

Sexuality and the Culture of Silence in Colm Tóibín's "The Pearl Fishers"

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Colm Tóibín's narrator in "The Pearl Fishers" (*The Empty Family*, 2010) is a middle-aged homosexual man who shares dinner with two friends from school, Gráinne and Donnacha, a married couple and faithful representatives of the Irish laity. To the narrator's surprise, Gráinne announces her intention to publish a book detailing her sexual abuse by Father Moorehouse when he was her teacher. Gráinne's husband, Donnacha, is the man with whom the narrator had a passionate love affair during their adolescence. Donnacha enforces silence on this issue, so their story remains unspoken and consigned to secrecy. Tóibín's short story deals with the consequences of an Irish legacy of ignorance and taboos concerning sex. This essay will thus delve into questions regarding Irish culture, the antagonistic but ambiguous connection between the Church and homosexuality, as well as the shame and silence traditionally attached to sex. Tóibín seems to adopt a critical approach to Irish society, complicating public debates surrounding Ireland's sexual past and the Church scandals. As will be argued, Tóibín does not propose in his story a totalising and explanatory view on the nature of the Irish sexual past, but rather he offers a thorough exploration of its ambiguities and complexities.

Keywords: Colm Tóibín; Catholic Church; Irish sexual history; male homosexuality; Church scandals; Ireland

La sexualidad y la cultura del silencio en "The Pearl Fishers" de Colm Tóibín

El narrador del relato de Colm Tóibín, "The Pearl Fishers" (*The Empty Family*, 2010) es un hombre homosexual de mediana edad que cena con dos amigos del colegio, Gráinne y Donnacha, una pareja casada y católicos practicantes. Para sorpresa del narrador, Gráinne le

informa sobre su intención de publicar un libro sobre el abuso sexual del que fue víctima cuando era alumna del Padre Moorehouse. Con Donnacha, el narrador mantuvo una relación amorosa pasional cuando eran adolescentes. Sobre este asunto, Donnacha impone silencio. El relato de Tóibín trata sobre las consecuencias de una tradición cultural irlandesa en la que la ignorancia y los tabús en torno al sexo abundaban. Por ello, este artículo analizará cuestiones relacionadas con la cultura irlandesa, las antagónicas pero ambiguas conexiones entre iglesia y homosexualidad, así como el secretismo tradicionalmente asociado al sexo. En “The Pearl Fishers,” Tóibín adopta un punto de vista crítico sobre la sociedad irlandesa, cuestionando debates públicos sobre los escándalos sexuales de la iglesia y el pasado sexual de Irlanda. El artículo mostrará que Tóibín no se propone ofrecer una visión totalizadora y esclarecedora sobre la naturaleza del pasado sexual irlandés, sino que ofrece un profundo análisis sobre sus silencios y ambigüedades.

Palabras clave: Colm Tóibín; Iglesia Católica; historia sexual de Irlanda; homosexualidad masculina; escándalos sexuales de la Iglesia; Irlanda

1. INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Claudia Luppino, Irish writer Colm Tóibín explains how in his fiction he tends to work with scenarios which are dramatic and provide fertile ground for the subversion of literary clichés and stereotypes (Luppino 2012, 464).¹ Moreover, Tóibín reports that his main interest lies in the psychology of his characters, though he also adds that “obviously, psychology lives in society” (459). As no individual is disconnected from the physical and imaginary space she or he inhabits, Tóibín’s central characters often become entangled in complex attachments to place, past and community. Thus, Tóibín’s protagonists, even if they might be considered transgressors, cannot escape their personal histories and their Irish cultural inheritance. In this process, as Oona Frawley argues, “Tóibín’s work reflects the inheritance of peculiarly Irish collective and cultural memories, but it is simultaneously marked by multiple (other) cultural memories that form concentric and overlapping circles in his work” (2008, 72). By doing so, Tóibín engages with Irish cultural legacies in all their complexity.

In “The Pearl Fishers” (*The Empty Family* 2010b), Tóibín also deals with personal and cultural memory. Tóibín’s protagonist in this short story is a middle-aged homosexual man who writes gay thrillers and lives on his own in Dublin. He shares dinner with two old friends from school, Gráinne and Donnacha, a married couple with two small children. As a notorious spokesperson for the laity of the Catholic Church, Gráinne intends to publish a book detailing her sexual abuse by a school priest, Father Moorehouse. Curiously, while Gráinne speaks out about her decision to narrate her hidden sexual story, the narrator vividly recalls his passionate love affair with Donnacha, which began in their adolescence and lasted until their early adulthood. The narrator has loved Gráinne’s husband for years, but their story is confined to darkness and secrecy since Donnacha enforces silence on this issue, thus their past relationship remains unspoken.

Although Tóibín’s story epitomises a new freedom to represent homosexual sensibilities in Irish literature, its tone is not wholly celebratory and his protagonist carries a personal history of repression. In this respect, Eibhear Walshe astutely observes that “Colm Tóibín’s gay fictions are both radical and conservative at the same time, reflecting the ambivalence in any new recognition of diverse sexual identities within a culture and a literature” (2013, 69). Significantly, Tóibín’s “The Pearl Fishers” is set during the 1990s, the time of the Church scandals, when reporting of clerical abuse was widespread. The previous lack of public discussion about clerical abuse is presented as another consequence of a cultural tradition of silence with regard to sexual matters. In this story, silences reveal not only self-suppression or shame but they also hint at deep meaning in what the characters do not say or refuse to acknowledge.

As a means of providing a context for the analysis of this short story, this essay will delve into questions regarding Irish culture, the antagonistic but ambiguous

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connection between the Church and homosexuality, as well as the shame and silence traditionally attached to sex and desire. In “The Pearl Fishers,” Colm Tóibín also seems to adopt a critical approach to Irish society, complicating public debates surrounding Ireland’s sexual past and the Church Scandals.

2. SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN IRELAND

In his monumental work, *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault explains how “between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it” ([1976] 1998, 26). One of Foucault’s central arguments is that twentieth century Western societies were living under the dominance of a Victorian regime in which sexuality started to be regulated, put into discourse and turned into an object of scrutiny and study. This Victorian moral code, Foucault notes, enforced and promoted a new type of social and sexual respectability: “Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule. The procreative and legitimate couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy” (3).

For most of the twentieth century, Irish society was also dominated by a sexual morality of prudery and chastity. This Victorian ideal, however, could not eradicate sexual realities such as prostitution, incest or child abuse, which “starkly contradicted the prevailing language of national identity formation, with its emphasis on Catholicism, moral purity and rural ideals” (Smith 2004, 214). Moreover, Ireland’s moral policing was centred round the regulation of women’s sexuality and the repudiation of homosexuals. Many of those who did not conform to Victorian notions of sexual respectability were often shamed, punished or confined to state-run institutions (209). According to Tom Inglis, Victorian values on sexuality fitted well into the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. For this reason, Victorian morality became more persistent and insidious in Ireland than in other societies: “Whereas in Britain and America opposition to Victorian prudery emerged as soon as it became dominant, the crucial role of the Catholic church in the modernization of Irish society meant that Victorian morality remained dominant in Ireland until late in the twentieth century” (Inglis 2005, 33).

In *Occasions of Sin* ([2009] 2012), Diarmaid Ferriter also dismantles the false myth of Irish chastity that was promoted in many Irish cultural institutions from the nineteenth century, as he unveils stories of sexual transgression that were often hidden from public view until the 1990s. Thus, Ferriter calls attention to the significant gulf between public discourse and private experiences: “During an Irish century when there was an avowedly Catholic ethos, oppression and watchfulness, there was also no shortage of clandestine and illicit sexual behaviour. The challenge that various authorities set

themselves was to keep uncomfortable truths behind closed doors” ([2009] 2012, 546). In a confessional state such as Ireland, Ferriter acknowledges the traditional influence and political power of the Catholic Church, but he also notes that there are other forces operating in this *quest* for the sexual respectability of society. Tracing historical similarities with other European nations, Ferriter contends that Ireland’s sexual history should be located in the context of “an international struggle to cope with the perceived evils of modernity, increased industrialization, political upheaval and the construction of middle-class norms of the body and sexual behaviour” (2). But, more significantly, Ferriter explains how these social controls upon sexuality have tended to create stigmatised identities, especially for women and homosexuals, tainting their sexual desires with embarrassment and shameful silence (542).

Interestingly, Colm Tóibín’s “The Pearl Fishers” not only explores the relationship between the religious and sexual spheres of a country’s social life, but it also deals with the consequences of a cultural legacy of secrecy and taboos concerning sex. Importantly, even though her confession is presented in an ambivalent light by the narrator, only Gráinne seems to have come to terms with her sexual past, deciding to publish her book denouncing her sexual abuse by a school priest. As regards the narrator, he is placed on an ambiguous terrain in terms of his sexual liberation and emotional honesty: he has not repressed his memories of love and sexual fulfilment with Donnacha, though he complies with the silence his former lover demands regarding the issue.

3. REPRESENTATIONS OF MALE HOMOSEXUALITY IN IRISH CULTURE

The concept of the homosexual, as Foucault relates, emerged in the nineteenth century as a “type of life” ([1976] 1998, 43), a category of knowledge, a cultural figure with a specific social and historical meaning. In Ireland, as in many other countries, homosexuality was formulated as a “foreign perversion” and source of evil that undermined the ethos of the nation. According to Kathryn Conrad, the notion of the homosexual as foreigner arose in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century: “both the British colonial powers and the Irish nationalists wrote homosexuality as a kind of foreign ‘pollution’” (2004, 25). Until relatively recently, male homosexuality was criminal in Ireland, which prompted its condemnation and relegation to secrecy and illegitimacy. Lesbianism, on the other hand, was rendered socially and legally invisible, as though women could never desire other women: “For Irish lesbians, the issue of identity was more complicated because of the lack of a public identity, even a criminalised one” (Walshe 1997, 6).

When dealing with Irish sexual history, one fundamental aspect that should be considered is the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1993.² As Ferriter

² The struggle for decriminalisation was, in great part, headed by the Irish Gay Rights Movement after a twenty-year campaign for the civil rights of homosexuals. During the 1980s, public figures such as the politician David Norris, a homosexual man himself, pursued legal actions against the criminalisation of homosexuality

indicates, decriminalisation helped change the Victorian character of the Irish Constitution, whose “laws relating to male homosexuality were draconian, and dated from 1861” (2005, 715). During the 1980s and early 90s, many debates in Ireland against decriminalisation centred round the cultural imperative of preserving the Catholic ethos of the nation. In fact, homosexuality has been very often regarded as an attack against two of the cornerstones of Catholic life: marriage and the (heterosexual) family. Therefore, as Conrad explains, “the relationship of male homosexuality to religion and to marriage and family, institutions expressly addressed in the Constitution, was the main focus of attention and dissent” (2004, 48). Interestingly, the struggle for decriminalisation also brought to public attention other considerations, such as the extent to which the State had a right to intervene in private issues concerning two consenting adults. Eventually, though a fundamental step in the acceptability of homosexuals, decriminalisation could not ensure social equality: “although gay men were now allowed their private sexuality, public space was still treacherous for both gays and lesbians” (53).

In spite of the still persistent homophobia in Ireland,³ decriminalisation did mark a turning point for the work of many Irish intellectuals and artists. “This legal change,” as Walshe relates, “validated the diverse Irish lesbian and gay cultural identities, many of these evolving outside the law throughout the twentieth century ... Since law reform, Irish writing has responded to this legal validation with ‘out’ or openly lesbian and gay work from Cathal O Searcaigh, Emma Donoghue, Jamie O’Neill, Keith Ridgeway, Mary Dorcey and others” (2008, 138-139). Similarly, after decriminalisation, Colm Tóibín not only came out as a gay author but also started to include homosexual characters and concerns in his fiction, most notably in *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999).⁴

During the years of the Celtic Tiger,⁵ there was also a noteworthy shift in the popular representations of male homosexuality in Ireland, since, in the most liberal sectors of society, gay men started to be perceived as icons of modernity, cosmopolitanism, diversity and sexual freedom. In his influential article, “‘He’s My Country’: Liberalism,

on the grounds that the Law transgressed the right to privacy. Having lost his case in the Irish Supreme Court, Norris appealed against the ruling. In 1988, the European Court of Human Rights had ruled that Irish Law did not respect the European Convention on Human Rights. This paved the way for the eventual removal in 1993 of the Victorian law against male homosexuality (see Conrad 2004: 47-62).

³ A survey in 1997 reported that “only 12.5 per cent of Irish people would welcome a gay person into their family” (Mac Gréil, 352).

⁴ Set in rural Ireland, *The Blackwater Lightship* remakes received discourses on family, homosexuality and AIDS, advocating a more inclusive and tolerant society. The critic Eibhear Walshe, for instance, commends Tóibín for his inclusion of a sympathetic AIDS narrative within the Irish literary panorama: “Tóibín does achieve a cultural centrality for the discourse of AIDS, almost single-handedly in Irish fiction” (2013, 91).

⁵ In the 1990s, Ireland saw the creation of the so-called Celtic Tiger, characterised by sustained high levels of economic growth. Thanks to this change in the economy, Irish society gradually became more confident and outward looking. Unfortunately, this patina of national success concealed unpalatable social realities, since the liberal policies of this period created a growing inequality in access to housing, education and healthcare (see Cronin 2004).

Nationalism, and Sexuality in Contemporary Irish Gay Fiction,” Michael Cronin writes that “literary and discursive constructions of gay male identity are currently being pressed into service as icons of Irish modernity,” since “gay men are routinely represented as the epitome of urban, metropolitan, consumerist lifestyle” (2004, 255). “In the course of this process,” Cronin asserts, “gay identity has been emptied of any radical political potential it may have had” (254). This new and unreflective stereotype of gay men might be read as another manifestation of the homosexual as a ‘type of life.’ However, as has already been pointed out, this cultural space that the homosexual began to occupy did not really correspond with the daily lives of most Irish lesbians and gays. In his fiction, Tóibín does portray a gained sense of freedom and sexual frankness. Nevertheless, he also explores areas of concern and ambiguity with respect to homosexual experience and the legacies of sexual repression, thus subverting the literary clichés of gay male identity that Cronin described in his article.

4. THE CHURCH AND THE SEXUAL SCANDALS IN IRELAND

For most of the twentieth century, as Brian Girvin rightly notes, “one of the strengths of the Catholic church ... had been its close identification with the majority of Irish people” (2008, 92). This identification with the Church had to be repudiated once the revelations of clerical abuse hit the headlines and public indignation ensued. The Church, which had been looked to for guidance against sexual immorality, now appeared as backward and repressive. In recent years, the legal prosecution of clerics has replaced the traditional Irish reticence concerning the sexual abuse of minors (see Donnelly and Inglis, 2010). However, child abuse had also been taking place within families and communities. In reference to mid-twentieth century Ireland, Ferriter argues that “the excessive focus on suppression and containment diverted attention from the fact that there was already substantial public and judicial awareness of sexual crimes against children” ([2009] 2012, 330). The Church, it seems, was not the only institution enforcing the silence of the victims and facilitating the impunity of abusers.

As already suggested, the cases of clerical abuse seriously undermined the moral authority of the Church. Historian Terence Brown, for example, describes the widespread consternation in Ireland when, in 1994, an old priest pleaded guilty to seventeen charges of sexual abuse: “it was argued that not only had Catholic church authorities long known about their paedophile priest, but that they had sought to deal with the problem he presented by moving him from post to post in the hope that he might desist from his activities” (2004, 368). No longer beyond reproach, the Church became open to inspection, as there was a social awareness that the institution had made mistakes that had to be amended. However, the old and traditional tactic of considering homosexuals the root of all evils remained deeply ingrained in conservative sectors of the Church. As Susannah Bowyer contends, “the Church’s institutional response to the sexual abuse crises has focused increasingly on developing strategies to exclude

homosexual men from religious life and on purging seminaries of ‘gay subcultures’” (2010, 814). On this occasion, homosexual priests became the moral contaminant within the institution, the perverse element that had to be repudiated.

In *Love in a Dark Time* (2001), a collection of essays on gay lives, Tóibín advocates a far more balanced view on the issue of homosexuality and the Church, arguing that “when they [gay priests] joined the seminary no one talked about homosexuality, it was not allowed for as a possibility. No one gave these men any guidance about their sexuality; in the society around them it was a great taboo” (275). This repression and lack of self-discovery around sexuality—which it must be said is not unique to the experiences of homosexuals—might also entail many gay men having no means of engaging with their own sexuality in a healthy and fulfilling manner. Nonetheless, to blame gay priests for all the sexual wrongdoings of the Church would be to equate male homosexuality with pathology and paedophilia, as though gay men were naturally inclined to sexual abuse. Such a damaging claim falls far from truth. As Colm Tóibín denounces, “for the many gay priests in the Church it is deeply disturbing and indeed frightening that their sexuality can be so easily associated with rape, sexual cruelty and the abuse of minors” (2010a). In fact, sexual transgressions in Catholic institutions cannot be attributed to the mere presence of gay priests. As Susie Donnelly and Tom Inglis remind us, “sex scandals within the Catholic Church during the second half of the twentieth century involved both paternity cases and the sexual and psychological abuse of children by priests, brothers, nuns and bishops” (2010, 8).

As Colm Tóibín shows in “The Pearl Fishers,” cases of clerical sexual abuse of minors have also affected women, as in the case of Gráinne and Father Moorehouse. Another school priest in the story, Father O’Neill, was recently reported to have had sex with male students, though the narrator tells us that this happened years after he left school. In “The Pearl Fishers,” Tóibín locates the controversial cases of clerical abuse within a cultural climate of sexual repression that favoured the concealment of abuse. As the writer shows in his story, the cases of clerical abuse are varied and the victims often became affected by the crippling power of silence. The shame and guilt surrounding sex also isolated the victims, which aggravated their vulnerability.

5. LEGACIES OF SEXUAL REPRESSION IN COLM TÓIBÍN’S “THE PEARL FISHERS”

Colm Tóibín is “a great novelist,” the American writer Edmund White explains, “because he knows how to dramatise complexity” (2012, 11). White’s insightful opinion on Tóibín’s widely acclaimed *The Testament of Mary* (2012)—a compelling rewriting of the Marian myth—holds also true in “The Pearl Fishers” (*The Empty Family* 2010b), a short story which brings together a married heterosexual couple—two members of the Catholic laity concerned with the “soul of the nation”—and a homosexual man who was a fierce believer but has long ago rejected Catholicism and “lost interest in arguments about the changing Ireland” (Tóibín 2010b, 63). As is common in his fiction, Tóibín

presents his readers with an Ireland where, as Matthew Ryan puts it, “‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ intersect rather than simply clash and supersede” (2008, 28).

It is important to note that “The Pearl Fishers” is filtered through the fallible and biased perspective of the narrator, who is personally involved in the past events that he describes. This internal point of view limits the matter of the story to the narrator’s subjectivity. Tóibín’s choice of narrative voice also becomes a subversive act since he allows a traditional *deviant* other, a homosexual man, to reproduce his political views and cast judgment on matters of religion and heterosexuality. All in all, Tóibín’s inscription of a plurality of gay characters in his fiction favours the inclusion of a variety of aspects that are related to homosexual experience, as the writer undermines the traditional suppression of gay identities. As Eibhear Walshe remarks in *Sex, Nation and Dissent*, “to locate the presence of homosexual sensibility in Irish writing is also to locate crucial areas of concern and anxiety within the so-called mainstream writing” (1997, 7).

As regards Tóibín’s inscription of homosexual identities, Robinson Murphy takes the view that his gay characters undergo symbolic “baptisms” that “signal their emergence into a new world, one tolerant of homosexual desire” (2009, 487). Murphy further argues that Tóibín “reworks an oppressive framework so as to allow for the formerly excluded to participate and celebrate their non-heteronormativity, or queerness” (487). Contrary to Murphy’s argument, I would rather maintain—following Walshe (2013, 69)—that the notion of the celebration of ‘non-heteronormativity’ is a much more ambivalent and complicated issue in Tóibín’s gay fictions. Since homosexual repression still lingers, Tóibín resists utopian portrayals of gay affirmation and liberation. Both Gráinne and Donnacha—Donnacha for obvious reasons—know about the narrator’s sexuality, but the articulation of his ‘queerness’ is given no space. Yet Tóibín’s narrative does represent a greater freedom for homosexuals in today’s society, as the narrator shows no inner turmoil over his sexuality and does not feel compelled to conform to the heterosexual ideal. In this respect, Ryan perceptively observes that “while responding ambivalently to the prizes and pitfalls of a changing culture, Tóibín’s fiction never succumbs to a pure celebration or complacent description of present conditions” (2008, 30).

Tóibín’s protagonist makes a living out of the gay thrillers and violent screenplays that he produces. His sexual needs are satisfied thanks to Gaydar, a gay social network that he uses to find casual sex with no strings attached. In fact, the narrator claims to spend his days as he pleases, with nobody to disturb him. However, he fleetingly admits that “viewed in the morning, it often seems a perfect life; once darkness falls it is sometimes sad, but only mildly so” (Tóibín 2010b, 63). Though he appears to celebrate his personal freedom, the protagonist’s brief moments of self-recognition point to raw areas in his emotional life. His not sharing any bonds of intimacy with another man seems not to hurt him, but he does feel jealous “of the idea that he [Donnacha] and Gráinne had been together for almost twenty-five years, that she had him all the time, every night” (66). The narrator is in fact tied to a past of emotional turbulence and

bitter disappointment. It is a past that he confronts with irony and wry humour, as illustrated by the first words he addresses to Donnacha in the story, as he is having dinner with the couple:

‘You’re still married to her?’ I asked
 He smiled almost shyly and looked at Gráinne.
 ‘What God hath put together,’ she said.
 ‘Well,’ I said. ‘I don’t often meet a divinely inspired couple.’ (66)

Equally relevant to “The Pearl Fishers” is Tóibín’s graphic descriptions of gay sex, inscribing the gay body and sexuality within the mainstream of Irish literary discourse. Furthermore, this verbalisation of sexual intimacy can certainly become a transgressive act in a society which has traditionally proscribed sex, let alone lesbian or gay sex. In this respect, Kathleen Costello-Sullivan rightly notes how the narrator and Donnacha’s past sexual encounters “contrast with the repressive need for secrecy and heterosexual containment” (2012, 153). Not surprisingly, the narrator and Donnacha’s affair in their teenage years fell outside the realm of the acceptable or even the imaginable. After their first sexual relationship, intense feelings of longing arise, as the following morning the narrator “glanced up at him [Donnacha] in wonder, almost in fear” (Tóibín 2010b, 71). But, as the narrator tells us, their sentimental bond was only given expression through their secret sexual encounters: “in the dark ... and with no words being spoken or whispered between us he would be passionate in a way that I could never manage” (70). Though they continue their secret relationship until their early twenties, the narrator cannot recall any images of public visibility or acknowledgement. All their moments of emotional attachment seem to have occurred within walls and in the dark, with no words being spoken to describe their feelings. Tóibín’s narrator, though occasionally sarcastic and bitter, acknowledges his emotional dependence on Gráinne’s husband when he privately admits that “there was a time, indeed, when I had loved him” (65). After all these years, the protagonist is still hurt by Donnacha’s indifference—he offers “not even the smallest hint of recognition” (88).

One of the narrative’s many ironies lies in the fact that, although Donnacha appears highly sexualised in the story, the narrator considers him part of a culture where everyone should conform to an ideal of chastity: “He [Donnacha] remained part of the culture that produced him. In that culture no one ever appeared naked. In the school, there were doors with locks on each shower, and a hook to hang your clothes within each shower cubicle ... Observing him now, I could sense that nothing was different. He probably slept in his pyjamas, sitting each night at the side of the bed” (76-77). Thus, the narrator seems to associate Donnacha’s behaviour with a culture in which sex is guilt-ridden and the body becomes a source of sin. Desires have to be kept at bay and be given expression in an almost clandestine manner. This also links to the manner in which both Gráinne and Donnacha are bringing up their sons, keeping the

computer in the kitchen so as to know what the children are looking at. These rules and regulations around sex, reproduce a culture of prudery and sexual shame that has had a long tradition in Ireland.

Viewed as duplicitous and reserved, Donnacha seems to hide his true feelings. The narrator, rather sarcastically, tells us that “most of us are gay or straight; Donnacha simply made no effort, he took whatever came his way” (65). Throughout the story, Donnacha’s sexuality remains hard to place and reveals continuities between heterosexual and homosexual lives. Since Donnacha’s cultural affiliation lies on the side of conservative Catholic values, heterosexual marriage becomes a compulsory ritual for his public role as a man, husband and father. Thus, Donnacha appears to have publicly adjusted to the heteronormative ideal, though his sexual desires might not be contained within the heterosexual script. In ways that are highly relevant to the story, Judith Butler theorises that “sexuality is regulated through the policing and shaming of gender,” hence “the homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts ... is often also a terror over losing proper gender” (2000, 164). In “The Pearl Fishers,” Donnacha’s suppression of his past ‘homosexual acts’ and his choice of ‘proper gender’ might be viewed not only as his adherence to the Church’s moral teachings, but also as being connected to questions of social and symbolic capital. As Inglis argues in *Moral Monopoly*, “the Catholic Church still has considerable influence not just in the religious field, but in the character of Irish social life” (1998, 13). “Being a good Catholic,” Inglis points out, “helped get contracts and jobs, be elected, be educated, be well known and liked” (11). Curiously, in Tóibín’s story, Donnacha features as a successful hospital administrator who gives radio interviews and has meetings with the Health Minister and the *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister). Paradoxically for the reader, Donnacha remains an elusive character whose inner motives cannot be easily understood. All his past and present actions are reported and interpreted by the narrator, who resents Donnacha’s decision to conform to a *normal* life and relegate their past relationship to silence.

In the previously mentioned work by Foucault, the French philosopher explains how silence becomes an integral part of discourse: “silence itself—the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse ... than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them” ([1976] 1998, 27). In precisely this way, in “The Pearl Fishers” Tóibín dramatises how silence can conceal as much as it can disclose: silence impedes knowledge, but creates its own cultural codes. These considerations become particularly relevant in light of the narrator’s newly acquired knowledge of Father O’Neill’s sexual interest in boys. The narrator reflects upon this shocking news and comes to the following conclusion: “The idea of a priest wanting to get naked with one of the boy’s at St. Aidan’s and stuff his penis up the boy’s bottom was so unimaginable that it might have happened while I was in the next room and I might have mistaken the grunts and yelps they made for a sound coming from the television. Or I might have mistaken the silence they maintained for real silence”

(Tóibín 2010b, 69). Here, Tóibín's story illustrates how these personal and cultural silences reveal crucial aspects of the Irish social psychology in relation to sex. As a young man, the narrator was influenced by a variety of silence that enforced ignorance about sexual realities that, for him, belonged to the realm of the unimaginable. Similarly, in Irish society, prior to the victims breaking their silence, clerical abuse was almost unthinkable. The silence that victims maintained may have been attached to feelings of guilt and shame, which probably hindered their search for emotional support. Moreover, this silence—where abuse can flourish when power disparities take place—occluded those realities which were not acceptable in the public arena.

In the story, even Gráinne, the most vociferous of the characters, is affected by a tradition of silence and denial concerning sex. As a popular journalist and spokeswoman for the laity, Gráinne feels she will have a good chance of publishing her memoir of her sexual abuse by Father Moorehouse. We learn that she and the narrator used to meet with the priest as teenagers to discuss poetry and prayer and she wants the narrator's permission to include a devout poem he composed at the time. In this way she will make the narrator a witness of those private meetings, in which she claims that Father Moorehouse "had [them] in his thrall" (70). At this point, the narrator realises that he and Gráinne had never before talked about those days. Now, he sees that her silence concealed her secret, but he remains unsympathetic and strangely skeptical about her status as a victim. "There was nothing," the narrator says, "not a single detail, not a blush, for example, on either of their faces, not a thing unusually out of place" (79). Moreover, as well as his complex feelings towards her because of his (unresolved) previous relationship with her husband, the narrator distrusts and dislikes Gráinne, not only on a personal level but also because of her political views. As Walshe points out, "the narrator is gleefully cynical and critical of Gráinne's militant Catholicism" (2013, 150). Portrayed as proud and self-centred by the narrator, Gráinne claims to have written the book because the Church of the future will stand for truth. Despite her alleged commitment to truth, the narrator seems to view her as unreliable, opportunistic and eager for attention, as "a great diva who would go on to sing many great arias" (Tóibín 2010b, 80).

Curiously, Gráinne's memoir opens on the night when the three of them, as students, attended a dress rehearsal of the opera *The Pearl Fishers*. According to Gráinne, that was the first time that she and Donnacha knew that they were meant to be together for the rest of their lives—ironically, Donnacha and the narrator were lovers at this time. Gráinne's sentimental recounting over dinner of *The Pearl Fishers* night is more than the narrator can stand: "As she went on I pretended for some time that I barely remembered the night, and I excused myself to go to the bathroom ... I hoped I could soon get away" (80). Once again, the narrator's past relationship with Donnacha becomes overwritten by the married couple's official narrative of heterosexual fulfilment. Here, Tóibín might be making the point that—even today, in a more sexually liberated Ireland—some private realities still can't be talked about and are submerged beneath the *sanctity* of matrimony and ideal heterosexuality.

In line with the author's reticence to produce simple depictions of gay liberation, "The Pearl Fishers" closes with an ambiguous tone of affirmation in which the narrator compares his solitary nights with the empty rituals that Gráinne and Donnacha perform as a married couple. Being aware that he could have chosen to be like Donnacha, the narrator suddenly comes to the realisation that "no matter what I had done, I had not done that" (89). In this way, Tóibín's central character questions the notion that ideal heterosexuality is a necessarily superior and desirable choice of life. By doing so, Tóibín's narrator challenges the dominant heteronormative model of sexuality in Ireland: "No matter how grim the city I walked through was, how cavernous my attic rooms, how long and solitary the night to come, I would not exchange any of it for the easy rituals of mutuality and closeness that Gráinne and Donnacha were performing now" (89).

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As discussed, Ireland's sexual history has been characterised by a national ideal of purity and chastity. Victorian values of gender and sexuality—which dominated Irish society for most of the twentieth century—were adopted and promoted by the State and the Church. In order to keep unpalatable sexual realities behind closed doors, those who were deemed to be *deviant* were too often condemned to silence and marginalisation. This sexual morality created stigmatised identities especially for women and homosexuals, tainting their sexual desires with embarrassment and shameful silence. However, in contemporary Ireland, an increasing modernisation has propelled internal dissent with respect to gender and sexual inequality. The moral and political power of the Church has been further undermined by the unveiling of cases of child abuse. With this new turn of events, the liberal media began to project images of gay men as icons of Irish modernity, whereas the Church was perceived as backward, repressive and alien to a sexually liberated Ireland (Bowyer 2010, 803).

In the "Pearl Fishers," Colm Tóibín brings together a Catholic married couple and a gay man, all three of them sharing similar histories of illicit sex, shame and secrecy. As such, the story reveals continuities between the lives of individuals with highly different political and cultural affiliations. Gráinne, though a staunch Catholic nationalist, becomes critical of the old system and denounces her status as a victim of clerical abuse. Tóibín's narrator, on the other hand, is a middle-aged gay man who enjoys modern life but carries a personal history of emotional turbulence. Though he has no internal conflict with his own sexuality, he seems unable to overcome his regret over Donnacha's attitude towards him. Donnacha—a family man with a successful career in the administration—enforces silence on his past love relationship with the narrator, which lasted for several years. Donnacha's sexuality remains hard to place and reveals ambiguities that cannot be easily contained within the socially constructed binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Nevertheless, since readers only share the

narrator's internal point of view, this story is not only permeated by the narrator's self-suppression and prejudices, but also by the silences of the other characters.

Contrary to rigid discourses on sexual behaviour and desire, Tóibín favours in "The Pearl Fishers" a narrative of gaps and silences which accounts for the complex legacies of sexual repression in a society whose approach to sexuality continues to be affected by a past of denial and secrecy. Furthermore, Tóibín—through the figure of the narrator and his failed relationship with Donnacha—resists stereotypes of gay liberation while reflecting on the traditional but still existent suppression of homosexuality. Coincidentally, the writer appears to locate the cases of clerical abuse in the context of a national pathology surrounding sexual expression and emotional honesty. In "The Pearl Fishers," Tóibín seems not to propose a totalising and explanatory view on the Irish sexual past, but rather offers a thorough exploration of its ambiguities and complexities.

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