to show that language has become a powerful tool of categorisation and occlusion, which because of its latent manifestation, has remained a powerful and enduring method of controlling and containing those deemed to be mentally ill in Irish society. This societal categorisation of the mentally ill serves, as Luce Irigaray states, as an ‘authoritarian pedagogy’, which worked in conjunction with and, arguably in modern times, surpassed institutionalisation as the primary method for controlling and categorising those deemed to be mentally ill in Irish society (Irigaray 1985a, p.271).

This ‘authoritarian pedagogy’ is referred to in a latent, yet powerful, manner in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, in an exchange between Ruttledge and Patrick Ryan whilst the two men are engaged in erecting a new building on the farm. Noting the aesthetic beauty of viewing the sky through the roofless structure Ruttledge notes:

how the rafters frame the sky. How the squares of light are more interesting than the open sky. They make it look more human by reducing the sky, and then the whole sky grows out from that small space. (McGahern 2010, p.72)

Patrick Ryan’s response to this eloquent expression of awe is indicative perhaps of a traditional Irish response to individuals who do not conform to societal norms. He tells Ruttledge that there ‘was a time when people were locked up for saying less than that. If you came out with a spake like that they’d think you had gone off like one of the old alarm clocks’ (McGahern 2010, p.72). This response, or perhaps friendly warning, serves to remind Ruttledge, and indeed the reader, of the linguistic prison which traditionally encircled those who did not conform to societal norms in Irish society, and of the danger, not only of not conforming to societal expectations, but

even of voicing such non-conformity. Whilst the power of the physical architecture of containment has undeniably waned in the twenty-first century, it could be argued that the linguistic architecture of containment in Ireland has survived right up to the present day, and has a latent, yet profound effect of modern Irish citizens.

The work of McGahern and Enright is littered with both latent and direct references to mental illness, and to its place and perception in modern Irish society. As such, their work serves to chart changing (or indeed unchanging) representations and reception of mental illness in Ireland. It is interesting to note that, despite the temporal differences of their work, there are many similarities in terms of their respective treatment of mental illness. McGahern, through latent references in many of his novels and short stories, draws attention to the language surrounding categorisation of the mentally ill, and more particularly, to words and phrases universally understood within Irish society that publicly labelled individuals as mentally ill or mad, without actually having to directly engage with the issue of mental illness. In other words, he speaks to the way in which madness has a pejorative connotation in Irish society. In McGahern’s short story ‘Why We’re Here’, two characters, Gillespie and Mr Boles, discuss the fate of Sinclair, the man from whom Gillespie had purchased his farm. Having moved away from the area, Mr Boles is curious as to Sinclair’s whereabouts and asks Gillespie:

‘Any word of Sinclair this weather?’

‘The crowd up for Croke Park saw him outside the Amiens Street with an empty shopping bag. They said he looked shuck. Booked close enough to the jump.’

‘Never looked very healthy.’

...A strange person.

‘Touched, that’s all. I got to know his form well, the summer I bought this place from him and was waiting for him to shunt off...’ ‘No, he was a strange person. He suffered from the melancholy.’ ‘But he had a pension, hadn’t he, from that cable in Valentia?’

‘No, it wasn’t money troubled him’. (McGahern 1973, p.19)

It could be argued that the way in which the two men speak of Sinclair is indicative of the way in which Irish society interacts with, and defines, those deemed to be mentally ill. The terminology which the two men use to describe Sinclair; ‘a strange person’ who was ‘touched’ and ‘suffered from the melancholy’, serves to marginalise Sinclair by positing him as mentally ill, and hence as other, yet the language provides no insight into the cause of Sinclair’s distress. The men’s use of euphemism and dissimulation foregrounds an inability, or perhaps even a refusal, to engage with the root causes of individual cases of mental illness. This exchange alludes to a refusal, on the part of ‘mainstream Irish society’, to touch those deemed to be ‘touched’, even in a linguistic manner. The language surrounding mental illness in Irish society was, and arguably still is, in many instances, vague and ambiguous, positing people as ‘not well’, as ‘suffering from their nerves’ or as ‘touched’.

This tendency is glimpsed briefly in *The Gathering* when Veronica recalls being sent to live temporarily with her grandmother in order to allow her mother to recover from an illness which could be interpreted as a nervous breakdown:

this was the year that we were farmed out to Ada, me and Liam and Kitty, and we did not see our mother, not even for Christmas, though our father did arrive with a smug-looking Bea some time in the afternoon. ‘Mammy’s still not herself,’ she said, looking extra pious in her new tank top, a mohair thing in stripes of raspberry and blue. (Enright 2007a, p.86)

Bea’s assertion that ‘Mammy’s still not herself’ is an interesting euphemism for mental illness or distress. It insinuates a division of the self, a separation or marginalisation of Mammy from her real or true ‘self’. Veronica’s mother is labelled as unwell, yet no further discussion is entered into by any of her family members. Rather than engaging directly with the issue of mental illness which affects their family in such a profound manner, the Hegartys cope with their mother’s distress by

categorising her as ill, whilst avoiding any interaction with the root causes of her illness. As Hurt states in her article ‘Disciplining through Depression: An Analysis of Contemporary Discourse on Women and Depression’:

Depression greatly varies from individual to individual, but medicalization posits it as a uniform disorder—one that is based on ‘biology’ and not the specific situation. When the content of women’s discontent is overlooked, the unique and complex circumstances that led to these experiences are silenced in the name of medicine. (Hurt, 2007, p.306)

In much the same way as mentally-ill individuals were classified under various universally understood euphemisms, institutionalisation too was often discussed in hushed tones, using similarly vague language. Individuals who were temporarily institutionalised were often described as ‘being away for a while’, while being in ‘Clonmel’, ‘Ballinasloe’ or ‘the Gorman’ were popular euphemisms for institutionalisation. This is evident in *The Gathering*, when Veronica recalls a childhood visit to see her Uncle Brendan in St. Ita’s mental institution. Whilst waiting for the bus which would take them to the institution, Ada, Veronica and Liam were offered a lift by a passing stranger. The man asks Ada if they were ‘going to the hospital?’ to which Ada replies:

‘St Ita’s, yes,’ on a long exhalation. The stranger lets it lie, this heavy word now beside us in the car. He is not going as far as the gates, he says; he will let us down near enough. It is his habit, evidently, to pick people up at this bus stop, and I know by the way he says ‘hospital’ that St Ita’s is not a hospital. If we were going to a hospital, then Ada would have said. (Enright 2007a, p.113)

The unspoken understanding that flows between Ada and the driver, and which Veronica, at such a tender age, begins to grasp, is indicative of the discomfort which was, and is, felt by many people when discussing mental illness and its treatment. Just as the driver is not ‘going as far as the gates’ of the institution, thus perhaps physically avoiding the building and its associations, he also linguistically avoids

directly engaging in a conversation with Ada about the institution, or her reasons for visiting it. This behaviour is mimicked by Ada, who seems as eager to remain silent on the subject. St. Its’s, in this instance, becomes a universally understood label which negates, in many respects, the need for further questioning.

This equivocal language is also evident in Enright’s novel *What Are You Like?*, when Evelyn muses upon her step-daughter Maria’s recovery from a depressive episode. Following her discharge from hospital, Maria takes up employment as an attendant in a ladies’ dressing room in a shop in the local town. Her father, Berts, does not travel into town to see her, but Evelyn visits Maria often at work ‘for the barest of reasons’:

At least she was able to hold her head up in front of the neighbours and say, when asked, that Maria was between things. That is what you said about children these days, that they were between things – you did not say that this was the place they had ended up. (Enright 2001, p.66)

Once again, euphemistic language is used to classify Maria’s condition, and Evelyn, in this instance, appears to be more concerned with ensuring that her daughter’s recovery and return to the workplace is couched in socially-acceptable terms, than with offering any consideration of the root cause of Maria’s depressive episode. In fact Evelyn is seen to feel quite uncomfortable with the upheaval that Maria’s depression and abrupt return home has caused, and this is emphasised in the way in which she describes Maria’s attempt to recover and move on in the aftermath of her depressive episode:

Maria...was waiting for something and Evelyn did not know what it was. Every couple of weeks she came in to see if she had found it yet and each time she came into the shop she hoped to find her gone. (Enright 2001, p.63)

Despite the fact that Maria does not behave, or express herself, in a socially unacceptable manner in the aftermath of her breakdown, Evelyn appears to be overwhelmed with anxiety concerning her step-daughter’s potential for embarrassment or even perhaps relapse, and has little difficulty with expressing a private desire to distance her step-daughter, or perhaps more specifically her step-daughter’s illness, from herself and from the remainder of her family. For Evelyn, Maria has become defined by her mental illness. Despite the fact that she has undergone treatment and is beginning to reframe her life and live independently, Maria’s identity cannot be separated from her illness in her step-mother’s eyes. She becomes an individual to be monitored, an individual whose identity must be tailored to conform to the expectations of the ‘neighbours’ and, by extension, to those of Irish society at large. Evelyn’s hope, that one day she would visit Maria at work only to find her gone, is also significant. It perhaps reflects a hope that, should Maria distance herself or become physically marginalised, from the local community, that Evelyn could reframe her situation in what she believes to be more socially acceptable terms, thereby avoiding the shame or negative label that she feels Maria’s illness brings upon the family.

It is interesting to note that Maria’s father, Berts, similarly utilises equivocal language to categorise his daughter as mentally ill. Alongside his physical avoidance of his daughter after her depressive episode, Berts correspondingly attempts to marginalise his daughter, and her illness, through language.<sup>21</sup> Whilst fantasising about a fictional exchange with a woman with whom he works, Bert imagines what it would be like to explain his daughter’s condition publicly:

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<sup>21</sup> Berts initially visits Maria in the treatment centre that she resides in, however he is unable to cope with these visits and eventually drives Evelyn to the centre and waits for her in the car. Similarly he never visits her at her workplace after she is discharged from the centre, once again it is Evelyn who makes these trips into town.

‘I have a daughter gone into hospital,’ he said to her in his head, as he walked away from her room. ‘Nerves,’ he said. ‘Oh dear,’ she said, smiling. ‘Oh dear.’ As she brushed her lips across his forehead. ‘Never mind. It’s not your fault.’ ‘No, it’s not my fault.’ (Enright 2001, p.178)

The fact that this exchange is Berts’ fantasy is crucial, as it reveals his ‘real’ feelings in relation to his daughter’s illness. In this conversation, his classification of his daughter as suffering from her nerves is undertaken to elicit sympathy from his work colleague. The reply that he desires in response to this admission, namely to be told that he is not to blame for Maria’s condition, could be interpreted as a latent attempt to distance himself from a daughter whom he has classified as abnormal or other. Maria is classified in this exchange in the same manner as Veronica’s mother in *The Gathering*, namely in order to posit her as other, whilst occluding the connection between the family unit, and the distress experienced by one of its members. Published forty-one years after McGahern’s short story collection, *Nightlines*, which includes the story ‘Why We’re Here’, *The Forgotten Waltz* stands testament to the ways in which Irish society still attempts to categorise and label mentally ill individuals, often with little consideration for the root causes of their distress.

Alongside her fictional work, Enright also draws upon her own personal experiences with depression to explore and critique the classification and categorisation of those deemed to be mentally ill. In a book review entitled ‘Fuzzy Edges’, Enright compares late pregnancy and depression, claiming that:

The only difference between late pregnancy and depression that I can think of is that loss of a sense of self – at nine months, you feel like a vegetable; when depressed, you feel like a very important vegetable, or a hugely worthless one (Enright 2003b, p.50).

It is interesting to note here that Enright appears to be engaging in the type of categorisation and labelling of depressed individuals similar to what is evident in *The Gathering* and ‘Why We’re Here’. However, in this instance, Enright could be viewed as appropriating a label (in this case that of ‘vegetable’), and using it to expand current societal discussions centring on mental illness. Having had previous personal experience of depression, Enright, as an author, can be viewed as aiding societal understanding and awareness of depression and indeed of other mental illnesses by categorising and explaining her own personal feelings in relation to her experience of the illness. Lacan makes the point, in *Écrits*, that the ‘absence of speech is manifested in madness by the stereotype of a discourse in which the subject...is spoken instead of speaking’ (Lacan 2006, pp.231-232). Enright utilises her own personal experiences of depression to re-appropriate the discourse of mental illness, in the process also re-appropriating the labels associated with mental illness. Also, by associating the feelings experienced by mothers in the latter stages of pregnancy with those experienced by individuals touched by depression, Enright is, to a certain degree, re-appropriating societal conceptions and stereotypes concerning mental illness, and making them comparable to an un-stigmatized, and much cherished, human experience.

Julia Kristeva, in an interview with Dominique Grisoni, stated that ‘in the broadest sense of the term...we speak of melancholia as a “distant soul”’ (Kristeva 1996a, p.79). Through her re-appropriation of the certain labels associated with mental illness, Enright’s work attempts to bridge the gap between these distant souls and mainstream Irish society, a gap which could be interpreted as a manifestation the ‘distant skin’ of the Irish, in order to de-stigmatise the experience of mental illness and alter the perception of, and labels associated with, mental illness in modern

Ireland. This personal engagement with her readers on the subject of living with and experiencing mental illness or depression, which she outlines in a more in-depth manner in *Making Babies*, represents an attempt to voice the feelings and experiences of women living and coping with mental illness in modern Irish society.

In her non-fiction work, *Making Babies*, Enright also challenges and critiques modern Ireland’s continued persistence in categorising individuals as either ‘normal’ or else ‘mentally ill’ or ‘unstable’ based upon their outward appearance or on their ability to conform to societal norms and dictates. At one point in the book she asks the reader to:

Look at that lovely woman in the school playground with her lovely children, all scrubbed; the girl in florals, the boy with a baseball hat turned cutely back to front. Normal – ostentatiously so, a pillar of propriety, a devoted mother, the very linchpin of society. While chatting about this and that, she says, ‘Oh, I wouldn’t let them into the garden . . .’ and you have a choice of asking why, or backing slowly away. She is, you realise, completely, fragrantly, bonkers. And not only bonkers, but justified. She could talk about the state of your living-room for a week... (Enright 2005, p.159)

While this observation is undeniably humorous, it also serves to make a powerful and pertinent point about the way in which mental illness is perceived and identified in modern Irish society. Foucault argues, in *Madness and Civilisation*, that madness:

is judged only by its acts; it is not accused of intentions, nor are its secrets to be fathomed. Madness is responsible only for that part of itself which is visible. All the rest is reduced to silence. Madness no longer exists except as *seen*. (Foucault 1967, p.250)

Enright, through her humorous critique of manifestations of madness or mental illness, emphasises the point, made by Foucault, that one is only deemed to be, and thus labelled, mentally ill or touched in Irish society, if one is *seen* to be mentally ill. Latently, through her humorous diatribe, Enright emphasises the link, even in modern

Irish society, between being deemed normal or indeed abnormal or mentally ill, based upon one’s ability to conform to societal norms or dictates. In an era which has championed the closure of traditional sites of psychiatric institutionalisation and confinement, Enright’s work charts the emergence of linguistic walls to replace the physical walls of the asylum which no longer contain the mentally ill. These linguistic walls serve to maintain a distance between the ‘touched’ and mainstream Irish society through categorisation and judgement. In this manner her work critiques society’s passive acceptance of labels such as ‘normal’ or ‘mentally ill’ without consideration for the complexities which complicate any attempt to simplistically label any individual.

As Enright suggests, the woman in the playground may be ‘bonkers’; however she avoids being labelled as such by mainstream Irish society due to her ability to outwardly conform to its ideals concerning motherhood and propriety. Enright similarly critiques this societal tendency to label based upon conformity when she asks the reader to:

...consider your Auntie May, or any other woman with a house-cleaning habit – the raw fury as they wipe and disinfect and gouge and squirt. Who is this fury directed against? Invisible enemies – that’s who. There is a strong connection between a clean house and a tendency towards paranoia, which is quite annoying for someone like me, who gets the paranoid tendencies without the bonus of a gleaming kitchen sink. If you are a woman and you clean, society thinks that you are fantastically well balanced and sane, even you think that you are well balanced and sane, which is sort of unfair for the people who have to live with you and are not allowed to wipe a spill off the floor with the cloth that is used to wipe the counter, even if it is going straight into the washing machine. It is the sudden screaming, I imagine, that gets such families down. (Enright 2005, pp.158-159)

This extract highlights the way in which wayward or non-conforming desires and feelings are deemed acceptable, so long as they are channelled into gender-appropriate and socially useful roles such as cleaning. However, the voicing of the

pain and distress caused by mental distress, through an action such as screaming, is immediately defined as dangerous or unacceptable behaviour which must be silenced. By voicing such societal hypocrisies, even in a humorous manner, Enright challenges perceived societal ideas and tendencies in relation to the classification of mental illness. By challenging the reader to accept the innate complexities surrounding, and numerous manifestations of, mental illness, Enright’s work posits depression not as a ‘matter of an individual’s shortcomings but of the position in which s/he is placed by society’ (Schwall 2011, p.209).

### **The Dehumanising Effect of Labelling**

From the evidence presented above, it is clear that the tendency to label those individuals deemed to be mentally ill has been, and arguably remains, a feature of Irish society. This disturbing tendency is illustrated by Jenny Diski in a recent book review entitled ‘I Haven’t Been nearly Mad Enough’. Whilst reviewing *The Last Asylum: A Memoir of Madness in Our Time*, by Barbara Taylor, which outlines Taylor’s personal experience of mental illness and institutionalisation, Diski recalls ‘the most objectionable thing’ about her own personal experience in an English institution called Friern, which was the:

experience of twenty or so suited doctors and social workers sitting in a circle interrogating me: on the coffee table in the centre of the circle, the open gold cake box with a half-finished cream gâteau inside that no one thought to offer me. (Diski 2014, p.3)

Diski recognises, and voices, the ease with which she is marginalised and dehumanised by her position and classification as a patient suffering from a mental

illness.<sup>22</sup> The collective failure, of nearly twenty intelligent and supposedly caring individuals to offer her a slice of cake, a gesture which is one of basic politeness normally extended to any person with whom we were interacting, signifies the extent to which society at large can deny those diagnosed with a mental illness an identity, a sense of selfhood and general consideration that would be automatically afforded to individuals who do not suffer in the same manner. Both McGahern and Enright explore such occlusions and denials. Their work engages with the after-effects of a public diagnosis, a diagnosis that has the potential to permanently affect the way in which these people are identified and defined by their families, their communities and indeed society at large.

Luce Irigaray makes the point, in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, that:

the one who has the power to prohibit madness...gives the name of ‘madman’ to his ‘other’-or his ‘one,’ that is, to whatever is foreign to him, whatever in/for him is now and forever alienated....This will be done by a display of strength in which ‘madness’ will not simply disappear on command but will rather be subjected to prohibition, denial, leaving a clear field to law, discourse, which are discrete and have neatly delineated categories and dichotomies, with nothing left unaccounted for outside themselves. (Irigaray 1985a, pp.270-71)

In this way, the discourse surrounding madness and mental illness can be interpreted as an exercise of power; in which certain individuals can, through words and labels, strip an individual of his/her sense of self, their position in society, and even their most basic rights as individuals by neatly categorising them as mentally ill. McGahern and Enright, in their exploration of mental illness in Irish society, bear out this point made by Irigaray, foregrounding the way in which those deemed to be mentally ill are posited as ‘other’, as ‘foreign’ and ‘alienated’, thus allowing a discourse to develop which delineates mentally-ill individuals as marginalised and somehow less than

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<sup>22</sup> While it must be acknowledged that Friern is an English, not an Irish, institution, it could be argued that Diski’s experience is indicative of the way in which mentally ill individuals are labelled and treated in society and thus is comparable to Irish society’s treatment of those deemed to be “touched”.

human, beings. For example, in Enright’s novel *What Are You Like?* Berts makes an inconsiderate and insulting comparison between his wife Anna (who passed away as a result of an untreated brain tumour, which had profoundly affected her mental health), and his car, which he terms ‘a vindictive Lancia, as bad as his wife. The electricians were not the best. Press the indicator switch and the wipers came on, the whole lot fused in the rain’ (Enright 2001, p.9). This brief throwaway comment is indicative of the ease with which an individual suffering from any kind of mental illness can be dehumanised and denied their self-hood and right to identify themselves, and indeed how deeply engrained such attitudes are in Irish society. The very fact that Anna has passed away makes this dehumanising comparison even more extreme and determinate, as she has no recourse with which to challenge this depiction of herself; she has been, in the truest sense of the word, marginalised and alienated by her family and society.

This loss of identity and selfhood is similarly evident in *The Gathering*, when Veronica explores and outlines the way in which her mother’s identity has been radically altered following her brush with mental illness. Veronica muses about:

what she was like before we had to go away, or...what was lost when we returned each time – if some ‘Mama’ who danced with the sweeping brush and kissed the baby’s tummy was replaced by this piece of benign human meat, sitting in a room (Enright 2007a, p.47).

Veronica’s initial emotive and loving memory of her mother; “‘Mama’ who danced with the sweeping brush and kissed the baby’s tummy’, is overwhelmed and, in many ways, negated by her prevailing and enduring dehumanising categorisation of her mother as a piece of ‘benign human meat’ (Enright 2007a, p.47). Throughout the novel, Veronica’s mother is marginalised by her family and denied her identity of

mother and head of the household due to their impression of her as mentally ill and weak. For example, whilst she is told of her son’s death by Veronica, she does not take, nor is she afforded, an active role in planning his funeral, a role which, arguably, should have been hers, as mother of the deceased. It is Veronica who travels to England to identify Liam, and it is she who brings his body home and makes the majority of the arrangements. The family’s collective attitude regarding their mother, that of ‘Don’t tell Mammy’, posits her as marginalised, alienated within the family unit (Enright 2007a, p.9). As a collective familial attitude, it enables her children to treat her like a child, to avoid including her in significant discussions and decisions, thus denying her identity and position as head of the family.

It is interesting to note that Veronica is actively aware of the difficulties that are faced by those labelled as mentally ill in Irish society, and voices a deep concern that her children should be protected from any factors that might make them more susceptible to depression or mental illness. At one point in the novel, Veronica remembers an incident whilst on holidays the previous year when:

there was some bickering over directions, and in the middle of it I glanced in the car mirror and saw Rebecca staring straight ahead. Her mouth had sunk inwards and I saw, with terrible prescience, the particular thing that would go wrong with her face, either quickly or slowly, the thing that could grab her prettiness away before she was grown. I thought, I have to keep her happy. I have to be in love with her father and keep her happy, or this thing will happen to her, she will turn into one of those people that you pass every day on the street. (Enright 2007a, p.69)

Veronica’s particular use of language in this extract is illuminating. Her fear that unhappiness, depression or even perhaps mental illness could turn her children into one of ‘those people’ once again adds to the discourse of marginalisation and to the delineation of those considered to be mentally ill. The use of the phrase ‘those people’ posits mentally ill or depressed individuals as the unidentified, the undefined,

metaphorically denying them an identity and, perhaps worse still, grouping such individuals together as a nameless and faceless collective.

Perhaps one of the saddest cases of labelling leading to dehumanisation of the mentally ill is illustrated by John McGahern in his novel *The Pornographer*. After falling pregnant with the main protagonist Michael’s baby, Josephine moves to England to give birth far from her conservative family and from the prying eyes of Dublin society. Initially she is aided by Jonathan, an English acquaintance who appears to have romantic designs on her. Jonathan is a married man; however, his wife appears to suffer from an undisclosed mental illness which, as can be seen from the evidence presented in the novel, enables Josephine, and perhaps her husband, to posit her as other, hence denying her an identity and alienating her from her position of wife and loved one within her family unit. In one of her letters to Michael, Josephine describes Jonathan as ‘English, with handlebars. He’s very charming. Married to this crazy wife who’s been in and out of hospitals for years’ (McGahern 1980, p.122). Even in this initial written introduction, Josephine posits Jonathan’s wife as a marginalised figure, a woman who, instead of being named, and thus identified, as a distinct individual, remains nameless, save for her label which identifies her as ‘crazy’. Her intermittent institutionalisation affects her primacy and central position within the family home, painting her instead almost as an intermittent guest in her husband’s house.

As the novel develops, Josephine takes up residence in Jonathan’s basement and it becomes evident that, if not for the obstruction of his current marriage, Jonathan would like to marry Josephine. In her letters to Michael, Josephine tells him of this new happy life in England, complaining of only possible difficulty:

She couldn't describe how grateful she was to Jonathan. She wouldn't have believed before this all happened that such a purely good person existed in the world. He'd suffered for years with his crazy wife and he'd never had what's called a normal happy life. The only snake in their Eden now was that Jonathan's wife might discharge herself from the institution and find her in the house. Since she'd come to the house she'd started to read the wife's letters. He'd asked her to. One of the forms the madness took was crazy, irrational jealousy. They could only hope and pray she'd not discharge herself. (McGahern 1980, p.149)

The obvious hypocrisy evident in this passage is interesting to consider when exploring the loss of self-hood and agency which mentally-ill individuals can experience. Despite the fact that Jonathan's wife's suspicions about Jonathan's relationship with another woman are accurate in this case, these suspicions are dismissed as simply a symptom of her mental illness, even by one of those individuals who has intimate knowledge of Jonathan's true intentions. By labelling this woman as mentally ill, her agency has been severely diminished. Her eventual demise, later in the novel, is greeted with rejoicing by Josephine, who writes to Michael explaining that:

Just when they were afraid Jonathan's wife would discharge herself, find her installed in the basement, and let all hell loose, what happened, but in a crazy fit, didn't she jump from the hospital window and kill herself. After all these years Jonathan was now free. (McGahern 1980, p.150)

Josephine's overarching joy and lack of compassion concerning the suicide of an evidently distressed woman is disturbing, as it foregrounds the possibility that marginalisation, be it through social alienation, physical containment within an institution, or even death, can be interpreted as a method of 'freeing individuals' from their mentally-ill family members. Jonathan's wife's death is framed as a celebration, rather than a loss or a profound grief, which latently symbolises the extent to which she has been dehumanised as a result of being labelled mentally ill.

Finally, perhaps the most interesting, and complex depictions of the effect of labelling on an individual is outlined in Enright’s *The Forgotten Waltz*. While the novel is primarily concerned with the affair between the main protagonist, Gina, and her lover Sean Valley, and the effect that this affair has upon the lives of both their families, a significant proportion of the novel is devoted to the story of Sean’s daughter Evie. Evie’s life-story, albeit very brief given her young age, is compelling because it provides a complex insight into a society, community and even a family’s compulsion to label individuals whom they deem to be ‘unusual’ or ‘abnormal’. Indeed in the opening pages of the novel Gina admits that she:

always thought Evie was a bit peculiar...but also that she was special in the old-fashioned sense of the word. There was a funny, off-centre beauty to her. She went to an ordinary school, but there was, even at that stage, an amount of ambivalence about Evie, the sense of things unsaid. Even the doctors – especially the doctors – kept it vague, with their, ‘Wait and see.’ So there was a lot of anxiety around Evie – too much, I thought, because she was also a lovely child. (Enright 2011a, p.1)

As the novel progresses, the reader learns that Evie has certain medical issues, the extent of which is never fully diagnosed or classified. It becomes clear that any awareness, on the part of other characters, of Evie’s ill-defined neurological condition, profoundly affects the way in which they perceive the child. For example, on their way home from a day trip to the sea, Gina and her husband Connor discuss Evie, after Gina is informed of Evie’s difficulties:

‘Apparently she has some kind of thing. The child,’ I said, because that was what Fiona muttered to me by the sink, as we washed up.

‘Like what?’

‘You know, something wrong. Fiona didn’t say.’

Evie was a funny, disturbed little article, there was no doubt about it. She didn’t seem the same age or stage as Megan, though they were both around eight years old... If I had known more about these things I might have put her on a spectrum, or tried to. Except that Evie was all there – alert, trembling with it – she just found things very difficult. And whether this was, as I suspected, her mother’s fault, I couldn’t say for sure. I did find her slightly unbearable, though. It might have been something to do with the fat; those plump, kissable baby wrists; but with the wrong sort of face above them, the wrong kind of eyes. I didn’t say this to Conon, of course. I mean, I might

have said, ‘She is quite an object,’ but I am pretty sure I didn’t say the fat made her unpleasant to me; I did not share my ‘failure to love’, as Megan’s teacher calls a sin these days... (Enright 2011a, p.25)

The way in which Gina describes and refers to Evie in this extract is noteworthy. Firstly, Gina’s reference to Evie as ‘the child’ rather than by her own name signals a denial of identity, a denial exacerbated by her objectification of the little girl as a ‘disturbed little article’. Indeed it parallels her referring to Fiachra’s heavily pregnant wife as his ‘Fat Flower’, a label which achieves a similar denigration of personhood. Indeed many of the words and phrases which Gina uses to describe Evie; ‘funny’, ‘unbearable’ and finally ‘an object’, all serve to dehumanise the child and paint her in a negative light, emphasising the effect which labelling her as abnormal, or a child with neurological issues, has upon the way she is accepted and perceived by those around her.

Evie, throughout the novel, is the subject of much speculation in relation to her neurological health, and it is interesting that despite the fact that numerous tests fail to find a conclusive cause of Evie’s seizures, her mother Aileen continues to strive for a conclusive ‘diagnosis’ with which to label her daughter. Despite the fact that Evie is continually represented as being unwell or abnormal by her family and other characters for the first twelve years of her life, during this time, she suffers only four seizures and a handful of incidences where she becomes unfocused, loses time, and has no memory of this incident afterwards. She eventually outgrows this condition. The question must be asked as to whether Evie actually suffered from an undiagnosed neurological condition, or, did her family and the community around her attribute certain isolated events to this ill-defined illness solely because she had been previously labelled as having neurological difficulties? This can be connected to the assertion by Link and associates who:

argue that presentation of a mental illness label activates for respondents a set of beliefs about mentally ill people. To the extent these beliefs are negative (e.g., the mentally ill are dangerous), behavior [*sic*] attributed to them will likely be negatively evaluated. (Socall and Holtgraves 1992, pp.436-437)

Enright’s novel never provides the reader with any concrete evaluation of Evie’s condition; however, by presenting Evie’s story in this manner, Enright is perhaps making an important point in relation to the classification of individuals with mental or neurological difficulties. While Evie does suffer, briefly, from a relatively mild neurological condition, the effects of these symptoms are seen to be quite mild in comparison to the effects of being labelled as neurologically impaired by her family and her community. Evie’s ‘condition’ therefore’ could be described as a complex combination of both symptom and the effects of categorisation, and while Evie is seen to outgrow the majority of her symptoms by the novel’s close, it remains to be seen if she can outgrow the label which she has been assigned by those closest to her and regain an independent identity and sense of self. It can also be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy which defines her status in the family and in broader society.

The uncertainty, in relation to Evie’s ability to outdistance the label which has been assigned to her by society, in *The Forgotten Waltz*, is also fore-grounded in Enright’s novel *What Are You Like?* In this novel, one of the main protagonists, Maria, experiences a nervous breakdown whilst living in New York. Whilst in the midst of her initial breakdown, Maria makes a number of observations concerning mental illness and, more particularly, concerning the long-term effects of being publicly defined as ‘touched’. After an incident in which Maria cuts herself in order to find relief from her psychological distress, she walks through the streets of New York observing the world around her. She concludes that now she is:

in the country of the lost. They were everywhere – a small man with a chair strapped to his back walking down Varick Street, a woman in the middle of Broadway, going through the contents of her handbag as the cars swerved past. It was a parallel world. It was just over the other side. Maria had always known it was there, but, now she was in it, she did not know how to get back out again. (Enright 2001, p.57)

This statement serves to illustrate both the extent to which people suffering from mental illness can feel marginalised or alienated from so-called mainstream society in ‘the country of the lost’, and simultaneously emphasises the indefinite duration of the sentence often imposed upon those classified as ‘touched’ in society. Arguably those labelled mentally ill are often indefinitely consigned to ‘the country of the lost’, with no way of getting back out again. This indefinite categorisation is perhaps one of the greatest fears associated with publically admitting to even a brush with mental illness. Maria voices this fear in *What Are You Like?*, when she outlines the ramifications of being publically defined as mentally ill or ‘touched’:

She had lost a secret. This, she decided, was her definition of a nervous breakdown: after a nervous breakdown, you were never sexy again. There was no mystery that could be broken with the grief of your name, whispered in the dark. Maria. (Enright 2001, p.188)

Maria’s assertion here can be linked to labelling theory which suggests ‘that even if societal reaction does not directly create mental illness, negative societal reactions do exist and engender self-devaluation and expectations of devaluation by others’ (Link 1987 & Link et al 1989; cited in Socall and Holtgraves 1992, p.435). As in the case of Evie’s story, the reader remains unaware, at the end of *What Are You Like?*, of Maria’s eventual fate. As such, the reader cannot say whether Maria is able to progress beyond the mentally-ill label assigned to her by her family and society, or if she is able to move beyond the self-devaluation that she evinces in the extract above. The inconclusive endings in relation to characters such as Evie and Maria is perhaps a

deliberate strategy on the part of the author, as she strives to encourage the reader to question society’s tendency to label and categorise individuals on the basis of mental well-being, and the real, far-reaching and often unknown implications of this action.

### **Silence and Occlusion Surrounding Mental Illness**

It is clear, from the evidence presented, that the classification or categorisation of those deemed to be ‘touched’ can facilitate the marginalisation of the mentally ill in Irish society. As a result, it is perhaps unsurprising that many individuals in crisis choose not to reveal their conditions, for fear of being unequivocally, and often permanently, labelled as mentally ill and/or socially marginalised. Foucault makes the point, in *Civilisation and Madness*, that:

...the man of madness communicates with society only by the intermediary of an equally abstract reason which is order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the requirements of conformity. As for a common language, there is no such thing; or rather, there is no such thing any longer; the constitution of madness as a mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, affords the evidence of a broken dialogue, posits the separation as already effected, and thrusts into oblivion all those stammered, imperfect words without fixed syntax in which the exchange between madness and reason was made. The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence. I have not tried to write the history of that language, but rather the archaeology of that silence. (Foucault 1967, pp.x-xi)

The silence, the broken dialogue that results in the wake of a public diagnosis of mental illness remains a real and present fear for individuals suffering from a mental disorder in Irish society. It could be argued that individuals suffering from a mental illness in Ireland understand the physical and moral constraint, the societal and familial pressures and the requirements of conformity that will be imposed upon them should they publicly voice or admit to such an illness. Throughout their work, McGahern and Enright foreground this ‘broken dialogue’ that exists between mentally-ill individuals, their families and the wider community and they probe the

difficulties associated with trying to forge a discourse which enables mentally-ill individuals to come forward and express the distress that they are suffering.

Anne Enright’s work is littered with instances whereby characters choose to hide or occlude their distress, depression or mental illness rather than be labelled ‘touched’ by their family, community or society at large. Grace makes a veiled reference to this tendency in *The Wig My Father Wore*, when describing her work colleague, Frank:

Frank has worked for his sanity. He has a wife and a house and he talks too much. He used to tell me how Sheilagh won’t have sex at home anymore but drags him into the bathroom by the belt every time they have dinner with friends. Now he is talking about younger ass. I don’t want to know. Married people should not tell tales. Being miserable in silence is the price they pay for being happy. (Enright 2007c, p.45)

While Grace, at first glance, appears to be specifically discussing the fate of married couples, this statement could also connote the traditional belief that if an individual conforms to societal ideals and dictates (such as having a wife/husband and a house), and does not outwardly admit to having any personal problems, then they will be deemed to be of sound mind, and this normative state will lead to social acceptance and a ‘happy’ existence. Grace’s assertion that being ‘miserable in silence is the price they pay for being happy’, emphasises the fact that all individuals experience problems, yet it is only those who open up honestly about their difficulties who are labelled as abnormal. It emphasises a societal tendency to conform, and a belief that this conformity, whatever the emotional or personal cost, is a necessity in order to be accepted by society and to be happy. Grace’s assertion that she does not ‘want to know’ about Frank’s personal problems is similarly indicative of a wider societal apathy towards individuals in distress. As Ireland moves into the twenty-first century, society has become increasingly individualistic, arguably making it progressively

more difficult for individuals in distress to find a willing and sympathetic ear to whom they can reveal their difficulties. This individualistic attitude, and the resultant distance between individuals within a community, is representative of what Foucault terms the ‘broken dialogue’ between the mentally ill and society as a whole. However, the question must be asked, whether is it society itself that limits, and on certain occasions destroys, any possibility for dialogue between it and the mentally ill individuals who exist on its periphery?

Enright engages with similar fears and obstacles which prevent characters from voicing their daily struggles with mental illness and depression in *What Are You Like?* Throughout the novel, a number of characters suffer from mental anguish and depression, and many of them can be seen to attempt to hide their distress from their families, friends or loved ones. Whilst at college studying music, Rose experiences insomnia and other symptoms which could be attributed to depression. However when her boyfriend, William, asks her ‘how’s college?’, Rose’s response is less than forthcoming:

Rose did not say that she had started staying up all night. That her brain was racing all night. She did not say she was in love with the dark outside her window, or that she had become interested in silence, addicted to it, so that when she put on some music she felt as though something vital had been broken. She did not say, ‘I think I’m losing it.’ She said, ‘Oh, you know.’ (Enright 2001, p.137)

Rose’s evasion here signals an inability, or a refusal, to voice her true feelings, even to an individual with whom she is intimate. The fact that Rose does not acknowledge any particular reason for withholding her true feelings could be interpreted as her unquestioning and sub-conscious understanding that voicing these difficulties would alter the way in which she is perceived by William and, by extension, by society in general. This occlusion of distress and depression is mirrored by Rose’s twin sister

Maria who, as stated previously in this chapter, experiences a nervous breakdown whilst living in New York. Maria utilises cutting as a method of release, a means of controlling her distress, and at one point in the novel, she expresses a desire to display her maimed body to her lover Anton, in order perhaps to publicly demonstrate the depths of her anguish. While Anton is asleep, Maria cuts herself and then positions herself close to the bed. She muses upon the fact that, should he open his eyes:

he would see her sitting there, a bloody foot, a stained thigh. A blunt knife. A dark crotch. Maria wanted to leave this picture for him, somehow, when he woke, but she didn't want to be there herself She slipped out of the chair (leaving herself in the chair) and put on yesterday's dress. Her bloody foot slipped and stuck to her sandal as she made her way across the floor. (Enright 2001, p.55)

Maria's desire to 'leave this picture' for Anton signals, perhaps, an attempt to move beyond the 'broken dialogue' and 'separation' evident between those experiencing mental illness and society at large, through utilising her maimed body as a signifier of her distress rather than trying to verbalise her difficulties. The splitting of the self that is evident in this passage (Maria slipping out of her chair whilst simultaneously remaining in it) is a powerful metaphorical image, symbolising the desire to remain, and thus be discovered and understood, combined with the fear perhaps of the possible negative ramifications that would ensue upon being discovered and thus labelled and categorised as mentally ill.

Enright's short story, 'Fatgirl Terrestrial', which appears in the collection entitled *The Portable Virgin*, similarly engages with the complex and often multifaceted issues concerning the silencing and occlusion of mental illness in Irish society. The main protagonist, Bridget, suffers an emotional crisis, the cause of which is never fully defined, which manifests itself physically in a neglect of personal hygiene and loss of weight:

Bridget was bright as a button at work in the same dress all week, although she changed hats from day to day. The hats were needed to hide the beehive of tangles she got from writhing on her back underneath the travel agent, which she somehow wasn't interested in combing away. There were wrinkled noses and whispered complaints, but her bosses were all men, so none of them took her aside for a few words. Besides, Bridget had started to lose weight. (Enright 2007b, p.139)

Interestingly Bridget's rapid change in her daily habits, her declining personal hygiene and weight loss do not go unnoticed by her work colleagues; however these symptoms of her mental distress are actively ignored by those around her and are met with silence. Once again, a broken dialogue is evident between the individual in distress and the community around her. This silence is only broken, three weeks later by three female friends, Maggie, Joan and Sunniva, who:

knew a crisis when they saw one...cut Bridget's hair short, made her a meal and ran the bath. They all got splendidly pissed and made plans for the wedding, which for Bridget's sake, and the state she was in, would have to be fast or not at all. Joan said not at all, but Bridget said Yes at all costs. Sunniva agreed and made a pact with Bridget to 'pull herself together'...Bridget realised the need for secrecy. Both her lapses and her man must be kept secret from the rest of the world. Her smell without water settled down and she chose a musky perfume to complement it and make it more modern. She made the effort to dress and moved without complaint to the backwaters of the firm. (Enright 2007b, pp.139-140)

Bridget's efforts to conform, outlined at the end of this extract, are crucial to consider when evaluating the silence surrounding mental illness in an Irish context. While Bridget understands that 'her lapses...must be kept secret', and thus is never seen to voice her distress, it is evident that her physical symptoms have betrayed her mental anguish to her friends and work colleagues, a revelation which has profound effects upon her career, which is seen to be adversely affected by even the mere suspicion that she may be suffering from a mental illness or depression, and as a result she is seen to move 'without complaint to the backwaters of the firm' (Enright 2007b,

p.140). The link drawn here between Bridget’s ‘lapses’ and the stagnation of her career highlights the traditional fear that an admission of mental illness could effect not just one’s personal relationships, but also one’s career and one’s professional perception. It highlights the fact that an admission of mental illness or depression can lead to an assumption that one is incapable of performing work duties. This can lead individuals to hide or disguise their illness in the hope of retaining an unaltered professional persona.

While Enright and McGahern can be seen to write about very divergent characters, often living in alternate centuries, and in very different locations, their works intersect in their exploration of the occlusion of mental illness or depression. It could be argued that a comparison of the character of Elizabeth in McGahern’s first novel *The Barracks*, and the character Joan in Enright’s latest novel *The Forgotten Waltz*, reveals the enduring culture of silence and suppression in relation to mental illness and depression, and how, despite efforts on a personal, community and national level to combat the stigma associated with mental illness, fear and silence is still a primary feature of many individuals struggle with mental disorder in Irish society.

Despite the fact that Elizabeth in *The Barracks* is not diagnosed with depression, nor is mental illness of any kind openly discussed in the text, one could contend that the novel’s tale of her life and death in the barrack household, simultaneously illuminates a solitary and often despairing struggle with depression, which stems primarily from her physical pain and the eventual diagnosis of her terminal cancer. Elizabeth’s attempts to cope with her depression and anxiety concerning her illness are characterised by silence, often mingled with vain attempts to distract herself from thoughts of her impending fate through physical work:

She was existing far within the recesses of the dead walls and gaping out in mute horror. She tried again to bring herself to the surface: to break out of the grip of tiredness and despairing reflection: to live only in the chores and repetitions she knew; and in this plodding way she kept on till the children came from school. (McGahern 2008a, p.57)

Elizabeth’s characterisation of her horror as ‘mute’ is indicative of her attempt to silence her true feelings, and of her inability to voice her anxieties, even to those closest to her. This can be linked to Julia Kristeva’s assertion in an interview with Dominique Grisoni, when she states that:

Today, what upsets us and frightens us is not so much sex but the threat of permanent pain, of the potential cadaver that we have become. Who among us wants to confront this directly? Depression remains a secret force, perhaps even a form of modern sacredness. (Kristeva 1996a, p.84)

By maintaining a discreet silence in relation to her true feelings, perhaps Elizabeth feels that the façade of normality within the barrack household can be maintained. This is evident at one point in the novel, when, overwhelmed with anxiety and despair, she wishes to fall into her husband Reegan’s arms:

and give way to starved emotions. And, still, she could not do that, it would be in no ways fair, neither to him nor to herself. Even if there was no such thing as control or private order, it was better to try to have a semblance, so that they might stay in some measure free, and not be all gathered into a total nothingness. (McGahern 2008a, p.71)

Elizabeth’s silence, as evidenced from the clarity of her reasoning in this passage, is a measured calculated response, one which is cognisant of the importance, and indeed the necessity, of at least the appearance of ‘private order’ within their household and community. Her silence enables her family to remain ‘in some measure free’, and simultaneously enables her to remain free from being labelled as ‘touched’ or even

being marginalised by her family should they realise the extent of her distress. Eamon Maher makes the point in ‘Disintegration and Despair in The Early Fiction of John McGahern’ that:

The abyss she is faced with, the loss of control over her existence, the disintegration of her daily routine, are all conveyed with compelling intensity. She is alone with her suffering, alone with her dark thoughts and questions about what may await her in the after-life. (Maher 2001, p.85)

Elizabeth’s ability to face this abyss, to cope with suffering and certain death with dignity, is testament to the physical, emotional and spiritual strength of a woman who is, in many ways, alone throughout such a traumatic experience. However through this solitary struggle, McGahern similarly explores the deep anguish that must be faced by any individual facing a traumatic and life-changing experience, who feels that they cannot truly share this experience with another human being.

Written nearly fifty years later, at the dawn of a new century, *The Forgotten Waltz* similarly engages with emotional complexities associated with the decision to remain silent in the face of mental illness and depression. Whilst the novel primarily tells the story of Gina and her lover Sean, it also tells the story of Gina’s mother Joan, who, like Elizabeth, experiences health and age-related depression which, for the most part, she conceals. An exquisitely beautiful woman in her youth, Joan finds it difficult to come to terms with her ageing body, an issue which comes to overwhelm her and initiate a downward emotional spiral which would culminate in her death:

That Winter Joan complained of swelling in her feet, which, for our mother, was a terrible comedown, the row of shoes she had, going back thirty years, all foresworn for Granny boots: she just hated it. She got supplements in the health food shop and complained of depression – she was, actually, depressed, I thought – and it never occurred to her, or to any of us, to do anything about it except mope and talk on the phone about kitten heels and peppermint lotion and the various shades in which you might get support tights. (Enright 2011a, p.30)

While Joan does not face the same physical pain and suffering as Elizabeth, it is evident that both women’s bodies come to fail them, and this failure leads to pain (be it physical or emotional), suffering and depression. In a similar manner to Elizabeth, Joan hides the extent of her distress from her family, a strategy which her Gina comes to understand later in the novel:

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. With hindsight it was clear there was something wrong with Joan...that she hadn’t been entirely right for some time. But there were so many reasons we could not see it, not least of which was that she did not want us to. (Enright 2011a, p.38)

Neither woman wants her family to truly understand the extent of their anxiety and despair; in a sense, they utilise and manipulate the broken dialogue that characterises the discourse centring on mental illness in order to occlude their own distress and thus avoid categorisation or marginalisation. Like Elizabeth, who physically strains herself daily, in order to appear well and ‘untouched’ by her illness and despair, Joan also exhibits an aversion to illness or weakness. Gina, speaking of her mother, maintains that illness ‘was not something she allowed herself. It was so unattractive. And terribly hard on the skin’ (Enright 2011a, p.39). In this pronouncement, Joan allies herself with Elizabeth, who gains a sense of self-worth and inner peace from feeling needed and productive within the barrack household. Joan similarly understands the traditional societal tendency to classify individuals by their outward appearance and by their ability to contribute to their society, their community and their family. For Joan, and indeed for Elizabeth, the unattractiveness of being labelled as unwell or depressed arguably outweighs the desire to voice their anxiety and depression to their families or society at large.

Whilst there is evidence to suggest that both women disguise their true mental state in order to maintain an outwards appearance of conformity in their respective communities and families, it is also evident in both novels that these women’s families fail to notice, or indeed ignore or dismiss the evidence of their mental anguish and despair. Elizabeth encapsulates the solitary nature of her condition in *The Barracks*, when she notes, during a moment of panic and anguish that:

She could run now, throw herself on the netting-wire, and call out across the lake to the woods where the saws still sung, ‘Oh, answer me. Will Something answer me?’ and she’d be met with echoes and real sounds of the saws and birds, cloud shadow on corrugations the wind had made on the water, and silence—the silence of the sky and lake and wood and people going about their lives. And if she was heard it could be only by people and what could they do? She’d look silly or gone crazy, she’d have broken the rules. She could only cause painful concern to those involved with her and wring ridicule and laughter from those who were not, the thing that runs counter to the fabricated structure of safe passions must be slaughtered out of its existence. (McGahern 2008a, p.193)

This passage evocatively highlights the societal and national concealment of mental illness (be it wilful or involuntary). Elizabeth’s understanding that breaking down constitutes breaking ‘the rules’, which indicates her unspoken understanding that demonstrations of emotional instability would not be tolerated on a societal level, as it threatens the ‘fabricated structure of safe passions’ that can be traditionally posited as the norm by society at large (McGahern 2008a, p.193). Eamon Maher makes the point that McGahern’s writing in *The Barracks* is powerful in the way in which it reflects:

Elizabeth’s deep pain and her sense of powerlessness as she faces all alone her disintegration. There is not even a touch of sentimentality here, just a pure, simple expression of her private hell. What is lost sight of by many commentators in their treatment of *The Barracks* is Elizabeth’s ultimate acceptance of her fate and her refusal to sink into a morass of despair. She has great inner strength and a dignity that increases in direct proportion to her suffering. (Maher 2001, p.87)

While it is indeed true that Elizabeth’s story reflects the inner strength and fortitude of an individual in the face of intense suffering and certain death, it can also be argued

that the novel serves to reflect societal mores and dictates concerning the discourse surrounding physical and mental anguish and disturbance. This is further demonstrated in an exchange between Elizabeth and her doctor, who visits her regularly when she becomes bedridden as her condition worsens. She asks the doctor how he is on that particular morning, to which he replies:

‘How are you today, Doctor?’ she asked. ‘Wonderful: there’s not even the rain to complain about so far today, though it was quite heavy last night. You don’t do much complaining yourself, do you?’ ‘No. There’s not much use.’ ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘There’s a lot to be said for a few roars too, as most people unfortunately realize. At least they manage to get attention, if it’s only for the fuss and nuisance they make. (McGahern 2008a, p.208)

The doctor is the only individual to perceive that Elizabeth maintains a purposeful silence in relation to her condition. It is interesting to note, however, that through his attempt to encourage her to voice her suffering and distress, he latently reinforces the negative societal categorisation of individuals who strive to mend the ‘broken discourse’ between those in deep distress and society at large. The doctor’s observation that those who voice their suffering cause little more than ‘fuss’ and ‘nuisance’ is not likely to encourage the anguished Elizabeth to reveal the extent of her distress, as she is someone who above all wishes to avoid ‘painful concern to those involved with her’ (McGahern 2008a, p.193). The question must also be asked as to the true nature of the ‘attention’ that the doctor states individuals in distress generally receive as a result of the ‘fuss’ that they make (McGahern 2008a, p.208)? If the voicing of their distress is interpreted as a ‘fuss’ or ‘nuisance’, it is unlikely that the attention that it engenders will take the form of societal sympathy or concern. The doctor’s comment rather implies that the attention received by these individuals only

serves to further categorise them as abnormal and non-conforming, and perhaps because of this Elizabeth chooses to maintain her silence.

The failure to discern and acknowledge mental illness or depression on the part of families and loved ones is also evident in *The Forgotten Waltz*. Gina honestly admits, and laments, the failure, on her part, and on that of her extended family, to notice that her mother had developed depression:

I can't remember the day – the hour – when Joan's 'poor form' became 'depression', for example, or when the depression turned into something physical and harder to name. There must have been a moment, or an accumulation of moments, when we stopped listening to the words she said...There must have been a day when we stopped listening to her at all – one single split second, when she changed from being our mother, Oh Joan, would you ever ... and turned into the harmless object of our concern. 'How are you, darling? All right?' I was busy of course – I mean, we were all busy – but if I had recognised that moment then things might have been different. If I had been able to see her, instead of being surrounded by her, my beautiful mother, then she might still be alive. (Enright 2011a, p.47)

Like Elizabeth, Joan's silence facilitates the deterioration of her condition, without arousing the suspicions of her family. Gina's lament here also highlights modern concerns in relation to the occlusion of mental illness. Her admission that she 'was busy', and the sense that they 'were all busy', is indicative of the rapid pace of daily life in a modern individualistic Irish society, where individuals in distress can become lost in the relentless grind of daily life. While this is perhaps a concern more prominent in twenty-first century Ireland, McGahern does make reference to this tendency in *The Barracks*, particularly in connection with Reegan's response to Elizabeth's final illness. Determined to leave the police force, wherein he is deeply unhappy, Reegan attempts to save the funds necessary to resign and buy a farm in the local area, primarily through taking on additional work in the bog, by renting numerous banks and selling the turf for a profit. Because of this, he works long hours away from the house, and Elizabeth's sickbed, often only returning in darkness in

order to rest and sleep. His nights are spent in a separate bed in Elizabeth’s room and his few holidays are spent in the bog with the children, whom he bribes and cajoles into working with him. As a result, Elizabeth, and her illness, are effectively ignored on many occasions by Reegan, a point borne out by the fact that he was working with all save one of the children in the bog on the morning that Elizabeth died. Through physical displacement, Reegan arguably denies the extent and true nature of Elizabeth’s illness, a denial prompted by his fear and incredulity that ‘two wives could die on the same man’ (McGahern 2008a, p.99). It could also be said that Reegan’s inability to postpone his plans to make additional income and buy the farm points to a fledgling individualism in Irish society, a trend which would become increasingly apparent as Ireland moved towards the twenty-first century. In many ways, Elizabeth’s case is comparable to that of Joan who had, as Gina states, ‘been frightened for a long time – months, a year perhaps – she had been frightened, and we had not seen it, and now she was beyond our soothing’ (Enright 2011a, p.114).

### **Mental Illness in a Modern Irish Context**

While much of this chapter has been concerned with the exploration of traditional Irish societal responses to mental illness and the ‘touched’, this examination will now turn to focus upon the place and position of mental illness and the mentally ill in modern Irish society. Whereas in McGahern’s work, the fate of women with mental illness is arguably not positive, with isolation, marginalisation or death being the norm,<sup>23</sup> Enright’s writing provides the reader with a more complex engagement with mental illness in contemporary Irish society, charting both the negative elements previously discussed, such as social categorisation, marginalisation and even

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<sup>23</sup> In particular this point makes reference to characters such as Elizabeth in *The Barracks*, and John Quinn’s first wife, Margaret, in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*.

institutionalisation, but also providing an alternative outlook on the aftermath of mental illness, particularly within a modern societal context. Whether speaking of her own experience of mental illness and her recovery, or about the attempt of many of her female characters to come to terms with their mental illness or depression and move on, she arguably presents a more rounded picture of the realities of living as one of ‘the touched’ in Irish society.

While it is clear, from the evidence presented, that Enright’s writing acknowledges both the fear of, and indeed the actual loss of, self-identity which can result from being publicly labelled as mentally ill, her work could also be said to resist this tendency by attempting to foreground the voice of mentally ill individuals, enabling those categorised as ‘touched’ by Irish society to reframe their own identity, to regain control of their self-hood and self-representation. Michel Foucault stated in *Madness and Civilisation* that the ‘science of mental disease, as it would develop in the asylum, would always be only of the order of observation and classification. It would not be a dialogue’ (Foucault 1967, p.250). Whilst it is evident that classification, categorisation and observation, rather than interaction, with those deemed to be ‘touched’, has typified Irish societal responses to mentally-ill individuals, Enright’s writing challenges the reader to hear the voice of the ‘touched’, and to engage in a dialogue with and about mental illness and the mentally ill, in order to bridge the societal distance and alienation imposed upon the ‘touched’. One of the most thought-provoking ways in which Enright’s work achieves this is by providing characters labelled as ‘abnormal’, or mentally ill, the space and freedom to elucidate the reality of living and coping daily with mental illness. This provides these individuals with an opportunity to reframe their own identity; namely to classify their

own condition and how it effects their identity, rather than passively accepting the labels which Irish society imposes upon them.

This powerful voicing of identity is perhaps most clearly evident in *The Forgotten Waltz*, when Evie, in the aftermath of a seizure which took place in the school playground, explains to her parents the distance that she places between her own identity and the unknown neurological illness which is beginning to outwardly define her:

...everyone made a great fuss of her. But there was one little girl who was mean and really, as Evie said to her mother, with all the wisdom a five-year-old can muster, ‘It’s just not me, you know?’ They laughed when she said it, but they were ashamed too. Evie was saying that this might happen inside her, but she was outside it. It was not for her a question of poetry, or personality. It was just a bad thing that happened to her and she wanted it to stop. (Enright 2011a, p.201)

As outlined earlier, while it must be acknowledged that Evie does not suffer from a mental illness, nevertheless the neurological nature of her illness, combined with familial and societal persistence in labelling the child as ‘abnormal’, ‘ill’ and ‘different’, posits her as a credible figure through which to explore the effects of such negative categorisation. Evie’s brief, but powerful attempt to challenge the way in which she is being perceived by those around her is crucial, both in the way in which she asserts her own identity, and also in the way in which her assertion is interpreted by her parents. Evie’s declaration that her seizure is ‘just not me’ is a direct and powerful statement, which firmly cements both an acknowledgement, even by a child as young as five, of the tendency of society to interpret an individual as little more than a physical manifestation of illness, and also a direct challenge to those around her to face the reality that they are culpable in this diminution and attenuation of her identity.

Indeed, the very fact that Evie’s statement is not truly a statement at all, but a question levelled at her mother (‘it’s just not me, you know?’), latently indicates a doubt, in Evie’s mind, as to her mother’s ability to truly separate her own daughter’s identity and selfhood from the illness that is affecting her (Enright 2011a, p.201). The reaction of Aileen and Sean to their daughter’s honest admission of her feelings, namely that of laughter coupled with shame, is also important to consider. Through this one sentence, Enright highlights the difficulties which can be experienced by those suffering from a mental illness, when they attempt to reframe their own identity and engage in a dialogue relating to the way they are perceived socially. Evie’s parents initially laugh at her attempt to define herself, at once undermining the child’s effort, and then feel a sense of shame at so doing, shame which belies, perhaps, their self-delusion that they are treating their daughter as they would any other child. This implied parental shame could also be interpreted as a manifestation of a wider societal or national shame which, through intense and persistent categorisation and classification, has traditionally prevented mentally ill individuals from framing their own identity, or bearing witness to the reality of living (both personally and socially) with their condition.

Complex and emotionally confused societal responses to Evie’s attempt to voice both her true identity and experience of living with an illness of the brain in modern Irish society is further explored later in the novel in an exchange between Evie and a specialist whom her parents have brought her to in an attempt to define the condition affecting their daughter. Having questioned Evie for a number of minutes the doctor finally asks:

‘And what do you think is going on, Evie?’...to which Evie offered the idea that her brain might be funny. ‘In what way funny?’ Evie, who by this time knew more than

most children about the human brain, said, ‘The two halves – the hemispheres, you know? – it is like they don’t join up properly.’ Dr Prentice pursed her mouth and looked into her lap, then she lifted her head and with great clarity and tactfulness, discussed the anomalies of Evie’s case, and suggested – strongly suggested – that alongside her medical tests and enquiries, they should bring Evie for ‘psychiatric assessment’. (Enright 2011a, p.216)

While the doctor does ask Evie’s opinion about the nature of her illness, thus affording her a space within which to express her personal experience of living with her illness, and an opportunity to work in tandem with her parents and medical professionals to come to a deeper understanding of what is affecting her, nevertheless her response to Evie’s honest assertion is significant. Evie’s attempt to vocalise her interpretation of her illness, an illness which she experiences daily, is met with silence, and a questioning of her overall mental health. Through this one passage, Enright foregrounds the difficulty which individuals deemed to be mentally ill or ‘touched’ often face when trying to engage in a dialogue with others, particularly those in a position of authority, about the true nature of their condition. The use of the question asked by a small child is a significant performative of how so much needs to be questioned in terms of the treatment of the mentally ill in Ireland.

This passage is demonstrative of the persistence of a method of, as Michel Foucault stated, ‘observation and classification’, rather than dialogue, in the treatment of mental illness (Foucault 1967, p.250). Enright could be said to be challenging the reader here, and by extension Irish society, to evaluate and critique the ways in which we, as a nation, respond to the attempts made by mentally-ill individuals to take control of their own identity, to re-frame their experience and to share that with society at large. Foucault makes the point that ‘no aspect of reality should be allowed to become a definitive and inhuman law for us’ (Foucault 1988, p.1). Through the figure of Evie in *A Forgotten Waltz*, Enright foregrounds the degrading and, in many

cases, inhuman ways in which we treat those suffering from mental illnesses in Ireland, and her writing poses a challenge to families, communities and those in authority to engage in a more concerned and concerted dialogue with mentally-ill individuals in our society, in order to afford them the space in which to take an active role in the framing and representation of their identity. Her work here engages actively with Andrea Hurst’s question in relation to Derrida’s exploration of mental illness, namely, ‘who decides, and in the name of what, which are the better constructions?’ (Hurst 2008, p180).

### **Living With Mental Illness in a Modern Irish Context**

Nicole E. Hurt, in her article ‘Disciplining through Depression: An Analysis of Contemporary Discourse on Women and Depression’, states that:

In today’s society, it seems plausible to think that the stigma that once plagued depression may have been obliterated due to the significant number of people who now suffer from the disorder. Yet, do the ways in which we currently conceive of women’s depression really differ from the intense stigmas of the past? How do we talk about women’s depression? Is this discourse empowering and encouraging for women? Or, do we...stifle women’s depression and keep it confined to the private and taboo site of misunderstood madness? (Hurt 2007, p.285)

Enright’s work aids in de-stigmatising mental illness in Irish society through its open and frank portrayal of both fictional characters suffering from mental illness, as well as through her own struggles with depression. Through these portrayals and memoirs, Enright provides an empowering and encouraging discourse, which details the ways which individuals, suffering from a mental illness or depression, can move forward and develop ways with which to live with their illness in a positive manner, despite being profoundly affected by their illness. Julia Kristeva makes the point that ‘one could describe melancholia as an unnamable and empty perversion’, and goes on to

challenge us as a society ‘to raise it to the level of words – and of life’ (Kristeva 1996a, p.80). Enright has succeeded in raising melancholia to the ‘level of words – and of life’ by moving beyond traditional representations of women’s depression in Irish literature, and indeed in Irish society, which presented a predominantly negative image of living with a mental illness, often resulting in marginalisation, institutionalisation and even death (Kristeva 1996a, p.80).<sup>24</sup>

This chapter opened by exploring Foucault’s assertion that individuals, and society at large, ‘confine their neighbors [*sic*], and communicate and recognize each other through the merciless language of non-madness’ (Foucault 1967, p.ix), and the ways in which this was evinced in the literature of McGahern and Enright. This final section will move on to investigate the ways in which Enright’s literature attempts to directly combat this tendency by foregrounding the voice of the ‘touched’ throughout her work. Her writing enables those who are confined, by the categorisation and isolation engendered by traditional discourses surrounding mental illness, to in some way free themselves through discourse itself, by voicing their lived experience of mental illness, and by providing alternative perspectives that will promote a dialogue centring on mental illness in modern Irish society. Similarly, Enright’s work strives to assess modern societal challenges and prescriptions levelled at Irish women. Hurt argues that contemporary discourse encourages women to engage in ‘self-discipline and self-monitoring’, not solely in relation to their bodies, but also in relation to ‘ideal mental health’ (Hurt 2007, p.305). She argues that ‘despite women’s efforts to achieve the ideal mental health, just like the ideal femininity, it will remain forever beyond their reach’ (Hurt 2007, p.305). Enright’s work calls into question societal delineations of mental health, by demonstrating that modern Irish women can take an

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<sup>24</sup> Some examples of these characters include Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, Margaret Quinn in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, Molly Sweeney in Brian Friel’s play of the same name, to name but a few.

active and independent role in Irish society without having to attain, or even feign achievement of, society’s definition of ‘ideal mental health’.

Enright’s novel *The Gathering* provides a detailed and complex insight into the difficulties of living and attempting to come to terms with depression in modern Irish society. While it must be stated that the main protagonist, Veronica, is never diagnosed with a mental illness, her grief, coupled with insomnia, excessive and solitary drinking, self-imposed isolation and feelings of inadequacy and marginalisation from her family, could be interpreted as symptoms of a deep depression experienced in the wake of her brother’s suicide. As such, *The Gathering* can be interpreted as Enright’s attempt to represent the mindset, and struggles, of a deeply depressed woman, who utilises a self-imposed writing therapy in an attempt to come to terms with the distress that she is experiencing as a result of her childhood, her familial struggles and her bereavement. Carol Dell’Amico attests that:

Although the novel seems to concern itself with the past, it is firmly rooted in the boom-period present of Veronica’s response to Liam’s suicide, a response that is something like a nervous breakdown and which threatens her marriage. Shifting restlessly between past and present, Veronica’s story’s main focus is, finally, Veronica herself, her crisis and her recovery. (Dell’Amico 2010, pp.63-64)

Throughout much of the novel, Veronica admits to feelings of inadequacy, blame and insignificance, particularly in relation to her interactions with close family. In the aftermath of Liam’s suicide Veronica admits that:

There is something wonderful about a death, how everything shuts down, and all the ways you thought you were vital are not even vaguely important. Your husband can feed the kids, he can work the new oven, he can find the sausages in the fridge, after all. And his important meeting was not important, not in the slightest. And the girls will be picked up from school, and dropped off again in the morning. Your eldest daughter can remember her inhaler, and your youngest will take her gym kit with her, and it is just as you suspected – most of the stuff that you do is just stupid, really stupid, most of the stuff you do is just nagging and whining and picking up for people

who are too lazy even to love you, even that, let alone find their own shoes under their own bed; people who turn and accuse you – scream at you sometimes – when they can only find one shoe. (Enright 2007a, p.27)

Veronica’s admission, that she is ‘not even vaguely important’, represents a distortion of her reality and a loss of self-esteem that makes her feel profoundly isolated from her family. Through this passage, Veronica demonstrates to the reader how difficult it is, both to remain connected to one’s family, and to live from day to day, when an individual suffers from depression. Veronica’s mental state even hampers her relationship with her children. She limits the time that they may spend watching television as she believes that:

If I don’t talk to them I think I will die of something – call it irrelevance – I think I will just fade away. (Enright 2007a, p.37-38)

The perspective from which the novel is written facilitates its demonstration of the realities of living with mental illness or depression in a modern Irish context. The novel is written entirely from Veronica’s perspective and the reader may question whether Veronica’s family truly isolate, marginalise and blame her for the litany of faults of which she believes herself to be culpable.

However, what is perhaps being highlighted in this work is the unimportance of the veracity of Veronica’s claim. Whether her isolation and culpability are being fostered by her family or not, Veronica’s mental state encourages her to perceive her situation in this manner. In this way, the novel clearly voices the loneliness and isolation that can be felt by individuals suffering from depression and mental illness, even if they are surrounded by a loving support system. This is evident in Veronica’s admission that:

I can not feel the weight of my body on the bed. I can not feel the line of my skin along the sheet. I am swinging an inch or so off the mattress, and I do not believe in myself – in the way I breathe or turn – and I do not believe in Tom beside me: that he is alive (sometimes I wake to find him dead, only to wake again). Or that he loves me. Or that any of our memories are mutual. So he lies there, separate, while I lose faith. (Enright 2007a, p.133)

Veronica’s language here is indicative of her perceived marginalisation. Her inability to connect with, touch or feel her own body, or the body of her husband, highlights Veronica’s ‘distant skin’, which separates her, not only from her husband and family, but even from her own body and the physical world around her (Enright 2007a, p.155).

Despite the anguish and depression that threaten her mental state, familial relationships and marriage, Veronica is seen, by the novel’s close, to come to an understanding of her current mental health, and to make the decision to seek help in order to deal with the root causes of her distress. Veronica admits, at one point in the novel, to being ‘in the horrors’; however, she remains, for the most part, silent about the extent and nature of her grief and depression (Enright 2007a, p.133). Her decision, at the novel’s conclusion, to return home to Ireland and break the silence and secrecy surrounding the sexual abuse of her brother as a child, represents an acknowledgement of how deeply affected she has become by the secret that she has carried since childhood, and of her willingness to accept discourse and intimate discussion as a therapeutic aid, in order to combat her depressive feelings and tear down the emotional wall of silence that has existed between Veronica and her husband and siblings:

I know what I have to do – even though it is too late for the truth, I will tell the truth. I will get hold of Ernest and tell him what happened to Liam in Broadstone, and I will ask him to break this very old news to the rest of the family (but don’t tell Mammy!)

because I can not do it myself, I do not have the arguments for it. (Enright 2007a, p.259)

Veronica’s decision in this regard represents an acknowledgement that her current feelings and mental state can be altered, and that the isolation, fear and guilt that she currently feels need not be a permanent element of her life. Enright brings Veronica’s story to a close by bringing her to an emotional crossroads, enabling her to look past her current anguish and toward her desires for the future, which are closely linked to a desire to find an emotional equilibrium:

...I do not want a different destiny from the one that has brought me here. I do not want a different life. I just want to be able to live it, that’s all. I want to wake up in the morning and fall asleep at night. I want to make love to my husband again. (Enright 2007a, p.260)

This statement highlights Veronica’s belief that change is both possible and desired; that her internal struggles can be worked upon in order to attain a greater sense of mental health and well-being. The very fact that the novel closes before Veronica’s return home is significant, as the reader will never know if Veronica is able to move on and live her life in the aftermath of divulging her secret.

However, Enright’s novel depicts the possibility and hope that one can learn to cope with and survive mental illness or depression, whilst similarly foregrounding the argument that women do not necessarily need to prescribe to societal dictates concerning ideal mental health in order to maintain active and positive familial and public roles in modern Irish society. Veronica outlines this belief quite frankly in *The Gathering* when she states:

...there is no worse place for me to go. This is the worst place there is. In which case, it is not too bad. If this is as mad as I get then it is not too mad. My children will not

be harmed by it; though I may have to change my life a little; get out more, trade in the Saab. (Enright 2007a, pp.237-238)

Veronica’s assertion that her situation ‘is not too bad’ is indicative of an acceptance of the fact that her current mental state does not conform to societal ideals concerning sanity and mental health, ideals which may ‘remain forever beyond’ her reach, whilst simultaneously exhibiting a distinct confidence that her illness is controllable (Hurt 2007, p.305). Veronica understands and freely admits that her mental distress affects certain elements in her life, yet she refuses to allow it to socially or personally disempower her. Veronica’s desire, by the end of the novel, is perhaps, not to permanently exorcise her mental demons, arguably an impossible goal, but rather ‘to be less afraid’ (Enright 2007a, p.261). Her decision to return and take up her active and prominent familial role at the end of the novel represents ‘a major step toward recovering a lost equilibrium’, implying an ability to live daily with depression and mental illness, rather than simply living despite it (Dell’Amico 2010, p.72). Whilst Veronica may never fully recover her equilibrium, she nonetheless will not allow her mental state to isolate her or deny her a full and active life.

## **Personal Experiences**

Jenny Diski, recalling her own experiences with mental illness and institutionalisation, states that upon engaging in frank and open conversations with other individuals who had experienced mental illness and its treatment, the conversation had:

the same steely glint of challenge in one direction and more of camaraderie in the other that you sometimes see when Jews tell stomach-curdling Jewish jokes, while the uncircumcised grope in their bag of possible socialised reactions for a way to respond. (Diski 2014, p.3)

Diski raises a central question here in relation to the discourse surrounding mental illness. If one considers Foucault’s assertion, examined earlier in this chapter, that ‘the language of psychiatry...is a monologue of reason about madness’, then Diski’s comment questions the very ability of those who have not personally experienced mental illness to move beyond socially acceptable or socially delineated ways of engaging in, or responding to, a frank discourse surrounding mental illness (Foucault 1967, pp.x-xi). Having had personal experience of the effects of depression, Enright’s writing, arguably, has the ability to move beyond socialised reactions to mental illness and depression, in order to demonstrate the ‘real’ experience of living and coping with mental illness on a daily basis.

In both her fiction, and her personal descriptions of coping with depression, Enright foregrounds the importance of the recognition of the need for and provision of adequate centres of care for individuals suffering from mental illness or depression. In doing so, Enright engages with what Diski terms a traditional societal tendency to associate the treatment of mental and emotional disorders as somehow less important, or necessary, than the treatment of physical conditions:

It’s obvious that someone lying on the ground with a broken leg can’t walk, so no one expects them to get up and pop into A&E to get it set, and then get on with their business, but it seems it is much harder for many to believe in the physical anguish, debilitations and incapacitations of mental illness, and see the need to offer relief. (Diski 2014, p.6)

Whereas physical illness is perhaps immediately evident, and, as such, validated as a condition which is affecting the body, mental illness, as an internal and, in some ways, invisible struggle, is interpreted differently, and is often seen to be connected to

a person’s personality and thus intrinsically associated with the way in which they are identified by society.

In her novel *What Are You Like?*, Enright chronicles her character Maria’s struggles with depression and mental instability, including her voluntary admission into a psychiatric care facility in Ireland following a suicide attempt in New York. This admission finally enables Maria to temporarily relinquish control of her emotions, her responsibilities, and of her life in general, in a safe environment, in an attempt to regain an emotional equilibrium. Maria recognises that this care facility allows her to ‘let go’, that:

All the things she found difficult she did not have to do any more. She did not have to wash or speak or dress. She had to go to the toilet sometime, but perhaps not yet. The sunlight moved from one corner of the room to the other and broke her heart. She did not have to watch it. She could sleep instead, or just close her eyes and sleep. The nurse’s smile was the right size as she handed her the tablets. There was nothing to it, the nurse held the cup. (Enright 2001, pp.159-160)

This fictional description closely parallels Enright’s own personal description of her brief stay in what she terms ‘a nice middle-class home for the tearful’ in *Making Babies*:

I was saved by a ‘good’ GP (they must come in both varieties, like fairies) – who was the first to ask the right questions; he went through a list of them, as he had been trained to do, and referred me to a psychiatrist who got me a bed, two days later...where I fell like a stone, and stayed fallen for some months. I was dosed up to the gizzard. Such tranquillity. Life was like a television set in another room. It was just something we have forgotten to turn off for a while – company. (Enright 2005, pp.188-189)

This action of letting go of all responsibilities within a safe and professional setting provides both the fictional Maria, and Enright herself, with temporal and emotional

space in which to come to terms with their mental anguish and distress; as Maria states ‘to slay the monster – which was nothing at all’ (Enright 2001, p.163).

Enright’s narratives, in this respect, differ from many traditional accounts of institutionalisation and treatment of mental illness in Irish literature and Irish society, wherein it can often be posited as a punishment, a confinement or an attempt to marginalise those deemed to be mentally ill. Enright’s narratives, in these instances, describe institutions of psychiatric care in much the same manner as Diski, who, lamenting the closure of some of British institutions in favour of community-based programmes, voices a concern that places of safety for individuals with mental illnesses are steadily disappearing. Diski makes the point that these institutions and care centres:

held out the promise of containment...You could get relief from feeling socially obligated and guilty, because you were finally in a place that knew what you were and how you were, even if it couldn’t do much about it. Sometimes you need to bury yourself, to be enabled to sit the worst out without the world pulling at you, asking you what the matter is, or reminding you of the things you should but can’t be doing. It sounds like an almost absurd expectation in the current austerity/hardworking family rhetoric. But providing places of safety to people who are ill might not be economic madness. (Diski 2014, p.6)

Whilst advocating or promoting places of institutionalisation for mentally-ill members of Irish society may seem an erroneous tactic, particularly given Ireland’s historical ‘architecture of containment’ and the litany of abuses that followed, Enright’s narratives seek perhaps to reconceptualise the very term ‘containment’. She advocates the need for appropriate, safe, modern and professional spaces which mentally-ill or depressed individuals can access in the hope of developing strategies to cope with and even overcome their respective illnesses. In an era in which budget cuts and austerity have drastically affected public expenditure in relation to health care, the question must be asked, will mentally-ill individuals in Irish society face new

challenges in the wake of calls to close asylums and other mental health care facilities. There is a possibility that these individuals may face a new isolation, the prospect of which Diski states currently faces those in British society, namely: ‘emergency psychiatric wards’ in general hospitals:

with a limited number of beds and as fast a turnover of patients as anti-psychotic drugs can sustain after which the patient is left alone with the pills, and the underfunded, understaffed, sometimes mythical care in the community. (Diski 2014, p.6)

Enright’s narratives cannot answer these questions, nor do they claim to promote in-patient care over and above out-patient or community programmes. However, her work does raise interesting and complex questions about the treatment of mental illness in a modern Irish context. It challenges the reader to move beyond traditional perceptions and fears concerning in-patient care within the psychiatric system in Irish society, and to be aware of the complexities involved, perhaps, in advocating community-based care as a method of treating mental illness over and above in-patient or institutionalised care.

Finally, a discussion of Enright’s exploration of mental illness in a modern Irish context would not be complete without evaluating her detailed and frank account of her own experience of depression, which she outlines in *Making Babies*. Irigaray famously asks the question in her work *The Sex Which is Not One*, ‘does the hysteric speak? Isn’t hysteria a privileged preserving – but “in latency,” “in sufferance” – that does not speak?’ (Irigaray 1985b, p.136). Through *Making Babies*, Enright challenges Irigaray’s assertion of sufferance in silence by detailing the realities of living with, treating and living beyond depression in modern Irish society. In a latent criticism, perhaps, of attempts to write about mental illness, Enright admits that:

It is easy to write nice sentences about this kind of thing, but depression functions in the place where people hate both themselves and other people. It attracts complication, paranoia, impossibility, slippages, sneering, and pride. These emotions are ragged and infectious; they happen, not only inside you, but between you and everyone else in the room. The depressive think that they are self-contained, but they never stop leaking misery, banality, and hatred – because it is also a dull state as everyone knows, a grey old thing. God, I hated being depressed. You make all the wrong calls. You get a week of feeling artistic for every two years of feeling like shit. (Enright 2005, p.188)

Her writing chronicles, as outlined earlier, the help sought and treatment she received for her depression, alongside the author’s observations concerning her attempt to come to terms with a debilitating illness and thence to rebuild her life, and as such provide an insight into the difficulties associated with maintaining a sense of identity in the wake of diagnosis, and the intense struggle to regain a powerful and independent sense of self in the aftermath of a breakdown:

Sick. Well. It was all a new language for me. How long before you don’t have feelings, just symptoms, just a direction, like Connie – ‘up’ or ‘down’. It’s only chemical. I had to remake myself. I had to unmake myself. I was a bunch of chemicals. I was a dog that had to be walked, or it would bite. I had to be careful with myself, like a trusted cup that you carry to the table as a child and do not spill. I had to think about power – because I was surrounded by the powerless. I was one of them. I had lost, discarded. (Enright 2005, p.192)

Enright’s discourse latently emphasises the tendency to interpret and classify mentally-ill individuals as little more than a product of the symptoms which they manifest. Her admission that she too was ‘one of them’, is indicative of the dehumanisation and isolation that can be experienced by individuals labelled as mentally ill, a situation which Enright combats through an active engagement with her own sense of self, and attempt to regain a sense of personal power and sense of that self (Enright 2005, p192). Julia Kristeva, in an interview with Suzanne Clark and

Kathleen Hulley, makes the point that there are two alternative ways which a subject can interpret his or her crisis; either it can be viewed as ‘a suffering’, and ‘a pathology’, or alternatively, as ‘a creation, a renewal’ (Kristeva 1996b, p.37). Enright, through her personal portrayal of emotional crisis, postulates the possibility of renewal, of beginning afresh, whilst taking account of the life-lessons learnt by one’s experience of mental illness and/or emotional crisis. She chronicles this decision in *Making Babies* when she states that:

There is a certain ruthlessness about a recovering depressive, and like alcoholics we are never cured. It takes rigour. No sharp knives. No breakages of the skin. No baths after nightfall. No pockets. No rocks. You must learn to accept many things: that mornings are like this. That some days you will not leave the house...For six months, the medication turned all my thoughts into symptoms, and made me question everything about who I was. It dismantled my personality. The chemical happiness that crept up on me was not a joyful one, but it kept me alive, and after a while I came to appreciate the soggy buzz of it. I had a place to stand. When I was able to think again, I would make decisions. I would change the circumstances of my life, and so give life itself a chance to return. (Enright 2005, p.193)

Like Veronica in *The Gathering*, Enright’s personal account serves to point out the incompatibility of societal dictates and norms concerning ‘ideal mental health’, and the daily lived-experience of many individuals in Irish society, and her writing questions the need to even feign conformity to these unattainable ideals. At the close of *Making Babies*, Enright admits that:

I’m still a bit odd. I don’t go out a lot. I have an occasional ability to attract people’s obsessions or to smell out their damage. So I like a bit of distance. I keep my small paranoias, a little armoury of them – a quiet, but highly resistant, neurosis about opening or posting letters, for example, and a fairly odd approach to the whole issue of getting my hair cut. But maybe that’s doing all right, for forty. And on the plus side – a family, a marriage, this deliberate happiness. (Enright 2005, p.195)

Alongside her fictional depictions, Enright’s open and honest portrayal of her personal experience of depression serves to add a new and complex dimension to the

emerging discourse centring on mental illness in modern Irish society. Through her exploration of the place and position of mentally ill individuals in modern Irish society, Enright’s work succeeds, in many ways, in achieving what Foucault terms ‘the mediation of madness’, through which the world becomes culpable, ‘compelled by it to a task of recognition, or reparation, to the task of restoring reason *from* that unreason and *to* that unreason’ (Foucault 1967, p.288). Through her art, Enright consistently reminds the reader, and society of the unassailable truth; namely ‘how hard people work at being ordinary’ (Enright 2005, p.195).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter seeks to explore the complexities of living with a mental illness in Irish society. In an era which has seen the demise of much of the architecture of containment, of which many of Ireland’s mental institutions were a part, it is important to recognise the ease with which a linguistic form of containment can come to replace the walls of stone that previously had confined individuals suffering from a mental illness or disorder. It is in this context, that the euphemism ‘to be touched’ is such a significant term within Irish society, simultaneously embodying a wish to disengage from the particulars of any one individual’s mental illness, and at the same time signifying an attempt to categorise that individual as abnormal and distinct from mainstream Irish society. At a time when mental illness affects such a significant percentage of Irish society, the tendency to label and categorise individuals as ‘touched’ has a detrimental effect on people’s ability to come forward and discuss their emotional pain and suffering in what they feel is a safe and affirming environment. However this chapter also seeks to acknowledge and explore the importance of literature in highlighting and indeed improving the plight of ‘the

touched’ by bringing forward honest and open testimonies, (be they real or fictional), of individuals living with mental illness and by widening both the representation of, and the debate surrounding mental health in Irish society.

## Conclusion

The primary aim of this thesis, at its outset, was to undertake an exploration of the ways in which the place, representation and agency of women in Irish society have evolved as Ireland moves into the twenty-first century. While it must be stated that this research is not, and indeed cannot, represent a comprehensive overview of the polysemic nature of touch, this project seeks to promote further discussion and debate centring on women's representation in Irish literature and Irish life; areas of study which will no doubt provide several future avenues of research. As a nation which demonstrates a problematic relationship with interpersonal and personal touch, it is vital to acknowledge, critique and attempt to move beyond, the forces and historical influences which encourage us as a nation to maintain our 'distant skin' (Enright, 2007a, p.155). As such, this work aims to add to the discourse concerning the place and reception of the body in Irish society and literature, particularly in its attempt to foreground the voices individuals and groups traditionally repressed within Irish society.

The opening section of this study has attempted to demonstrate the interwoven social, religious and political influences which have shaped Irish women's response to, and connection with, their own bodies, and to analyse how these responses and connections have evolved as Ireland has moved into the twenty-first century. By exploring the traditional reticence to touch often displayed by Irish people, insight can be gained into the personal, cultural and historical factors which shaped the way in which individuals physically interact with others and even with their own bodies.

The second chapter of this work seeks to expand upon that of the first with an examination of Ireland's history of violence and sexual abuse, in domestic, scholastic and religious settings. By acknowledging, discussing and analysing the harrowing

stories of Irish women and children who experienced such violent and degrading forms of touch, an insight can be gained into the profound ways in which these horrific forms of touch, and indeed the relatively recent revelations concerning the widespread nature of such abusive touch, have shaped the way in which Irish people interpret the body and more particularly interpersonal touch, even from those people who are closest to them.

By analysing issues surrounding pregnancy and child-bearing in Ireland in chapter three, the work moves away from the violent focal point of chapter two, yet remains focused upon the complex feelings, emotions and bodily changes that result when a woman experiences pregnancy as a unique form of internal touch. As a simultaneously private, yet visible and public experience, pregnancy and child-bearing incite strong, and at times even ambiguous feelings concerning body image, self-identity and family support and structure, emotions which must be analysed to gain an insight into how this profoundly important experience in a woman's life affects the way in which she views her own body, and indeed how physical changes in the body of a pregnant woman can drastically alter the way in which she is viewed and treated by her family and society in general.

Finally, in its exploration of the representation of mentally-ill individuals in Irish literature, and Irish life, this work seeks to engage with a societal issue which has come to affect a significant, and rising, proportion of modern Irish society. Research, published in October 2013 by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland states that currently:

by the age of 13 years, 1 in 3 young people in Ireland is likely to have experienced some type of mental disorder. By the age of 24 years, that rate will have increased to over 1 in 2. Based on international evidence, that means that over one half of young

## *Conclusion*

Irish adults are at increased risk of mental ill health into their adult years. (Cannon et al 2013, p.7)

Given the rising prevalence of mental illness in modern Irish society, it is evident that the way in which mentally-ill individuals are represented, identified and treated will have a dramatic and influential impact on a significant section of Irish society. Furthermore, the traditional silence afforded to difficult or uncomfortable issues in Irish society, this study seeks to touch upon and examine the way in which Ireland as a nation interacts with the issue of mental illness and its treatment, in order to foreground a discourse which, arguably, will be of untold importance to future generations. As Linda Kauffman reminds us, theory 'should, after all, lead to reconceptualizations of power that go beyond traditional definitions of politics', 'the point of theorizing is to transform human behavior' (Kauffman 1989, p.3).

While this work serves, not as the conclusion of a discourse, but the initiation of an exploration of the historical and cultural roots of modern Irish women's place and position within society, it also attempts to demonstrate and highlight the national importance of the respective work of John McGahern in highlighting the connections between individual identities, familial roles and social, religious and legal structures in Irish society, while at the same time demonstrating the immense value of Enright's work as a lens through which to chart modern societal change in Irish society. Enright, in her article 'Pumping up the Parish', articulated perhaps the most important aspect of a writer's responsibility, stating that:

one of a writer's duties is to return to personal experience, to push the way things are described, to disrupt the national conversation and not to reach any conclusions. This is what happens in fiction. (Enright 1994, p.41)

### *Conclusion*

This statement arguably summarizes the importance of both McGahern and Enright's collective work. It is their respective ability to push the boundaries of traditionally acceptable representations of social issues, to disrupt and add new and often repressed voices to the national conversation, and to touch the lives of women in Irish society in a myriad of ways, that enables them to foreground a discourse in relation to women's experience that has the potential to influence personal, social and even national perspectives in relation to the ways in which women touch and are touched by powerful and prevailing familial, social, religious, and political forces in Irish society.

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## Appendix One – Biblical Quotations Prohibiting Touch

1. ge.3.3 But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.
2. ge.20.6 And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.
3. ge.26.11 And Abimelech charged all his people, saying, He that toucheth this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.
4. ex.19.12 And thou shalt set bounds unto the people round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death:
5. ex.19.13 There shall not an hand touch it, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live: when the trumpet soundeth long, they shall come up to the mount.
6. ex.19.14-15 And Moses went down from the mount unto the people, and sanctified the people; and they washed their clothes. And he said unto the people, Be ready against the third day: come not at your wives.
7. le.5.2 Or if a soul touch any unclean thing, whether it be a carcass of an unclean beast, or a carcass of unclean cattle, or the carcass of unclean creeping things, and if it be hidden from him; he also shall be unclean, and guilty.
8. le.5.3 Or if he touch the uncleanness of man, whatsoever uncleanness it be that a man shall be defiled withal, and it be hid from him; when he knoweth of it, then he shall be guilty.
9. le.7.19 And the flesh that toucheth any unclean thing shall not be eaten; it shall be burnt with fire: and as for the flesh, all that be clean shall eat thereof.
10. le.7.21 Moreover the soul that shall touch any unclean thing, as the uncleanness of man, or any unclean beast, or any abominable unclean thing, and eat of the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings, which pertain unto the LORD, even that soul shall be cut off from his people.
11. le.11.8 Of their flesh shall ye not eat, and their carcass shall ye not touch; they are unclean to you.
12. le.11.24 And for these ye shall be unclean: whosoever toucheth the carcass of them shall be unclean until the even.
13. le.11.26 The carcasses of every beast which divideth the hoof, and is not cloven-footed, nor cheweth the cud, are unclean unto you: every one that toucheth them shall be unclean.

14. le.11.27 And whatsoever goeth upon his paws, among all manner of beasts that go on all four, those are unclean unto you: whoso toucheth their carcass shall be unclean until the even.
15. le.11.31 These are unclean to you among all that creep: whosoever doth touch them, when they be dead, shall be unclean until the even.
16. le.11.36 Nevertheless a fountain or pit, wherein there is plenty of water, shall be clean: but that which toucheth their carcass shall be unclean.
17. le.11.39 And if any beast, of which ye may eat, die; he that toucheth the carcass thereof shall be unclean until the even.
18. le.12.4 And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled.
19. le.15.5 And whosoever toucheth his bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even.
20. le.15.7 And he that toucheth the flesh of him that hath the issue shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even.
21. le.15.10 And whosoever toucheth any thing that was under him shall be unclean until the even: and he that beareth any of those things shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even.
22. le.15.11 And whomsoever he toucheth that hath the issue, and hath not rinsed his hands in water, he shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even.
23. le.15.12 And the vessel of earth, that he toucheth which hath the issue, shall be broken: and every vessel of wood shall be rinsed in water.
25. le.15.19 And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even.
26. le.15.21-22 And whosoever toucheth her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even. And whosoever toucheth any thing that she sat upon shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even.
27. le.15.23 And if it be on her bed, or on any thing whereon she sitteth, when he toucheth it, he shall be unclean until the even.
28. le.15.27 And whosoever toucheth those things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even.

30. le.22.4 What man soever of the seed of Aaron is a leper, or hath a running issue; he shall not eat of the holy things, until he be clean. And whoso toucheth any thing that is unclean by the dead, or a man whose seed goeth from him;
31. le.22.5 Or whosoever toucheth any creeping thing, whereby he may be made unclean, or a man of whom he may take uncleanness, whatsoever uncleanness he hath;
32. le.22.6 The soul which hath touched any such shall be unclean until even, and shall not eat of the holy things, unless he wash his flesh with water.
34. nu.4.15 And when Aaron and his sons have made an end of covering the sanctuary, and all the vessels of the sanctuary, as the camp is to set forward; after that, the sons of Kohath shall come to bear it: but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die.
35. nu.16.26 And he spake unto the congregation, saying, Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest ye be consumed in all their sins.
36. nu.19.11 He that toucheth the dead body of any man shall be unclean seven days.
38. nu.19.13 Whosoever toucheth the dead body of any man that is dead, and purifieth not himself, defileth the tabernacle of the LORD; and that soul shall be cut off from Israel: because the water of separation was not sprinkled upon him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is yet upon him.
39. nu.19.16 And whosoever toucheth one that is slain with a sword in the open fields, or a dead body, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.
40. nu.19.21 And it shall be a perpetual statute unto them, that he that sprinkleth the water of separation shall wash his clothes; and he that toucheth the water of separation shall be unclean until even.
41. nu.19.22 And whatsoever the unclean person toucheth shall be unclean; and the soul that toucheth it shall be unclean until even.
42. nu.31.19 And do ye abide without the camp seven days: whosoever hath killed any person, and whosoever hath touched any slain, purify both yourselves and your captives on the third day, and on the seventh day.
43. de.14.8 And the swine, because it divideth the hoof, yet cheweth not the cud, it is unclean unto you: ye shall not eat of their flesh, nor touch their dead carcass.
44. jos.9.19 But all the princes said unto all the congregation, We have sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel: now therefore we may not touch them.
45. ru.2.9 Let thine eyes be on the field that they do reap, and go thou after them: have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee? and when thou art athirst, go unto the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn.

46. 2sa.18.12 And the man said unto Joab, Though I should receive a thousand shekels of silver in mine hand, yet would I not put forth mine hand against the king's son: for in our hearing the king charged thee and Abishai and Ittai, saying, Beware that none touch the young man Absalom.
47. 2sa.23.7 But the man that shall touch them must be fenced with iron and the staff of a spear; and they shall be utterly burned with fire in the same place.
48. 1ch.16.22 Saying, Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm.
49. job.6.7 The things that my soul refused to touch are as my sorrowful meat.
50. ps.105.15 Saying, Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm.
51. pr.6.29 So he that goeth in to his neighbour's wife; whosoever toucheth her shall not be innocent.
52. isa.52.11 Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD.
53. jer.12.14 Thus saith the LORD against all mine evil neighbours, that touch the inheritance which I have caused my people Israel to inherit; Behold, I will pluck them out of their land, and pluck out the house of Judah from among them.
54. la.4.14 They have wandered as blind men in the streets, they have polluted themselves with blood, so that men could not touch their garments. la.4.15 They cried unto them, Depart ye; it is unclean; depart, depart, touch not: when they fled away and wandered, they said among the heathen, They shall no more sojourn there.
55. hag.2.13 Then said Haggai, If one that is unclean by a dead body touch any of these, shall it be unclean? And the priests answered and said, It shall be unclean.
56. joh.20.16-17 Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.
57. 1co.7.1 7 Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.
58. 1co.7.2 Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.
59. 2co.6.17 Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.
60. co.2.21, Touch not; taste not; handle not;

*Appendix One*

61. heb.12.20 (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart:
62. 1jo.5.18 We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not.

## **Appendix Two – Biblical Quotations Where Touch is Permitted**

1. ex.29.37 Seven days thou shalt make an atonement for the altar, and sanctify it; and it shall be an altar most holy: whatsoever toucheth the altar shall be holy.
1. ex.30.29 And thou shalt sanctify them, that they may be most holy: whatsoever toucheth them shall be holy.
2. le.5.13 And the priest shall make an atonement for him as touching his sin that he hath sinned in one of these, and it shall be forgiven him: and the remnant shall be the priest's, as a meat offering.
3. le.6.18 All the males among the children of Aaron shall eat of it. It shall be a statute for ever in your generations concerning the offerings of the LORD made by fire: every one that toucheth them shall be holy.
4. le.2.27 Whatsoever shall touch the flesh thereof shall be holy: and when there is sprinkled of the blood thereof upon any garment, thou shalt wash that whereon it was sprinkled in the holy place.
5. nu 19.18 And a clean person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it upon the tent, and upon all the vessels, and upon the persons that were there, and upon him that touched a bone, or one slain, or one dead, or a grave:
6. 1ki.19.5 And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat.
7. 1ki.19.7 And the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.
8. 2ki.13.21 And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, that, behold, they spied a band of men; and they cast the man into the sepulchre of Elisha: and when the man was let down, and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet.
9. es.5.2 And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre.
10. job.1.11 But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face.
11. job.2.5 But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face.

12. job.4.5 But now it is come upon thee, and thou faintest; it toucheth thee, and thou art troubled.
13. job.5.19 He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee.
14. job.19.21 Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me.
15. job.37.23 Touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out: he is excellent in power, and in judgment, and in plenty of justice: he will not afflict.
16. ps.104.32 He looketh on the earth, and it trembleth: he toucheth the hills, and they smoke.
17. ps.144.5 Bow thy heavens, O LORD, and come down: touch the mountains, and they shall smoke.
18. isa.5.1 5 Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill:
19. jer.1.14-16 Then the LORD said unto me, Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land. For, lo, I will call all the families of the kingdoms of the north, saith the LORD; and they shall come, and they shall set every one his throne at the entering of the gates of Jerusalem, and against all the walls thereof round about, and against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgments against them touching all their wickedness, who have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands.
20. da.8.18 Now as he was speaking with me, I was in a deep sleep on my face toward the ground: but he touched me, and set me upright.
21. da.9.21 Yea, whiles I was speaking in prayer, even the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation.
22. da.10.10 And, behold, an hand touched me, which set me upon my knees and upon the palms of my hands.
23. da.10.16 And, behold, one like the similitude of the sons of men touched my lips: then I opened my mouth, and spake, and said unto him that stood before me, O my lord, by the vision my sorrows are turned upon me, and I have retained no strength.
24. da.10.18 Then there came again and touched me one like the appearance of a man, and he strengthened me,

25. am.9.5 And the Lord GOD of hosts is he that toucheth the land, and it shall melt, and all that dwell therein shall mourn: and it shall rise up wholly like a flood; and shall be drowned, as by the flood of Egypt.
26. hag.2.12 If one bear holy flesh in the skirt of his garment, and with his skirt do touch bread, or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any meat, shall it be holy? And the priests answered and said, No.
27. zec.2.8 For thus saith the LORD of hosts; After the glory hath he sent me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye.
28. mt.8.3 And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.
29. mt.8.14-15 And when Jesus was come into Peter's house, he saw his wife's mother laid, and sick of a fever. And he touched her hand, and the fever left her: and she arose, and ministered unto them.
30. mt.9.20-9.22 And, behold, a woman, which was diseased with an issue of blood twelve years, came behind him, and touched the hem of his garment: For she said within herself, If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole. But Jesus turned him about, and when he saw her, he said, Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole. And the woman was made whole from that hour.
31. mt.9.24-25 He said unto them, Give place: for the maid is not dead, but sleepeth. And they laughed him to scorn. But when the people were put forth, he went in, and took her by the hand, and the maid arose.
32. mt.9.29 Then touched he their eyes, saying, According to your faith be it unto you.
33. mt.14.36 And besought him that they might only touch the hem of his garment: and as many as touched were made perfectly whole.
34. mt.17.7 And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid.
35. mt.20.33-34 They say unto him, Lord, that our eyes may be opened. So Jesus had compassion on them, and touched their eyes: and immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed him.
36. mr.1.30-31 Simon's wife's mother lay sick of a fever, and anon they tell him of her. And he came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up; and immediately the fever left her, and she ministered unto them.
37. mr.1.41 And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; be thou clean.
38. mr.3.10 For he had healed many; insomuch that they pressed upon him for to touch him, as many as had plagues.

39. mr.5.25-28 And a certain woman, which had an issue of blood twelve years, And had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse, When she had heard of Jesus, came in the press behind, and touched his garment. For she said, If I may touch but his clothes, I shall be whole.
40. mr.5.31 And Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him, turned him about in the press, and said, Who touched my clothes? And his disciples said unto him, Thou seest the multitude thronging thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me?
41. mr.6.56 And whithersoever he entered, into villages, or cities, or country, they laid the sick in the streets, and besought him that they might touch if it were but the border of his garment: and as many as touched him were made whole.
42. mr.7.33-35 And he took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue; And looking up to heaven, he sighed, and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened. And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain.
43. mr.8.22-25 And he cometh to Bethsaida; and they bring a blind man unto him, and besought him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town; and when he had spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked him if he saw ought. And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees, walking. After that he put his hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up: and he was restored, and saw every man clearly.
44. mr.10.13-14 And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them: and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.
45. mr.10.16 And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.
46. mr.12.26 And as touching the dead, that they rise: have ye not read in the book of Moses, how in the bush God spake unto him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?
47. lu.5.13 And he put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will: be thou clean. And immediately the leprosy departed from him.
48. lu.6.19 And the whole multitude sought to touch him: for there went virtue out of him, and healed them all.
49. lu.7.14-15 And he came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still. And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak.

50. lu.7.37-39 And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.
51. lu.8.43 And a woman having an issue of blood twelve years, which had spent all her living upon physicians, neither could be healed of any,
52. lu.8.45-48 Came behind him, and touched the border of his garment: and immediately her issue of blood stanch'd. And Jesus said, Who touched me? When all denied, Peter and they that were with him said, Master, the multitude throng thee and press thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me? And Jesus said, Somebody hath touched me: for I perceive that virtue is gone out of me. And when the woman saw that she was not hid, she came trembling, and falling down before him, she declared unto him before all the people for what cause she had touched him, and how she was healed immediately. And he said unto her, Daughter, be of good comfort: thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace.
53. lu.18.15 And they brought unto him also infants, that he would touch them: but when his disciples saw it, they rebuked them.
54. lu.22.51 And Jesus answered and said, Suffer ye thus far. And he touched his ear, and healed him.
55. heb.11.28 Through faith he kept the passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the firstborn should touch them.