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Has the Present Reconciled Itself with the Past? Women and the Pressures of Catholicism  
in Jacqueline O'Mahony's *A River in the Trees*

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This is why we leave. Because we beg to differ. Because we dread the psychological choke. But leaving is only conditional. The person you are is anathema to the person you would like to be. But time changes everything, including our attitude to a place. There is no such thing as a perpetual hatred any more than there are unambiguous states of earthly love.

Edna O'Brien, *Mother Ireland* (1976)

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**Abstract:** *A River in the Trees* (2019) by Irish author Jacqueline O'Mahony deals with the personal circumstances and preoccupations of two Irish women, Hannah and Ellen, who live 100 years apart—in 1919 and 2019, respectively—in a small rural area in County Cork. Despite the significant timeframe that separates both women, and the distinct political, economic, and social circumstances that exist in each era, Ellen and Hannah seem to be deeply affected by the same source of oppression: Catholicism. In the novel, both women swim against the tide of moral norms that places them at the centre of the domestic sphere, relegating their aspirations within the social structure to those of marriage and motherhood. The parallels traced between the two characters suggest that the novel takes a pessimistic position regarding Irish rural communities' ability to progress against to the unwavering influence of the Catholic Church.

**Keywords:** Women, sexuality, motherhood, Ireland, Catholic Church, double standards.

## 0. Introduction

In an interview on *Mother Ireland* (1976), Edna O'Brien defined her homeland as a lonely, hopeless, "plundered" land where "the family tie is more umbilical than among any other race on this Earth".<sup>1</sup> The word *family* comes from the Latin term *familia*, which meant 'household',<sup>2</sup> as it referred to the people who lived within a 'house' that was traditionally conformed by the father as the head of that house, followed by the mother and children. According to the historian Wiesner-Hanks, "of all the ways in which society was hierarchically arranged, ...gender was regarded as the most 'natural' and therefore the most important to defend" (Wiesner-Hanks 331). In other words, the hierarchy established between man and woman was an unquestionable reality, whose maintenance

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<sup>1</sup> Edna O'Brien, interview on *Mother Ireland* (1976) in the BFI National Archive. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubYJMNC08-0>. (For citations, see minutes 6:46 to 7:44).

<sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster online dictionary. For a detailed definition and brief explanation of the uses of the word *family*, see "Family." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/family>. Accessed 22 Jun. 2022.

became key to the stability of the patriarchal system in Western countries. Patriarchy<sup>3</sup> functions through the mechanism of three main spheres: religion, law and the family.

The patriarchal system in the Republic of Ireland has long been sustained by the intrinsic relationship between the Catholic Church,<sup>4</sup> mostly, and the rule of Conservative parties whose laws have only just started to change in very recent times, in part thanks to the opening of the country throughout the prosperous era known as the Celtic Tiger.<sup>5</sup> However, the difficulties of social change, especially in a highly rural island formed by small, isolated communities, needs to be recognised as a significant factor. In “Writing Ireland”, Patrick J. Duffy says that “Edna O’Brien (1960) commemorated the struggle of individuals [...] to escape the suffocating grip of fields and family in the countryside. This preoccupation with both positive and negative renditions of rurality reflects the simple point that, until the 1960s, much of Ireland—North and South—was a predominantly rural society” (Duffy 71). Furthermore, going back to O’Brien’s thoughts on Ireland, she described her childhood in a “very enclosed community, quite rigid and watchful” as “very fervid and fairly suffocating”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In this dissertation, I understand *patriarchy* as a “social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line”. “Patriarchy.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patriarchy>. Accessed 22 Jun. 2022.

<sup>4</sup> My reference here to the *Catholic Church* is to the institution of the church as a social system, not to the set of beliefs that conforms the Catholic religion. References to the Catholic Church, Catholicism, Catholic dogma or doctrine will refer to the social consequences that stem from the extensive influence of this institution in the development of the Irish society.

<sup>5</sup> The *Celtic Tiger* refers to the economic boom that took place in the Republic of Ireland at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although there has been some debate to set the exact dates when it started, it is mainly divided in two periods: the 1980s to 1990s and the 1990s to 2007, immediately prior to the 2008 global financial crisis. See O’Leary, Eoin. “Reflecting on the ‘Celtic Tiger’: Before, during and After.” *Irish Economic and Social History*, vol. 38, 2011, pp. 73–88, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24338906>. Accessed 16 Apr. 2022

<sup>6</sup> Edna O’Brien, excerpt from interview (date unknown). Uploaded by Nemcomtelevision, 18 May 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ok0E-Nei9tc>

Women in Ireland, particularly in rural areas, have been subjected to Catholic ideas of virginity, chastity, purity, obedience, and submission. Although this vision has changed significantly over recent decades, women's role within the family, as in society, had traditionally been reduced to marriage and motherhood, thus 'suffocating' those who could not or would not comply to these.<sup>7</sup>

Irish literature is well known for its engagement with nationalist discourses, a boxingring in which Irish writers fight for their land against English colonisation, as in, for example, a lament like Mangan's *My Dark Rosaleen* (1846). Irish identity, the relationship that the Irish have with the land and the problem of exile from it are other literary themes conventionally explored by Irish writers: P. Carpenter's ballad "Skibbereen" (1869); Liam O'Flaherty's short story "Going into Exile" (1924), or Seamus Heaney's poem "Digging" (1966) are simply a few very diverse examples of narratives that navigate these topics. In contrast to this, however, Irish literature has focused rather less on women and the Irish home, on how the family unit functioned in terms of the social norms of a highly religious community and the evolution of its society where religion, women's lives and their part in nationalism or exile, for example, are examined together. Returning to Edna O'Brien's own perception, she claimed that "the martyred Irish mother and the raving rollicking Irish father [were] not peculiar to the works of exercise writers but common to families around the land". In fact, women have been treated as 'passive symbols' in the forming of the nation and, although being the object of contemplation within the Irish poetic tradition, women's own experiences as

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<sup>7</sup> In reference to the Victorian notion of the "fallen angel", essentially referring to single women who had sex or/and became pregnant outside marriage and were forced to live as outcasts, usually resorting to prostitution in order to survive. For an engaging analysis of fallen women in Victorian literature, see Braun, Gretchen. (2015) "'Untarnished Purity': Ethics, Agency, and the Victorian Fallen Woman", *Women's Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2015, pp. 342-367. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2015.1009757>.



independent beings (Nash 108-109) have been relatively neglected. However, some authors such as Paul Durcan, Eavan Boland, Liam O’Flaherty and J.M. Synge, among others, do assess—to a greater or lesser extent—the position of women within the household and the double standards of the Church, such as the sexual abuse underlying declarations of purity and virtue, and the oppressive discourses surrounding sexuality.<sup>8</sup> Regarding contemporary Irish literature, authors Marina Carr, Anne Enright<sup>9</sup> and Claire Keegan<sup>10</sup> have focused their writings on the exploration of the Irish family, depicting dysfunctional families marked by sexual abuse and intergenerational trauma, which might serve as further criticism of the duality of Catholic social values.

It is within the dissatisfaction with the repressive role of Catholicism and the wish to escape rural life, most specifically the ‘suffocating’ family sphere, that I will analyse Jacqueline O’Mahony’s *A River in the Trees* (2019). The novel’s cyclical narrative structure is set both in the early years of the 1920s and in 2019, and dwells on the lives of two Irish women, Hannah and Ellen, who, despite living a hundred years apart, share a common understanding of what it feels like to be a woman in a small Irish community and deal with similar experiences regarding sexuality, motherhood, intergenerational relationships, and exile.

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<sup>8</sup> I understand *sexuality* as “the feelings and activities connected with a person’s sexual desires.” “Sexuality.” *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, Oxford Dictionary, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/sexuality?q=sexuality>. Accessed 28 Jun. 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Marina Carr’s play *On Raftery’s Hill* (2001) and Ann Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007) both portray dark, broken Irish families who seem unable to escape the hovering presence of a traumatic past. Despite their connection to the question of family and Ireland’s present-past relationship, these texts will not be explored in this dissertation as such an analysis exceeds the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>10</sup> Claire Keegan’s short story “The Parting Gift” (2007) will be further analysed in this discussion as it criticises the main values of the nuclear family, deconstructs motherhood and questions women’s position in rural Ireland.

## 0.1 Literary Review

Although there has been considerable research on the topic of Irish migration from both sociological and literary perspectives, direct critical discussion is not extensive on how exile, alongside issues of sexuality, motherhood and the Irish family might or might not relate to or differ from the influence of the Catholic Church on Irish society. Nevertheless, there are several researchers who explore the *indirect* presence of religion within these social layers and who provide different perceptions of the past and present situation of Ireland's society. In her study "Moral Rescue and Unmarried Mothers in Ireland in the 1920s", historian Maria Luddy provides a detailed account of the role of the Church in propelling unmarried mothers either to emigrate or to conceal their *shame*—by abandoning their child or joining maternity homes—with the purpose of protecting their family's honour and by extension, the "welfare policies of the state and the Catholic Church" (798). In a similar line, but from a contemporary point of view, Tom Inglis and Carol MacKeogh in "The Double Bind: Women, Honor and Sexuality in Contemporary Ireland" reach the conclusion that Irish women are still subjected to "contradictory sexual discourses which create a cultural double bind" (68). Inglis and MacKeogh analyse the reaction of a small Irish community to a real-life sexual assault case to illustrate how family honour continues to be present in people's lives in rural Ireland, in opposition to the cosmopolitan logic of the big cities. Such division calls for "ongoing clashes between the increasing sexualization of Irish society and the continuing legacy of the Church's attitude to women and sex" (70). Consequently, according to both studies, the presence and influence of the Catholic dual morality that affected women's lives in the 1920s also seems to be a constant in the twenty-first century.

This idea directly contradicts other accounts on present-day Ireland that praise the cultural and social progress witnessed, for instance, since the legalization of divorce,

abortion and same-sex marriage. Referring to the contemporary Irish novel, Jennifer M. Jeffers claims that current authors face a challenge to represent an “ever-changing people and culture”, thus declaring the end of Ireland as “an agrarian, homogeneous” country (28). Jeffers cites Ursula Barry’s belief that the Church has continued exercising control over politics and gender as a “raw Irish historical nerve” (Jeffers 20), which suggests that Barry’s opinion might no longer be applicable. Sociologist Florence Craven adds to the idea of society moving forward from the constrictions of Catholic dogma in her thorough study on Irish attitudes towards gender and women’s social position. Based on data collected during 2000, Craven concludes that, even though there continue to be negative feelings towards women in Irish society, especially concerning women in positions of power, the rejection of traditional gender roles and the acceptance of maternal employment have become “a strong indication of change in people’s attitudes” (306). Lastly, writer Susan Cahill takes the stance forwarded by Inglis and MacKeogh and, in her article on Eimear McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), heavily criticises the changes that took place in the post-Tiger period. Cahill arraigns the incapacity of Irish society to offer a promising future for young women within “the climate of a conservatively Catholic state, only interested in girls in terms of their purity or potential motherhood” (168).

To compensate for the lack of secondary sources addressing the subject matter, other literary works written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries will be used in this dissertation as a tool to explore O’Mahony’s novel, with the aim both of understanding and attempting to provide answers to the research question in this dissertation. *A River in the Trees* will be analysed in unison with J.M. Synge’s play “In the Shadow of the Glen” (1903), Patrick Kavanagh’s poem “The Great Hunger” (1942); Eavan Boland’s *Mise Éire*

(1987)<sup>11</sup> and Claire Keegan's short story "The Parting Gift" in *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007). All these short narratives explore the living and social conditions of women held fast by the grip of religion, and emphasise the double standards of the Catholic Church, especially as regards the role of the pure and obedient mother, a reflection of the Virgin Mary that Catholicism tried to enforce upon women.

Having reviewed the critical discussion surrounding my topic, I sense that there is a critical space concerning the assessment of genuine social progress that has not yet been fully addressed and which, I believe, makes this study relevant. I intend to address this space by posing the following thesis questions: **By presenting two parallel stories that relate to one another in terms of agency, sexuality, and motherhood, is *A River in the Trees* proposing a reconciliation between the past and the present through the social progress embodied in Ellen's character? Or is it being pessimistic about the capacity of the rural Irish society to truly progress and leave a clinging conservative morality behind?**

In order to engage with this research, my thesis will be structured as indicated in the following section.

## **0.2 Structure**

This dissertation will be structured into two chapters, which focus—respectively—on the two main female characters in the novel: Hannah, living in 1920s Ireland, and Ellen, living in twenty-first century Ireland. First, the figure of Hannah will be analysed with the purpose of establishing the novel's position regarding the Catholic Church's role in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hannah's character will be looked at from three main perspectives:

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<sup>11</sup> Although the text by Eavan Boland was written during the Celtic Tiger era, it can also be examined in light of the 1920s as it explores and criticises the subject matter, not as a static situation that arises in the 1970s and 1980s, but as an ongoing inheritance.

her position within the family as a woman, her sexuality, and her relationship to motherhood. Chapter two will focus on Ellen's situation in current Ireland in regard to Hannah's previous analysis. Structuring the work in this way will compare both women's lives in order to provide, I hope, a clear answer to my research questions. Additionally, chapter one will be used as a basis for the analysis developed in chapter two, as Ellen's position within the novel will be assessed in relation to her roots, which effectively takes us back to Hannah's own character. Chapter two will also examine Ellen's character, following the three main perspectives which previously discussed in chapter one. In this way, parallelisms between both stories will be drawn to determine the extent to which the novel might be enforcing the idea that life for women in a small rural Irish Catholic community may, in fact, not have improved as much as one might have assumed.

## **1. Hannah**

Hannah's figure in *A River* could be thought of as the most important in the novel, since her story can be read as the trigger that sets the plot into motion: Hannah's decisions shape

and determine the O'Donovan family's future, while on the other hand, it is Ellen's purchase of the old family house and her interests in Hannah's past that leads Ellen to return to Ireland and face her own struggles. The novel is structured in alternating chapters between both women, which facilitates drawing parallels between their lives. Moreover, the plot reaches its climax when Ellen realises that Hannah is, in fact, her great-grandmother, which further connects the two. In order to comprehend Ellen's roots and to provide a fuller analysis of Ellen's life as the main representation of a modern Irish woman in the text, we first need to look at Hannah's storyline.

Despite the historical allusions throughout Hannah's episodes to the conflict between the Black and Tans and the Irish republican militia during the initial years of the War of Independence (1919–1921), this simply seems to provide background information for Hannah's situation to develop; it is not directly relevant to the objectives of this dissertation. Indeed, according to Irish journalist Áine Ní Ghlinn, the historical part of the novel is not particularly accurate and functions only as a background against which a family story can be set (Ní Ghlinn, 5'40''). Nonetheless, as a historian herself, O'Mahony manages to convey a plausible image of the lives of an Irish family in the countryside, and I believe that this suggests that an approach to this literary narrative as a historical document is a misunderstanding of the novel's basic form and function.

### **1.1 Hannah's Role in the Family**

Hannah's position in the O'Donovan family unit could be read as both traditional and subversive in relation to the role fulfilled by women in the Irish home of the early twentieth century. On the one hand, Hannah seems to fit into the role of the "eldest son" (Ní Ghlinn, 0'49''), taking on the duties that were designated to males in the family, such as being a decision-maker or performing tasks outside the domestic sphere. For instance, when the O'Donovans were hiding the rebels in the attic, risking the rage and violence

of the Tans, Hannah's father, Sean, gives her a gun to defend herself with, saying that "[he] never saw anyone learn how to handle a gun faster" (49). Later in the novel, Hannah would shoot and kill two members of the Black and Tans, becoming the saviour not only of her family but also of O' Riada and his men. In another instance from the novel in which Hannah finds herself in a powerful position, she intrudes onto a conversation between her father, O' Riada, and the rest of the men, and she orders them to hide in the roof, "speaking directly to O' Riada" (89), which surprises her greatly. Showing such disbelief at the fact that they might listen to what she is saying suggests just how little room for opinion women had at that time.

Probably due to her role as the first "son" in the family, Hannah is the only female character who shows some kind of agency, making the mother and sister passive figures who more readily represent the prototypical behaviour of women: taking care of the house, looking after the children, being silent, docile and obedient. Kristine Byron suggests in her analysis of "In the Name of the Mother" by Edna O'Brien, that "dealing with issues such as motherhood, sexuality, religion, and marriage, the Trilogy exposes the ways in which feminine gender roles are constructed, offering a radical critique of a capitalist patriarchy that is specifically Irish and Catholic", thus deconstructing these roles (448). *A River* creates a similar idea, by presenting Hannah as a heroine who steps outside of the submissive role expected from women and juxtaposing her with her sister, Eily. Their differences are accentuated by their physical appearances: Hannah is wild, and does not care about her looks, while Eily is described as the perfect little girl, "with her golden hair and her ready smile" (29). Their interests, too, are distinct: Eily centres her attention on finding a husband, wearing new dresses and attending balls. Meanwhile, Hannah seems preoccupied by the lack of books to read, apart from "a cookery book by Mrs. Beeton that had been a wedding present to her mother, and prayerbooks, of course" (30).

Nonetheless, despite Hannah's strong will and the subversion of her role as a woman within the household and in relation to other male figures in the novel, her character is unable to escape certain conditions that place her in a similar position to that of her mother and sister. Although the text does not engage directly in discussions about the Catholic Church, its influence is present throughout the novel and, together with the family's economic status, this is what shapes the general life conditions of women in the 1920s. For instance, the previous reference to the lack of books in Hannah's home might speak to the censorship laws, promoted and supported by the Church, which began to break down in the 1940s. A lack of education was a common problem for families in rural Ireland, since sons and daughters were needed as a workforce for the family to produce and sustain themselves. However, the tendency was for girls to leave school early to help in the household, precisely because education was not deemed necessary for them or their families; finding a husband, in contrast, was. Hannah's intellectual frustration is evident in the following excerpt:

Certainly, since she'd left school the days had hung heavily on her, and too often she wandered the house saying to herself, almost without realizing it, what will I do now, because each day was like a fence she had to climb over (...) there was nothing to do but sit in the kitchen and sew a bit of stuff or lie on her bed in the stillness and wait for sleep to come (13).

From the very beginning of the novel, Hannah's discomfort with her duties in the house is made evident, and her affair with O'Riada might even be interpreted as a need to escape this situation. She feels "dull, stupid and lumpen" (30). Women's difficulty to access knowledge might be considered one of the threads that has limited and undermined female agency and independence throughout history. This was a preoccupation of early feminist writers as far back as Mary Wollstonecraft, who became a crucial figure in the fight for women's rights in 18<sup>th</sup> century England. "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792)



was already criticising how the institution of the Church<sup>12</sup> and its influence on the laws blocked women's access to education and knowledge. The following passage illustrates Wollstonecraft's irritation with the role of the Church in promoting women's ignorance:

The glare of worldly pomp which surrounded these impostors [the priests], and the respect paid to them by artful politicians, who knew how to avail themselves of this useful engine to bend the necks of the strong under the dominion of the cunning, spread a sacred mysterious veil of sanctity over their lies and abominations (...) Say not that such questions are an insult to common sense – for it is your own conduct, O ye foolish women! Which throws an odium on your sex! And these reflections should make you shudder at your thoughtlessness, and irrational devotion. – for I do not suppose that all of you laid aside your religion, such as it is, when you entered those mysterious dwellings. Yet, as I have throughout supposed myself talking to ignorant women, for ignorant ye are in the most emphatical sense of the word, it would be absurd to reason with you on the egregious folly of desiring to know what the Supreme Wisdom has concealed (418).

Such reflection continued to be present in other literary discourse, as is the case of Virginia Woolf, whose “A Room of One's Own” (1929) spoke directly to the importance of a private space, and of money, for a woman to fully develop her capacities. Hannah, having neither the education nor the space or opportunities to develop on her own, felt pressured by “the weight of what she didn't know, what she didn't understand, [which] was too much to take in” (49). In the end, Hannah is able to exert authority on only a few occasions, although she is limited not just as a consequence of her “ignorance” but because being a woman in 1920s Ireland was a conditioning factor in itself. Evidence for this is seen in another crucial moment in the novel, after the Black and Tans almost beat Mr. O'Donovan to death. O'Riada decides to follow their lorry to punish them, and while he forbids Hannah from joining them despite her eagerness and good command of a gun, he accepts the assistance of Owen, Hannah's fourteen-year-old brother.

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<sup>12</sup> Although Mary Wollstonecraft advocated for the rights of women within a Protestant context, she severely criticised the role of the Protestant Church not as an ideological branch of Christianity but, fundamentally, as an institution of social, cultural, and political power. Therefore, reference to her here is to exemplify women's fight against institutional control of women's access to knowledge, regardless of the specific branch of Christianity.

Finally, Hannah's role regarding her position within the family is especially problematic when she involves herself with O' Riada. Sexuality, most importantly, female sexuality and desire, or rather its absence or its shamefulness, greatly shaped the lives of women in Hannah's times. This will be further analysed in the following section.

## **1.2 The Negative Perception of Sexuality**

In rural Catholic Ireland, sexuality had always been socially rejected and treated as a sin for both men and women. "The Great Hunger" (1942) by Patrick Kavanagh provides an insightful account on the suppression of desire by retelling the life of Paddy Maguire, a poor farmer. The whole poem is laced through with Catholic morals of obedience, confession, and sacrifice because the farmer is tied to the land and cannot explore "the passion that never needs a wife" (35). The poem presents a man's struggle to balance his inner passions with his duty towards God and the Church, and its moral implications. According to Beale, "[t]o both politicians and Churchmen, 'the family and the nation' were inextricably linked, and any threat to the Catholic family was seen as a threat to the stability of society as a whole (...) The continuity of the family and survival of the farm were closely related and were controlled by a strict system of marriage" (7). While this affirmation is certainly true, it seems to propose that marriage was a general means of survival for both men and women, when in fact only women depended upon marriage to have a respectable life. Looking at Hannah's narrative, marriage would have been the only proper solution to preserve not only her honour and prosperity but that of her family.

In an interview on *The Country Girls*, O'Brien talked about how her subsequent work discussed "the relationship between the sexes, often from the point of view of women who lose themselves in love, and later must struggle to regain their sovereignty" (O'Brien in Guppy, interview). This happens, too, in O'Mahony's novel. Hannah is

mesmerised by O’Riada and although she perceives some sort of danger<sup>13</sup> from the beginning, she is, according to O’Brien’s words, lost in love. From the moment that she surrenders to O’Riada’s charm and has sex with him, Hannah’s story is marked by loss: she loses her family, her reputation and honour, and ultimately, her baby. Going back to Kavanagh’s poem, while the consequences for men who thought about sex, or had it, were basically at the level of faith, women risked their already limited chances to establish themselves as respectable members of society. Thus, Catholicism set the moral rules that differentiated between the honour of a man and a woman, and the ways in which they could preserve or lose it.

Notwithstanding this, the oppression of sexuality was so strong that it became shameful to even speak about it. Luddy cites Glynn to the effect that “the lack of sexual knowledge revealed by those women who became pregnant showed that she [*sic*] was ‘not bad.’ This was someone who needed to be taken in hand immediately to ensure a successful recovery of virtue” (803), and this explains how not knowing about sexuality might have been used during the 1920s as an acceptable reason for having committed a sin. However, this was just another excuse forwarded by the Catholic Church to control women’s access to knowledge, by determining their innocence based on how much they knew. In the novel, Hannah explains how her mother avoided mentioning or explaining what menstruation was and how the female body worked. In one specific passage, Hannah explains the following:

“One month she had not changed the hated pad in time and it had soaked through – the blood had run down her legs. She had been at school when it had happened. She couldn’t tell the master, and she had no friend she could confide in. At break she had stayed at her desk, the blood coming out in little terrifying pumps, and when home time had come, finally, she had waited until she was the last one to leave (...) But the shame of it, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Hannah describes O’Riada as follows: “His eyes were all pupil, black and flat. He can’t see me, she thought. His eyes are too black with anger to see. There is danger here, she thought, and I’m afraid” (46).

fright, had stayed with her, and she felt the shame now, all over again, and the panic, and the fear” (107-108).

Through this example, *A River* illustrates the taboos that surrounded the female body and how ignorance brought feelings of shame and fear for women, while it was a justification of chastity in the eyes of the Church. In fact, Hannah remembers the day in which she had her first period, and how her mother’s only words on the matter were, “you’re a big girl now, Hannah. (...) *Don’t tell anyone about this*” (211, my italics).

Lastly, women were not perceived as capable of desiring and pursuing sex for pleasure, since sex outside marriage—but in fact even as part of a married couple—was understood by the Church purely as a means to procreate. That was its only function (Beale 8). This concept is exemplified in the novel when the O’Donovans learn that Hannah is pregnant. Although their initial reaction is to expel Hannah from the house, and hence the family, there is a brief moment in which they ask her if she has been forced, which Hannah quickly denies. This further demonstrates that, during the twentieth century, sexuality (female sexuality, particularly) was not allowed to be voluntarily explored. It is interesting to notice how other works written in the early twentieth century had already started to criticise the restrictive control on sexuality and desire that suppressed the Irish. For instance, the play “In the Shadow of the Glen” (1903) by J.M. Synge reflects on loneliness and the condition of women as passive figures, subjected to the passing of time. When Nora discovers that her husband has died during the night, she says to the corpse, “[m]aybe cold would be no sign of death with the like of him, for he was always cold, every day since I knew him, – and every night” (26). Her words criticise the lack of passion in her relationship, defying ~~and~~ and longing for a life of freedom outside the cage of marriage. Similarly, Hannah describes her desire as “[making] her feel like she was a stranger to herself, and there was relief in that, and wild, frightening, freedom, too” (185).

### **1.3 The Duty of a Mother**

Hannah's feelings of freedom end with the realisation that she is pregnant with O' Riada's child. Although at first she decides to wait for him to return to her, she soon realises that O' Riada is more preoccupied with his political career. It is even suggested that O' Riada might have been habitually seducing other women, too, as early in the novel he is asked whether he "has finished with the romancing yet" (111). What seemed to most preoccupy the government and the Catholic Church was not so much a concern for purity or virginity but rather the outcome of any 'immoral practices', which basically meant the "unmarried mother" (Luddy 798). The double standards of the Catholic Church become evident in this statement. A woman's primal role in life was to become a mother, but only if this occurred within the constrictions of marriage, in compliance with their duty towards the welfare of the family, and by extension, the state. Therefore, having a child outside marriage presented a fissure in the religious discourse of "mothers" as pure representations of the Irish woman, and this implied a danger for the stability of the institutions.

When Hannah realised that she was pregnant, "she would kneel by her narrow white bed and pray, Please God. Please. But God would not take pity on her, she thought, even as she prayed. That was what the priest told them. God would not take pity on those who had gone against him" (213). Ironically, "those who had gone against him" could be applied to both men and women, yet that was never the case. While a woman could not deny that she had become pregnant, a man could easily escape all responsibility because he received greater support from the state. Luddy claims that "the putative father was further protected by a right to appeal and by the fact that the mother required corroboration for her evidence. It is clear from the discussions that took place that the situation of the alleged father was of much greater concern than that of the mother. (...)

In the case of unmarried mothers, the issue of protection centred on the men rather than the women” (812).

When confronted by Hannah, O’Riada himself suggests how “another could be the father” (309) by questioning if she is telling the truth about the baby. Moreover, O’Riada first tries to convince the O’Donovans to call the priest, knowing that he would take the baby away from its mother to avoid future claims of legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, O’Riada leaves the house unpunished. In contrast to this, Hannah’s reputation is ruined, and she is forced to leave her home. Days before her *fall*, she prays for “everything to be as it was before they came” and promises to be “a good girl, then, a good quiet girl and not a word to anyone. I’d stay in the house and make no trouble” (220). When analysing Hannah’s story, reviewer and writer Theresa Smith observes that “the times were so fraught with danger, from so many fronts, the old world still grasping at everyone’s coat tails despite the modern world beckoning from beyond. You were never really in control of your own life if you were Irish, much less so if you were a woman” (Smith, review).

There were some alternatives to becoming an outcast that could even help to recover the family’s reputation, or at least hide its shame, which meant abandoning the baby. On the one hand, priests and nuns run maternity homes where a woman could hide her pregnancy and then dispense with the child in an attempt to “avoid the stigma of unmarried motherhood” and “return to a ‘normal’ life” (Luddy 804). The other alternatives were becoming a hag like May, an old woman who takes care of Hannah and helps deliver her daughter. Some instances in the novel imply that May also gave birth to

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<sup>14</sup> During an exchange between O’Riada and Sean O’Donovan, the former says that “I can’t have the child left on this farm and all knowing its story” (313). Hannah’s father ends up promising that, “we won’t speak your name again (...) we’ll make no claim on you” (314).

a child out of wedlock, but a priest took the child away, and she never saw it again (Ní Ghlinn, 5'09''). In a sense, May could represent one of Hannah's possible futures, while her sister Eily, who marries a farm boy called Denis and adopts Hannah's baby, would offer another outcome, this time with a bittersweet ending. Hannah's story ends with her departure to America, alone. Although one of the reasons for her leaving is to escape repercussions for having killed two Black and Tans at the end of the novel, this (serious though it obviously is) represents a mere addition to the real problem, which is being a single mother.

To finish, Luddy cites Desmond's observation that "Liverpool girls generally returned to their families once the baby had been born, but the Irish girl has the sense of shame and flees, but all this does not solve the problem" (Luddy, 808). This could explain why Hannah never returned to Ireland to look for her baby. While Liverpool shares its majority Catholicism with Irish cities, England would have been less constraining on girls' behaviour, possibly due to its comparative liberal openness, which was greater than that of Ireland. Desmond's remark might imply that the circumstances experienced by women in the early twentieth century outside Ireland were slightly better in comparison to the strong influence, at home, of the Catholic Church in the preservation of a pure family structure. If unmarried mothers were allowed to return, this was at least something that improved in their lives.

## **2. Ellen**

Moving now to Ellen's side of the story, it is worth mentioning that—despite being set in 2019—Ellen is a 38-year-old woman. Consequently, she was born and raised during the post-Celtic Tiger period in the 1980s and 1990s. Although she decided to emigrate to North America and then to Britain at the age of eighteen, her education and formation as a woman took place in Ireland. It is important to bear this in mind throughout Ellen's

analysis, as most of the references that will be used to understand her character do not necessarily belong to the second decade of the twenty-first century, but rather to the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. As mentioned in the critical review, the post-Celtic Tiger period was harshly criticised because of the insufficient progress made regarding women's future, due to the underlying presence of Catholic conservatism (Cahill 168). Therefore, and despite steps taken from the beginning of the twenty-first century until the present day, Ellen's situation in modern Ireland will be understood as the outcome of a society whose progress exists, but which moves at a significantly slow rate.

Researcher Chrystel Hug, a specialist in sexual morality in the Irish Catholic Church and State, claims that at the beginning of the 1990s the Catholic Church used the word *disorder* to describe "anything that corrupts moral order", insisting on the importance of the collective duties of the individual regarding the community and God. Hug argues that, despite a distancing from the Church's moral language by the Irish in general, and in spite of their change towards a pluralist perception of society, two principles continued to persist: that people should distinguish between good and evil, and that to do so, they needed the Church's guidance and "immutable principles" (Hug 22-23). Consequently, even though there is a lack of explicit reference to the Catholic dogma in Ellen's chapters, its presence can be inferred through an analysis of Ellen's position in current Irish society, and her experiences in regard to sexuality and motherhood.

## **2.1 Ellen's Position as a Modern Woman**

The figure of Ellen in the novel serves as a tool to explore general struggles that women still face in a modern society. According to Ní Ghlinn, Ellen's story *per se* has not been sufficiently developed, as there are missing items of information such as Ellen's motives for leaving Ireland or Ellen's true reasons for coming back. However, and considering the social contextualisation that has been set out in the previous section, these might be



deduced from the text (which at all events is, as I have already argued, a literary—and not a social or historical—account). Ellen indeed makes no mention of her reasons for emigrating or returning to her homeland, yet she describes the Irish as “an inward-looking people, suspicious and mean-minded most of them, content enough to live out their days under the drizzle” (105). However, despite this negative description of her people, she is also aware of the struggles of emigration. Ellen’s thoughts are as follows:

She thought of the people she knew who had learned to turn their faces away from the world and who were bent down and into themselves, broken by having to leave a whole life behind and start another life somewhere else. It was perilous to leave your own place behind – she understood that, now. How much easier it was to stay under the skies that had made you, to stick to a predestined course, not to have to cleave yourself from the life you should have had (53).

From this passage, it is clear that Ellen’s feelings towards the land are confusing as she acknowledges how broken but brave one must be to leave their country, while at the same time, she admits that staying was both easy yet conformist. Although it is not overtly mentioned, this “predestined course” could be related to the long-standing traditional roles that determined and limited the lives of the Irish people.

Referring to the 1937 (“De Valera”) Constitution, Craven states that “as women did not play a part in the drafting of the Constitution, which is gendered, Catholic and non-inclusive of any minorities, the Constitution constructed a ‘monolithic woman’ as mother whose place was very much within the family” (294). Looking at Ellen’s immediate family, formed by her English husband Simon and herself, it might seem that the novel is proposing a challenge to the traditional family unit. It is apparent that Ellen, similarly to Hannah, does not meet the standards set for them, according to this idea of the “monolithic woman”. However, while Hannah’s differences with Eily, for instance, could have been considered a sign of resistance to what was expected from a young woman in the 1920s, Ellen’s oppositional behaviour is described more as a failure.

All the same, none of the characters in the novel seem to notice the magnitude of her struggle or how she is clearly depressed because of her four miscarriages and the trauma of a stillbirth. Ellen sees herself as “this fat person who keeps her head down and tries to get through the day. I’ve become someone who apologizes before she does anything. I’m afraid of everything now. Ever since the baby, I’m afraid of the whole world” (21). Here Ellen seems to connect the decline of her physical appearance to that of her autonomy, and it is this emphasis placed on the body that appears to represent the new, modern concept of women. In the contemporary world, women are expected to work, to become mothers, and to maintain a socially acceptable, restrictive body shape, otherwise they might be deemed a failure. Dorothy<sup>15</sup> tells Ellen that “[w]e have to look after the figure, don’t we? Isn’t it a struggle for us?” (41), in an obvious allusion to the fact that it is a woman’s struggle but also her duty to be physically attractive. The pressure to be prepossessing, and quiet, and modest in the nineteenth century has been significantly reduced, yet it has directly influenced the notion that women’s bodies need to suit a consumerist world. Susan Cahill claims that:

The young woman is blamed for the rampant consumerism and for the money-driven culture, while also being denied access to the structures of power—it is her boyfriend who is the property developer, banker, or lawyer. The figure of the girl has a long history of carrying and symbolizing social anxiety, particularly when that anxiety circulates around questions of consumerism, modernity, and sexuality—and this figuration becomes especially potent when these anxieties intersect (Cahill 155).

Cahill’s conceptualization of the relationship between the modern man and woman evokes the relationship between Ellen and Simon, especially in terms of financial stability, since Ellen stops working to devote all her time and energies to getting pregnant, thus depending on Simon’s money. In addition to this, Ellen embodies what Cahill

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<sup>15</sup> Dorothy works as a receptionist in the hotel where Ellen stays. They are related, since Dorothy’s mother was an O’Donovan. Dorothy’s presence in the novel reinforces the idea of rural Ireland being a small community where everyone knows each other’s past.

denominates “social anxiety” through her addiction to alcohol, cigarettes, and her obsession with fatness. In fact, returning to Craven’s study, this determined that “the majority of 88% [of Catholic contestants, *sic*] agreed with ‘How a woman looks is still important in how society regards her’ (...) On top of this, respondents are also mindful of the social pressure to conform to the sexual objectification of women” (303). Simon, for instance, does not blame Ellen for losing the baby, but he blames her for “[putting] on all this weight and [doing] nothing to try to lose it” (299).

However, while Ellen is aware of Simon’s rejection, and that “he associates [her] now only with loss, and failure, and sadness, with death, even”, she has grown dependent on him, both financially and emotionally. What requires special attention in this case is that Ellen stopped working to devote all her time to the task of becoming pregnant. The Post-Celtic Tiger period, especially in about the 1980s, brought a change of mindset regarding roles inside the house, as it promoted maternal employment and women began to receive equal pay. This also affected sex-role attitudes towards women, which became more liberal (Craven 294). Nevertheless, Craven’s study also states that more than 80% of participants still believed that it was the Constitution’s duty and right to “protect and uphold the virtues of marriage and family” (Craven 298). Simon is seen as the protector of the family: he is the holder of power and Ellen needs him to buy the house for her. Ellen is aware of the fact that her existence is no longer sustained by herself and says that “[t]hey would wipe her out, these men. They wouldn’t leave her room to breathe and she would have to make herself so little and so quiet to fit into the space they left behind them that she would have to get smaller and smaller all the time and eventually (...) disappear with a small damp pop, like a bubble” (83), and that she “would never, again, be free” (155).

Even though there is a growing willingness to obtain equality in the home and in society, women continue to be subjected to negative attitudes in Irish society, plausibly due to the Irish need to protect the family structure, despite its obsolescence. This clearly is a direct consequence of the persistent presence of religious attitudes towards women (Craven 306). In consequence, the modern woman is still conditioned by an archaic heritage that will blame her for not fulfilling society's expectations, whether these are becoming a married mother or having a socially acceptable body and showing socially acceptable female behaviour.

## **2.2 Ellen's Views on Sexuality**

Sexuality and how this is perceived in the modern world has obviously taken a different direction from the strict norms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the one hand, as has been seen in the narratives of Hannah, Nora and Maguire, sexual desire neither officially existed nor was it accepted in what might have then been termed a *decent and civilised* community. This was especially the case with female sexuality, as women who had sex outside marriage or in pursuit of pleasure faced far harder consequences than was the case with men. Currently, and compared to past generations, there has been a palpable change "in women's 'perceptions' of themselves; a noticeable shift towards a stronger sense of identity, towards women actively choosing their way of life rather than simply accepting a predestined role" (Beale 1). In this sense, for instance, Ellen shows some sort of determination to follow her heart and redirect her life by returning to Ireland to purchase her old family house. Despite her dependence on Simon's money, the decision ends up being hers, which seems to initiate her healing path. However, glimpses of progress in women's lives, such as this example of Ellen's agency, are emphatically drowned out by how sexuality is represented in the novel.

Returning to Beale's analysis of women in Ireland, she recognises that "[s]ome of the ideas of women's liberation took longer to take root in Ireland because of the subordinate position of women in Irish society" (Beale 4). The inferior position at which women seem to be stuck and which Beale makes reference to is plainly represented in *A River's* treatment of sexuality. Although Ellen is supposedly allowed to embrace her sexuality and find pleasure in sex, her experiences in the novel are pessimistic and represent an increasing problem for women in the modern world: to reconcile female sexuality with female and family honour. In other words, society appears to advocate for the normalisation of sexuality and sexual activities, yet at the same time criticising and shaming those who openly seek to do so.

According to Inglis and MacKeogh, "Irish women are caught in contradictory sexual discourses which create a cultural double bind. The legacy of Catholic Church teaching, in which the sexual honour of women revolves around their innocence and subservience, still lingers" (Abstract, Inglis and MacKeogh). This concept of a double morality is portrayed in the relationship formed between Ellen and John O'Connor, the estate agent. First of all, although sexual activity is no longer limited to married couples, adultery is still perceived not only as negative, but also as a source of promiscuity. When Ellen invites John to her hotel room, before Simon's arrival in Ireland, she decides to put an end to their encounter by saying that she has had enough, yet his reaction is to "lurch towards her with his mouth open, like a snake's" (101). John seems oblivious to the fact that Ellen can actually decide not to have sex with him, and eventually leaves in frustration. This brief incident already foreshadows the man's depressingly slight regard for women's self-worth and authority, as he will try to rape Ellen in the subsequent chapters.

Unfortunately, what the novel is presenting is not an isolated situation for women in Ireland. Inglis and MacKeogh bring light to this idea by exploring the media's treatment of a public case of rape in a small Irish town in 2009. Their research analyses the reaction of its community and the social consequences for the victim, which are greater than for the culprit. In their study, they retrieve Father Sheehy's declarations in favour of the accused. His words were that "all that was wrong in the case was that Foley and his victim had engaged in a sexual act outside of marriage and that that behaviour was immoral" (69). Therefore, Fr. Sheehy essentially trivialises the rape itself by focusing on the extramarital characteristic of the case. In the novel, Ellen decides to keep silent about John's violent behaviour because "she would have to tell [the guards<sup>16</sup>] about the night at the hotel, and Simon would find out then" (236). Ellen would prioritize saving a marriage that is already failing over exposing a rapist. Meanwhile, Dorothy and even Ellen's mother Imelda<sup>17</sup> could be perceived as being complicit with such silence, because they know what has happened and decide to do nothing in that regard. Of the real-life event, Inglis and MacKeogh conclude that:

The case shows how there is still in Ireland, a double bind for women (...) when it comes to sex. It is demanded that [women] be sexually alluring and erotic but, when boundaries are transgressed and abuse and violence occurs, they are often blamed. (...) [This] is evidence of ongoing clashes between the increasing sexualization of Irish society and the continuing legacy of the Church's attitude to women and sex (70).

Moments before John tries to force Ellen, he tells her that "None of us are saints now, are we?" (193), alluding to their previous encounter in the hotel room. His words further

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<sup>16</sup> Dorothy and Ellen use the term *guard* in reference not to a hotel security agency but to the *Garda Síochána* or the *Gardaí* (the national police service of the Republic of Ireland).

<sup>17</sup> Although Ellen's mother does not explicitly mention that she knows about Ellen's violent situation with John O'Connor, she appears to be turning a blind eye to the situation. Evidence for this is that she "believes" Ellen's story about a fall in the fields in spite (troublingly) of the red marks on her wrists, her lack of trousers and her distressed attitude.

emphasize the idea that a woman who is sexually active but also in control of her own body and her own actions cannot be good.

Other literary works from the Celtic and post-Celtic Tiger period share similar views on female sexuality. On the one hand, Eavan Boland's *Mise Éire* (1987) condemns the general situation of women who either stayed in an oppressive Ireland or emigrated in pursuit of better life conditions. The poet criticises the image of woman as a simile of thenation: passive, decorative, raised as an emblematic status such as representing the purity of the Virgin Mary or sacrifice for the land, Mother Ireland. Moreover, and connecting the text to the issue of sexuality, the poem exemplifies the reality of women's lives that have been disguised as the above-mentioned similes in Irish literary tradition. Female reality is harsh, "[women's] roots are brutal" (16). The poet becomes the woman "who practices/ the quick frictions, / the rictus of delight / and gets cambric for it / rice-coloured silks"<sup>18</sup> (22-26) and the woman who is forced to emigrate "holding her half-dead baby to her"<sup>19</sup> (32). Boland's reflection on the past called out the damage that continues to underlie Irish conscience.

On the other hand, Claire Keegan's "The Parting Gift" (2007) portrays a negative representation of a contemporary Irish family in which the father abuses both his wife and daughter. This story becomes another example of families turning a blind eye to the sexual abuse that occurred in small rural communities, to avoid the confrontation, the shame and the moral consequences that acknowledging such an atrocious event implied. When drawing a line between Hannah's experience of sex, and that of Ellen and the protagonist in Keegan's story, there is a defined thread that revolves around the lack of male responsibility regarding sex, and an unwillingness—in order to protect family

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<sup>18</sup> A reference to prostitution.

<sup>19</sup> This was especially the case for unmarried women.

honour—to report sexual crimes. As Eoghan Smith presents it, “such a story, which is set in any time between the mid-1970s and mid-2000s, is immediately suggestive of sexual abuse cases which have been a periodic feature of the Irish news cycle in recent years” (4). The negative representation of sexuality in *A River in the Trees* is thus a common yet uncomfortable reality that seems to be latent but is somehow hidden underneath a layer of nationalism, idealised rural Irish life, and romanticised Catholic families (Beale 6).

### **2.3 The Issue of Motherhood**

Returning to Hannah’s motherhood status, as has been previously mentioned, male responsibility was largely non-existent with respect to pregnancies in unmarried couples, as the child’s legitimacy was usually put into question by the fathers and by the law. There might not seem to be an evident connection, according to this idea, between the attitudes of Hannah and Ellen towards motherhood: on the one hand, by having a child out of wedlock, Hannah had lost her right to be considered a respectable woman. Meanwhile, Ellen’s desire to become a mother with her husband Simon could easily be regarded as a “normal” step in any modern couple’s life. However, Ellen’s difficulties to have children could plausibly represent a “modern” problem in relation to social responsibility, as it is far more common for women than men to be stigmatised for not being able to conceive. In fact, and although this is not addressed in Hannah’s story, infertility in rural areas was a problem solely blamed on women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the pretext that the fairies had abducted the human woman and replaced her with a changeling. This provided men with an acceptable reason that excused their possible responsibility in any difficulties regarding conception and let them “harm or kill in well-meaning but ill-advised attempts to drive away the changeling and so cause the real



human to return”<sup>20</sup> (Danaher 123). This indicates traditional thinking that directly associates infertility with women.

Returning to Ellen’s situation, she is constantly thinking about her unborn child, and the opinion she has of herself revolves around ideas of incompleteness and failure. For instance, the following is Ellen’s account of a recurring dream:

I dream I’m on a small boat with the baby and we’re on a very hot still sea and the baby is getting burned because I have no suncream and she’s not dressed properly, I don’t have a sunhat for her and there’s no cover on the boat. And we’re drifting away from a big boat and my father is on that boat and I’m calling out for him to help us but he doesn’t hear me, he just keeps drifting away (68).

Ellen’s dream voices her traumatic experience regarding motherhood, as she is trapped in this small boat, unable to take care of her child, who would probably die due to the heat. O’Mahony’s use of both a first- and third-person narrator emphasizes the struggle for Ellen to move on and how misunderstood she is by the rest of the characters, since her emotions are excruciating but they do not seem to notice her pain.<sup>21</sup> For example, Simon dismisses Ellen’s problems because he considers that sufficient time has passed since the stillbirth. His insensitivity highlights, yet again, the lack of responsibility taken by the man in the couple’s attempt to have a baby. Added to this, Ellen recalls a scene, when she realised that she was pregnant, in which Simon claimed to have the right to decide whether she should proceed with the pregnancy. Ellen, in a fit of agency, replied, “no. It is my

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<sup>20</sup> For Irish rural communities, fairy discourse or fairy tradition was a way to understand and cope with the problems that affected the country economically, demographically, and socially until the very beginning of the twentieth century. For a more detailed account of the workings of the fairy belief system, see Angela Bourke, “Reading a Woman’s Death: Colonial Text and Oral Tradition in Nineteenth century Ireland”, *Feminist Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1995, pp. 553-86. JSTOR [www.jstor.org/stable/3178199](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178199), or Danaher, Kevin. “May Day.” *The Year in Ireland*, 1972, pp. 86-127.

<sup>21</sup> The following is an excerpt from the novel in which Ellen’s emotions are accessed through a third-person narrator: “She had wished that she could sit in a comfortable room in front of a fire and have someone look after her, have someone be kind to her; her body was sore and she was aware that she was moving slowly, and not thinking sharply. I’m not right, she remembered thinking to herself (...) she’d almost started crying then from the loneliness and the desperation of it all” (157).

body (...) I am in control of what happens in it and to it, I decide” (103), but then she rectifies by adding that “she had been wrong about that (...) she was in control of nothing” (104). While it is true that motherhood is now no longer dependent on marriage and that single mothers do have real opportunities for success, there is still an underlying pressure for women to become mothers once they have married and a tendency to play heavily upon women’s conscience, almost exclusively, for not being able—or not wanting—to become mothers. Ellen’s sense of “no control” might even entail that she would not have been the one to make the decision on the pregnancy, as becoming a mother is embedded in most women’s minds, making it hard to admit or contemplate the option of not having children.

Finally, in the novel, Ellen and her mother discuss how the fact that the O’Donovan family changed sides after the Civil War (supporting Éamon de Valera and not Michael Collins<sup>22</sup>) made the community reject them. However, Hannah’s actions could be the real reason for the family’s rejection and subsequent decline because as Dorothy tells Ellen, everyone in the town knew that Hannah was pregnant and that, eventually, Eily kept the baby. This becomes relevant in Ellen’s narrative because towards the end of the novel, her mother clearly rejects Hannah’s story out of shame for what she did. Imelda interrupts her daughter by exclaiming that, “Hannah went to America, baby or no baby. Hannah never came back. That’s all we know, that’s all we need to know” (176). Through her words, Imelda seems to represent an unforgiving attitude that continues to be conditioned by Catholic ideas of shame. The realisation by Ellen and Imelda of Hannah’s identity differs greatly. On the one hand, Ellen seems to understand Hannah’s fight against her

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Collins reconfigured the Volunteers into the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and led the guerrilla wars against the Black and Tans. On the other hand, Éamon de Valera had politicized his fight for Ireland, and received major support from the upper classes. They disagreed on the extent of violence required to free Ireland from British rule, which led to a division of opinion among the population.

“predestined role” and sympathises with her struggles and her failure as a mother, because she is forced to abandon her child, while Ellen also loses her child. However, on the other hand, Imelda could not accept Hannah’s decisions, as she blames her for the decline in her family. She says that “[she did] not feel sorry for Hannah (...) She left – she could have stayed, presumably, or she could have taken the baby with her. She made a choice” (246–247). Believing that Hannah actually had a say in the matter and not accepting her side of the story might be a tool for the novel to accentuate the different mindsets between Ellen and Imelda. Ireland’s attitude “towards liberalisation and late capitalism was uneven” (Nally 409). This statement points to ongoing differences regarding the Irish understanding of social movements. While people in the cities, or people who have emigrated, such as Ellen, might have the ability or opportunity to move away from the idea of motherhood as a necessary role that preserves the old Irish tradition of family honour, Imelda represents rural Ireland’s difficulties to forget about the past and its restraints regarding women’s role in relation to sexuality and motherhood.

### **3. Conclusions and Further Research**

Having analysed the behaviour of Hannah and Ellen in their respective times, and having contrasted their circumstances with the Catholic morality embedded in the workings of Irish society, I would conclude that *A River in the Trees* intentionally draws parallels between both stories to convey a sense of failure and negativity regarding rural Ireland’s capacity to step outside of the cocoon of Catholicism in favour of a more liberal attitude towards female agency within the family, and towards women’s sexuality and their relationship to motherhood.

To begin with, Hannah and Ellen conform to their place in the family, and thus in society, for two main reasons: first, because their agency is limited by the men in their

lives—Mr O'Donovan and O' Riada on the one hand, and Simon on the other—and second, because of the lack of knowledge in the case of Hannah, and the lack of financial and emotional stability in that of Ellen. These circumstances limited women's possibilities for pursuing their own objectives and, although it might be possible now for a woman to succeed outside married life (although this was emphatically not an option in the 1920s), Ellen's situation demonstrates how it is still easier for men to hold the power of decision-making.

Next, the novel's stance regarding sexuality seems to reflect little change, at least in accordance with the experiences of Hannah and Ellen. On the one hand, Hannah directly suffers the consequences of the Catholic Church's oppressive attitude towards female sexuality and desire. Having sex outside marriage, and subsequently becoming pregnant, brings shame to Hannah's family and challenges their sense of honour. Sexuality is only conceived as a means to procreate within the state of matrimony; consequently, all sexual intercourse outside marriage or for the purpose of pleasure was treated as a sin. Therefore, Hannah's engagement with sexuality turns her into an outcast and a failure for her community. On the other hand, it is true that Ellen is able to explore her sexual desires as a free woman, sexuality no longer being constrained to marriage in the contemporary world. However, as has been discussed, the Catholic Church influenced a double morality with regard to sex: while women were praised for gaining agency over their bodies and desires, sex was still regarded as promiscuous and sinful, blame usually being attached to women and not to men for engaging in "immoral" acts. As a consequence of their initial sexual encounter, Ellen is herself involved in a violent situation with John O'Connor, unable to report him for fear of jeopardising her marriage and her own standing in her small community.

Last, the notion of motherhood is presented in opposing forms for the two women, although it is criticised in both stories. Hannah subverts the Catholic conception of motherhood by being pregnant and unmarried. Her situation, as happened in real life, left unmarried mothers with little room for any choice. They could either leave their children with a priest and try to recover part of their respectability, or else they could emigrate (mostly to America) in search of a better future. However, and following O’Riada’s example, men were exempt from the consequences of having a child out of wedlock. This lack of responsibility in the issue of motherhood is what mainly connects Hannah’s struggle with Ellen’s. During the 1920s—but still resonating in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries—the *vital* role of a woman was to become a mother. Ellen precisely embodies the impossibility of having children, which already presents her as a failure in society. Moreover, her depression emphasizes Simon’s impassivity. Simon, in his privilege as a man, seems exempt from a moral responsibility towards parenthood. This was also the case with O’Riada, reinforcing the idea that motherhood has always been a task or duty for women, solely.

Whether it was O’Mahony’s intention or merely coincidence, *A River*’s parallel stories portray women who have lived 100 years apart in the same negative light, as regards the oppressive roles of societies whose behaviour and social norms are, then and now, still influenced by a restrictive Catholic doctrine.

### **3.1 Further Research**

Other authors have introduced dysfunctional Irish families into their novels, presenting traumas through the intergenerational relationships of the same members of an Irish family. This can be seen in Miranda Carr’s *On Raftery’s Hill* (2001), Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007), and short stories from Claire Keegan’s *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007). The view on Irish families in all of these novels seem to be pessimistic, since they

introduce different family members whose lives have been inundated with traumatic experiences, most especially sexual abuse and violence within their own homes. It would be interesting to assess these novels, in comparison to *A River in the Trees* (2019) as well as to one another, to ascertain whether they take a similar stance regarding the position of the Catholic Church in Ireland and how this might have contributed and/or influenced the past and present situations of the main characters in each novel. Questions such as, “Is there a common pattern in the representation of families in Ireland?” or “What is the attitude of these novels in relation to the Catholic Church?” would be most interesting to enquire further into.

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