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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

The Unspeakable: Silence and Identity in Claire

Keegan's Small Things Like These

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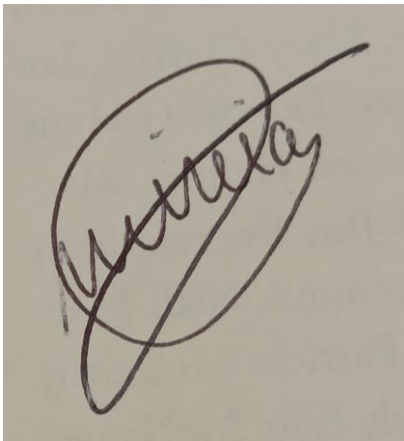
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**Title of Assignment: The Unspeakable: Silence and Identity in Claire Keegan's
*Small Things Like These***

I declare that this is a totally original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

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22 January 2024

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Abstract

The protagonist of Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*, Bill Furlong, is made to be an embodiment of the silence surrounding the treatment of young, out of wedlock mothers in Ireland during most part of the twentieth century. Keegan uses this character as the narrator of a fragment of his life in which he rebels against the Catholic Church, the perpetrator of the abuse in the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland, therefore, breaking the cycle of silence.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how Keegan uses the modern short story and its convention of ellipsism and omission to recount one of the most tragic issues in Irish history. In doing so, she projects onto the characters of the story different roles that make us understand how the Magdalene Laundries were able to continue to exist for decades.

Keywords: *Small Things Like These*, Claire Keegan, Silence, Irish Short Story, Magdalene Laundries.

0. Introduction

Small Things Like These is a long short story, novella, or, simply put, a book that stands out for its gritty realism and Keegan's austere and meticulous style. Claire Keegan is an Irish author who is known for her short stories which have been published in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review* and *Granta*. She has been highly praised by book reviewers in *The Washington Post*, *The Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Irish Times*, *The Guardian*, among many others. Altogether, her work, albeit modest in size, has the projection of being highly influential. Beyond that, it has already seen worldwide attention in the big screen, as her standalone "long short story" (Keegan) *Foster* was made into the film *An Cailín Ciúin*, which was nominated in the Academy Awards in the Best International Feature Film prize. Keegan's style, even in longer fiction like *Small Things Like These*, is consistently reminiscent of Joyce's "strategy of 'scrupulous meanness'", where "motivation and explanations are suppressed and the reader has to fill in the gaps" (D'Hoker *Women Writers* 160), namely, Keegan adheres herself to the short story regardless of the length of her work. Likewise, her writing has repeatedly been compared to John McGahern's and Edna O'Brien's. McGahern uses "realism and mid-twentieth-century Irish literary tropes" which she reworks in a "McGahern-esque quality (Yen-Chi 179). The modern realism in Keegan's fiction is transmitted through the detailed mundanity of the narration and her ability to create an engulfing environment that transports the reader in a specific time and place. Nevertheless, that realism is bound to a magical feeling that's representative of mythical Irish folklore, in other words, "a striking feature in Keegan's work is her blending of tradition and superstition with modernity, in such a way that boundaries are blurred" (Morales-Ladrón 276). Another repurposing of the mid-twentieth century realism tropes that Keegan engages in is by injecting them with social commentary.

The story at hand, even if it could be considered a novel in terms of length, acts like a short story in structure and follows the general conventions of the genre. The framing of the plot as a snippet of reality and the narrative focused on the mind of the main character, Bill Furlong, mixed with a clear criticism of society leads us to perceive *Small Things Like These* as a short story. Furthermore, Claire Keegan became a household name for the Irish short story with her first collection, *Antarctica*, and she has kept this style even in longer fiction like *Foster*. In the collection of essays *The Irish Short Story at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, Madalina Armie states that “short stories of this period deal with the religious scandals that began to surface in the 1990s and which shook the pillars of the religious world” (84), and that is exactly what Keegan’s story’s focuses on, although it was published in 2021. Additionally, “the short story allows the writer to show glimpses of changing Irish social mores, and to achieve a rapid and incisive insight into these changes” (Terrazas-Gallego 81), for instance, the declining influence of the Catholic Church that the book at hand hints at by having the main character completely rebel against it.

The Irish short story has a predictable thematical commonality. Like in post-colonial literature, the base of a big portion of this literature is trauma and oppression. From this framework, the concept of silence erupts as a trope and theme, therefore, “breaking the silence resulting from structures of oppression, exclusion and disempowerment has received quite some attention in Irish studies” (D’Hoker *Aesthetics of Silence* 96). *Small Things Like These* exemplifies this perfectly with its focus on the Magdalene Laundries, in which approximately 30,000 women were imprisoned until 1996 and 796 babies died between 1925 and 1961 only in the Tuam home. (Keegan 116)

In this essay I aim to analyse the role the concept of silence partakes in the narrative of *Small Things Like These* and how Furlong embodies this silence, which exists

as a literary device and as a historical representation of the Catholic Church's power in Ireland in the twentieth century. The study of silence in modern Irish literature is very extensive as it is an extremely prominent feature of it. Nevertheless, even if Keegan's fiction, along with dozens of Irish authors such as Colm Tóibín or Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, has been exhaustively examined, *Small Things Like These* has been generally obviated from academic research. The recency of the publishing could be a reason for the gap in academic interest, however, I have chosen to study this book because it encases the conventions of the Irish short story, and it simultaneously disrupts them through the main character.

In the first section I will explore the importance of the Irish short story in bringing forward socially hidden discourses like the abuse of young women by the Church, as its "laconic nature makes it the ideal form to stage the secrets, taboos and traumas that haunt people, families and communities" (D'Hoker *Aesthetics of Silence* 88). On the second section I will analyse the protagonist of the story by examining his relationships with his past. Additionally, I will show how his moral code intermingles with the fabric of his community in New Ross, a town woven with complicit silence and intentional ignorance.

1. Silence

1.1. The short story

The concept of silence has always played a crucial part in the short story, namely, the Irish short story. To understand the roots of silence within the convention of this literary genre, we must take a close look at the origins and development of the short story. A long list of Irish scholars has debated whether the short story developed in conjunction and as a consequence of the substantial oral tradition or as a disjunction and response of that

with the intention of heading towards a more modernised form of literature. Anne Enright in *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story* quotes John Kenny to explain that “the short story has flourished ‘in those cultures where older, usually oral forms, are met head on with the challenge of new literary forms equipped with the ideology of modernisation’” (XII). Also, following the same train of thought, Enright adds that “(Frank) O’Connor’s theories place the short story as the genre of the cusp between tradition and modernity. The story is born from the fragmentation of old certainties, and the absence of any new ones, and this produces in the writer a lyric response” (XII). Heather Ingman, in *A History of the Irish Short Story*, further assesses the dispute by introducing Elizabeth Bowen’s thoughts regarding the “newness and lack of tradition” of the short story, in opposition of literary critic Vivian Mercier’s opinion which “leads him to emphasize its strong roots in the oral folk tradition” as well as to argue that “the vibrancy of oral storytelling in Ireland is one of the reasons why the short story established itself as a characteristically Irish form” (2). It could be argued that it is the contemporary Irish short story the one that resembles or even mirrors oral tradition, contrary to the modernist one, in which the author intended to disrupt the literary canons of the nineteenth century, such as *Dubliners*, “a collection that stylistically, at least, bears no connection with the oral tradition” (Ingman 4). Nevertheless, if we look at how the two discourses converge with one another we can conclude that the modern short story, while keeping Irish folklore and tradition alive, disrupts the societal status quo by sparking dialogues about marginalised communities and taboos. Ingman voices this phenomenon by saying that “there is a tension between the Irish short story as a transmitter of tradition and its current position as the form that perhaps best expresses Irish modernity” (10), this dichotomy is seen in *Small Things Like These* with the clash between the Catholic traditionalist values and the

need for liberation of Furlong, all within an Irish landscape in which the conflict never feels contradictory.

Claire Keegan encapsules the Irish short story in a sense that she, throughout her body of work, presents “brief moments of existence (...) permitted snapshots of the effects of the Celtic Tiger, immigration, the decline of the Catholic church, changes in the family unit, and other still current Irish issues” (Ingman 11). Furthermore, she keeps challenging the dominant gendered narratives by giving voice to often forgotten, hidden and silenced sections of society, such as the women who were imprisoned in the Magdalene Laundries for over half a century. In the short story paradigm in Ireland, silence and identity have settled a discursal prominence that can only be understood in juxtaposition with its history of colonial oppression along with the country’s internal power structures. Since, as Ingman states, “both gender identity and Irish identity have been increasingly interrogated, deconstructed and diversified in the short stories of this period, so that the key to these decades is transformation, of society, of the family and finally of the Irish short story itself” (227).

1.2. Silence as a convention

The short story is already a form of literature powered by omission and brevity and it creates meaning by using the unsaid as a resource to expand the narrative. Following this definition, Elke D’Hoker delineates Keegan’s short stories’ blueprint as a “concentration of a story on a particular moment or scene which grounds characters, development and plot also comes, as in McGahern’s stories, with an understated, almost minimalist style in which meaning is conveyed through suggestion and subtle symbolism” (*Women Writers* 160). Nevertheless, it is important not to associate silence as a tool widely used in the short story genre, with the tendency to use silence as a theme to explore societal

oppressive constructions of the Irish short story, because although it is “tempting to construct a causal link between the manifold forms of silence and silencing in modern Ireland and the success, or even specific characteristics, of the modern Irish short story” (D’Hoker *Aesthetics of Silence* 89), there is not direct causation. The reason for that is, “as several critics of Irish exceptionalism have noted, other European countries too have been marked by the systems of domination associated with secrecy and silencing” (D’Hoker *Aesthetics of Silence* 89), in addition to the fact that the formal characteristics of ellipsis and omission are widely used by short story authors all around the world. Still, there is no doubt that silence as a theme is used in a significant amount of short literature by Irish authors, especially women authors.

In the Introduction of the collection of essays *Silence in Modern Irish Literature*, Michael McAteer goes through different approaches modern Irish authors have addressed the concept of “Irish silence”, those being “psychological, ethical, topographical, and spiritual” (1). The first significant silence, and one that is often overlooked, is the deafening silence of the Irish language, the lack itself of usage of the language in Irish literature points to the colonial past of the country and elucidates the unadulterated extinction of culture and identity the Irish people went through by the hands of Britain. Irish is “a language that still exists as the official language of the Republic of Ireland even though it is no longer used on a daily basis by the vast majority of the Republic’s population” (McAteer 16). Nevertheless, Keegan constantly infiltrates Hiberno-English in her texts which adds to the authenticity of the context and induces the reader closer to the characters. The usage of certain Hiberno-English expressions and words, such as “a leanbh” which is an endearment form for little girl that Furlong calls her daughter by, takes the disruptiveness of her work one step further, not only by focusing on breaking the silence in a gender or class-based perspective but national too.

The trope of silence in Irish literature has also been repeatedly used in works based on the Troubles in Northern Ireland, where silence could be an ally, for instance, in Patrick Radden Keefe's book *Say Nothing* this phenomenon is exemplified in detail. It goes as far as to imply that this silence from the generation pre-Troubles was intended to act as a fortress to defend the present, nevertheless, "it has only smoothed its passage to the next generation" (DenHoed 13). The silence trope has also been used to depict how the Catholic Church swiped under the rug the thousands of paedophilia cases, in which silence was an accomplice, or even to portray how the famine and mass emigration left the country empty and silent. In *Small Things Like These* silence wraps itself all around the characters and becomes a guardian that protects the convent from criticism. As seen in the Introduction of *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, "silence can also be imposed and insidiously produced in order to alienate certain populations and enforce denial of their suffering, equal rights and humanity or, in the worst-case scenario, to annihilate their existence" (Caneda et al. 3), which is exactly what concerns Keegan's story in her portrayal of the Magdalene Laundry. In addition to silence, themes like motherhood, promiscuity, and reproductive rights have increasingly been tackled by contemporary Irish female writers, which have come along with the relatively recent dismantling of the Catholic Church in Ireland. With the inclination of the Irish short story towards a more liberated narrative, "maternity and its desirability either in the context of a marriage or as a solitary experience is a very popular theme in (...) the turn of the twenty-first century." (Armie 76)

1.3. The Catholic Church and social control

Small Things Like These puts a focus on the social control the Catholic Church held during a specific time in history in Ireland, namely in the 80s. The narrative takes place in New

Ross, but it could transpire all around the Republic. Since the 1937 Constitution, supervised by De Valera, the Catholic Church adopted a powerful role in the government, essentially making Ireland a Church-State ruled nation. This partnership was essential for the Oireachtas because “Catholicism helped to build national unity, supported by a popular and imagined cultural and ethnic homogeneity” (Armie 56). Nonetheless, this alliance invoked a reign of censorship of artists and writers that did not align with the ideology and values of both the Church and the government, and in addition, “the parallel and coterminous structures of Church and State ruled, with comparatively little criticism from those being ruled” (O’Brien 138). This created a tendency to remain silent, and thus, “silence has prevailed well into our contemporary moment with regard to clerical abuse in Ireland, obscured and enabled by the cordon sanitaire it produces” (Caneda et al. 8). The fact that the Magdalene Laundries scandal was not unveiled until the 90s, after half a century of relentless abuse of young women, is proof that the Catholic Church was one of the main pillars of the Irish structural social power, and “what is remarkable is not that the Church has lost its hegemonic status, but rather that this process has been so belated” (O’Brien 137).

To understand how the Magdalene Laundries came to be it is imperative to understand to which moral rules Catholicism abides, it is intrinsically patriarchal, and the control of women lays its foundation in bodily and sexual control. Furthermore, in order to keep this control afloat, silence, fear and guilt were used as tools that shifted the origin of that oppression to come from oneself or the community. Also, another tool of control was, as McAteer puts it, “the destructive influence of the sacramental binding to silence in Ireland in the twentieth century, during which time codes of silence operated in Irish society around issues such as domestic violence and homosexuality” (11) meaning that everyone was involved in the keeping of this silence. It is debated whether the general

population was aware of even a fraction of the abuse committed in those institutions, though “it cannot be claimed (...) that there was a total lack of knowledge regarding the violent practices in the Magdalene Laundries” (Armie 59). A big part of Irish society, namely, the deeply Catholic and conservative one, was very punitive and moralistic against women “who had lost their way”, i.e. women who might have gotten pregnant outside of marriage, among other things. The Catholic ideological bottom line was that “women and their bodies were considered important primarily for their role in reproduction” (Luppino 11), so women were stripped from any autonomy they could aspire to. In addition, the shunning from the community, even family, was so extreme and the punishment so cruel that “many single mothers preferred prostitution to being locked up for life in the Magdalene Laundries” (Armie 59).

In Keegan’s *Small Things Like These*, we only see glimpses of the torture happening inside the laundry, she only shows us Furlong’s quick observations, for instance, the girls’ burned hands when he accidentally steps into the laundry room of the convent or how Mother Superior locks all the doors behind her. Likewise, we only get two full sentences from the girl, Sarah, who Furlong saves. This lack of information given to the reader is enough to understand to what extent the girls are subject to abuse, nevertheless, it is never actually evidenced. Keegan plays with this to mirror the silence established in society in regard to the Laundries, or in D’Hoker’s words, “(the narrative) is shaped by what remains unsaid as much as by what is said, often in an attempt to illuminate the unsayable” (*Aesthetics of Silence* 88).

As it has already been established in this section, the story at hand falls into the recently established convention of the new Irish short story in which narratives are used to critique and highlight contemporary and old power structures. In *Small Things Like These* those critiques are manifested through the actions and speech of the characters. For

example, Mrs Kehoe, the bartender in the pub, utters a momentous sentence “You’ve reared a fine family of girls – and you know there’s nothing only a wall separating that place from St Margaret’s” (Keegan 99). Here, it becomes clear how easy it is for one’s life to be destroyed at the whim of the Church, the reader suddenly feels the clerical power in all its force, and it is not the only remark of that nature in the story. The conversation Furlong has in the convent with Mother Superior goes similarly when she implicitly threatens the future expectations of Bill’s daughters. Even Eileen, Furlong’s wife, shuts down any speculation Furlong utters.

1. Bill Furlong

The main themes of the story, silence, alienation, and religious power are constructed upon the sense of identity of the main character, Bill Furlong. His struggle to understand and make peace with his selfhood is linked to his quietness and isolation. Those themes are also representative of the big picture of the plot, i.e. the silencing of the atrocities perpetrated to young girls in the convent and the isolation from society inflicted on them. In this section I will analyse the different facets of Furlong’s identity to establish a clear picture of his embodiment of the silence surrounding the crimes perpetrated by the Catholic church jointly with the Irish State.

The story is shown through the eyes of Furlong. He is, on the surface, a common family man ruled by the routine of day-to-day life as a coal and timber merchant, he has a wife, Eileen, and five daughters who he cares deeply about. In an interview with “The Booker Prizes”, Keegan describes Furlong as someone who does not say much, “he’s a most unwilling narrator”. He is a quiet man who actively avoids any possible conflict with the people around him and is ruled by cordiality, nevertheless, the reader sees the

constant worry plaguing his mind. One recurrent thought shown, through omniscient narration, is that he is constantly aware of his “privileged” life, as he “had come from nothing. Less than nothing, some might say” (Keegan 5). This presents, in a general way, his personality and his psychology. His own consideration of this privilege highlights a humble character that we see throughout the story, furthermore, this humility even becomes guilt, which is an aspect of his character that relates to his Catholic upbringing. Furlong has just enough resources to care for his children and keep them warm and fed, notwithstanding, the socioeconomic context of Ireland in 1985 means that life is extremely precarious, and that the Furlong’s comfort could be swiped away unexpectedly.

Furlong was born out of wedlock from sixteen-year-old girl, she worked as a domestic for Mrs Wilson, a protestant widow who took her and the child in no questions asked and without expecting anything in return. Throughout the story Furlong reminisces about his childhood in Mrs Wilson’s big house, where he was protected but felt like an outcast and longed for a father figure after his mother’s tragic early death. These childhood experiences of being different and, consequently, being constantly chastised by his classmates along with the humble kindness taught by Mrs Wilson, found a way to reproduce in the adult life of Bill Furlong, for better and for worse. Even in his adult life and being a parent himself, he still struggles with the question of who his father might be, this leads to him wondering about an alternative life. Furlong’s feeling of isolation from his wife and the people around him can be translated and analysed through Keegan’s disruption of the Irish father figure archetype in literature. She plays with archetypal figures by making Furlong a character who steps away from the expected cruel, alcoholic, and authoritative father and delves into an estranged, complex character that wishes to escape the shackles of society, which is distinctive of female personifications in modern

Irish fiction. Even Keegan's own earlier stories are mostly told from a lonely female point of view.

2.1. Identity struggle

All through the narrative, Furlong has constant flashbacks, both from his childhood and his earlier adult life. His train of thought and decision-making allows us to piece together his fragmented identity. For instance, when he is at home with his daughters and Sheila asks him if Santa ever came for him and what did he bring him, he lies and instead of saying that he got *A Christmas Carol* he just tells that he got the farm puzzle he really desired. He then gets lost in thought reminiscing about growing up with Mrs Wilson as an almost parental figure, albeit not motherly. This moment highlights Furlong's yearning for having come from a different background, he is not ashamed but cannot help but imagine who he would have been in an alternative life, therefore, he is in a constant conflict with the idea of himself, which paralyses him. Consequently, he seeks refuge in the routine of the coal yard. In the same scene, in which he is helping around at home on a Sunday afternoon, we see him drift away, keeping his mind busy, and longing for Monday morning. Notwithstanding, he does not find joy in routine but escapism, a conversation with Eileen encapsulates his behaviour and mindset:

‘At least I’ve Sundays off.’

‘You have them off but do you take them, is the question.’ (Keegan 30)

It could be speculated that these childhood flashbacks come from unresolved trauma, as it would fit within the themes of the novel as “Irish Studies and Women’s Studies’ first incursions into the field of trauma were concerned with the reverberations of memory and silence” (Armie et al. 5), however, my analysis would be that these memories are coming up as a result of stagnation and an eagerness for something else. Nevertheless, this feeling does not incite him towards change but rather paralyses him

even more: “He was touching forty but didn’t feel himself to be getting anywhere or making any kind of headway and could not but sometimes wonder what the days were for.” (Keegan 36). However, it could be argued that his inclination to not talk with his wife about his internal thoughts and feelings might also be leading him to a sense of alienation.

Another part of Bill Furlong’s intrinsic identity is his feeling of strangeness and otherness regarding his community. There is a noticeable difference between him and the other men around him, one example would be during work on Christmas Eve, there is a barrier between him and the other workers of the coal yard that is unrelated with the fact that he is their superior. One characteristic that emphasises the difference is his sobriety, Furlong is not inclined to drink alcohol and he even rejects it. The only times we see him drink is in a memory with Ned and on the aforementioned scene in the pub where Mrs Kehoe, the bartender, insists on a hot whiskey. Nevertheless, he feels alienated: “Why could he not relax and enjoy them like other men who took a pint or two after Mass before falling asleep at the fire with the newspaper, having eaten a plate of dinner?” (Keegan 86). Drinking alcohol is also, especially in Irish culture and literature, a symbol of masculinity which Furlong might feel he lacks. It could be argued that he longs for a feeling of normalcy because of the discomfort the sensation of wanting more from life brings him. Nevertheless, the entirety of the story shows us that he has a need for redemption, even if he has not committed any crime or sin, or, in other words, he has a need for a self-realisation that can never be achieved in his mundane and content life.

2.2. Fatherhood and Christian identity

The theme of fatherhood is laid in the background of the story, and it adds to the reaffirming of Furlong’s broken identity, especially in his fatherlessness condition. He is

distraught by the mystery: “Where was his father now? Sometimes, he caught himself looking at older men, trying to find a physical resemblance, or listening out for some clue in the things people said.” (Keegan 23). Furthermore, not having this primordial figure could have also affected his sense of masculinity.

On one hand we have Bill’s own experience of fatherhood, there is not much that can be extracted from it apart from the fact that his innate kindness and worried manner permeates into his form of parenting. His apparent lack of a father figure makes him go the extra mile, in comparison to the usual fathers in his specific time and place and, most importantly, the literary fathers of Ireland. One example of this dichotomy of literary Irish fatherhood would be Michael Moran from *Amongst Women* by John McGahern who fits in the stereotype of the father who projects “frustrated energies and ambitions into petty authoritarianism and violence, the invocation of Catholicism to support a domestic reign of terror” (Quinn 79). This reiterates the distance which Furlong holds in relation to the Irish man archetype in modern Irish literature.

On the other hand, there is Ned, whose family name is never revealed. He is the closest form of father figure Furlong ever has, and furthermore, he plays a crucial part in the self-realisation of the protagonist, even in his physical absence in the story. A relative of Mrs Wilson is the precursor to Bill’s epiphany and inevitable realisation that Ned is, with high probability, his biological father. Keegan hints the relationship between them in page 87 with a confession that Ned had told Furlong long ago, he explains that during one harsh winter he smuggled out some of Mrs Wilson hay to give to a man in need of some for his donkey. Thereupon, a parallelism is formed between the morality of both men, in which they both generally follow the rules but will always have the urge to reach out to someone vulnerable in need of help even if it means putting themselves in a

compromised situation. Nevertheless, the principal feeling expressed implicitly by both men is that of guilt and shame, Ned felt shameful for having stolen from his mistress who had always treated him well and Furlong feels guilty for his position of “privilege”.

It becomes clear that Furlong has realised that his father has been by his side all along when he remembers that “this was the man who had polished his shoes and tied the laces, who’d bought him his first razor and taught him how to shave. Why were the things that were closest so often the hardest to see?” (Keegan 104). The silence surrounding the identity of the father deeply influences Furlong’s identity as an adult, not only internally and psychologically but also socially. On the other side of silence, there are the rumours and gossip that being a fatherless child of a teenage mother entailed in a small village in Ireland in the 80s, which also impacts Bill’s upbringing and makes shame emerge as a primary emotion. Additionally, shame is the root of Ned’s silence. In Furlong’s perception, Ned is too ashamed to reveal to Bill that he is his biological father because of the feeling of dishonour he carries because of his low social and financial status.

One other main figure in Furlong’s childhood was Mrs Wilson who acted like a distant, but caring, stepmother. With his biological mother’s untimely death, the woman slides into an abstract, almost non-existent maternal role. There is evidence throughout the text that Mrs Wilson had a positive impact on Furlong’s personality: “to get the best out of people, you must always treat them well, Mrs Wilson used to say” (Keegan 93). Nevertheless, we can appreciate her, nearly, aloofness by the fact that we never learn her first name. Even so, there exists a moment when she acted as a mother:

Mrs Wilson had rubbed the top of his head and praised him, as though he was one of her own. ‘You’re a credit to yourself,’ she’d told him. And for a whole day or more, Furlong had gone around feeling a foot taller, believing, in his heart, that he mattered as much as any other child. (Keegan 29)

It must be considered that Mrs Wilson plays into the theme of alienation from the angle of community, she is a protestant, which essentially puts her at the border of the social fabric of New Ross and she has the privilege of being wealthy enough to stay at the margins of the community. Her separation from the Catholic church is grasped with her taking in Furlong's mother when she falls pregnant, and her family rejects her. Mrs Wilson was the only obstacle between the sixteen-year-old girl and the laundry, and Furlong knows it.

As mentioned earlier, both Furlong and Ned experience a duality in their moral beliefs, Bill Furlong struggles with the part of himself that wants a complacent life based on the following of social rules, which include being in good terms with his workers, costumers and, most importantly, the convent. The importance of that relies upon his aspiration for his girls to have the opportunity to go to the school run by the same nuns. The other half of his moral values do reside in his Catholic upbringing; however, these are based on kindness and solidarity, and they eventually clash with the interests of the clerical class. Furlong is even aware of his own duality when he thinks that "the ordinary part of him wished he'd never come near the place" (Keegan 62).

At the introduction of the conflict, when Furlong discovers the girl in the shed, we see an inflection in his character towards rebellion. His image and trust for the Catholic church cracks after his encounter with the girl, but most importantly, Mother Superior. That interaction with the nun epiphanises his development toward what will be his complete self-realisation. The breach between the institutional Catholic church and Furlong's Catholic personal values is unveiled with his decision not to receive Communion after he leaves the girl behind in the convent, he does not feel deserving of the body of Christ which is given by a priest who enables the torturing of the girls from

the laundry. Nevertheless, it is clear to our protagonist that his religious beliefs are completely detached from the powerful Catholic institution, as he had “gone on, like a hypocrite, to Mass” (Keegan 92) the same day as his revelation of the truth of the convent.

The atrocities that occur in the laundry are allowed to keep going as long as it is not talked about. We, noticeably, see in the exchange between Furlong and Mother Superior that she expects him to make no comment or speculation about what he has seen, as remaining silent is nothing but advantageous for him, personally. To make sure he does not step out of place, Mother Superior mentions his children emphasising the scarcity of positions available in the nun-run school, and so threatening Furlong with having a negative impact over his children’s future:

‘Won’t they all soon find themselves next door, in time to come, God willing.’

‘God willing, Mother.’

‘It’s just that there’s so many nowadays. It’s no easy task to find a place for everyone.’ (Keegan 69)

All things considered, the theme of silence is extremely prevalent in this tense scene, and it shows how the source of power for the convent, and, essentially, the Church, relies on the maintenance of a general sense of fear that leads to remaining silent and obedient in order to keep one and one’s family afloat. Nevertheless, Furlong challenges the assumption of quiet agreement, and he keeps steady: “(Furlong) soon understood that this woman wanted him gone – but the urge to go was being replaced now by a type of contrariness to stay on, and to hold his ground” (Keegan 73). This is a turning point for Furlong, as he has become a threat for the convent and his journey of self-fulfilment has taken its first step.

Small Things Like These further follows the conventional structure of the short story in which the ultimate climax of the plot occurs right at the end, therefore, Furlong

achieves his longed-for self-actualisation when he finally saves the girl. This scene comes with tense anticipation, as readers we are still not sure if he will do it, even when he is going back to the convent. Furlong is walking lost in thought, once again, but we get suddenly transported to the moment he opens the shed and secretly takes Sarah away from the nuns. There is an underlying meaning behind his action, by doing so he is also coming to a hypothetical redemption regarding his own mother: “In an earlier time, it could have been his own mother he was saving – if saving was what this could be called.” (Keegan 114). The symbolism and relation between this particular girl and Furlong’s mother are far from subtle, considering that they both even have the same first name, Sarah. The journey of the hero is complete, but we will never know at what cost, as the story ends before this action causes any consequences in a Chekhovian manner. Notwithstanding, Keegan’s conventional schism, as previously stated, is most centred to the archetypal similarities Furlong has with the female characters in her own former stories. As Morales-Ladrón defines it, “her (Keegan’s) attempt to challenge social gender constructions through subversive performative acts – in truth, ineffectual role reversals – surface as the product of the same binary system and transform into an outmoded option” (277).

3. Conclusions and Further Research

In this paper I have explored how silence is embedded in Irish society and literature and the way this transpires out of Keegan’s main character and narrator in *Small Things Like These*. Furlong’s quiet personality reflects the unspoken troubles of his town; however, his fragmented identity allows him to break from the community’s decorum to pursue self-realisation and, consequently, break the silence. Keegan uses the protagonist to expose the bigger picture of how the Catholic Church used the people’s faith and fear of

alienation to become immune to criticism in Ireland. The book's abrupt ending, apart from being a short story usual practice, induces a sense of continued silencing, because Sarah's fate remains untold, along with the fate of the other Magdalene girls.

Small Things Like These uses silence almost like another character that shadows Bill Furlong as it constantly follows him throughout his life, with his alienation from the community of New Ross, the secrecy of his father's identity and, with his overall quiet manner. Keegan juxtaposes Furlong's psyche with the historical silence that surrounded the truth about the Magdalene Laundries to paint a distinct picture of how this dark stain of Irish history was navigated within society. She breaks the norm, as Furlong does, by not only writing about the silence of the abuse in the Church, but by incorporating it into the narrative itself.

Finally, it is relevant to reiterate that there exists a scarce academic attention paid on the book at hand, although it being written by an author highly praised and examined by Irish literature scholars. From this essay my intention for future research would be going further deep into Keegan's work to analyse how she explores the subversion of archetypal characters in Irish literature.

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