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„The Portrayal of the Female Protagonists  
in a Selection of Short Stories  
by Anne Enright and Claire Keegan“

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You are truly saying very little. People say very little anyway. We talk a great deal, of course, but we actually say very little to each other. I think the short story is a very fine place to explore that silence between people, and the loneliness between people and the love that is there.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is made by Claire Keegan about the literary discipline of short story writing in the following interview:

Van Dusen, Kate. "An Interview with Claire Keegan, Celtic Studies Writer in Residence." *University of St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto*. 19 March 2009. 8 April 2013. <[http://stmikes.utoronto.ca/news/archives/09\\_stories/09\\_0330\\_claire\\_keegan.asp](http://stmikes.utoronto.ca/news/archives/09_stories/09_0330_claire_keegan.asp)>.



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## 1. Introduction

The prospect is that the 'Ireland' of Irish criticism, because it is expectant of its own fulfilment, will make 'gender' a perpetual resident in its waiting room. (Graham 103)

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the topic of Irish women's writing has been widely debated in the Irish national context. For this reason, many researchers have written about women's position in Irish society as well as about the female writers' place in the Irish literary canon (cf. Curtin, Jackson, and O'Connor 1987; D'hoker, Ingelbien, and Schwall 2011; Haberstroh and St. Peter 2007; Ingman 2007; Moloney and Thompson 2003; Pelan 2005; Tovey and Share 2003; Weekes 1990). Therefore, it may be inferred that the inclusion of Irish women's writing into national discourse is of constantly increasing importance not only to cultural, but also to literary studies in Ireland. Although a lot of groundbreaking studies on women and their literature in the Irish nation have been published so far, there seems to be a scope for new research that focuses on recent literature by Irish female authors. Lanser (24), for instance, points out that "[...] feminist criticism will need many more studies of women's fictions, studies focusing on many different cultures and from many different vantage points, before anyone can speak with authority about women writers and narrative voice."

The general aim of this thesis is to offer new insights into the field of Irish women writers by focusing on the two contemporary authors Anne Enright and Claire Keegan as well as on the portrayal of the female protagonists in a selection of their short stories. In particular, not only Keegan's *Antarctica*, *Love in the Tall Grass*, *Men and Women* and *Quare Name for a Boy*, but also Enright's *Green*, *Here's to Love*, *Until the Girl Died* and *Yesterday's Weather* will be analysed. This selection of texts is based on two short story collections, namely Claire Keegan's *Antarctica* (1999) and Anne Enright's *Yesterday's Weather* (2008). Given the fact that up to the present these eight short stories have only been marginally studied and reviewed, this thesis seeks to make a contribution to the field of Irish literary studies by subjecting the female central

characters to detailed analysis. As far as methodology is concerned, basically three theoretical frameworks are applied in this study, namely close-reading, narrative theory and gender theory. Regarding the structure of this research paper, it is divided into four chapters focusing on the analysis of different aspects of the short stories and their main female characters:

Initially, to provide the reader with the socio-cultural context of the topic, an overview of the historical background of Irish women and Irish women writers from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first centuries shall be given. Moreover, the authors Anne Enright and Claire Keegan, who are frequently referred to as postmodern and post-feminist writers, as well as their literary production are introduced.

What follows in chapter three is the discussion of narrative technique with a particular focus on narrative voice. In an interview, Enright herself classifies her characters' 'voices' as the basis of her short stories:

Well, not their characters, not their personalities, their voices are the motor of, the engine of a lot of my work. [...] They give me the rhythm and the rhythm of their thought - that's what makes the story go for me, is their voice, often, because a lot of the time it's first person and it's subjective. [...] The stories, usually women's voices, I've begun to realise they're not the spoken word, they're not the word in the room, they're their inner voices, they're their voices in their head, they're on the brink of articulation. [...] It is their most intimate voice.<sup>2</sup>

However, the main part of this chapter will be dedicated to the characterisation of the individual female protagonists, who have been grouped into three categories, namely 'Married Women Between Happiness and Misery', 'Women Taking the Wheel' and 'Women Feeling Left Alone', in order to provide a basis for comparison. In fact, the reason for the character analysis representing the largest part of this thesis is that the short stories' protagonists seem to form the centre of the texts around which all the other aspects revolve. In this context, Keegan herself states: "[...] when I'm writing I'm just trying to concentrate on the

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<sup>2</sup> Beale, Nigel: "Audio Interview with Anne Enright on: What Constitutes a Good Short Story (3)." *Literary Tourist Blog*. Audio File. 16 Dec. 2008. (24:18-26:31). 10 March 2013. <<http://literarytourist.com/2008/12/audio-interview-with-anne-enright-by-nigel-beale/>>.

emotional dynamic of the emotional dilemma of my central character and try to follow that to its logical conclusion.”<sup>3</sup>

The next section deals with representations of Irish womanhood in the short stories discussed. Broadly speaking, this chapter is divided into three parts: Firstly, it presents Irish national stereotypes that are linked to womanhood and examines their construction and deconstruction in the short stories. Secondly, not only the crises and changes in the female protagonists’ lives are studied, but also the female protagonists’ identity constructions and self-perceptions are subjected to discussion. The third part, which is about the themes and motifs the short stories have in common, attempts to link these thematic issues to the female protagonists’ lives and sentiments.

The final conclusion provides a summary of the central points of each chapter and puts the findings of this thesis into the wider context of Irish women’s national identities and Irish women’s writing. Moreover, plot summaries of each of the eight short stories are provided in the appendix intended for potential readers of this thesis not familiar with the primary texts.

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<sup>3</sup> Van Dusen, Kate. “An Interview with Claire Keegan, Celtic Studies Writer in Residence.” *University of St. Michael’s College in the University of Toronto*. 19 March 2009. 8 April 2013. <[http://stmikes.utoronto.ca/news/archives/09\\_stories/09\\_0330\\_claire\\_keegan.asp](http://stmikes.utoronto.ca/news/archives/09_stories/09_0330_claire_keegan.asp)>.



## **2. Women and Women Writers in Irish Society of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries**

In this chapter, a concise overview of the research that has been done on the topic of Irish women and Irish women writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as their status within Irish national and literary contexts, will be given. In fact, the focus will be on studies from 1991 onwards, since the controversy that arose over the publishing of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Deane et al. 1991) is intended to serve as a starting point for this discussion. Although some notions of Irish womanhood will certainly be part of this section, there will be a separate, more detailed part on female stereotypes, stereotypical gender roles, as well as their construction and deconstruction in Irish women's writing. A further sub-chapter of this section will be dedicated to the two contemporary Irish women writers Claire Keegan and Anne Enright. Here, short biographical information will be provided and an attempt to investigate their role in Irish literary discourse will be made. In addition, as the two authors are often labelled 'postmodernist' or 'post-feminist' writers, the two theories will be presented in brief, and their connection to Enright and Keegan will be explored.

### **2.1. Historical Background: Women in Irish Society from the 1990s to the Present**

In the past, "women's role was to stay at home, bear as many children as possible, and be shining examples of Irish modesty and self-sacrifice. (Eagleton, *The Truth about the Irish* 175)

It may be claimed that Eagleton's quote summarises common perceptions of women's role and status within Irish society quite well, as women in general seem to have been placed at the margins of society, namely in the domestic, non-public sphere. Throughout the twentieth century gender roles were reversed to some extent, however, traces of these traditional beliefs and social expectations still seem to have an influence on contemporary life in Ireland. Some of the prevailing notions of womanhood can be connected to the topic of

both, Irish national and Irish gender stereotypes, which will be critically examined at a later stage of this thesis. The focus of this sub-chapter is on the portrayal of some of the perhaps most crucial historical facts that may be linked to the general theme of Irish women and Irish women writers.

Since this thesis deals with two contemporary writers' short stories, which have been published from 1999 onwards, the main concern of the following paragraphs will be Irish society, economy and politics from the 1990s to the present, in order to provide relevant historical background knowledge for the interpretation of the texts. Nevertheless, one particularly significant event, which happened quite some time before 1990, must not be left out, as it had, and still has, a decisive influence on Irish social constructions of womanhood: Eamon De Valera's First Irish Constitution<sup>4</sup> of 1937 and its article 41 on the role of the family, motherhood and marriage in Ireland, which is still valid and seems to be especially important for this discussion:

(2.1.) In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

(2.2.) The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labor to the neglect of their duties in the home.

(3.1.) The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack.

It might be inferred from these statements that the Irish do not only ascribe high values to the family, marriage and motherhood, but that they also have rather fixed ideas about the position women should occupy in Irish society. In particular, their main solicitude should be domestic life, and they should not be involved in any kind of public affairs or work outside the house because there would be a danger of them "neglect[ing] their duties in the home." In addition, females were mostly perceived as self-sacrificing mothers and wives. A number

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<sup>4</sup> Bunreacht Na hÉireann – Constitution of Ireland. *Enacted by the People 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1937, In operation as from 29<sup>th</sup> December, 1937.* 02 Feb. 2013. <[http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached\\_files/html%20files/Constitution%20of%20Ireland%20\(Eng\)Nov2004.htm](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached_files/html%20files/Constitution%20of%20Ireland%20(Eng)Nov2004.htm)>.

of researchers point out that this picture of the female gender is still a dominant one in Irish culture (cf. Eagleton 2006; Ingman 2007). In her thesis, Fasching, who examined this topic in great detail, drew the conclusion that women were associated with domesticity, non-public life and passivity, although, as she puts it, “[...] the homemaker was mainly concerned with hard physical labour, such as household work, cooking, lighting fires, sewing, knitting and baking bread. The rural woman’s workday additionally contained the caring for livestock, milking, farmwork and potato picking.” (Fasching 8) This means that women being confined to the domestic, private sphere had a lot of work to do. For this reason it may be stressed that they were not passive at all, as they had to engage actively in hard labour. To sum up, it might be deduced from the national discourse that married women were mainly excluded from public life and their voices were left unheard (cf. O’Connor 1998; Tovey and Share 2003).

Leading over to contemporary Irish society from the 1990s to the present, the situation seems to be under constant change. In 1990 the feminist civil rights lawyer Mary Robinson was elected for President.<sup>5</sup> This may be regarded as a decisive moment in Irish women’s history as it was not only a woman who now occupied a high political post, but also one who engaged in female and civil rights (cf. Eagleton, *The Truth about the Irish* 177). After her, in 1997 another woman was elected for President in Ireland, namely Mary McAleese.<sup>6</sup> Thus, two women were chosen by the Irish nation to occupy this symbolically important post (cf. Cahalan 21). Among other factors, this may lead to the conclusion that in the Irish nation’s recent past the position of women has developed towards being perceived as more equal to and more independent from men. Beale (184) reflects about this issue, pointing out that “as Irish society has industrialised and urbanised, and as traditional values and ways have been challenged and questioned, every aspect of women’s lives has been subject to scrutiny and

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<sup>5</sup> cf. "Mary Robinson". *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.* Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2013. 02 Feb. 2013.  
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/505757/Mary-Robinson>>.

<sup>6</sup> cf. "Mary McAleese". *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.* Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2013. 02 Feb. 2013.  
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/713823/Mary-McAleese>>.

change.” This development is also important for the topic of Irish women writers and their place in the Irish literary discourse, which will be subjected to detailed discussion in the following sub-chapter. Even though it is often highlighted in scientific studies on Irish society and women that gender roles have been partly reversed, it is also stressed that some of the constructed and well-established stereotypes still exist and keep influencing women’s lives (cf. Fasching 2009; Ingman 2007; O’Connor 1998; Tovey and Share 2003).

In 1995 “The Family Law (Divorce) Act”<sup>7</sup> became part of the Irish Constitution in article 41 (3.2) and it has been implemented in 1996:

(3.2) A Court designated by law may grant a dissolution of marriage where, but only where, it is satisfied that –

- i. at the date of the institution of the proceedings, the spouses have lived apart from one another for a period of, or periods amounting to, at least four years during the five years,
- ii. there is no reasonable prospect of a reconciliation between the spouses,  
[...].

This article became effective only in 1996, which not only means that before marriage was even more protected by law, but also that divorce was practically not possible in Ireland.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it is often assumed that today spouses still do not dissolve their marriage because of financial reasons. This means that for a lot of couples who do not get along and would like to get divorced, it is simply cheaper to stay in a broken marriage. Especially for women who do not have well-paid jobs and have always been primary caregivers to their children, it is probably rather difficult to obtain a divorce as it is not only a controversial topic in society, but also a question of finance and the well-being of the children. Therefore, the issue of divorce is another crucial point in the historical development of Irish women’s options and rights.

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<sup>7</sup> Bunreacht Na hÉireann – Constitution of Ireland. *Enacted by the People 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1937, In operation as from 29<sup>th</sup> December, 1937.* 02 Feb. 2013. <[http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached\\_files/html%20files/Constitution%20of%20Ireland%20\(Eng\)Nov2004.htm](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached_files/html%20files/Constitution%20of%20Ireland%20(Eng)Nov2004.htm)>.

<sup>8</sup> cf. “The history of divorce in Ireland”. *Divorce in Ireland: A free guide to divorce in Ireland.* 02 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.divorceinireland.net/divorce-in-ireland/divorce-in-ireland/>>.

In *A Sociology of Ireland* (2003) Tovey and Share offer a detailed study of how Irish society has been influenced by historical events, politics, economic growth, as well as social constructions of gender, nationality and national identity. They point out that in the course of the last thirty years, there has been a huge debate about topics related to gender and gender roles, sexuality, as well as marriage and family. Further, they enumerate some of the main issues that have caused conflicts in the recent past, saying that “[t]he country has been convulsed by a series of conflicts around the, often linked, issues of contraception, adoption, abortion, censorship, homosexuality, sex education and divorce.” (Tovey and Share 228) On top of that, Tovey and Share concluded that there are three widespread viewpoints as far as the relationship between the male and female gender in Ireland is concerned. Firstly, there is the assumption that actually a lot has changed over the past thirty years and that there is a progressive development towards equality between men and women. Secondly, some people are of the opinion that hardly anything has changed and women as opposed to men are disadvantaged. The third standpoint stresses that gender inequality as such is present in Ireland, but that there is a development towards the discrimination of men. At this point it needs to be asserted that neither of these claims can be verified objectively, but they can be utilised to demonstrate that there is still a lot of controversy on the question of gender relationships and gender equality (cf. Tovey and Share 228-229).

A further significant change for the roles of women in Irish society seems to be related to their presence in the world of employment. Sociologists argue in connection to this crucial point that “the world of work remains a key site for the expression of gender difference and the positions that men and women hold in the labour market are a major determinant of wealth, income, power and status. Work itself is a major element of personal identity [...]” (Tovey and Share 247) During the second half of the twentieth century Irish economy experienced tremendous expansion and, therefore, the employment rate of women grew as well. Nevertheless, comparing the percentage of employed women in Ireland to

the EU standards, it persisted to be rather low. For this reason, one may draw the conclusion that there is still hindrance to women's non-discriminatory involvement in the sectors of employment (cf. Tovey and Share 250-251).

Broadly speaking, it may be concluded from the previously discussed perceptions of gender roles in twentieth and twenty-first century Ireland that – as in many other countries of the western world – things are continually changing and developing. In spite of the assumption that some stereotypes of women and their position in the Irish nation might still exist and may still be widespread in parts of Irish society, it may be pointed out that gender roles have been addressed, reversed, or deconstructed within the Irish national as well as literary discourse:

Such writers as Brian Friel, Eavan Boland, Colm Toibín, Jennifer Johnston, Anne Enright, and Claire Keegan, have all – despite their differences in age, style, and locale – wrestled with the meaning of both public and personal history, and with what its place should be in a contemporary Ireland. They have all engaged with ideas of family, and how to navigate its emotional shoals. And each has addressed the collapse of the religious and political institution [...]. Recognizing the dangers of being controlled by the past, all of these writers nevertheless argue the utter necessity of contending with it – whether they choose irony, humor, or even touches of magical realism to make that point. (Fitzgerald-Hoyt 133)

This assessment of Irish history and its reprocessing in literature suggests that a vast range of Irish writers, both male and female, address historical developments and changes in their literary products. Two of the authors mentioned, namely Anne Enright and Claire Keegan, and their ways of incorporating their understanding of the past, mainly with regard to the female gender, will be dealt with in the course of this thesis. Before proceeding to the two writers and their texts, a general account of Irish women writers and their place in the Irish nation shall be given in the subsequent sub-chapter.

## **2.2. Irish Women Writers: Literary Production and Reception in Ireland from the Late Twentieth to the Twenty-first Century**

Changes which transformed Irish society from the 1960s on gradually helped liberate Irish women's fiction. (Weekes, *Towards Her Own History* 299)

In previous studies on the topic of Irish women writers, their work and its literary reception and status within Irish society, it has been argued that stereotypical perceptions and constructions of Irish women's identities traditionally led to the image of them being located at the margins of the nation (cf. D'Hoker, Ingelbien, and Schwall 2011; Ingman 2007; Moloney and Thompson 2003; Rea 2000). A decisive moment for the public discourse of Irish women's writing was the publishing of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 1991, which was edited by Seamus Deane and appeared in 3 volumes. The near omission of female authors led to a huge debate about their place in Irish society and its canon of literature. As a result, a lot of researchers started to investigate the topic from a variety of perspectives (cf. D'hoker, Ingelbien, and Schwall 2011; Haberstroh and St. Peter 2007; Ingman 2007; Innes 1993; Kirkpatrick 2000; Moloney and Thompson 2003; Pelan 2005). It has been highlighted by many of these scholars that in Ireland's past, women writers were not only marginalised, but also perceived as outsiders.

As far as *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Deane et al. 1991) is concerned, it is likely to get the impression that the work of women has remained nearly unnoticed for decades as their products might have been considered as not sufficiently important for the nation. O'Faolain (129) portrayed the circumstances of the late twentieth century as follows: "modern Irish literature is dominated by men so brilliant in their misanthropy [...] [that] the self-respect of Irish women is radically and paradoxically checkmated by respect for an Irish national achievement." However, with the publication of volumes IV and V in 2002, which have been edited by Angela Bourke, a remarkable step towards the inclusion of Irish women authors and their literary products into the

literary canon has been taken, since these two volumes cover women's writing only.

At this point it needs to be stressed again that as far as the literary canon is concerned, it has also been asserted that women were not entirely excluded from it, but placed at its margins (cf. Haberstroh and St. Peter 2007; Moloney and Thompson 2003). In *Irish Women Writers Speak Out: Voices from the Field* (2003), for instance, Moloney and Thompson analyse this act of marginalising Irish women writers with the help of feminist, post-colonialist and literary approaches. They do not only present their research position, but also include a variety of contemporary writers' opinions on the issue. In addition, Ingman surveys this marginalisation of Irish women not only as far as the literary field is concerned, but also regarding society as it is, in her book *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (2007). In its first chapter the reader is introduced to the topic with the help of an outline of the non-linear Irish history from a woman's perspective. Moreover, the assumption that "it may be argued that landmarks for Irish women in the twentieth century are different from those of men" (25) is proposed. Ingman takes a stand against the notion of Ireland being a male nation and propagates the hidden power of Irish women, which seems to be enormously valuable for the perception of Ireland's national identity. As the book's subtitle suggests, Ingman focuses on the mutual relationship between nation, gender and national literature in Ireland. In particular, she constantly uses "Kristevan theory as a lens through which to consider fiction by Irish women" (Ingman 3) and enforces her arguments with Julia Kristeva's theoretical writings about nation, gender, the self and the other (e.g. *Nations Without Nationalism* 1993, *Strangers to Ourselves* 1991). Ingman's viewpoints are supported by D'Hoker, Ingelbien and Schwall (1), who generally claim that "key concepts and underlying assumptions of that literary history are changed once the work of women writers is properly included." Kirkpatrick (2000), touching upon Kristevan theory as well, maintains that the inclusion of Irish women writers' voices into literary discourse will possibly lead to a transformation of the Irish nation as a whole. From a feminist perspective,



Pelan (2005) argues that there is a link between Irish politics and Irish women's creative writing of the present and the past. In fact, her study *Two Irelands: Literary Feminism North and South* (2005) is limited to Irish women's writing from 1970 to the mid-1990s. The significance of this time span for Irish feminism and the future deconstruction of gender roles is also emphasised by Weekes (2003). Through the lens of contemporary gender theories, Pelan links the events of the Second Wave of The Women's Movement to a critical analysis of various literary products of this period of time. She refers to the heated discussion that has been aroused by the near exclusion of Irish women writers from *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Deane et al. 1990) as being the most obvious evidence for the existence of the connection between the women's movement and women's fiction. In *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives* (2008) Coughlan and O'Tool continue Moloney and Thompson's research by additionally discussing other, more recent literary and critical works. In particular, they assume that meta-narratives of Irish literature still have an underlying focus on men and male perceptions of the nation and society. Therefore, Coughlan and O'Tool present, as their study's title suggests, female perspectives on the Irish literary canon. Furthermore, they refer to Haberstroh and St. Peter's *Opening the Field: Irish Women – Texts and Contexts* (2007) in order to stress the necessity of new contributions to the field of Irish literary studies by female researchers.

Transforming national identity, or identities, and giving audience to voices from the margins appear to be two major underlying attempts of several recent studies on Irish women writers (cf. D'Hoker, Ingelbien, and Schwall 2011; Ingman 2007; Kirkpatrick 2000; Moloney and Thompson 2003; Pelan 2005). D'Hoker, Ingelbien and Schwall's *Irish Women Writers: New Critical Perspectives* (2011) offers various points of view on the topic. For instance, grounding her essay *Narrating Across Borders: From Gendered Experience of Trauma to Subject Transformation in Monologues by Irish Women Playwrights* (2011) on feminist as well as psychoanalytical theories, Kurdi takes various female characters from Irish literature and subjects their monologues to a

detailed analysis. In general, the essay collection published by D'Hoker, Ingelbien and Schwall is mainly written by female authors, who critically evaluate the developments of Irish literature and society with the help of French feminist theory, trauma theory and gender studies. Being most valuable for the research area, the texts basically cover the most frequently discussed features of Irish women's literary production. All in all, D'Hoker, Ingelbien and Schwall seem to not only present challenging and innovative perspectives on the research topic, but also stress that the position as well as the recognition of women writers in Ireland has changed significantly in the course of the last twenty years. Since the 1980s anthologies and critical scientific studies about women's literature have been published more and more frequently (cf. D'Hoker, Ingelbien and Schwall 1).

Ingman's *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (2007) has proposed an interesting strategy to include Irish women writers and their female heroines into the Irish literary discourse. In her analysis, she focuses on the characterisation of the books' heroines and their status in fictional society. This approach is nothing new, as Innes (1993) and Weekes (1990) have not only worked with the same method in the early 1990s, but have also already interpreted some of the books being subject to Ingman's research. Nevertheless, it seems to be an extremely interesting way of combining general ideas about the history of female authors with their distinct literary works as well as their fictional characters. Also Pelan (2005) dedicates parts of her research to an analysis of the female protagonists in a number of Irish women's books. In fact, she investigates the strong tendency of Irish women writers to primarily use female reflector characters as far as narrative mode is concerned.

It is basically this approach that will be used in the following chapters in order to find out how the female protagonist of each short story is portrayed and how these portrayals may or may not be linked to the general topic of women in Ireland. It may be stated that nowadays Irish women writers are more than present in the field of Irish literature. There are countless successful Irish

women writers, who have been awarded prestigious prizes and definitely not perceived as outsiders. It does not seem to be farfetched at all to say that Enright and Keegan are two of these established writers. To illustrate this argument, the next pages of this study are dedicated to the two authors, their biographies and their fiction.

### **2.3. Anne Enright and Claire Keegan: Two Contemporary Irish Women Writers**

Anne Enright and Claire Keegan are both contemporary female authors, who are known for their writing of short stories, as well as novels and non-fictional texts. Further, they seem to have much more in common than being women and being born in Ireland. In fact, they may be seen as part of a new generation of people engaging in literature, as both were born in the 1960s and started publishing within the last two decades of the twentieth century:

Writers whose careers began in the 1990s worked in a very different climate from that of their mothers and grandmothers: in Celtic Tiger Ireland, neither church nor state exert much influence over an affluent, mobile population, and women writers introduce free-spirited characters, women, if not modeled on their peers, at least held up as models to them. (Weekes, *Towards Her Own History* 299)

As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, there are actually various similarities in their writing. For instance, some of the characters of their short stories do transport these images of free-thinking individuals. Enright and Keegan may be described as postmodernist writers and also as feminist or post feminist writers. The following sub-chapter will discuss what these terms mean in connection to the two authors. At this point, however, short biographical information on both of them will be provided in order to locate them within the literary context.

Anne Enright is one of the most innovative and exiting writers in Ireland today, whose work encompasses a wide range of genres, themes and interests. With her dark humour and wry tone she displays an ability to be remarkably funny while engaging with serious subjects and themes. (Bracken and Cahill 1)

Anne Enright, the well-known and often awarded female Irish author, was born in 1962 in Dublin. With both of her parents, she spent her infancy in Dublin's suburbs. Later, she attended high school in Canada, but in 1981 she moved back to Ireland to study English and Philosophy (BA). Already in these days, Enright developed her interest for literature and drama, so she started writing texts and continued her studies by doing a MA degree in Creative Writing. From 1989 onwards she published various collections of short stories. In 1995 her first postmodern novel *The Wig My Father Wore* was released. In addition, she wrote non-fictional texts, for example *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2004), which is about motherhood and her personal experiences of being a mother. The short story collections *Taking Pictures* (2008) and *Yesterday's Weather* (2008) are part of her recent publications. Within the various awards she received for her literature, the Man Booker Prize in 2007 probably was the most famous (cf. Bracken and Cahill 1-4). In August 2009, Enright comments on her sentiments about this award, and on how far she identifies with the categories into which she is often put by literary critics, in an interview conducted by Bracken and Cahill (14): "But you know, I am a woman, sometimes, for weeks at a time, and I am only Irish of a Tuesday. And the thing about the Booker is that it takes you out of those two boxes and puts you into another box, which is Booker winner."

Her stories frequently take place in urban areas of modern Ireland and are often about contemporary Irish society and its changes, as well as the connection of the past to the present, how culture and stereotypical images are changing and developing (cf. Bracken and Cahill 5). What is more, one of her main focuses is on narration in the books, so who is narrating the story and how: "[...] but actually I'm very involved in the character who is narrating the book and they have a whole other way of describing the world from that" (Bracken and Cahill 32). This seems to be of great significance for the study of her short stories in this thesis, as it centres on the portrayal of the female protagonists who are either first person narrators or reflector figures.

The four of her short stories that will be under analysis in this thesis, namely *Until the Girl Died*, *Yesterday's Weather*, *Here's to Love*, *Green*, were published in *Taking Pictures* for the first time, although some had already appeared on the radio or in special editions of newspapers a bit earlier. Nevertheless, as they all reappeared in the *Yesterday's Weather*, which is also from 2008, the actual texts that will be analysed in the following chapters have been taken from this collection. In all of these short stories, the female characters are given a voice to tell their stories and present their viewpoints. This act of letting her female narrators and main characters speak out seems to be a major component of Enright's literature: "This desire to 'bear witness' to the past, something which runs throughout Enright's work, is not an attempt to uncover the truth (it is an 'uncertain event' after all), but rather to open space for other stories and voices, repressed in the past, to be heard." (Bracken and Cahill 6)

Claire Keegan also voices the thoughts, beliefs and perceptions of her main characters by making them either narrate the story or influence the narration as reflector figures. Beyond that the two writers likewise stress the essentiality of the reader for their texts. For instance, Anne Enright reflects upon her readers as being "very interested, very involved, very engaged." (Bracken and Cahill 20) Also Keegan states in an interview, "It's essentially about trusting in the reader's intelligence rather than labouring a point. To work on the level of suggestion is what I aim for in all my writing."<sup>9</sup>

Her laconic insight, her fineline sketches, her skill at conveying anticipation and fear and the frisson which results from either, make the short story her *métier juste*. (Mahony 26)

The contemporary Irish author Claire Keegan, who is primarily known for her short stories, was born in rural Ireland, namely in County Wicklow, in 1968. There she grew up on a farm as a member of a Catholic family. She studied at Loyola University and her subjects were English and Political Science. In 1999 Keegan published *Antarctica*, a collection of short stories that she had already

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<sup>9</sup> O'Hagan, Sean. "Claire Keegan: 'Short stories are limited. I'm cornered into writing what I can.'" *The Observer* 5 Sept. 2010. 01 Feb. 2013.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/sep/05/claire-keegan-short-story-interview/>>.

completed in 1998. Her second short story collection *Walk the Blue Fields* was published in 2007 and her fictional text *Foster*, which is a single story, came out in 2010. For her literary achievements, Keegan has won many awards, for instance the Rooney Prize for Literature, the Francis MacManus Award, The Day Byrnes Irish Writing Award 2009, or the Los Angeles Times Book Award of the Year. At the moment, she is also involved in the teaching profession in the United States of America.<sup>10</sup>

As already mentioned, both Enright and Keegan are frequently referred to as postmodern and post-feminist writers. Moreover, especially Enright seems to be associated with notions of feminism and feminist writing. Therefore, the final part of this chapter will concentrate on postmodernism and post-feminism in connection to the two authors and their writing.

#### **2.4. Anne Enright and Claire Keegan as Postmodern and Post-feminist Writers**

The following paragraphs will concentrate on the literary production of Anne Enright and Claire Keegan with a focus on their short stories. Both authors are often referred to as postmodern or post-feminist writers (cf. Bracken and Cahill 2011; Coughlan 2004; Fogarty 2007; Moloney 2003). On the other hand, other researchers would rather group Anne Enright into the category of feminist writers. Ross (16), for instance, would link Enright to an approach of feminist critique when stressing that nowadays there is a lot of “feminist critique of the Irish tradition, as in the works of Mary Morrissy or Anne Enright”. Furthermore, D’hoker, Ingelbien and Schwall (1) point out that “[w]riters such as Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin or Anne Enright consciously engage with feminist theory to dramatise realities of women’s lives in contemporary Ireland.” Here it may be important to allude to the supposition that writers develop and change in the course of their creative processes and literary careers and

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<sup>10</sup> cf. “Claire Keegan.” *Irish Writers Online: a concise dictionary of irish writers*. Ed. Philip Casey. 02 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.irishwriters-online.com/clairekeegan.html/>>. & “Claire Keegan.” *Faber and Faber*. 02 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.faber.co.uk/author/claire-keegan/>>.

therefore, it seems reasonable to state that there are more possibilities than being either a postmodern, post-feminist or a feminist writer.

When asked in an interview if she would classify herself as a post-feminist writer, Enright answered:

Right, you know you do wonder whether Ireland ever had a proper feminism, to have a post-feminism so quickly. Irish feminism had to fight so hard to claim control of the female body, that it didn't have time to fight for the female career. [...] Personally, I am a feminist, I have always been a feminist, but I am not a deliberately feminist writer. (Bracken and Cahill 17)

In this interview she mentions not only that she thinks that people find it hard to ascribe a distinct label to her work or to her as an author, but also that she is in favour of feminism and feminist goals (cf. Bracken and Cahill 17). Moreover, Enright herself includes the aspect of postmodernism into the discussion, when taking the "post" from post-feminism and relating it to postmodernism: "The 'post' thing, might hook with postmodernism. [...] The difference in my postmodern impulse is that I actually mean it. There's a sincerity to my discourse that isn't in most postmodern writing (although I'm not particularly interested in the labels). [...] So I was the only sincere postmodernist I know!" (Bracken and Cahill 17-18)

Before comparing features of postmodernism and post-feminism to Enright's and Keegan's texts, it shall be clarified what may be meant by and be part of the two concepts as far as the study of literature is concerned. First of all, it needs to be stated that postmodernism is a complex theory that does not seem to have any clear-cut definitions. In the introduction to *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader* (2002) Nicol (2) directly addresses the problem of postmodernism and its definitions: "This might seem like I am making two contradictory claims: postmodernism is definable, and postmodernism is indefinable. But my point is that even though there are signs that the *theory* of postmodernism is becoming less contentious, there are still doubts to be raised about whether it can successfully manage to represent its object." In fact,

postmodernist theories suggest that fixed categories that are often assumed to be transcendental or universal, and straightforward definitions as such, do not exist, but are socially constructed. Lyotard (73), perhaps one of the most important theorists of postmodernism, offers a basic but telling definition of postmodernism, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives." Overall, postmodernism not only questions such categories as 'high' culture, so called 'grand narratives' or universal truths, but also attempts to undermine or even erase the division between 'high' culture and 'popular' culture (cf. Eagleton, *The Illusions* vii; Wolfreys, Robbins, and Womack 128).

In this context, Wolfreys, Robbins, and Womack (128) point out: "While there is little consensus over the meaning of postmodernism, it may be suggested [...] that postmodernist literary criticism is concerned not only with the status of the literary artefact, but also with manners of language, representation, identity, origin and truth." For example, postmodern texts often experiment with language, question traditional concepts of identity, nationality and other common categories that seem to be part of our view of the world. Likewise, postmodernism criticises aspects such as the established canon of literature, binary oppositions and stereotypes. Considering the postmodernist concept of identity, it may be argued that no one – and this can be applied to both human beings as well as fictional characters of a text – has a single and true identity, but there are various selves that are constantly under change and development. Identities, moreover, are not biologically determined, so they are not 'inborn', but constructed by society. As a consequence, it seems that stereotypes cannot be linked to certain 'types of people' because these categories do not exist at all – they are nothing but constructed and made up entities. Haberstroh and St. Peter (5-6) also relate postmodernism to a deconstruction of stereotypes, especially those connected to gender: "Postmodernism might serve as a useful corrective to such binary thinking, as this theoretical stance works from the position that a coherent subjective identity is illusory; that binary concepts of



male and female are limiting; and that to speak of a woman's voice or individual female subjectivity gives a false sense of identity."

In addition, Bertens (108-110) highlights that postmodernism "takes extraordinary liberties with the traditions of fiction. [...] it unsettles and deconstructs traditional notions about language, about identity, about writing itself, and other major issues." Moreover, he highlights that postmodern texts are often characterised by having no clear closure, by intertextual references or by the use of irony (cf. Bertens 110-111). For this reason, postmodern texts may be difficult to interpret, to analyse and to group together as "[i]t is always possible then to read a postmodern novel two ways. [...] Still, how we read postmodern texts is, in good poststructuralist fashion, up to the reader." (Bertens 111-112) Overall, it seems that a variety of the mentioned characteristics of postmodern writing can be found in Anne Enright's and Claire Keegan's short stories. In fact, Bracken and Cahill (9) clearly link the work of both of them to postmodernism.

The issue of post-feminism and post-feminist theory does not seem to be any less controversial or complex than the discourse of postmodernism. Romack (2011) links the coinage of the term itself back to the 1980s and sees it as a counter-movement to second-wave feminism, which focused on women in contrast to men. From the 1990s onwards, the term as well as the concept slowly but surely developed more positive associations in people's minds. Thus, it may be summarised that the philosophy behind post-feminism seems to be an inclusive one, meaning that women shall not be seen in contrast to men, but rather that both are human creatures and both are equal (cf. Romack 242). McRobbie (2004) proposes that post-feminism is actually an opportunity for feminism to be viewed from a meta-perspective, to be analysed and to be adapted to a recent context, where a lot of progress and change has already happened. For this reason, she states, feminisms of the past can be critically examined, questioned and evaluated with the help of this post-theory (cf. McRobbie 255).

It will be shown in the following chapters of this thesis that various aspects of postmodernism as well as post-feminism and feminism may be detected in the short stories under discussion. There are postmodern concepts of identity and the self, gender stereotypes are addressed and deconstructed, and notions of what is real and true get blurred. Additionally, there are a lot of gaps in the texts and their interpretation is left to the reader. In fact, as “[p]ostmodernism has been referred to as a romance of the marginal or the other” (Waugh 34), the theory is very useful for the textual analysis of Enright’s and Keegan’s short stories because they are often about marginalised figures, for instance women, who are viewed by society as outsiders or “the other” (cf. Hall 1996; Waugh 1992).

To illustrate the arguments that have been voiced in this chapter, a few short extracts taken from one of the short stories under analysis shall be provided at this point. Actually, parts of Enright’s ‘slice of life’<sup>11</sup> story *Here’s to Love* seem to be indicators for the text being a postmodern one. Here the female protagonist walks home and looks up at a building where she once “saw a man with a gun.” (Enright 75) Then she narrates that this man turned around and pointed at her with his gun, but he did not shoot at her. In addition, she states, “It was the wrong place for such a thing to be happening – though there was no doubt that it was happening. It was very real.” (Enright 76) The fact that she stresses the undoubted reality of the event, although she did not look up again – and there is a possibility that she may have imagined a man up there or she may have seen some strange shadow – seems to make the narration even more unreliable. On top of that, the last two sentences of the short story seem to add another element of confusion because here she wonders if her husband, about whom she spoke throughout the text, is real at all: “I open the door and wonder if he is

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<sup>11</sup> Shipley (306) defines the ‘slice of life’ story as a text that focuses on the “direct presentation of reality itself [...]” Moreover, Cuddon (635) writes that it “presents life ‘in the raw’ [...]” However, as Enright and Keegan not only write about real life, but – in a postmodern manner – also include fictive and extraordinary elements, the following definition of a ‘slice of life’ story by Shaw (348), in this context, appears to be most appropriate: “In the slice of life technique, a novelist or dramatist opens a door for the reader, permits him to see and hear characters, and then closes the door without comment or observation.” In addition, he states that it is “[t]he unselective presentation of life – life the way it is, without neat and specific beginning and ending [...]” (Shaw 348)

real. And if he is still alive.” (Enright 76) With this final statement, the reader is left with a number of open questions. This last passage as well as the whole story requires the individual recipient to come up with his or her own interpretations. Enright discontinues her story with these bewildering utterances and now one may start to question the substance of many elements of the story – for example, *What did actually happen and what may have been pure imagination of the narrator figure?* Based on this, it might be pointed out that the text in itself denies closure and definite interpretations. These elements of uncertainty, or gaps, and the features of unreliability in the text may also be connected to postmodern techniques of writing.

In previous sections of this thesis, essential background information on the topic of women in Ireland as well as Irish women writers from the past to the present has been given, which is closely connected to Anne Enright’s and Claire Keegan’s short stories that will be under discussion in the following chapters. Moreover, the two authors and their literature have been introduced and their writing has been put into the context of postmodernism, feminism and post-feminism. All of these aspects will reappear in other parts of this research paper as they form a basis for the analysis of the female protagonists in a selection of short stories by Enright and Keegan. The focus of the subsequent chapter will be on the use of narrative technique in the texts, as well as on the characterisation of the short stories’ main characters.

### **3. From the Margins to the Centre: Female Protagonists Speak Out**

A host of wild and wry women come to triumphant life in the work of Mary Dorcey, Eilis Ni Dhuibhne, Anne Enright, the later Jennifer Johnston, Claire Keegan, Emer Martin and others. (Weekes, *Towards Her Own History* 300)

This chapter is, above all, dedicated to the individual protagonists of Anne Enright's and Claire Keegan's short stories. In particular, it is not only about their portrayal in terms of narrative technique and characterisation, but also about the similarities and differences that can be found in the descriptions of and by these women. The first sub-chapter entitled *The Female Main Character's Voice* will compare the narrative techniques that are employed in the eight short stories: The reason why the term *Voice* should be highlighted here is that – with the help of narrative technique – all female protagonists are given a voice either to tell their stories themselves, or to highly influence the narration of their experiences. Additionally, literary concepts such as subjectivity, unreliable narration and gaps in the narration will be analysed, as they seem to be decisive components of the texts.

The main part of this section is intended to offer a comparative analysis between the short stories' female protagonists. Firstly, it aims at providing detailed characterisations of each of them, whereas, secondly, the character traits and stories of these women will be compared and linked, where feasible, to the findings of previous sections of this thesis. At this stage, it is important to mention that all but one of the main characters are Irish women who have always lived in Ireland, who went away and returned, or who still live abroad. Claire Keegan's *Antarctica*, however, constitutes an exception, as its central character seems to be from England, or at least lives near Wells and there are no indications for her to be Irish. Nonetheless, the choice of analysing this protagonist seems to be reasonable, as *Antarctica* is not only one of Keegan's best known short stories, but also the title story of the collection of short fiction. What is more, this protagonist is an extremely interesting figure to analyse, as

she is the only woman who betrays her husband and who does not seem to embody character traits such as weakness or sentimentality, which are frequently described to be female stereotypes.

As far as structure is concerned, the characters are grouped into three categories, namely 'Married Women Between Happiness and Misery', 'Women Taking the Wheel' and 'Women Feeling Left Alone'. It needs to be mentioned here that these groupings are rather arbitrary, as not only most of the characters may fit into more than one of these headings, but also an almost infinite number of other groups could be established. Therefore, this approach is only one out of many ways in which the research can be structured. To find out what constitutes the personalities of the fictional figures, either direct or indirect characterisations will be studied. At this point, it is important to state that as far as narrative theory and its terminology are concerned, the analysis will largely be based on F. K. Stanzel's *A Theory of Narrative* (1984) and Fludernik's *An Introduction to Narratology* (2009). Moreover, especially with regard to narrative voice, G. Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980) and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988) will serve as basis for the analysis of the texts.

### **3.1. The Female Main Character's Voice**

The purpose of this sub-division is to explore the implications of the authors' use of narrative technique in the short stories under examination. At first glance, it may seem that in these texts the centrality of women is evoked by them being the main characters and therefore, in the centre of events. Nonetheless, there seems to be a second, equally important component to this, namely the fact that all of the protagonists also perform central functions as far as narrative technique is concerned. In fact, they are either first person narrators, who render the stories from their points of view, or reflector figures – being part of a figural narrative situation – whose thoughts, reflections and emotions form the foundation of what is told (cf. D'hoker, *Distorting Mirrors* 43). In this sense, D'hoker writes about Enright's fiction:

Yet common to most stories in *Taking Pictures* [, a short story collection in which *Green*, *Here's to Love*, *Until the Girl Died* and *Yesterday's Weather* are included,] is that unity is conferred not through metaphorical constructs or metafictional frames, but rather through the consciousness of the protagonist, whose thoughts, feelings, hopes and memories constitute the main interest of the story. (D'hoker, *Distorting Mirrors* 41)

Therefore, it may be claimed that with the help of narrative technique, the authors create a voice for their female main characters so they can speak out and position themselves in the centre of the stories, rather than at the margins.

In *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (1992), Susan Snaider Lanser analyses narrative voice in a variety of women writers' texts and connects its use to feminist as well as postmodern theories. Broadly speaking, she extensively discusses the link between the narratological concept of voice and the feminist understanding of this term:

When feminists talk about voice, we are usually referring to the behaviour of actual or fictional persons and groups who assert woman-centered points of view. Thus feminists may speak of a literary character who refuses patriarchal pressures as "finding a voice" whether or not that voice is represented textually. When narrative theorists talk about voice, we are usually concerned with formal structures and not with the causes, ideologies, or social implications of particular narrative practices. (Lanser 4)

For the examination of women writers' fiction and their fictional female characters, this approach of connecting the two fields of research – and in the case of this thesis also including post-feminist and postmodern theories – seems to offer interesting readings of the texts. This approach appears to be very suitable for investigating not only how both Enright and Keegan put their female protagonists in a subject position by giving voice to them, but also how these characters actually utilise it to convey their stories. In this context, Moloney (*Re-Imagining Women's History* 8) argues that voicing the thoughts of her characters is exactly what Anne Enright attempts to do in her story writing, when she states, "Enright's narrative technique gives her protagonist a voice to tell her own story." Further, Bracken and Cahill (6) point out in their introductory

chapter about Enright's fiction that one of the author's goals is "to open space for other stories and voices, repressed in the past, to be heard."

What is more, the issue of being able or not being able to speak, either having a voice or having someone who withdraws it, is also directly addressed in a number of the authors' short stories. Not only the female protagonists, but also other, especially male characters are frequently connected to speechlessness and silence. This may be shown, for instance, in *Until the Girl Died* when the female narrator asks, "Why not rear men who can speak?" (Enright 7), or when she cannot say her husband's name until she decides to forgive him. Another example can be found in *Yesterday's Weather* when Hazel has a fight with her husband John and accuses him as follows: "Or whatever passes in your fucking family for talking." (Enright 22) In Keegan's *Antarctica*, it is a man who forcibly takes the voice from the female protagonist by putting a cloth into her mouth: "She tried to speak. She was gagged." (Keegan 19) She finds herself tranquilised and speechless, and for this reason, she cannot object or make herself heard. This question of being heard or not heard is also raised in further short stories such as *Yesterday's Weather*. Here, Hazel imagines some kind of barrier between her words and those of her husband. Consequently, any sensible communication is prone to fail: "It seemed to Hazel that she could not hear him, even though his words were quite clear to her. Or that she could not be heard, even though she was saying nothing at all." (Enright 17)

Coming to narrative technique, a first person narrative situation can be found in Anne Enright's *Green*, *Here's to Love* and *Until the Girl Died*, as well as in Claire Keegan's *Men and Women* and *Quare Name for a Boy*. In the latter, for instance, it is stressed right in the beginning of the text that the protagonist now makes use of her voice to tell what has happened to her, when she says, "I have come home to tell you." (Keegan 95) In fact, this statement may have more than one meaning – which seems to be typical of Keegan's postmodern fiction – as with "you" she may either directly address the reader, or refer to the

father of her unborn child, whom she is going to meet and tell about her pregnancy.

*Yesterday's Weather* by Enright, together with *Antarctica* and *Love in the Tall Grass* by Keegan are characterised by a figural narrative situation. Although the stories have a third person narrative situation, the three of them still do not seem to offer less personal accounts of the protagonists' lives and sentiments than the first person narratives, as all of these women represent reflector figures, meaning that the stories are told from their perspectives. Thus, the narration is highly influenced by their points of view, along with their emotions and thoughts about themselves as well as other characters. Even though *Love in the Tall Grass* has a second reflector figure – namely the protagonist's lover, who is only referred to as "the doctor" – the main one is the central character, as the accounts of her thoughts and inner life obviously set the tone. In particular, her sentiments even play a decisive role in the creation of the story's general atmosphere, which may be described as dark, gloomy and depressing: "So many small, useless facts rattle around like old currency inside Cordelia's head. [...] She feels her heart beating, feels tired, bone tired, and evening deepens all around her quickly, so very quickly." (Keegan 24-25) Furthermore, in the short story *Yesterday's Weather*, it is quite clear that Hazel represents the only reflector figure as her feelings and reflections are very present in the narration and all the events are narrated from her point of view. This may be demonstrated with the help of the following passage:

Hazel felt like she was losing the baby, and getting someone new. She thought that she would fall in love with the baby if only it would stay still, just for a minute, but the baby never did stay still. Sometimes it seemed like it was all around her, as though there was nothing in her world except the baby, but every time she looked straight at the baby, or tried to look straight at the baby ... whatever it was, just wasn't there. (Enright 23)

It seems to be quite obvious that this woman's sentiments about her baby, and even more so her doubts about the love for the child, are emotions that only a parent who is in the middle of such a situation can feel, and therefore it has to be Hazel's internal perspective. Moreover, *Antarctica's* protagonist is the story's



sole reflector figure as well: The reader gets an in-depth look into her mind, including her dreams and biggest fears: “She thought of him and felt nothing. She thought about her husband and her children. [...] She thought of Antarctica, the snow and ice and the bodies of dead explorers. Then she thought of Hell, and then eternity.” (Keegan 21)

Considering the previous paragraphs, it may be asserted that the forms of narration applied in the texts under discussion can presumably be connected to a high degree of subjectivity. As a consequence, the narration not only seems to be unreliable at various points, but also appears to have a number of gaps that leave the reader with unanswered questions at the end of the stories. However, this does not seem to be a negative feature of the texts, as it opens up space for discussion, critical reflection and multiple interpretations. Generally, these components of doubt, suspicion and a certain degree of completeness link postmodernism and can be described as features of postmodern fiction (cf. Bertens 110-112).

Finally, it might be stressed that the components that have been presented in the preceding paragraphs might be classified as further similarities between Anne Enright’s and Claire Keegan’s fiction. Thus, both not only write about women – mostly Irish women – and put them in the centre of their stories, but also supply each of their female protagonists with a voice to recount her story. This introductory part of chapter four will be followed by a thorough examination of the individual female protagonists, their position in fictional society, as well as their relation to other characters.

### **3.2. Married Women Between Happiness and Misery**

The women who will be characterised in the following sub-sections are the female protagonists of the following three short stories: Claire Keegan’s *Antarctica*, and Anne Enright’s *Until the Girl Died* and *Here’s to Love*. All of them pretend to live in happy marriages; on closer examination, however, they actually find themselves in quite complicated situations and seem to be

confronted with anything but storybook marriages. On the one hand, these stories seem to portray life as it is, or at least as it can be, in a realistic manner. Throughout the texts, the protagonists are confronted with difficulties such as boredom, discontent, forgiveness or even betrayal, and there is no happy ending for anyone of them. On the other hand, rather unrealistic and exceptional elements are added, as for example the possible non-existence of one protagonist's husband or another main character's involuntary confrontation with her personal Hell.

### **3.2.1. The Betrayed Wife and Mother in *Until the Girl Died***

In Enright's *Until the Girl Died*, the female protagonist is portrayed with the help of indirect characterisation only, as she is the first person narrator and explicitly characterises the people around her, but not herself. Nevertheless, her actions, thoughts and statements may evoke a range of inferences as far as her personality and identities are concerned. It may be asserted that this character remains quite static throughout the text, as she does not change anything in her life, although she is betrayed by her husband every once in a while. This may be because she is deeply attached to him and even more so to her children, and therefore simply does not want to give it all up. In addition, there seems to be a lot of ambiguity in her narration, since she constantly switches from defending her husband to accusing him.

In general, the woman around whom this piece of fiction revolves might be seen as a representation of a strong, controlled and modern female. She is fully aware of the fact that her husband commits adultery once in a while, but she describes these affairs as 'lapses' that simply happen from time to time. These rather objective and sober accounts of her husband's betrayal create a picture of the female main character being above such things. For instance, she states, "[M]y husband is prone to lapses – less often of late, but yes, once every couple of years he does lapse, after the office party say, or travelling on business." (Enright 3)

Throughout the short story, the protagonist comments on past experiences in the form of a narrating self. In fact, she concentrates on her husband's affair and its influence on their marriage. Further, interwoven with these strands of narration, general statements about her attitude towards men and women are made. The descriptions of her husband seem to be rather contradictory: On the one hand, she appears to whitewash the situation, but on the other hand, she seems to struggle hard to keep up appearances. For example, knowing about his 'lapses', she still explicitly characterises her husband as being 'better' than some other men, although at first she is not completely sure about this assessment, as she only does not "*think* he visits prostitutes" (Enright 3), but does not *know*. After a few lines, however, the protagonist seems to be totally convinced of what she was not sure about before: "And I can say, without a shadow of a doubt, that my husband is not the kind of man to buy sex in the street." (Enright 3) Moreover, she states, "And he also loves me. He is not a bastard, that is what I am saying. I am saying that he is a fantastic man. My husband is a fantastic man." (Enright 3-4) However, right after giving this more or less liberal and understanding account of her husband's personality and behaviour, the following statement seems to represent a turning point: "But actually I hated it. It was like living on a page of some horrible Sunday newspaper. Horrible people. Horrible people with their horrible sex lives and their horrible money." (Enright 4)

These contradictory elements may lead the reader to the assumption that her opinion of her husband is of ambivalent nature and she herself has not yet decided if she ought to condemn or praise him. On the one hand, she describes him as a fabulous person and downplays his affairs, but on the other hand, she cannot even voice his name until the end of the story: "Ke ... I can't say his name. Isn't that funny?" (Enright 4) When she calls him "my fantastic, stupid man" (Enright 10), it becomes even clearer that she does not know what to think. All in all, it may be inferred from her uncertain way of portraying her husband that she is not sure about her feelings, and for this reason, she never clearly states if her marriage stands for happiness or misery.

Another interesting point is that the act of regarding her husband's sexual relationships with other women as 'lapses' may lead to the assumption that she views him, or even men altogether, as weak figures, who do not have enough control over their bodies to resist certain temptations. That the female narrator thinks in the previously described way as far as men and their 'nature' is concerned, may also be deduced from the following statement: "I don't think he visits prostitutes – I mean, some men do, some men must. Or quite a lot of men must, actually – but my husband doesn't. And I know, I know, I would say that, but ..." (Enright 3) What is more, as the narration continues, she also ridicules some aspects which she associates with the male gender: "They feel 'excluded', fathers; isn't that what the articles say? They have the weight of the world on their shoulders, and after a while – I'm convinced of this – they start to resent you, maybe even to hate you." (Enright 5)

What appears to be striking in this context is that – right from the start – she does not seem to have a much more negative opinion about men than about women. Although being betrayed by her husband in regular intervals and immediately thinking of a list of flaws she would ascribe to the male gender, she still regards them as a "great mystery" (Enright 3), as human beings who just do not know any better. Right in the beginning of the story, however, she describes other women in a rather pejorative manner. Probably, she does this because they are the ones who had sexual intercourse with a married man, namely her husband. She does so, for instance, by referring to his most recent affair, namely the one who died in a car accident, as a "silly twit", who "died the stupid way" (Enright 3). Nonetheless, visiting the dead girl's grave at the end of the text, her hatred and anger seems to vanish: "So I went to the cemetery and sought out her grave. I wandered through the headstones until I found her, and I put the lilies on the ground under which she lay, and I told her that she mattered." (Enright 11)

Being the mother of three children and the wife of a hard-working husband, she dedicates her life to offering them a happy home: "He works hard, my husband.

And I have always been a great asset to him. And we are ordinary people. And I am proud of that too.” (Enright 4) Thus, her place seems to be the domestic sphere, where her husband benefits from her support. However, he is the one who is depicted as hard-working, whereas she is an “asset” or – to formulate it in extreme terms – his belonging. Pretending to be content, she strives for protecting her family, especially her children, from bad things. For this reason, it might be that she tells her husband that she does not want him to tell her what has happened, and that she suppresses her anger in order to continue their ‘normal’ life: “‘I don’t want to know.’ That was all. ‘I don’t want to know.’ And I said it really fast, like I was talking off the record, here. Like what was happening was not actually happening. Or he’d better make bloody sure it wasn’t happening because I wasn’t having the mess of it all over my beautiful, hard-won house.” (Enright 5)

The protection of her family does not seem to be the only reason why the protagonist refrains from getting a divorce. She also thinks that outside marriage there would be no perspective for her or her husband: “At the time, I looked at him and I thought that our marriage was finished, or that he was finished. I was looking at extended sick leave and then what? My husband crying on the sofa was forty-nine years old. And if you think forty-nine is a tough station, try fifty-five.” (Enright 7)

A further component of the portrayal of the protagonist of *Until the Girl Died* is that she seems to have a fixed opinion about the features of her character and about her being a certain type of woman, who is not prone to overreaction, sniffing or losing her nerves: “I’d learned that I was not that sort of woman – the sniffing sort, the type to rage and scream [...] I kept my head held high.” (Enright 6) However, her actions tell a totally different story: “And then, before the water is boiled, I have the recycling bin spilt all over the floor, and I’m going through the old newspapers for death notices.” (Enright 8) Moreover, she is actually raging and panicking at some stages, although she stresses that she is not that kind of woman. Besides, it may also be regarded as contradictory that

she describes herself as “too proud” (Enright 10), and then she “realised [that] it was time to put [her] pride away.” (Enright 10)

Although the protagonist of *Until the Girl Died* is actually an anti-heroine, the victim of betrayal and treason, she is still depicted as a tough woman who puts herself and her grief aside in order to protect her family and her home. Even so, this act of silently accepting her husband’s wrongs and suppressing all the anger may also show that she is a passive character, who lets others do things to her. She does not stand up for herself or speak out in front of her husband. Enright states about this character in an interview, “The characters aren’t always very likeable though. I mean, the woman in ‘Until the Girl Died’, she’d drive me up the wall if I had to be around her for any length of time. I couldn’t have her in a novel. I couldn’t do a novel with her.” (Bracken and Cahill 17) It seems that this fictional figure is entitled to evoke feelings of anger and disbelief, as she silently endures betrayal without getting furious, without accusing her husband, without even talking to him about their problems. Throughout the story, what can be felt is the presence of “a silent war between the narrator and her husband [...]” (D’hoker, *Distorting Mirrors* 45) Yet, it may be claimed that the way she tells the story does not make her look weak – on the contrary: She seems to be the stronger one in their relationship, who feels sorry for her husband and forgives him at the end.

To conclude, the following quote by D’hoker appears to summarise the essence of the previously discussed short story and its female protagonist quite clearly:

In this second story, Enright does not offer a general critique on patriarchy or feminine identity, but rather provides a concrete, conventional, and convincing picture of a middle-class marriage. The domesticity of the narrator’s life is flaunted rather than denied, yet in the end it is the woman of ‘Until the Girl Died’ who comes out stronger. Her very honest narrative admirably catches her inner struggles as she manages to keep her pride and save her marriage. (D’hoker, *Distorting Mirrors* 45)

### **3.2.2. A Woman Committing Adultery in *Antarctica***

In contrast to the female protagonist of the previously discussed short story, who has been betrayed by her husband, the unnamed central character of Keegan's *Antarctica* is the one who commits adultery. She is directly characterised by the narrator as a happily married woman and mother who is in search for a sexual adventure with another man. As this contradiction between being happily married and desiring to have sexual intercourse with a stranger also serves as the starting point of the text, it seems to be a central element of the story and the characterisation of the protagonist: "Every time the happily married woman went away she wondered how it would feel to sleep with another man." (Keegan 3)

Broadly speaking, she is described as a middle-aged, middle-class woman living in England, who "wanted to do this before she got too old." (Keegan 3) In fact, she appears to live somewhere close to Wells, as this city seems to be conveniently situated for her to reach by train and to go there over the weekend. In the text, there is no indication that she has a job, so she probably is staying home while her husband is out for work and her children are at school. This may be inferred from the following passage: "She would return to untidy, cluttered rooms, dirty floors, cut knees, a hall with mountain-bikes and roller-skates." (Keegan 13) Thus, this married woman's misery and desperation seem to result out of boredom, as well as out of her monotonous everyday life as a housewife and mother.

For this reason, she seems to yearn for some kind of change and escape, and therefore, she tells her husband, who had "no reason not to trust her" (Keegan 3), that she will go to Wells over the weekend, where she will stay in "a small, white room with a view of Vicar's Close, one of the oldest streets in England" (Keegan 3), to buy Christmas presents. Still, before leaving on Friday evening, she fulfils her usual duties: "She had left a dish of macaroni cheese out for the kids, brought her husband's suits back from the cleaners." (Keegan 3) However, after having arrived at the city, she stops thinking about them: "She saw the

smoke from another man's fire cross the window, but she did not think about her husband, and her lover never mentioned her home life either, not once." (Keegan 10) For this reason, it may be argued that although being rather emotionless and indifferent about cheating on her husband, she generally cares about the wellbeing of her family and may still be seen as a considerate mother, who needed to escape from all the dull routine for a while.

With concrete intentions in mind, "[s]he dressed up in the afternoon, put on a short plum-coloured dress, high heels, her darkest lipstick, and walked back into town." (Keegan 4) These do not seem to be the female protagonist's everyday clothes, but she probably wears them to gain attention from men, or at least from one man with whom she may sleep. From this point of dressing up and heading towards a pub, the character appears to undergo a dramatic change and a transformation from a housewife and mother to a wild, seductive woman, who might be viewed as a *femme fatale*. Furthermore, the fact that she is basically drunk during the whole weekend seems to indicate that she behaves differently than usual: "When she went to the ladies' room, she was drunk. [...] She could stay drunk; she could live like this. [...] Drunk and careless and occupying the same bed on the same night. [...] Over plates of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding they got drunk again, but they didn't talk much." (Keegan 5-14) The excessive drinking is another thing that she normally does not do, a thing that is not like her: "She couldn't remember ever being drunk like this." (Keegan 5)

Interestingly, what makes the female protagonist enter the pub where she gets both some drinks and her weekend-lover, is a song called *The Ballad of Lucy Jordan* (cf. Keegan 4). The most popular version of it by Marianne Faithfull dates from the 1970s and is also about a middle-aged woman, housewife and mother, who is dreaming of a different life and of exciting experiences. The following lines from the song are intended to exemplify the parallels between the woman in *Antarctica* and *The Ballad of Lucy Jordan's* protagonist:



As she lay there 'neath the covers,  
dreaming of a thousand lovers,  
till the world turned to orange  
and the room went spinning round.

At the age of thirty-seven,  
she realised she'd never  
ride through Paris in a sports car  
with the warm wind in her hair.  
[...]

Her husband, he's off to work  
and the kids are off to school,  
and there are, oh so many ways  
for her to spend the day.

She could clean the house for hours,  
or rearrange the flowers,  
or run naked through the shady street,  
screaming all the way.

[...]

And she bowed and curtsied to the man  
who reached and offered her his hand,  
and he led her down to the long white car  
that waited past the crowd.

At the age of thirty-seven,  
she knew she'd found forever,  
as she rode along through Paris  
with the warm wind in her hair.

(*The Ballad of Lucy Jordan* by Marianne Faithfull)

It is not only the initial situations, but also the endings that seem to represent similarities between the cases of the two women. The song's title is mentioned very early in the short story – namely before the main character even gets to know the stranger in the pub – and may be interpreted as an anticipation of its final passages. In fact, Marianne Faithfull herself states in an interview on the Southbank Show that *The Ballad of Lucy Jordan* is mainly about “sexual jealousy” – which is very similar to *Antarctica* – and that these desires and dreams end as follows: “She climbs up on the roof, she goes crazy, she's taken away in an ambulance to the lunatic asylum and as she's in the ambulance, she

thinks that she's in Paris in a sports car with the warm wind in her hair. That's the actual text and that's what I sing."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it might be argued that the mentioning of the song's title is the first instance of 'foreshadowing' in Keegan's text, meaning that it already provides the reader with a hint at the tragic outcome of the protagonist's affair. As the narration continues, more of these clues may be detected; for instance, the fact that she is watching a documentary on Antarctica, which she will remember when lying in the man's bed, handcuffed and shivering with cold: "While he took charge of dinner, she sat on the couch with the cat on her lap and watched a documentary on Antarctica, miles of snow, penguins shuffling against the sub-zero winds, Captain Cook sailing down to find the lost continent, icebergs." (Keegan 10) Moreover, the conversation about Hell she has with her weekend-lover could be classified as an instance of *foreshadowing*: "Instead, over Greek salad and trout the conversation somehow turned to the subject of Hell. [...] 'I always thought Hell would be unbearably cold, a place where you stayed half-frozen but you never quite lost consciousness and you never really felt anything,' she said." (Keegan 10) Ironically enough, the main figure finds herself in a similar situation at the end: "Cold was moving in, spilling into the house, filling up the rooms. She shivered. [...] She thought of Antarctica, the snow and ice and the bodies of dead explorers. Then she thought of Hell, and then eternity." (Keegan 20-21)

Considering the development of the relationship between the woman and the stranger, it may be concluded that it was her fault that she ended up in this tragic situation. Although having her doubts about some of his actions, she does not object to him from the beginning. This may be due to the excitement she feels while being with him, but also simply because she is drunk most of the time and does not even consider possible consequences of her actions. At first, she seems to find it all very amusing and even tells the man, "If only Sister Emmanuel could see me now, fucking a complete stranger, what a laugh." (Keegan 11)

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<sup>12</sup> "Marianne Faithfull Podcast." *The Southbank Show*. 25 June 2007 (07:13-07:36). 11 March 2013. <<http://download.itv.com/southbankshow/marianne.mp3>>.

In addition, there are many references in the short story to a somewhat child-like behaviour of the female protagonist. It appears to be rather strange that a middle-aged woman lets a man treat her like a child and seems to enjoy it: “She giggled and climbed, giggled and climbed again, stopped at the top. [...] She looked good in the yellow shaving light, raised her feet and arms and turned like a child for him. He made her sink back down into the water and rinsed her off, wrapped her in a towel.” (Keegan 7-8) Additionally, the way the female main character is approached and talked to by her lover, makes her look inferior to him, as if she were his little girl, who needs him to look after her: “‘I know what you need,’ he said. ‘You need looking after. There isn’t a woman on earth who doesn’t need looking after. Stay there.’ He went out and came back with a comb, began combing the knots from her hair. ‘Look at you,’ he said. ‘You’re a real blonde. You’ve blonde fuzz, like a peach.’” (Keegan 8) Even more obvious signs for these child-like actions, which may be linked to some form of regression to earlier times she experiences at the flat of the man, can be found: “She was full now, playing with her food. [...] She felt like a child being put to bed.” (Keegan 11-17)

Apart from adopting this child-like behaviour, it may be claimed that there is a connection between the protagonist and the stranger’s “white Persian cat” (Keegan 7), which is more or less the only thing that is alive in his cold flat. It is a mysterious creature that suddenly appears and seems to bewilder the protagonist: “The cat jumped up on the bed and startled her. ‘Jesus Christ!’ she said. There was something creepy about this cat.” (Keegan 12) As cats are often associated with bad luck and mystery, it may be that the stranger’s cat is a symbol for the woman’s misfortune.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in one utterance, the way the man treats the protagonist is compared to the treatment of an animal: “He stroked her arm, petting her like an animal. She imitated the cat purring, rolling her ‘r’s the way they’d taught her in Spanish class while hailstones rapped the window panes.” (Keegan 12) It appears to be striking that the woman also

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<sup>13</sup> cf. *Pure Spirit: Animal Communication, Training and Behavior Solutions*. Ed. Marilyn Tockach. 19 March 2013. <<http://www.pure-spirit.com/more-animal-symbolism/226-pure-spirit-minneapolis-st-paul-dog-training-and-international-all-species-animal-communication-cat>>.

encourages him to do so by imitating a cat's purr. Both, the act of treating her like a child and the act of treating her like an animal put the female protagonist in a position of inferiority and smallness.

As the events continue, her intuitions about the strangeness of the situation she got herself into become stronger; however, she still does not get away from the man. In the woods he hurts her for the first time by holding her hand too tight: "You're hurting me," she said. He loosened his hold but he did not say sorry." (Keegan 15) With the help of this quote it can be shown that even though the man is hurting her, she does not draw a line, but stays with him. Besides, she appears to become more and more passive and this makes her weak, although she views herself as a strong woman: "Handcuffs. She was startled, but did not think fast enough to object. [...] Frantic, she tried her best to undo the handcuffs. She did everything to get free. She was a strong woman." (Keegan 18-20)

To summarise, this strong woman, who initially only looked for an adventure with no consequences, ended up helpless like a child and being at the mercy of a strange man, who seems to take pleasure in exercising total control over her: "A section in her mind panicked. There was something deliberate about him, something silent and overpowering." (Keegan 18) McCormack's (220) statement about the protagonists of the short story collection *Antarctica*, and the eponymous lead story, may support this concluding claim: "[...] protagonist after protagonist fails to come to life. The title piece sets the tone: a middle-aged housewife visits London in search of Christmas presents for her family and a one-night stand but ends up handcuffed to a stranger's bed." Although it is not London she visits, but Wells – as has already been discussed in previous paragraphs – things certainly did not turn out the way she planned. Still, what can be made out of this tragic ending is up to the reader, since *Antarctica's* female protagonist and her actions are neither praised nor condemned in the story.

### **3.2.3. The One Who is Still 'Fun' in *Here's to Love***

In *Here's to Love*, the female first person narrator is a 39-year-old woman, who lives in Paris with her husband. This fictional figure is characterised indirectly through the way she narrates about her past and present experiences, as well as her attitudes and viewpoints. While her former boyfriend named Shay comes to visit her, she reflects on her life, her marriage and her personal development. In fact, she seems to enjoy meeting her male friends from Ireland because they seem to remind her of her younger self. Moreover, they talk to her about the problems they have with their wives and she listens to the stories about “the great unhappiness of [her] male friends' wives” (Enright 67), which makes her feel comfortable, as she does not perceive herself as one of these wives who relinquished their dreams for the sake of marriage.

Broadly speaking, it may be claimed that for her male friends, the protagonist, who never wanted to marry anyone of them, represents the counterpart of their wives. The one explanation she has for the phenomenon of these men wanting to talk to her about the problematic issues of their love life is: “And I never had children, which makes me a kind of throwback – I am still ‘fun’. I am still the way we used to be.” (Enright 68) For these guys, she may incorporate all the features of an ideal woman: She seems to be outgoing, self-confident and funny, she understands them and their ways of living, and she even seems to be a bit like them. Moreover, she assumes the following: “The thing Shay actually likes about me – the thing they all liked about me – is that I didn't want to marry them. I didn't even want to fall in love. [...] Men really like that;” (Enright 72-73) Overall, it is enormously important for her to stress this difference between herself and other women. Therefore, she gets drunk with the guys, pretends to be relaxed and independent, and attempts to be perfect. Not wanting to disillusion Shay and herself, she hesitates before admitting that she is now married too and even lies about her husband and the reason why they got married: “‘We only did it for the visa.’ This is a terrible betrayal. It is not even true.” (Enright 73)

Although the main character is a wife too, she regards herself as being utterly different from all the other wives of her friends. She attempts to analyse these women and gives Shay some advice on what to do and how females are supposed to think: “That feeling that you’re running out of road. It just hits women quicker. I mean, when they have kids, it hits them. That’s all. When they have kids.” (Enright 72) Here, the female protagonist talks about something she has never experienced herself because she does not have children. On top of that, in some instances, she even seems to make fun of the other wives: “I am sure she is a famous singer disguised as a wife, and that it is all Shay’s fault for thwarting her, and shrinking her life.” (Enright 71) In a satirical manner, she ridicules the ambitions and dreams of Shay’s wife. Thinking about Shay, she views him as someone “who loves a sad little gymnast and gets her to load his dishwasher for him, every night of the week” (Enright 73). From this statement it can be inferred that she does not only make fun of Shay’s wife, but that she also looks down on her.

However, as the narration continues, it becomes clear that what the protagonist really does is acting as if she were someone she is not. She pretends to be happy and when Shay asks her how she is feeling, she answers “Good, thanks. Really good.” (Enright 68) Nevertheless, the truth is, she has problems too; she is not totally happy, but she simply does not tell anyone. One reason for this act of not-telling might be that she does not want to destroy the ideal picture they have of her – and even more so, this way she might be able to keep up appearances for herself. Still, in a moment of honesty, she admits, “Though sometimes I also feel my life closing down.” (Enright 68)

As far as the character’s marriage is concerned, she is the one who works while her husband has no job and stays at home. As he is described as old, it may be that he is already retired. Nevertheless, in this case, traditional gender roles are reversed, and for both, wife and husband, there does not seem to be anything strange or unusual about it. Additionally, it may be concluded that once she even positions her husband close to the female gender, when she compares

him to old ladies: “He is like the old ladies you see on the French coast, who paddle out in their sunglasses and hairdos, and paddle back again, gossiping, like so many bodiless heads.” (Enright 70) Another instance in which she seems to put her husband into the category of ‘females’ is the following: “He does not sit, as Shay’s wife might sit – weeping, at the state of the house and the destruction of all her dreams.” (Enright 74) Here the female first person narrator compares her husband to Shay’s wife, and although she claims that he is different and does not weep, she still relates him to the category “wife” and not “husband”. Reflecting on her marriage and her love life, she states, “We are very happy. Or, no. We are not happy, exactly.” (Enright 70) In fact, at first, she again pretends to live a perfect life and to be totally content, but on second thought, she seems to become aware that nothing is ideal at all.

Finally, D’hoker (*Distorting Mirrors* 41) argues: “In ‘Here’s to Love’, the defining scene seems to be the protagonist’s confrontation with mortality in the form of a gun on a Parisian boulevard [...]” What happens in this scene is that the character’s experiencing self walks home and looks up at a building where she once “saw a man with a gun” (Enright 75). The protagonist tells: “Then he swung around and pointed the gun at me. Or past me.” (Enright 75) The age of her husband, as well as his war experiences may also be linked to the theme of mortality: “I walk home to Le Quang Hoa, thinking about his body in death; neat and beautiful on our marriage bed. I open the door and wonder if he is real. And if he is still alive.” (Enright 76) The fact that the woman actually doubts the existence of her husband, about whom she has narrated so extensively, may evoke doubts as far as the reliability of her narration are concerned. Again, the ending of the short story is left open and is accompanied by a number of open questions. It could be that the protagonist is mentally confused and that this husband is either already dead or never existed. Another interpretation could be that she thinks about his dead body because she wants to escape from marriage. Thus, in a postmodern manner, it is left to the reader to come up with the most plausible solution for this mysterious element in Enright’s *Here’s to Love*.

### 3.3. Women Taking the Wheel

The female main characters that will be under analysis in this section all decide to stand up for themselves and to take opportunities of different kinds: “Yet Keegan depicts the ascendance of a generation of women who “can butt in and take over, rescue and be rescued” [(Keegan 129)] in an Ireland on the verge of a self-generated wave of feminism.”<sup>14</sup> This description is not only true of Claire Keegan’s protagonist, but also of Anne Enright’s main character that will be studied here. Furthermore, again both Keegan’s and Enright’s protagonists seem to live up to the following comment by Brzezinski (341): “Despite crushing loss and cruelty, Keegan’s characters manage to persist, endure and even laugh.”

In Claire Keegan’s *Men and Women* a daughter together with her mother finally emancipate themselves from the male members of their family. In contrast to these women, who distance themselves from patriarchal suppression, the protagonist of *Green* by Anne Enright lives in a close and healthy relationship with her husband. She is the one who feels an urgency to disassociate herself from the traditional beliefs and values of the other female characters and society as a whole. In *Quare Name for a Boy* by Claire Keegan, a mother-to-be decides to keep her baby no matter if the father of the baby will offer his support or not. Generally, what these women seem to have in common is something that Enright has already addressed in an interview on BBC radio: Here, she describes the female protagonists of some of her short stories, and states that although they are living “constrained lives”, “their minds run free.”<sup>15</sup> With the help of their imagination of how things could be, they gain the strength that is needed to take control of the situations they are in.

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<sup>14</sup> Rev. of *Antarctica*, by Claire Keegan. *Publishers Weekly Forecasts* (July 2001). 03 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-87113-779-1>>.

<sup>15</sup> Enright, Anne. Interview with Matthew Sweet. *BBC Radio 3: Night Waves*, 11 March 2008.



### **3.3.1. A Young Girl Questioning Patriarchal Family Structures in *Men and Women***

The protagonist of *Men and Women* that will be under examination in this section is a young girl, who lives in rural Ireland together with her mother, her father and her brother Seamus. She narrates episodes from their family life and comments on these in a quite subjective manner. In fact, she adds her thoughts – especially those about each of the other characters – and feelings to all the narrated events and circumstances. Before considering her opinion about other fictional figures in order to make inferences about her character traits, other aspects, such as physical appearance and behaviour shall be studied.

Firstly, there are a few instances of direct characterisation, for example when the girl states, “I’m handy. I get out, open the gates, my father free-wheels the Volkswagen through, I close the gates behind him and hop back into the passenger seat.” (Keegan 119) Here, she portrays herself as a practical girl, who is helping her father regularly, and this seems to be a natural task for her. Moreover, she declares, “I am the girl of a thousand uses.” (Keegan 119) She not only assists her father outside the house, but also works indoors with her mother. She wears wellingtons, which are useful for working outside, and she seems to look healthy and strong – that is what another woman thinks when she remarks: “That girl looks fed to me.” (Keegan 120) Furthermore, she must be rather tall: “The night we get dressed up. [...] She asks me to fasten the catch on her string of pearls. I used to stand on the bed doing this, but now I’m tall, the tallest girl in my class; the master measured us.” (Keegan 125)

Secondly, the central character is characterised indirectly by her actions and the way she talks about other fictional figures. In fact, she engages in labour that might not be associated with girls at first. In this family, it seems that the women do a lot more work than the men, but they do not complain – perhaps because they know it would be in vain, as they do not seem to have a say at all:

Seamus gets a dartboard for Christmas. He hangs it on the back door and himself and Da throw darts and chalk up scores while Mammy and

me put on our anoraks and feed the pigs and cattle and sheep and let the hens out. 'Home come they do nothing?' I ask her. [...] 'They're men,' she says, as if this explains everything. Because it is Christmas morning, I say nothing. I come inside and duck when a dart flies past my head. 'Ha! Ha!' says Seamus. 'Bulls-eye,' says Da. (Keegan 124)

However, the girl appears to be good at everything she is doing, and thus, she is a helpful workforce for her family: "If he buys just a few sheep, he doesn't bother going home for the trailer but puts them in the back of the car, and it is my job to sit between the front seats to keep them there. [...] When we get home, I find the fire shovel and collect the sheep-droppings from the car and roll barley on the loft." (Keegan 119-121) In fact, she represents the total opposite of her brother, about whom she notes, "My brother sits in the sitting room beside the fire and pretends he's studying. He will do the Inter-cert. next year. My brother is going to be somebody, so he doesn't open gates or clean up shite or carry buckets. [...] He is the brains in the family." (Keegan 121) In contrast to him, she has to work on the farm at daytime and has to do her homework in the evenings: "Evenings, I get my school-bag and do homework on the kitchen table while Ma watches the television we hire for winter." (Keegan 122)

Furthermore, the way the girl uses language needs to be looked at, as this also is part of her personality: She uses a number of swearwords, particularly when she is talking to her brother. When she is asked to get him for dinner, she snarls, "Come up and get it, you lazy fucker [...]." (Keegan 121) Moreover, when Seamus just does not get what she is trying to tell him, she gets angry again: "'And you're supposed to be the one with all the brains,' I say. 'Gobshite.'" (Keegan 129) For this reason, it may be stressed that this very direct and sometimes rude way of talking may be seen as quite unusual for a girl of her age. Even more so, she seems to be outstandingly clever and critical for her age, as she knows about certain power dynamics and does not necessarily believe what she is told, but questions a lot of things that are going on, not only in her family, but also common norms and customs. Above all, she seems to have a very critical attitude towards the behaviour of her father and her brother: "My father dances with the women from the roads. I wonder how he

can dance like that and not open gates.” (Keegan 127) Also, she appears to be the only one who is clever enough to know what her brother is really doing when he pretends to study: “Santa does not come to Seamus any more. I suspect he knows what Seamus is really doing all those evenings in the sitting room, reading *Hit ‘n Run* magazines and drinking the red lemonade out of the sideboard, not using his brains at all.” (Keegan 123) For this reason, she quite obviously shows her brother that she is the clever one when she accuses him of not knowing what he is talking about:

‘Fluke,’ he says.

‘You don’t know what fluke is,’ I say. ‘Fluke and worms. Look it up in the dictionary.’ (Keegan 125)

However, considering other aspects of her narration, the protagonist can be described as rather naïve as well. One example for her naivety would be that she still believes in Santa Claus at the beginning of the story: “I am the only person in my class Santa Claus still visits. I know this because the master asked, ‘Who does Santa Claus still come to?’ and mine was the only hand raised. I’m different, but every year I feel there is a greater chance that he will not come, that I will become like the others.” (Keegan 123) This quote further suggests that she sees herself as an individual, a girl who is different from the others. As far as the topic of Santa Claus is concerned, her constant questioning of things finally makes her discover the truth: “I think of Santa Claus using the same wrapping paper as us, and suddenly I understand. There is only one obvious explanation.” (Keegan 134)

By and large, however, the girl behaves like an adult and she also seems to feel like one: “I am fed up being treated like a child. I wish I was big. I wish I could sit beside the fire and be called up to dinner and draw triangles, lick the nibs of special pencils, sit behind the wheel of a car and have someone open gates that I could drive through.” (Keegan 125) She gets bored by playing with her dolls and, as she already knows how certain things work, she quickly loses interest in them: “I play with my dolls after dinner but get up filling Tiny Tears with water and squeezing it out through the hole in her backside, so I take her

head off, but her neck is too thick to fit into my other dolls' bodies." (Keegan 124) The following quote by Eagleton (*The Truth about the Irish* 44) seems to partly explain the young girl's maturity in an Irish context:

[...] Irish children are on the whole impressively mature. They are less coy and cute than Anglo-Saxon kids, less conscious of themselves as a race apart. In general, they're sensible without being revoltingly precious. This may have to do with the culture of a rural society, where children must traditionally work alongside their elders; it may also be connected with the fact that sentimentality was a luxury the Irish could ill-afford.

What is more, the female protagonist seems to be unhappy about where she comes from and how her family lives: "Even though I washed the car out, I can smell sheep-shite, a faint, pungent odour that always drags us back to where we come from. I resent this deeply." (Keegan 126)

At the turning point of the story, namely in the night at Spellman Hall, the girl suddenly decides not to put up with her father's conduct any longer. Probably because she sees her mother in a very sad condition, she aligns herself with her and starts thwarting his plans: "I walk across the floor and tap Sarah Combs on the back. I tap a rib. [...] 'Excuse me,' I say, like I'm going to ask her the time. [...] 'I want to dance with Daddy.' At the word 'Daddy' her face changes and she loosens her grip on my father. I take over." (Keegan 128-129) From here, the girl seems to gain more and more power: "There's a feeling like hatred all around Da. I get the feeling he's helpless, but I don't care. For the first time in my life I have some power. I can butt in and take over, rescue and be rescued." (Keegan 129)

Finally, when her father commands her to get out of the car and open the gate for him, she refuses, just like her mother did and her brother will do: "'Get out there and open that gate!' he barks at me. Something tells me I should not move. 'Seamus!' he shouts. 'Seamus!' There's not a budge out of any of us. 'By Jeeesus!' he says. I am afraid." (Keegan 133) Although she is afraid of her raging father, she still does not back down. In the course of the narration, it

becomes clear that *Men and Women's* protagonist is a dynamic character, who develops, changes and gains more and more power throughout the story.

### **3.3.2. The One Who Got Away and Returned in Green**

The first person narrator of Enright's short story *Green* is a woman who grew up in a very small town and started all over again in France. She wanted to live independently and is now looking down on those women who never left their birthplace. She calls them "vultures" and states right in the beginning of the text that they are "young women you can see closing up over the years, getting bitter." (Enright 133) The other female character of the story, named Gertie, seems to be one of these "vultures" for the protagonist, who tells, "I like Gertie, but she doesn't get it." (Enright 133)

The female narrator went to a 'good' school and had the feeling that the girls only studied at this institution to find a decent husband: "[S]ix years of misery so you could catch a man with a better-cut suit and maybe a four-wheel drive." (Enright 133) Also, her mother suggests that she should simply marry a good man: "'Why not?' said Mam. 'Why not marry a nice, well-to-do man?'" (Enright 133) However, the protagonist never thought in the ways the other town-women did: "I said there's better ways to earn your new Sanderson curtains than on your back – I'd get the money myself." (Enright 134) Then she packed her bags and got away. She seems to be the only woman or at least one of the few women in this town who yearn for independency, for education and for travelling the world. She represents a woman with a free mind, who does not let herself be influenced by the talking and suggestions of the others.

The other female character who is directly characterised by the narrator is Gertie, who is depicted as dull and pious:

Gertie was a Matilda's girl too, of course. [...] she was really beautiful, and really dull. [...] Gertie was a saint. She tried to use a tampon once and fainted against the toilet cubicle door: kler-klunk. She never did leave the town. She married the man she was supposed to get: he drinks every

day now from half past twelve, and Gertie says he's infallible when it comes to a good Bordeaux. (Enright 134)

The female protagonist seems to despise her and the life she has chosen and talks about her in a sarcastic manner: "Go for it, Gertie. St Matilda's is proud of you yet." (Enright 134) Additionally, Gertie's behaviour and character traits seem to really annoy the protagonist and make her aggressive, as after a phone conversation she goes outside and hacks down a tree: "Then I put down the phone and went out and hacked down the sycamore that had suckered by the back wall." (Enright 134) After another phone conversation with Gertie, she feels anger and rage again: "[S]o I went to the toolshed and got out the handsaw and hacked at the poor sycamore until it was just a bleeding mess of green. It is very satisfying, cutting down a tree." (Enright 135) After a third talk on the phone, the female protagonist's aggression shows once more: "[B]efore I hung up and went looking for some implement of destruction – any implement of destruction – and a tree to cut down." (Enright 136)

The ironic component of the female protagonist's story is that as much as she condemns and hates the lives of the women living in the small town, she ends up living there, marrying a local man:

Because, strange to relate, I did marry a local man. And he does have a four-wheel drive. Which we need for the farm. But whatever way you cut it, eleven years after I left, I was back again in a white dress, walking down the aisle of the town church, that Gothic barn, the ghost of my childhood shifting her sticky knees on the green leatherette, *Behave yourself now*. [...] I was shaking – and not just with the cold. (Enright 134)

Given that the narrator knows that her earlier thoughts and beliefs do not really fit her present actions, she seems to be totally aware of the irony behind them. This situation and the ignorance of some of the town people, especially Gertie, seem to make her depressed and angry: "That evening I was all depressed. I walked under the plastic and listened to the sprinklers. I am not sentimental about vegetables, but I think I was crying." (Enright 134) In this context, Matthew Ryan (166) also points out: "The farm has prospered without local support [...] but a request from Gertie for a special order sends the woman into

a rage against the smallness of the place.” Furthermore, Matthew Ryan (166-167) stresses that “this story carries an ambivalence about both the freedom offered in the escape from home and the apparent satisfying stability of return.” Although having returned, “the narrator remains a critically reflexive approach to the patterns of village life and her place within them.” (Matthew Ryan 167) Overall it may be stated that the fact that she returned to her hometown does not mean that she intends to conform to its norms. It is by no means likely that she will adapt to the women, who – in her opinion – did nothing but “catch a man with a better-cut suit and maybe a four-wheel drive.” (Enright 133)

She does what seems to make her happy, namely working together with her husband on their organic farm. The decision of having children was also decently planned, as they wanted to get the business going first: “When I married J.P. and turned him organic, [...]. For the first five years we put off having kids, worked all the hours God sent [...].” (Enright 136) Interestingly, the woman represents the head of their business as she brought it into being and kept it going right from the start. From the description of their work, it can be inferred that she manages everything very well and her “organic man” is supporting her wherever he can: “I went all the way to Westmeath for the organic manure, [...] I made five trips. [...] I swung a deal with a small supplier in Smithfield. In year four I got our organic stamp. [...] I bought my first van. I bought my second van.” (Enright 136-137)

A depressive, dark atmosphere is evoked when the female first person narrator tells that she is awake at four a.m., looking out of the window and in the mirror. She thinks about Gertie and admits to herself that she actually hates her. She remembers the “white gloves that girls used to wear when they were all overcome by the Virgin Mary” (Enright 137) and calls Gertie’s husband a “little bully” (Enright 137). The picture of the Virgin Mary and the girls’ white gloves seems to be an allusion to the Catholic school the protagonist attended, as well as all the strictness and piety she was forced to experience.

At the end, the female main character narrates about a dream she has of water, which D'hoker (*Distorting Mirrors* 41) describes as “the defining moment” of the story: “a dream I have of water, an infinity of lettuce, row upon row of the stuff, coming out of a lake smooth as glass, so all you see is the lettuce and the reflection of the lettuce. And maybe, as I fall asleep, me also, floating in there, utterly still amidst the green.” (Enright 138) One interpretation of this picture of her slowly getting into the water and lying in there, totally still, may be that it expresses her thoughts of surrender and death.

Another possible reading may be the one proposed by Matthew Ryan (181): “The narrator of ‘Green’, we recall, dreams of a floating life. As she dreams, outside in the farmyard, a sycamore sucker oozes in a pulpy green mess. She had hacked it down in her sublimated rage against the limits of the town.” This means that the dream could stand for her subliminal desire to leave town and to live a life without borders or restrictions. This argument might be supported by a reference to “Hydroponics” that is included in the story. In fact, this allusion to “[e]bb and flood” (Enright 138), i.e. to the process in which the sea floats out and comes back again, may to some extent symbolise the female protagonist’s life in which she went away from home, only to come back after some time. Additionally, it could stand for her inner wish to leave again – just like water naturally does.

### **3.3.3. A Mother-to-be Making Her Decision in *Quare Name for a Boy***

The very first sentence of Keegan’s *Quare Name for a Boy*, namely “I have come home to tell you” (Keegan 95), seems to stress the fact that the female first person narrator now uses her narrative voice to tell something of crucial importance. With the pronoun “you” she may address either the man or the reader directly. Already in the second sentence, an allusion to her pregnancy can be found: “I have walked back into my past, my clothes too small for me, a story from a women’s magazine.” (Keegan 95)



To come to the unnamed woman's characterisation, it can be stated that she is a grown-up woman, who seems to be of an age at which she should – as far as her female relatives' opinions are concerned – already have a husband and a 'decent' occupation. When telling them that she intends to make her living by writing, they appear to be rather irritated:

'I'm going to write,' I say. [...] This always brings a sneer. It's a smart answer but a queer occupation, especially at my age. They calculate my age mentally, trying to remember what happened around the time I was born, who died. They're not too sure, but I'm no spring chicken any more. I should be latching myself on to some unmarried man with a steady wage and a decent car. (Keegan 96)

However, the protagonist has totally different interests and goals than the women surrounding her in her hometown. Born in Ireland, she went to England and lived there, separated from her family and only returned because of her pregnancy. She represents an open-minded woman, who strives for knowledge and independency: "I used to think I could never know too much. In college, I couldn't get enough. I stacked the books up high on the bedside locker, read late into the night and traded them in for more as if learning something you could reduce over time." (Keegan 99) Her knowledge and education may be described as a blessing as well as a curse because, on the one hand, she is an educated writer now, but on the other hand she feels that she knows things she would rather not have a clue about, especially when reflecting about herself and her life.

Throughout the story, she is referring to books she has read, for instance *Fanny Hill* by John Cleland, James Joyce's fiction, and *Jamaica Inn* by Daphne du Maurier. In fact, she even thinks about naming her child – if the baby is a girl – after the author of the latter: "I sit under the window and read with my face in the shade and my book in the sunlight and wonder if it's bad for my eyes, crossing that distance. I read *Jamaica Inn*, the first book that lured me into this deception, and think Daphne would be a good name if it's a girl." (Keegan 97) While she is reading, the other women are preparing dinner: She is not with the ladies, helping them in the kitchen, but doing what is actually important to her.

Additionally, she is not only reading, but also already writing herself, as she narrates that she has used her female relatives as models for her characters: “They don’t know the half of it. Don’t know the disguises I’ve made for them, how I took twenty years off their hard-earned faces, washed the honey-blonde rinses out of their hair. How I put them in another country and changed their names. Turned them inside out like dirty old socks. The lies I’ve told.” (Keegan 96) Thus, the fictional character of *Quare Name for a Boy* is a writer herself, who – in the fictional text – addresses certain aspects of literary production, namely character development, fictionalisation and adaptation of figures coming from an author’s life. Here, metafictional elements are included into the short story, since the narrator, who is part of a fictional text, reflects on the production of fiction.

A further component of characterisation that shall be considered here is a physical one. In this short story, statements made by other characters portray the female protagonist as a beautiful and tall woman, who has only gained some weight because of her pregnancy. In the following quotes, her female relatives analyse and comment on her looks while rummaging through her suitcase: “‘She has the legs.’ [...] ‘What size is that? Would that fit me? You’ve put on a bit of weight if ya don’t mind me saying so. But you have the height, you can carry it.’” (Keegan 97) What they find in there, are mostly casual and comfortable clothes, except for a few items the protagonist put in there to distract them and make them think she dresses as they would expect her to do: “practical cotton blouses, flared elasticated skirts, [...], a black wool trouser suit, a cashmere dress. Practical shoes that belie my occupation. A pair of red high heels to confuse them.” (Keegan 97) In contrast to her female relatives, the central character does not seem to care a lot about her clothes and appearances. However, it is her former lover who pays her compliments for her appearance: “You tell me the English air must suit me, that I’m blooming. ‘You’re looking well, whatever you’re doing with yourself over there,’ you say with something that sounds like disapproval.” (Keegan 97-98) This disapproval the man feels for the female protagonist seems to result from the view that “Irish

girls should dislike England” (Keegan 98), but she left and appears to enjoy living away from home. With the provocative statement “‘I’m a hooker, did you not know?’” (Keegan 98), she seems to make fun of his faulty expectations and the prejudices he has about women who do not conform and do not fit into his category of a ‘good’ Irish woman.

To come to the previously mentioned open-mindedness of this female protagonist, it seems that she has a very relaxed attitude towards certain aspects of life. She crosses the borders to live in England, rebels against the prejudices and expectations of the old generation of Irish women and is not at all shy as far as sexuality is concerned. This can be inferred from the sexual adventure she had over the Christmas holidays: “I was your Christmas fling, a thing to break the boredom of the holidays, and you were mine.” (Keegan 95) She did not take the thing they had seriously and did not want to be in any kind of relationship with the man: “I suspect you think I’m a woman who doesn’t have the tact to let go of a small thing like a week in your mother’s bed.” (Keegan 100) Overall, the protagonist does not get emotional about their affair, which she calls a “small thing”, and was just fun for her. Moreover, she makes a reference to the erotic epistolary novel *Fanny Hill*, which is about female sexuality and prostitution: “‘I’m going to write,’ I say. A smutty novel, I want to add, something lecherous and bawdy, make *Fanny Hill* look like your Sunday missals.” (Keegan 96)

From the way the female narrator directly characterises the other women in the story, she can be characterised indirectly. In particular, she seems to have totally different opinions than them and does not feel a lot of empathy for their lives or personalities:

My female relatives huddle round me in the bathroom, have brought up tea, china cups and saucers excavated from the sideboard, the clink of crockery on trays. They’re tweedy, big-boned women who like to think the taught me right from wrong, manners and the merits of hard work. Flat-bellied, temperamental women who’ve given up and call it happiness. (Keegan 95)

In contrast, the protagonist wants to be truly happy and does not simply attempt to find a wealthy husband and build a seemingly peaceful home, but strives for something more. Besides, she is not interested in things and topics that are stereotypically associated with the female gender, namely clothes, marriage, crockery or housework. Therefore, she also makes fun of the women's conversations and interests: "I unpack my suitcases and the ritual begins. They lean in from the bed, the armchair, the windowseat, and make conversation, wondering what new clothes I have, if my shoes are patent, my dresses silk. They finger the fabric, see how deep their hems are, read the labels, ruminate [...]" (Keegan 96) Her occupation is described as being "queer" for her age and also for her gender, so she seems to be breaking the traditional boundaries of gender, at least in her female relatives' opinion. This contrasting juxtaposition of the female protagonist and the other women in the story clearly demonstrates her wish to be dissimilar. She does not perceive herself as a typical girl or woman and it seems that for this reason, she disapproves their behaviour and wants to be different. For instance, when she meets with the guy she had an affair with, they sit on the coast of "Gentleman's Beach" (Keegan 98) for a long time where "[t]he salt wind is sharp, would cut the arse off a girl." (Keegan 98) But still, she is sitting there, thinking quietly, and does not complain – so she does nothing she thinks a girl would do.

To come to the central aspect of the story, namely the protagonist's pregnancy and the fact that she intends to go through it as single mother, it might be stressed that this is the peak of her emancipation. In this context, the female narrator makes her position very clear: She is an independent, strong woman, who thinks of herself as being totally capable of dealing with the situation. In fact, she is of the opinion that she has to manage because she is a woman and cannot simply take the easy way out. Thus, no matter how the father-to-be will react, she feels that she is able to deal with the situation:

Whatever you say, I'll manage. I will live out of a water-barrel and check the skies. I will learn fifteen types of wind and know the weight of tomorrow's rain by the rustle in the sycamores. Make nettle soup and dandelion bread, ask for nothing. And I won't comfort you. I will not be

the woman who shelters her man same as he's a boy. That part of my people ends with me. (Keegan 101)

With the last sentence, she demonstrates once more that she wants to distance herself from the lives of her female ancestors. She will not dedicate herself to the act of comforting a man, she will not make him stay just because of the baby. Therefore, she decides to keep the baby, despite of the man's negative reply to the news: "Well, the damage is done now, [...]." (Keegan 101) She immediately lets him know about her decision for the baby and against an abortion, which is illegal in Ireland except for special cases in which the life of the pregnant woman would be threatened substantially (cf. Fasching 12-15; Ingman 23). Telling the man that she will have the baby, the protagonist makes a clear reference to the issue of abortion and the fact that many Irish woman go to England to abort: "What do you think of the name Daphne?' And there it is, my decision named. No boat trip, no roll of twenty-pound notes, no bleachy white waiting room with women's dog-eared magazines." (Keegan 101)

By answering, "It's a quare name for a boy," (Keegan 101) the father seems to join in – at least for the moment. Ironically, now that she has him, meaning that there is a possibility that she does not have to do it all on her own, she does not want him:

Suddenly I don't want you, won't keep you away from the boys and your smoky snooker nights. [...] I'll be damned if I'll snare you like a fox, live with you that way, look into your eyes some night years from now and discover a man whose worst regret is six furtive nights spent in his mother's bed with a woman from a Christmas do. Suddenly I wonder why I came. (Keegan 102)

To summarise, it appears to have been the woman's initial intention not only to keep the baby, but also to raise it on her own, as she does not seem to be in love with the baby's father. She takes in the wheel in the sense of deciding for herself without being influenced by other people's opinions. She does not look for any easy way out and she does not want to be protected: *Quare Name for a Boy's* protagonist manages life with all its ups and downs, and she does it the way she thinks it is right for her.

### **3.4. Women Feeling Left Alone**

In this final part of the character study, the focus will be on two women who both experience feelings of solitude, disappointment and depression. Both of them are let down by a man in a critical situation in their lives. Firstly, the protagonist of Anne Enright's *Yesterday's Weather* will be portrayed: She has a lot of doubts about her marriage and also about her love for her child. In this difficult situation, she feels left alone by her husband. Secondly, the main character of Claire Keegan's *Love in the Tall Grass* experiences a different kind of loneliness: Her lover, a married man, has suspended their relationship for several years promising to resume it on New Year's Eve of the New Millennium. After that, this woman distances herself from social life and desperately waits for the man to come back to her.

#### **3.4.1. Hazel: A Mother Questioning the Way Life Goes in Yesterday's Weather**

Hazel, the female protagonist and reflector figure of *Yesterday's Weather*, is a young mother who has just started family life with her husband and their baby. They have bought a new house with a garden and should be happy together. For Hazel, however, the situation does not seem to bring any joy or happiness at all. Visiting her husband John's family, she feels totally left alone, since she is supposed to do all the work there, while John has a great time playing with her sister-in-law's children: "Hazel didn't want to eat outside [...] not only would she have to do all the work, she would also have to apologise for doing all the work when she should be having a good time, sitting outside and watching blue-bottles put their shitty feet on the teat of the baby's bottle while everyone else got drunk in the sun." (Enright 15)

She feels that nobody actually notices that she has to care for the baby and to prepare the meal, and this makes her extremely angry: "Now she grabbed a bowl of potato salad with the arm that held the baby and a party pack of crisps with the other, hoofed the sliding door open and stepped over the chrome lip on

to the garden step.” (Enright 15) Above all, the baby seems to make her uncomfortable: “Still, Hazel found it hard to get her breath; she felt as though the baby was still inside her, pushing up against her lungs, making everything tight.” (Enright 16) Wearing a T-shirt that is full of the baby’s snot and John not even listening to Margaret, his sister, who asks them to come and eat, stirs up the protagonist’s fury and desperation even more. D’hoker (*Distorting Mirrors* 47) writes that “the strangeness of being a new mother” is a central topic in *Yesterday’s Weather*, and uses the following picture to exemplify her statement: “The baby buried his face in her shoulder and wiped his nose on her T-shirt. He had a summer cold, so Hazel’s navy top was criss-crossed with what looked like slug tails. Here was something utterly depressing about being covered in snot.” (Enright 15)

Suddenly, as the ball John and the kids are playing with rolls past her feet and John asks her to throw it back, she cannot take it anymore. Therefore, she walks over to John and puts the baby into his arms saying, “Take the fucking baby!” (Enright 17) Then she lets off steam by hitting the ball and storming off. As the story continues, it becomes clear that Hazel’s overreaction comes from the fact that she is basically overwhelmed by all the work she has to do without getting any support from her husband. In this context, Fasching (82) highlights: “It becomes manifest that her feelings of resignation and frustration can be mainly attributed to her husband’s idleness.” When Hazel reflects upon the probable state of mind of her child, she also hints at her own general unhappiness: “‘Why should he be unhappy?’ she wanted to say. ‘He has had so few days in this world. Why should the unhappiness start here?’” (Enright 18)

It may be asserted that one reason for Hazel’s distress is her inability, or at least her unwillingness, to talk about her problems and negative thoughts to her husband and his family. Instead she keeps her doubts and worries to herself – and that may be the reason why these problematic issues get bigger and bigger: “Instead [of saying something] she kept her head down, and rummaged for nothing in the nappy bag.” (Enright 18) This woman does not make use of

her voice to ask for what she needs. Her refraining from speaking out may also be the result of them being at the home of John and his family, which is simply not used to talking about certain things. For instance, they avoid talking about the time when John's mother was still alive: "What did you used to have?' said Hazel, then realised she shouldn't ask this, because it was John's parents' house, and talking about the old carpet was talking about his dead mother, and God knows what else." (Enright 19) In this situation, Hazel again fears addressing a topic because it might not be appropriate or cause trouble and sadness. It seems to be for this reason that she decides to keep quiet: "Hazel said nothing." (Enright 20) Nevertheless, in a quarrel with her husband, Hazel addresses the issue of silence and not talking about important topics in her husband's family: "Or whatever passes in your fucking family for talking." (Enright 21)

In general, Hazel screams and cries a lot – throughout the story, there are only very few things she can laugh or be happy about. Looking at the instances of direct speech in *Yesterday's Weather*, and especially at the dialogues between Hazel and John, a lot of swearwords can be found. In fact, Hazel uses the word 'fucking' very often: "[...] and the double-fisted assault as his mother pushed him back out to the corridor crying that he could sleep in the fucking bar." (Enright 22-23) That there is a lot of shouting and quarrelling in the young family may be inferred from the following quote: "The baby didn't cry when she shouted. That was something she hadn't known, that the baby didn't actually mind shouting. Or maybe he just didn't mind her shouting." (Enright 20) The fact that the baby does not react to Hazel's shouting might suggest that it is simply used to it. Also when Hazel cries, the baby does not wake up: "He slept through his mother's anguished weeping, the roar of the taps, and the sad slosh and drip of her body shifting in the bath." (Enright 23) However, it appears to be rather strange that when it is silent, the baby suddenly wakes up and seems to be restless: "Maybe it was the silence that woke him." (Enright 23)



There is a further, even more serious problem that Hazel has to struggle with: She has doubts concerning her love for the baby. Although she takes care of it and is always around, she still is not sure if she loves it the way a mother should love her baby: "Sometimes it seemed like it was all around her, as though there was nothing in the world except the baby, but every time she looked straight at the baby, or tried to look straight at the baby ... whatever it was, just wasn't there." (Enright 23) Given that she is the one who is in charge twenty-four hours a day, it may be that the present situation is too much for her: "She thought that she would fall in love with the baby if only it would stay still, just for a minute, but the baby never did stay still." (Enright 23) Further factors that add to her sentiments of stress and discontent seem to be that she is very much involved in turning their new house into a comfortable home and that she has a strained relationship with her husband.

Still, Hazel is a strong woman, who does not simply give in, but tries to improve the situation and to make the best out of what she has: "She still hoped and hung on. Was this enough? Was this the way you loved a baby?" (Enright 23) While she thinks she is a bad mother, the way she treats the baby shows that in reality she is a caring mother, who puts her baby before everything else: "She would dunk a hotel towel in the sink and use that, no matter who had to pick it up, or use it afterwards. God, this baby business brought you very low, she thought, and turned with a smile to the opening door." (Enright 24) The following quote shows that the protagonist definitely has feelings of love for her baby: "Meanwhile, the feel of his bare skin against her own made Hazel vague with pleasure." (Enright 24) Moreover, she tries to protect her child and worries about it getting hurt: "Could anger hurt him, when he had never heard it before?" (Enright 23)

Driving back home, the situation seems to be peaceful and quiet: "At Monasterevin, he reached his hand to touch her cheek, and she held it there with the flat of her own hand while, in the back of the car, the baby still slept." (Enright 24) Hazel accepts that John touches her and she also gives something

back. For the first time in the story, she appears to be relaxed and to feel comfortable. However, arriving at their home, Hazel starts worrying again: She wonders if it will be possible to live peacefully and happily in this home. Is she able to cope with all this? Is this what she wants from life – raising a child, staying at home, loving her man? The final lines of the short story seem to represent the female protagonist's inner struggle:

When they pulled into the driveway, Hazel saw that her tulips had been blown down – at least, the ones that had been opened first. She wondered if the storm had hit here too, and how strong was that wind anyway – was it a usual sort of wind? What would she be able to grow, here? She tried to think of a number she could ring, or a site online, but there was nowhere she could find out what she needed to know. It was all about tomorrow: warm fronts, cold snaps, showers expected. No one ever stopped to describe yesterday's weather. (Enright 24)

While D'hoker (*Distorting Mirrors* 37) highlights that after returning home, “the protagonist realizes that life goes on”, Fasching (85) interprets the end of the story in a more pessimistic manner: “In combination with her negative point of view of the situation, her inability to see the tulips bloom metaphorically stands for the fact that she has to sacrifice herself for the upbringing of her child, which consumes time she will never be able to get back.”

In her review of *Yesterday's Weather*, D'hoker (*New Writing by Old(er) Writers*, 193) summarises the main points of the protagonist's inner conflict: “Another story I was pleased to discover here was Anne Enright's “Yesterday's Weather”. It admirably captures that curious compound of tiredness and love, of tenderness and indignation of a young mother who finds her world – and relationship – turned upside down by the arrival of a new baby.”

#### **3.4.2. Cordelia's Unrequited Love in *Love in the Tall Grass***

The female main character and reflector figure of Claire Keegan's *Love in the Tall Grass* is named Cordelia - a name that shall be taken into account in the analysis of the portrayal of this woman, as it may be regarded as a “speaking name”, meaning that it carries some information about the characteristics of the

fictional figure. In this case, it might allude to William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, since Cordelia is the name of one of the king's daughters. Shakespeare's virtuous and loving heroine truly loves her father King Lear<sup>16</sup> but refuses to proclaim her feelings in a loud and festering manner and states, "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (*King Lear* 1.1.1129). Although there does not seem to be a direct connection to the protagonist of *Love in the Tall Grass*, it may still be argued that she also represents a heroine who has to remain silent about her deep and true love to the doctor. Moreover, Cordelia is separated from the married doctor due to his wish – just as Shakespeare's Cordelia is from her father.

Keegan's character Cordelia is – at the beginning of the story – twenty-nine years old, and on her thirtieth birthday, the doctor finally takes the first step and kisses her, which may be considered as the starting point for her life to change completely. As narration comprises ten years of her life, she will be forty at the time she is to be reunited with her lover. In fact, the action of the story begins at the turn of the century: "Cordelia wakes on a white-cold afternoon [...] dresses, slowly, in a green dress, fastens the clasp of a platinum locket around her neck. She bends and laces up her flat black shoes, knowing that when this day is over, nothing will ever be the same." (Keegan 23) At that time, Cordelia is a lonely, sad and depressive woman, who lives an isolated life in her neglected house, which she only leaves when nobody is around. The view that she might suffer from a mental illness, namely a depression, is suggested by various descriptions of both her behaviour and her way of living: Since the day the doctor has suspended their affair, she has distanced herself from social life, has slept during the day and has felt sad and miserable. Furthermore, it seems that she has to force herself to eat and to accomplish the most basic daily needs. The following quotes from the text shall exemplify the melancholic and depressive state Cordelia is in: "She's slept, now she must eat. [...] She lights a candle at her feet, she looks so lonely. [...] She feels her heart beating, feels

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<sup>16</sup> cf. *Shakespeare Online*. Ed. Amanda Mabillard. 29 Dec. 2011. 16 March 2013. <<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/characters/cordeliabio.html>>.

tired, bone tired, and evening deepens all around her quickly. [...] She rose late, drank strong tea, made a ritual of cleaning out the grates.” (Keegan 23-34)

When the doctor tells her that their affair is over because his wife found out about it and that she will have to wait ten years for them to be reunited, Cordelia wants nothing but being left alone and, therefore, she withdraws from the outside world:

Cordelia coveted her solitude. She started reading late into the night, playing her piano, practising uncomplicated airs. She talked to herself, speaking disjointed sentences freely in the empty rooms. Slowly Cordelia became a recluse. She covered the TV with a tablecloth and put a vase of flowers there; she threw the transistor radio away. She made lists, paid her bills through the mail. She got the phone in, realised the turfman, the grocer, the gasman, anyone she wanted, would call round and deliver. They left the cardboard boxes, the gas cylinders outside the house, took the cheques from under the stone. (Keegan 33-34)

In addition, Cordelia explicitly alludes to an illness when describing how she felt at that moment: “This must be what it’s like to be informed of a terminal illness, she thought.” (Keegan 32-33) It may be inferred that from this day on, she has stopped living and as time went by “the promise stoked like a bright blade in Cordelia’s head.” (Keegan 33)

A character’s environment, and especially his or her home, can also symbolise or reflect some of his or her attributes and attitudes. In particular, before Cordelia stops seeing her lover, her house and garden seem to be a happy and vivid place: “She had always kept the garden, back and raked the ear-like laurel leaves off the sandy path, mowed the grass, lit small, inoffensive fires whose smoke poured down beyond the clothes-line.” (Keegan 34) However, after he left her for a long time, the house and the garden are depicted as dark, gloomy and neglected places:

A powder of rust-coloured ash fell over the house, accumulated on the sills, the curtain rails. It seemed that every time she moved she raised dust. [...] The neglected hedge began to intrude upon the house, grew so thick and close that all the downstairs rooms loomed in constant shadow, and when the sun was going down, strange, monkey-puzzle shadows poured into the sitting room. (Keegan 34-35)

The pictures of Cordelia's home that are evoked by these lines are full of melancholy and morbidity. In particular, the shadows that seem to be omnipresent allude to a dark and mysterious atmosphere, which reflects Cordelia's dark and unhappy mood.

The affair with the doctor, and especially its end, has also had an influence on the protagonist's physical appearance. Before, she looked young and attractive with her "long yellow hair" (Keegan 28). She was a woman the doctor was immediately attracted to: "The doctor noticed her knees, marked where she had knelt on the grass, her brown thighs, and thought of them as he drove back home to his wife and children, the fallen apples from Cordelia's orchard rolling around on his back seat." (Keegan 27) However, after ten years of separation, she feels old, which is reflected in her looks: "She knows no other woman whose hair's turned white at forty." (Keegan 24) When she meets the doctor's wife at the end of the story, the latter is also very surprised at Cordelia's appearance:

"Look at your hair. Your hair's white. What age are you?"

'Not yet forty.'

The doctor's wife shakes her head, reaches out to touch Cordelia's hair.

'I feel like I'm a hundred,' says Cordelia." (Keegan 37)

Moreover, during the ten years of loneliness, she has also lost her faith in God and "[s]he stopped attending mass." (Keegan 34) This might be because she thinks badly of herself as her conscience tells her that she is a sinner: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." (Keegan 25) On top of that, there is a reference to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ, but was forgiven: "She sits at the bottom pew and opens the missal at random, reads the lesson from Palm Sunday and thinks Judas Iscariot a beautiful name." (Keegan 25) Additionally, the fact that Cordelia actually gives apples to the doctor and that he comes back to have more of them may be an allusion to the biblical story of Eve tempting Adam to have a bite of the apple, which is seen as the archetypal symbol of sin. Therefore, it may be claimed that it is Cordelia who seduces the doctor and that this is a sin because the doctor is already taken.

Knowing that her lover is married and has young children who need him, Cordelia still does not refrain from committing adultery with him and from wanting him to come and live with her: “Cordelia dreamt of them together in a room with a green, flapping curtain she could not pull back. [...] Cordelia did not want to know about his wife. She wanted him to bang on her door in the middle of the night with his fist, to come in with a suitcase in his hand and call her by her name and say, ‘I have come to live with you at my own peril.’” (Keegan 29) This may be one of the reasons why she blames herself for her actions later on and why she believes to have sinned. It is only on the day when she will meet the doctor again at the dunes of Strandhill that she visits a chapel: “She stops at the chapel, slides back the glass porch door, blesses herself with water from the font.” (Keegan 24)

Throughout the text, the reader does not learn much about Cordelia’s past, i.e. the time before she met the doctor. There is only one reference to her childhood, namely to the habit of sitting under a chestnut tree, which can still be found in her garden: “When the doctor arrived, she took his hand and led him out under the chestnut tree whose limbs drooped low to the ground. Cordelia used to sit there as a child and imagine she was sitting inside a giant’s green skirt.” (Keegan 27-28) However, there is no mention of any husband or children she might have had. Therefore, it seems that she has lived alone and has only returned to this loneliness after the doctor was gone.

Cordelia seems to be an active and independent woman before she meets this man; even if something goes wrong, she does not hesitate doing something about it. For instance, she does a lot of work in the garden and when the apples fall down over night, she immediately decides to sell them: “Exasperated, she had taken a mallet from the shed and driven a staked sign down outside the front gate. APPLES, the sign read.” (Keegan 25-26) Nonetheless, since meeting the doctor, she starts to change as he “threw a tall and steady shadow over her” right from the beginning. (Keegan 26) In their relationship, it appears to be the case that Cordelia is the one who gives and the doctor is the one who

always takes and he, except for a few old books, gives nothing in return. For instance, he cuts “a lock of Cordelia’s hair”, takes it home with him and keeps it “between the pages of a book named *Doctor Zhivago*”. (Keegan 29) This intertextual reference is interesting insofar as Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* is also about a man, who works in the field of medicine, is married and has an affair. What is more, Cordelia writes letters to him in which she confesses her love, but he never answers: “And Cordelia wrote long, lavish letters on thick notepaper, pasted petals on the headings. [...] But the doctor never wrote a line to Cordelia. When he went away to Lisbon on vacation with his wife, Cordelia received no word from him, not so much as a postcard.” (Keegan 30)

On New Year’s Eve, when Cordelia surprisingly meets the doctor’s wife instead of him, she does not seem to feel awkward about this incident. Given that the two women have both experienced bad things in the past, they feel a strange kind of solidarity or even sympathy for each other. They do not blame each other for what has happened and “Cordelia feels no ill-will towards this woman, none of the biting envy she imagined.” (Keegan 37) This final event may be the first time after ten years that Cordelia actually feels relieved, as the long wait is over: “Cordelia is pleased, but nothing is as she imagined.” (Keegan 38) Although it is not clear how things will turn out, as “[a]ll three of them just sit there and wait: Cordelia, the doctor and his wife, all three mortals waiting, waiting for somebody to leave” (Keegan 38), this New Year’s Eve may represent a new start for Cordelia.

### **3.5. Resumé**

This section concluding chapter three will briefly summarise the most important findings about the characterisation of the short stories’ female protagonists. In fact, the focus will be on the similarities and differences between the portrayals of these women. However, as the subsequent section of this thesis will contain a detailed comparison of the texts, as well as its main characters as far as Irish womanhood is concerned, this conclusion will be kept short.

Each of the female protagonists under discussion represents an individual with a story to tell. Thus, in all of the eight short stories by the two contemporary Irish women writers Anne Enright and Claire Keegan, the female protagonists are positioned in the centre of the fictional world. In this context, Scholtmeijer (235) claims: “Literature gives material reality to otherness, and women’s narratives empower otherness by locating it securely in bodies, identities, and worlds [...]” Either young or middle-aged, married or single, they all have to struggle with their share of problems. Enright states in an interview: “The characters in my novels are damaged, but though they are interested in badness (or evil), they are more interested in/bewildered by, goodness, all part of the same problem.” (Moloney, *Anne Enright* 59) Although being weakened or – as Enright puts it – “damaged”, both authors portray their characters as strong and powerful women, who will finally manage.

While the protagonist of *Until the Girl Died* seems to be damaged because of her husband’s affair, *Antarctica*’s main character is the one who damages her marriage by committing adultery. At the end, the betrayed wife manages to overcome her grief and chooses forgiveness, which definitely falls under the category of ‘goodness’. The latter, however, experiences the tragic consequences of her affair with a stranger and – since the end is left open – the reader does not know if she will manage to overcome the damage that is done to her. The third woman that has been discussed under the heading of ‘Married Women Between Happiness and Misery’ has to deal with a more subtle form of damage: She seems to struggle with getting older and desperately tries to preserve her younger self. Moreover, it may be argued that her husband has been damaged by his war experiences and this makes their life rather depressing.

The female characters analysed in the section ‘Women Taking the Wheel’ have all experienced harm in connection to men as well as patriarchal structures of society. The young girl in *Men and Women* is surrounded by suppression, which is exercised by the male members of her family. Although she had to grow up in



this environment, she feels that things should not be that way and finally refuses to accept this subordinate role. While *Green's* protagonist actually lives in a happy marriage, she struggles with the gender roles that are taken as the 'norm' in her small hometown. By cutting down a tree, she eventually manages to get rid of her rage and to calm down. The single mother-to-be in *Quare Name for a Boy* has to deal with an unwanted pregnancy, which is called "damage" (Keegan 101) by the becoming father. Still, she decides for the 'good' solution, namely to keep the baby and to raise it on her own.

It seems that the central figures of the third section 'Women Feeling Left Alone' are having a very hard time with handling their anguish. While Hazel has doubts about being a mother in *Yesterday's Weather*, Cordelia suffers from depression and loneliness in *Love in the Tall Grass*. What they have in common is that men have disappointed both of them: Hazel feels left alone by her unsupportive husband, and Cordelia's world stops turning when the doctor, a man with whom she had an affair, leaves her to stay with his wife. Nevertheless, it seems to be likely that they will overcome their problems, as the final lines of both of their stories seem to point at a 'good' or happy ending: Driving back home, Hazel is finally reconciled with her husband. Furthermore, Cordelia seems to be relieved when she meets the doctor's wife in the end: "Cordelia is pleased, but nothing is as she imagined." (Keegan 38)

To sum up, the short stories under examination not only have women as their central characters, but also address problematic issues of Irish history – and especially Irish women's history – which have been discussed in chapter two. In fact, much-debated topics such as divorce, domesticity, emancipation, female writers, motherhood and marriage, are all addressed in the stories selected. Given that these concepts have all influenced the perceptions of Irish womanhood, they will be incorporated into the next chapter 'Fictional Representations of Irish Womanhood'.

## **4. Fictional Representations of Irish Womanhood**

Content wise, this final chapter is divided into two sections: The first part is intended to establish a link between the short stories under discussion in this thesis and conventional perceptions of Irish womanhood. In fact, these standardised images of Irish women's roles can also be referred to as gender stereotypes, which have developed in the course of the past centuries and still seem to be present in twenty-first century Ireland. To find out about these stereotypical constructs, the first sub-chapter will present the findings of various researchers (cf. Eagleton 2006; Graham 2001; Nash 1997; O'Connor 1998; Parker et al. 1992). The second sub-chapter will relate the theory on gender stereotypes in Ireland to the primary texts and their female protagonists. Above all, it shall be studied how stereotypical perceptions of Irish womanhood are constructed and deconstructed in the short stories.

The second part will focus on the topic of identity construction in connection to the female protagonists of the short stories. In particular, it will concentrate on the crises and changes, which the main characters experience in their lives and in their self-conceptions. Moreover, themes and motifs of love and betrayal, domesticity and escape will be analysed in this second part, since they are not only central to the main characters' lives, but also important as far as conventional perceptions of Irish womanhood are concerned.

### **4.1. Stereotypical Perceptions of Irish Womanhood**

Not all Irish women are Grace O'Malleys, but the typical image of them is as strong, shrewd, practical and affirmative. (Eagleton, *The Truth about the Irish* 174)

Before proceeding to the discussion of conventional images that are often connected to Irish females of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, concepts of gender and gender stereotypes shall be defined. Firstly, it needs to be stressed that as far as present discourse is concerned, gender is no fixed or inborn quality, since it is socially constructed and performed (cf. Beauvoir 1964).

In this sense, according to Butler (139), “[gender is] an ‘act’, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning”. Secondly, gender is not only constructed by society, but it is also connected to a variety of ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman, which are commonly referred to as gender stereotypes. Talbot (30-31) defines the term ‘gender stereotype’ as follows: “Within the field of language and gender, the term ‘stereotype’ is often used to refer to prescriptions of behaviour or unstated expectations of behaviour, rather than specifically to representational practices. Gender stereotypes are closely linked with and support gender ideologies.” It may be argued that basically every society has such stereotypical expectations and perceptions of both femininity and masculinity. Talking about the female protagonist of one of her short stories, Enright makes an interesting statement about ideologies, categorization and labelling, and how she works with these social constructions in her texts:

An ideology is something already distilled from life [...] it’s a kind of language that dies as soon as it’s spoken, so even a refreshed language – you go before ideology. I mean, I have a character who sells handbags in Dublin, and she falls in love with a woman who comes to her counter much to her own surprise. She doesn’t even know she’s gay, right? And by the end of the story, she still doesn’t know she’s gay. She’s just fallen in love with a woman who came to her counter and picked up an Argentinean calf-skin bag. So, she’s before the label, she’s before the ideology. [...] The moment before knowing is actually interesting, the moment before the word comes.<sup>17</sup>

In the following paragraphs, the focus will be on images of contemporary Irish womanhood. In fact, in Ireland, concepts of womanhood have changed throughout history: In Celtic Ireland, females actually had a lot of political as well as social power. They were free to not only engage in politics, but also to get a divorce (cf. Eagelton, *The Truth about the Irish* 174). However, the role of women took a turn for the worse, as “under the common law imposed on Irish society by the English, a married woman was in effect the property of her husband, who could do with her what he pleased short of killing, selling or

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<sup>17</sup> Beale, Nigel: “Audio Interview with Anne Enright on: What Constitutes a Good Short Story (3).” *Literary Tourist Blog*. Audio File. 16 Dec. 2008. (06:00-06:48). 10 March 2013. <<http://literarytourist.com/2008/12/audio-interview-with-anne-enright-by-nigel-beale/>>.

seriously injuring her.” (Eagleton, *The Truth about the Irish* 174) Although there has been a development towards equality and emancipation in modern Ireland, it is still characterized by patriarchal structures of society (cf. Eagleton, *The Truth about the Irish* 175), and it has already been highlighted in the second chapter that up to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries “[...] woman’s role was to be confined to the home where she was to ensure the stability of the state, the preservation of the family and the upholding of Catholic values.” (Ingman 11) In this context, Bracken (197) even goes one step further by arguing that this division between male and female gender roles forms the basis of modern Ireland: “The foundations of the modern Irish republic were based on a distinct gendered separation of public and private spaces, with the masculine occupying the active (and subjective role) of the public and the feminine relegated to a largely invisible and passive private sphere.” Given that the link of women to the domestic sphere is also explicitly addressed in the Irish Constitution of 1937, it seems reasonable to argue that domesticity is closely connected to the stereotypical notion of Irish womanhood.

In 1998, Pat O’Connor (21) describes established notions of Irish femininity as follows: “Concepts of womanhood continue to revolve around caring, familism, reproduction, love, sexual attraction and gendered paid employment, preferably in a ‘little job’ which is part-time, low paid, and undertaken for the ‘good of the family’.” In addition, Nash (110) points out that there are “traditional associations between nature, land, fertility and femininity”, which influence women’s position in the Irish nation. Females were not expected to be independent or ambitious, but they were supposed to accept traditional gender roles and to adapt themselves to social conventions (cf. Kurdi, *Contesting and Reversing Gender Stereotypes* 266). Furthermore, Parker et al. (6) point out that Irish women are stereotypically described as “chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal.” Moreover, Irish femininity is frequently connected to the national image of Mother Ireland and the religious figure of the Virgin Mary (cf. Goarzin 173). Thus, it may be summarised that standard images of Irish womanhood are still closely

connected to family, chastity, motherhood and marriage (cf. Eagleton 2006; Graham 2001; O'Connor 1998; Parker et al. 1992).

In *The Truth about the Irish* (2009), Eagleton (174-176) addresses a number of stereotypes related to Irish womanhood: He describes Irish women, and especially those who live in rural Ireland, as strong, practical, rational and unromantic, as “[t]he blushing English rose doesn’t grow readily in Irish soil.” (174) They are said to be clever, positively minded, responsible and hard-working. Moreover, he points out that in Ireland, womanhood is stereotypically linked to domesticity, which evokes the image of Irish housewives rather than females working in the public sphere. Eagleton (176) states that “[t]he number of women in work has increased fourfold since the 1960s. By some measurements, however, the country still has one of the lowest rates of female labour in the western world.” It may also be inferred from Eagleton’s account of Irish womanhood that in problematic marriages, it is easier for females to maintain a stereotypical image of a happy wife and mother than to get a divorce, since “Ireland today is a deeply divided society on these questions, as traditional values fight it out with progressive ones. Divorce, for example, got through only by the skin of its teeth. Rural women in particular have a hard time, marooned from social services and doing much of the farm work with scant recognition.” (176)

In the following sub-chapter, the stereotypical images of Irish womanhood that have been discussed so far will be linked to Anne Enright’s and Claire Keegan’s short stories. Moreover, it will be investigated if and how these stereotypes are constructed and deconstructed in the texts.

#### **4.2. Gender Stereotypes? – The Construction and Deconstruction of Irish Womanhood in the Short Stories**

Given that gender stereotypes and traditional perceptions of Irish womanhood can be found in both, Anne Enright’s and Claire Keegan’s short stories, this

section will focus on the construction and deconstruction of these images of femininity in their texts. At this point it needs to be stressed that the question mark in the chapter's title is very important, since stereotypical notions of Irish womanhood shall be questioned on the basis of Enright's and Keegan's short stories. In particular, it will be examined which stereotypical notions of Irish womanhood can be found in the portrayal of the short stories' female protagonists, as well as how they are constructed and deconstructed. Moreover, the main characters will be compared to both, female side-characters and fictional society as a whole. This comparison seems to be necessary in order to demonstrate a possible difference or "otherness" (cf. Hall 1996; Kristeva 1991, 1993; Scholtmeijer 1995; Waugh 1992) of the female protagonists in contrast to other figures.

In an interview with Bracken and Cahill, Enright argues that one of her intentions is to deconstruct stereotypical notions of Irish womanhood (cf. Bracken and Cahill 21). In this context, she also states that "writers always find themselves trying to break out of stereotypes of one type or another and deconstruct, pulling down, deconstructing things." (Bracken and Cahill 21) Here, Enright highlights that stereotypical perceptions of Irish femininity are important features of her fiction. Furthermore, discussing Enright's fiction, Matthew Ryan (166) claims that "[w]ry jibes at Irish stereotypes are common in her work [...]." Also Claire Keegan not only seems to incorporate conventional images into her texts, but also – in a postmodern manner – appears to deconstruct gender stereotypes.

Before coming to the textual analysis, Derrida's idea of 'deconstruction' shall be considered: In the documentary *Derrida* (2002), the philosopher stresses a defining feature of deconstruction, which is to refrain from naturalising underlying ideas or concepts that are in fact not natural, but socially, historically and institutionally constructed. Thus, the theory of deconstruction argues against the act of perceiving things as given by nature, against fixed concepts of any kind, as well as against established norms and rules that are regarded as

stable or general.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Derrida argues that there is neither one solution nor one essence to things (cf. Michael Ryan 65). For this reason, it may be concluded that deconstruction basically stands for the act of subverting established norms and rules of society. Furthermore, Michael Ryan (68) explains the concept of “deconstructive feminism”:

Derrida’s contention that the world is itself differential led many thinkers to apply his ideas to such social issues as feminism. The two most noteworthy practitioners of deconstructive feminism were Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Irigaray argues, in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) and *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1979), that in western philosophy women have been portrayed as matter, body, fluidity, boundarylessness, irrationality, artificiality, and the like. Women are the opposite or mirror image (hence speculum) of men, who are assigned reason, truth, authority, and authenticity.

Although, it cannot be claimed that the short stories under discussion are examples of “deconstructive feminism”, they definitely contain various elements of deconstruction of female stereotypes. In a postmodern manner, the portrayals of the female protagonists appear to not only question, but also partly reverse established images of Irish womanhood. Moreover, the following quote by Enright shows that some components of “deconstructive feminism” can be found in her fictional texts:

Well, you could say that all religious wars are fought over women’s bodies and of course it was very interesting to come of age in the Eighties when the wars were about abortion, divorce, contraception. And it was very clear what it was all about. [...] The imperative I feel to turn my women into subjects is part of a broader set of problems about gender and the objectification of women. We’re always breaking out of those stereotypes or images, or we’re always insisting on our subjectivity. And we’re relentlessly turned into objects.” (Bracken and Cahill 21-22)

Furthermore, a number of scholars stress that Anne Enright and Claire Keegan frequently address conventional or stereotypical concepts and attempt to break them in their fiction (cf. Bracken and Cahill 2011; Brzezinski 2002; Shumaker 2005). In particular, the questioning of patriarchal structures of society, gender roles and national stereotypes seem to be characteristic for their texts. For

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<sup>18</sup> cf. *Derrida*. Ed. Kirby Dick and Matt Clarke. Dir. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman. DVD. Jane Doe Films, 2002.

instance, discussing Keegan's short stories, Brzezinski (340) points out that "[a]symmetrical power dynamics abound and drive the majority of the stories." In addition, Moloney stresses the fact that "Enright's comedy challenges traditional belief systems and epistemologies [...]." <sup>19</sup>

#### **4.2.1. Images of Irish Motherhood and "Hausfrauishness" (Bracken and Cahill 21) in the Short Stories**

The first stereotypical image of Irish womanhood that shall be under discussion in this part is the strong connection between females and the private or domestic sphere, since one of the traditional gender roles associated with Irish women is that of the loving housewife and caring mother. In Irish families, women are frequently primary caregivers for their children, and therefore, they do not work outside their home. For this reason, wives often appear to be financially dependent on their husbands, which makes it hard for them to promote independence. As a result, women who find themselves in difficult and unhappy marriages may not have the courage to get a divorce, because this would probably lead to an existential crisis that is not to be underestimated. The issue of domesticity is also taken up by Enright in an interview: "All beliefs, nearly all kinds of national and religious belief, involve, finally, women staying at home. I mean, even fascist Germany was very involved in the idea of motherhood and hausfrauishness. So that is part of the deconstructive project." (Bracken and Cahill 21) In this context, Mulhall (68) argues that Enright provides a necessary contribution to Irish literary discourse by writing about stereotypical notions of femininity: "Enright's insistent focus on pregnancy, motherhood, the mother and the complexity of mother-daughter relations performs a conscious restitution of a definitely shaping gap within the Irish literary tradition."

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<sup>19</sup> Moloney, Caitriona. "Anne Enright: Irish Writer (1962 - )." *Twenty-first-Century British and Irish Novelists*. Ed. Michael R. Molino. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 267. *Literature Resource Center*. 2013. Vienna University Library. 1 Feb. 2013. <<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1200010975&v=2.1&u=43wien&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>>.



Before analysing how elements of Irish motherhood and – in Enright’s words – “hausfrauishness” are deconstructed in some of the short stories, it needs to be examined how they are constructed: Firstly, *Until the Girl Died* is one of the short stories in which a picture of an Irish woman as a responsible wife and mother is constructed (cf. Eagleton 174-176). Although the female protagonist is a victim of adultery, she chooses her family’s future happiness over her pride. For this reason, she suppresses her anger and sadness, and eventually decides to forgive her husband. In fact, there is only one instance in which this woman actually considers divorce: “At the time, I looked at him and I thought that our marriage was finished, or that he was finished. I was looking at extended sick leave and then what? My husband crying on the sofa was forty-nine years old.” (Enright 7) Strikingly, even in this dark moment of her life, the protagonist is concerned about her unfaithful husband’s well-being. Thus, the portrayal of the female protagonist of *Until the Girl Died* seems to be closely linked to the stereotypical perception of Irish women who choose to dedicate their lives to their family and their home. Still, the way she narrates the story fits Eagleton’s (*The Truth about the Irish*, 174-176) depiction of Irish womanhood: She is a strong, practical and powerful female, who stands by her husband, although he has hurt her feelings and has probably damaged everything that they had before.

Secondly, not only the female, but also the male characters of *Men and Women* appear to perform conventional gender roles: There is a clear patriarchal hierarchy, meaning that wife and daughter are subordinate to husband and son. The young female protagonist and her mother are portrayed as hard-working, practical and responsible. Moreover, they fulfil the stereotype of women living in rural Ireland, since they have to work in the house and on the farm. In particular, after finishing the housework, they engage in physically demanding farm work without getting any recognition (cf. Eagleton, *The Truth about the Irish*, 176):

Nobody’s up except Mammy and me. We are the early birds. We make tea, eat toast and chocolate fingers for breakfast. Then she puts on her best apron, the one with all the strawberries, and turns on the radio, chops onions and parsley while I grate a plain loaf into crumbs. We stuff

the turkey and waltz around the kitchen. Seamus and Da come down and investigate the parcels under the tree. Seamus gets a dartboard for Christmas. He hangs it on the backdoor and himself and Da throw darts and chalk up scores while Mammy and me put on our anoraks and feed the pigs and cattle and sheep and let the hens out. (Keegan 124)

While the smart and reflective daughter questions the division of labour that is present in her family, the mother has accepted her fate, which can be inferred from the following dialogue between the two females: “‘How come they do nothing?’ I ask her. I am reaching into warm straw, feeling for eggs. The hens lay less in winter. ‘They’re men,’ she says, as if this explains everything.” (Keegan 124) Nevertheless, in a symbolically loaded scene at the end of the short story, both women decide to break with traditional gender roles, since the mother refuses to open the gates for the father and both children follow her example:

Da stops the car and we roll back a bit until he puts his foot on the brake. He is waiting for Mammy to get out and open the gates. Mammy doesn’t move. ‘Have you got a pain?’ he says to her. She looks straight ahead. ‘Is that door stuck or what?’ he says. ‘Open it yourself.’ He reaches across her and opens the door, but she slams it shut. (Keegan 133)

From this point in the story, the power of the family’s patriarch gradually declines, while the women’s autonomy increases. As a final step towards future independence, this woman decides to take the wheel and to move forward: “And that is when Mammy gets behind the wheel. She slides over into my father’s seat, the driver’s seat, and puts her foot on the brake. We stop going backwards. [...] Mammy is taking us forward, past the Santa sign, past my father, who has stopped singing, through the open gates.” (Keegan 134-135) Brzezinski also attaches importance to this emancipatory component of the short story:

In “Men and Women”, an Irish mother and her daughter come to realize that reified gender roles have cheated them, and they take the first steps toward reclaiming power. Keegan returns again and again to power dynamics in which those in authority abuse their caretaker positions and to the legacy and implications of such abuse. (Brzezinski 341)

Furthermore, in the short stories, conventional images of women as housewives and mothers, occupying a marginalised and passive role in Irish society, are

frequently related to the side characters. In fact, many of the female protagonists recurrently comment on the traditional attitudes and behaviour of the women surrounding them. In *Quare Name for a Boy*, for example, the main figure's relatives seem to be personifications of submissiveness and domesticity:

We come from women who comfort men, men who never say no. Now they fill their best teacups, asking about my future, asking, 'What is it you do now?' and 'What are you going to do now?', which isn't quite the same thing." [...] Eventually they retreat into the kitchen to prepare dinner. It's getting on for six: the men'll soon be home. (Keegan 95-97)

This quote evokes a picture of housewives, sitting in their lovely homes, gossiping and chatting while having tea in their perfect cups. The sarcastic, dismissive tone in which the narrator describes this situation leads to the conclusion that she feels the need to distance herself from the women who embody widespread gender stereotypes.

A similar standard image can be found in *Green*: While the female protagonist attempts to break with traditional gender roles, all the other female characters seem to have adapted themselves to conventional social norms since childhood. Narrating her story, the main character calls these women "vultures [...]: young women you can see closing up over the years, getting bitter." (Enright 133) In particular, the antagonist Gertie, who is one of these "vultures", appears to personify all the gender stereotypes that are present in town:

Gertie was a Matilda's girl too, of course. She was three years ahead of me, and I thought she was really beautiful, and really dull. Or something worse than dull – the way Sister Albert smiled so sadly at her, and Gertie smiled so sadly back. Gertie was a saint. She tried to use a tampon once and fainted against the toilet cubicle door: kler-klunk. She never did leave the town. She married the man she was supposed to marry, and she got the curtains she was supposed to get: he drinks every day now from half past twelve, and Gertie says he's infallible when it comes to a good Bordeaux. Go for it, Gertie. St. Matilda's is proud of you yet. (Keegan 134)

It can be inferred from this quote that – similarly to the main character of *Quare Name for a Boy* – the female protagonist of *Green* despises the way Gertie and all the other women who never left town shape their lives.

In *Here's to Love*, the protagonist's male friends' wives embody female stereotypes, while the main character – as in the short stories *Quare Name for a Boy* and *Green* – neglects these socially constructed norms: The female side characters are depicted as housewives and mothers, who choose marriage and motherhood over other goals in life. Given that they have already given up on their dreams, they are characterised by unhappiness and misery: “I do feel burdened by it, a little; by the great unhappiness of my male friends' wives.” (Enright 67) Similar to *Green*, there is one character, namely Shay's wife Maria, who seems to serve as a personification of all the anguish that these married women feel:

I remember Maria – a tiny, pretty woman – we met once and she hated me, on sight. She was very keen to tell me how she trained as a gymnast, as I recall, but I don't remember any singing. I'm sure Shay is right. I am sure she is a singer. I am sure she is a famous singer disguised as a wife, and that it is all Shay's fault for thwarting her, and shrinking her life. (Enright 71)

As the narration continues, the protagonist once again refers to the smallness and sadness of Maria's life: “[...] my friend Shay, who loves a sad little gymnast and gets her to load his dishwasher for him, every night of the week.” (Enright 73) On the basis of these two quotes, it might be claimed that the female first person narrator actually turns the life of this married woman into ridicule. Referring to Shay's wife as “a famous singer disguised as wife” (Enright 71) might be the protagonist's way not only of making fun of this woman, but also of demonstrating her own superiority.

After scrutinising the construction of gender stereotypes in the short stories, the deconstruction of conventional perceptions of Irish motherhood and “hausfrauishness” (Bracken and Cahill 21) shall be under analysis. Referring back to *Here's to Love*, socially constructed norms appear to be deconstructed

in the portrayal of the protagonist, as she differs from all the other female figures in the text. While she is at work or meets her former boyfriends, her husband, Le Quang Hoa, stays at home and prepares dinner: “Every morning, when I go to work, my husband walks around to the municipal pool with his towel rolled under his arm. [...] It is five minutes to six. Back in the apartment, my husband has cooked, and decanted, and cooked up again, a beef broth for noodle soup.” (Enright 70-71) At one point, comparing her husband to old ladies, she even positions him close to the female gender: “He is like the old ladies you see on the French coast, who paddle out in their sunglasses and hairdos, and paddle back again, gossiping, like so many bodiless heads.” (Enright 70) A further instance, in which the main character apparently puts Le Quang Hoa into the same category as her friends’ wives, is the following: “He does not sit, as Shay’s wife might sit – weeping, at the state of the house and the destruction of all her dreams.” (Enright 74) Here, the female first person narrator compares her husband to Shay’s wife and, although she claims that he is different and does not weep, she still relates him to the category ‘wife’ and not ‘husband’. All in all, it might be argued that *Here’s to Love* is an example of “gender inversion” (cf. Shumaker 112) in Enright’s fiction, meaning that traditional gender roles are reversed in this text.

Another instance of “gender inversion” (cf. Shumaker 112) may be found in *Green*: Although the female protagonist is married and has children, she is the head of her own business, an organic farm, which she runs with her husband. Besides having children and a husband, she pursues her dream of producing and selling organic food. Moreover, it seems that since they married, her husband has decided to support her and she has “turned him organic [...]” (Enright 136) Matthew Ryan (167) highlights that in *Green*, “[t]here is a non-gender-division of labour between husband and wife in the farm work.” In this short story, the female protagonist is not only a wife and a mother, but also a successful business woman, who puts a lot of effort into her work: “I went all the way to Westmeath for the organic manure, and brought the first lot back by trailer. We couldn’t afford a lorry. I made five trips. [...] In year three I swung a

deal with a small supplier in Smithfield. In year four I got our organic stamp. Prices went up. [...] I bought my first van. I bought my second van.” (Enright 136-137) Given that the main character constantly refers to herself as the one who made the commercial trips, who swung the deals and who bought the vans, it may be inferred that she is the driving force behind the company. Thus, it seems that this woman breaks with stereotypical notions of Irish womanhood.

Furthermore, in *Quare Name for a Boy* traditional images of Irish motherhood are challenged, as the female protagonist prefers being a single-mother to marrying a man she does not love. In the middle of a rather disillusioning conversation with the unborn child’s father, she makes her decision, as she is sure that she will be strong enough to make it on her own: “Whatever you say, I’ll manage. [...] Suddenly I don’t want you, won’t keep you away from the boys and your smoky snooker nights. [...] Suddenly I wonder why I came.” (Keegan 101-102) In this context, the female first person narrator also refers to previous generations of Irish women who always attempted to “comfort men, men who never say no [...]” (Keegan 95), and makes it clear that it is time for things to change: “I will not be the woman who shelters her man same as he’s a boy. That part of my people ends with me.” (Keegan 101)

What is more, the problematic issue of abortion is addressed in this text: As abortion is illegal in Ireland, the main character narrates about the possibility to go to England to abort her unborn baby – an option that she refuses immediately by stating, “And there it is, my decision named. No boat trip, no roll of twenty-pound notes, no bleachy white waiting room with women’s dog-eared magazines.” (Keegan 101)

Moreover, the short story addresses another traditional belief linked to Irish womanhood, namely that Irish women are not supposed to leave their country and move to England, as they are expected to stay at home, to have children, especially sons, and to tolerate their husbands’ behaviour:

You tell me the English air must suit me, that I'm blooming. 'You're looking well, whatever you're doing with yourself over there,' you say with something that sounds like disapproval. Irish girls should dislike England; they should stay home and raise their sons up right, stuff the chicken, snip the parsley, tolerate the blare of the Sunday game. (Keegan 97-98)

Again, since the female protagonist has decided to leave Ireland in order to live in England, she has rebelled against these stereotypes of Irish womanhood as well as Irish nationhood. Thus, she has already crossed the border – and not only a national one, but also the one that is constituted between male and female gender stereotypes.

A further short story that can be linked to the topic of motherhood is *Yesterday's Weather*. In contrast to *Quare Name for a Boy*, the female protagonist Hazel does not have to raise a child on her own, since she is married to John, the father of her baby. Nevertheless, she does not find happiness in being a mother and a wife, which may be seen as a contradiction to the widespread view of women flourishing in their role of a mother. In this context, Fasching (82) states: "It becomes evident that she does not fully enjoy her position as the prime caregiver, which presents a contrast to the idea of the mother who finds fulfilment in caring for her offspring." In fact, the relationship of Hazel to her child is characterised by feelings of insecurity and doubt:

Hazel felt like she kept losing this baby, and getting someone new. She thought that she would fall in love with the baby if only it would stay still, just for a minute, but the baby never did stay still. Sometimes it seemed like it was all around her, as though there was nothing in her world except the baby, but every time she looked straight at the baby, or tried to look straight at the baby ... whatever it was, just wasn't there. (Enright 23)

Considering the characterisation of *Yesterday's Weather's* female protagonist, the argument that a mother naturally feels unconditional love for her child, and that her maternal instincts always let her know how to treat her baby and how to cater for its needs, seems to be weakened (cf. Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan 1994). Therefore, it may be concluded that in *Yesterday's Weather*, standard images of Irish womanhood are deconstructed, since "the stereotype of the mother who provides unconditional love and the institutional construction of

motherhood in Ireland are questioned.” (Fasching 83) Broadly speaking, the short story appears to present motherhood in connection to the dichotomy of happiness and sadness. In *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, Enright (42) states that the topic of motherhood needs to be written about more frequently, as it is central to the lives of so many women: “What I am interested in is not the drama of being a child, but this new drama of being a mother ... about which so little has been written. Can mothers not hold a pen?”

#### **4.2.2. Notions of Authorship, Sexuality, Religiosity and Females as Animals in the Short Stories**

Although Irish motherhood and Irish women’s housewifely existence appear to be the most prominent features of Irish womanhood that are included into the short stories, other interesting gender stereotypes are addressed in the texts as well. In fact, Anne Enright and Claire Keegan also deal with common perceptions of female authorship, piety and female sexuality. Reflecting upon the latter, Enright makes the following statement about her work: “In some way, when I deal with sexual material, I feel that I’m reclaiming or repossessing some territory that’s been taken away from women by male writers.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in some of the short stories, Irish women and their behaviour is linked to a selection of animals.

Firstly, in *Quare Name for a Boy*, the reader is confronted with a stereotypical Irish national attitude towards female authorship. In particular, there is a reference to the dominance as well as the greatness of male authors in the Irish literary discourse: “You laugh and loop your arm through mine and take me out to the coast, to Sandycove, the granite dome of Joyce’s tower mushrooming into the cold afternoon sun. ‘He wrote all them famous books. Imagine,’ you say, ‘and this is the snot-green sea.’” (Keegan 98) However, the female protagonist’s choice to become a professional writer is viewed with disbelief:

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<sup>20</sup> Tonkin, Boyd. “Interview: The fearless wit of Man Booker winner Anne Enright.” *The Independent*. 19 Oct. 2007. 11 March 2013.  
<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/interview-the-fearless-wit-of-man-booker-winner-anne-enright-394987.html>>.



'I'm going to write,' I say. [...] This always brings a sneer. It's a smart answer but a queer occupation, especially at my age. [...] I should be doing something else by now, latching myself on to some unmarried man with a steady wage and a decent car. 'You and your books,' they say, shaking their heads, squeezing the good out of the teabags. (Keegan 96)

The fact that female authorship is referred to as a "queer occupation" (Keegan 96) demonstrates that social norms suggest that professional writing is only regarded as a decent occupation for men, but not for women. Given that the term 'queer' does not only stand for 'strangeness', but may also be linked to a person who breaks with stereotypical gender roles, the conventional image of men as writers seems to be deconstructed in the portrayal of *Quare Name for a Boy's* female central character.

Coming back to James Joyce, one of the most famous Irish authors, Enright makes a statement about him and his influence on Irish women's writing:

Joyce made everything possible for writers. [...] He made it possible for Irish women writers, among other things, and I'm claiming him as an honorary woman, you know, because he wrote the way women are accused of writing inside people's heads, nothing much happens, very interested in the domestic, all of that, so he's the first Irish woman writer of the twentieth century. [...] I think every generation needs its voices and every time needs its voices.<sup>21</sup>

In this quote, Enright refers to Joyce as the first modern woman writer in Ireland, who opened the literary field for female authors. For this reason, it may be speculated that, in Keegan's *Quare Name for a Boy*, the mentioning of Joyce in connection to the protagonist's wish to become a professional writer indicates the necessity for stereotypes of female authorship to be deconstructed.

Secondly, the stereotypical perception of Irish women as chaste and shy as far as sexuality is concerned appears to be deconstructed in some of the short stories that were selected (cf. Parker et al. 6). It has been claimed that, in the past, female sexuality had no place in the Irish public discourse: "[...] sexuality,

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<sup>21</sup> Beale, Nigel: "Audio Interview with Anne Enright on: What Constitutes a Good Short Story (3)." *Literary Tourist Blog*. Audio File. 16 Dec. 2008. (30:59-31:49). 10 March 2013. <<http://literarytourist.com/2008/12/audio-interview-with-anne-enright-by-nigel-beale/>>.

however, as represented by powerful female figures, was simply written out of an Irish history that had no place for active heroines [...].” (Pelan 26) Writing about Irishness and sexuality, Inglis (146) points out that, in the course of the last decades of Irish national history, there has been a development towards more openness concerning the topic of sexuality: “There is no longer the same shyness, embarrassment, guilt and shame about being sexual. There is not the same sense of fear that used to be a characteristic of Catholic Ireland. Sin and damnation seem to be a thing of the past. Being sexually active is the norm.” This general change may as well have led to the deconstruction of women as personifications of chastity, which is also present in the short stories under analysis.

Before discussing these deconstructive elements of the texts, some constructions of Irish womanhood and chastity that can be found in the short stories shall be presented. In fact, there are references to the Virgin Mary (cf. Goarzin 173), who is the symbol for Immaculate Conception, in Keegan’s *Love in the Tall Grass*, as well as in Enright’s *Green*. In the latter, the narrator touches upon the stereotypical topic of Irish womanhood related to piety and the Virgin Mary: “I look into the mirror and think about Gertie. The sight of her praying in the school chapel at fifteen, with those lumpy-looking white gloves that girls used to wear when they were all overcome by the Virgin Mary.” (Enright 137) Here, it should be added that the main character actually ridicules Gertie for putting her religiosity on display.

In *Love in the Tall Grass*, the female protagonist, Cordelia, looks at a statue of the Virgin Mary and reflects on the relation between this figure of a saint and the colour blue: “A statute ornaments each side of the altar: the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph. One in brown, the other blue. Why is Mary always blue? she wonders.” (Keegan 24) These thoughts appear to be of importance, as the colour blue is mentioned once again at a later stage in the narration: “The doctor watched as fire devoured the pages, Cordelia’s lock of milky hair singeing in the blue heat.” (Keegan 32) Thus, one possible reading might be

that “the blue heat” (Keegan 32), in which Cordelia’s lock of hair is singed, symbolically stands for the main character’s loss of chastity, and possibly also of virginity, as a consequence of her affair with “the doctor”. To summarise, it seems that in this case, the link between Irish womanhood and chastity – and the Virgin Mary as the personification of chastity – metaphorically ends in smoke.

Coming to the deconstruction of standard images of Irish women’s sexuality, Keegan’s *Quare Name for a Boy* and *Antarctica*, as well as Enright’s *Here’s to Love* and *Until the Girl Died* will be compared:

In *Quare Name for a Boy*, for instance, the unmarried female main character frankly expresses her attitude towards sexuality and obviously acts out her sexual desires: “I was your Christmas fling, a thing to break the boredom of the holidays, and you were mine.” (Keegan 95) Knowing that her female relatives are very much concerned about being chaste and pious, she even considers shocking them by pretending to write a novel full of sexuality and bawdiness: “I’m going to write,’ I say. A smutty novel, I want to add, something lecherous and bawdy, make *Fanny Hill* look like your Sunday missals.” (Keegan 96)

Enright’s *Here’s to Love* is another example of a text that deals with the topic of female sexuality, since – similarly to the main character in Keegan’s *Quare Name for a Boy* – this short story’s female protagonist speaks out about her views on sexuality. What is more, in the past, she had a number of sexual relationships with men she did not love: “Actually, they are usually men I have slept with, these guys from home, the ones with the sad wives. If the truth be told. But that isn’t the important thing about them. I never did get very fussed about sex.” (Enright 68) Not only that she does not refrain from telling about these pre-marital sexual adventures, but also that she is still friends with these men demonstrates her open-mindedness concerning sexuality. Another point that supports this argument is that she tells about the love life she has with her husband without hesitation:

My husband's mouth is tight and soft as an opening bud. He is careful in his sexual pleasures. He likes to look at me as I walk around the room. His touch is always specific, and chosen, and light. When he makes love to me, there is very little hesitation. And though we do not make love as much as we used to, it is always 'successful' as these things go. (Enright 69)

In comparison to the central figure in *Here's to Love*, the female first person narrator of *Until the Girl Died* also mentions some details concerning the importance of sexuality in marital life:

Isn't it worth it? I used to say. Isn't it bloody worth it for a trip to Brown Thomas's and a long weekend with the kids, all of us together in Ballybunion, walking the winter beach, a couple of bottles of wine and more conjugal antics than is decent at our age, with my wonderful husband, home again after his little lapse;" (Enright 4)

The one short story that undoubtedly can be related to female sexuality is Claire Keegan's *Antarctica*. Given that the narrative is about a woman looking for an extra-marital sexual adventure, it is full of references to sexuality. For example, it might be argued that the way the female central character is dressed when she goes out and gets to know the man with whom she will have an affair symbolises anything but chastity: "She dressed up in the afternoon, put on a short plum-coloured dress, high heels, her darkest lipstick, and walked back into town." (Keegan 4) Even more so, the protagonist is directly characterised as a wild woman by the same man: "I know your type," he said. "You're wild. You're one of those wild middle-class women." (Keegan 6) As the narration continues, the situation in which the two characters have sexual intercourse is rendered in great detail:

'Pretend you're America,' she said. 'I'll be Columbus.' Under the bedclothes, down between the damp of his thighs, she explored his nakedness. His body was a novelty. When her feet became entangled in the sheets, he flung them off. She had surprising strength in bed, an urgency that bruised him. She pulled his head back by the hair, drank in the smell of strange soap on his neck. He kissed her and kissed her. There wasn't any hurry. His palms were the rough hands of a working man. They battled against their lust, wrestled against what in the end carried them away. (Keegan 9)

After discussing female authorship and female sexuality, the focus will now be on animalistic features that are ascribed to Irish women. In the following quote, Maureen O'Connor (27) stresses that, in Ireland, womanhood is sometimes linked to concepts of animalism and that this link is – and needs to be – questioned by Irish women writers, including Claire Keegan:

The twentieth-century Catholic Church in Ireland resembles in many ways nineteenth-century Victorian culture, and like the New Woman of a hundred years ago, the works of contemporary Irish writers, including Edna O'Brien, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Haverty, Claire Keegan, and Marina Carr are similarly engaged in interrogating gendered concepts of the nation through national imagery and an alignment of women and animals, categories that yet denote denigration well into the twenty-first century.

It has already been discussed in the previous chapter that at some points in the narration, the female protagonist of Claire Keegan's *Antarctica* is characterised by a cat-like behaviour. In particular, one explanation why she acts this way might be that she is also treated like an animal by her lover: "He stroked her arm, petting her like an animal. She imitated the cat purring, rolling her 'r's they way they'd taught her in Spanish class while hailstones rapped the window panes." (Keegan 12)

Furthermore, there is a link between an Irish woman and a cow in *Men and Women*, as the sadness of the female protagonist's mother is compared to the picture of a dying cow: "There is something sad about Mammy tonight; it is all around her like when a cow dies and the truck comes to take it away." (Keegan 128) In fact, Maureen O'Connor makes use of this quote in her discussion of *The Female and the Species: The Animal in Irish Women's Writing* (2010):

Claire Keegan's short fiction, also set in rural Ireland, makes [...] gendered use of the farmyard animal. [...] The connection between disposable livestock and disregarded countrywoman is more muted in 'Men and Women', but chilling, nonetheless: 'There is something sad about Mammy tonight, like when a cow dies and the truck comes to take it away.' [...] Keegan's mother-figure can be an ambivalent one, not entirely sympathetic, due to her complicity in the enforcement of patriarchal constraints.

In this context, the image of a cow that dies and is taken away may stand for the helplessness and despair the female protagonist's mother feels when she has to sit still, watching her husband dancing and flirting with other women.

In addition, it might be claimed that in *Love in the Tall Grass*, Keegan also makes use of an image taken from the world of animals in order to express the mood that surrounds the central character: "She hears music, travellers playing Jim Reeves records in the halting site, the systematic purr of a generator. A piebald mare whinnies and canters down along the ocean's edge as if she too has dreamt of a man holding a gun to her head. Clouds accumulate, thicken into darkness." (Keegan 31) Here, especially the word 'too' seems to denote that the whinnying and cantering mare is closely connected to the female protagonist, who is troubled and confused by her love for "the doctor".

Finally, Eagleton's (*The Truth about the Irish*, 174-176) account of Irish womanhood shall be considered once again: Broadly speaking, it appears that all the main characters under discussion may be described as strong women, who sooner or later manage to stand up for themselves and to make their own decisions. The protagonists under discussion are practical and hard-working women – either in the domestic or in the public sphere – who have experienced extremely dark moments, but still look on the bright side of it. In fact, Enright stresses in an interview that her characters, who "have small lives and large thoughts", find liberation, as they use their voices to tell their stories.<sup>22</sup>

Following a postmodern reading of Anne Enright's and Claire Keegan's short stories, it might be argued that both authors incorporate stereotypical perceptions of Irish womanhood into their work in order to reverse or deconstruct them on various levels. Finally, to support the conclusions that have been drawn so far, the following extract from a review of Keegan's short story

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<sup>22</sup> cf. Beale, Nigel: "Audio Interview with Anne Enright on: What Constitutes a Good Short Story (3)." *Literary Tourist Blog*. Audio File. 16 Dec. 2008. (03:03-03:57). 10 March 2013. <<http://literarytourist.com/2008/12/audio-interview-with-anne-enright-by-nigel-beale/>>.

collection *Antarctica* again shows how gender stereotypes are addressed, constructed and deconstructed in the texts:

Her mostly female narrators dwell on the cusp of self-knowledge: they have ruefully observed the example set by their mothers, aunts and grandmothers – “flat-bellied, temperamental women who’ve given up and call it happiness” [(Keegan 95)] – and are slowly feeling out new possibilities for their own lives. Rebellions range from the small and symbolic (a mother takes the wheel of a car and leaves her husband stranded) to the wider-reaching (a woman decides to keep her illegitimate child). [...] Yet Keegan depicts the ascendance of a generation of women who “can butt in and take over, rescue and be rescued” [(Keegan 129)] in an Ireland on the verge of a self-generated wave of feminism.<sup>23</sup>

#### **4.3. Crisis and Change in the Protagonists’ Lives and Self-conceptions**

“For this writer, identity is subject to change”<sup>24</sup> is the heading of an interview by David Mehegan, which he conducted with Anne Enright. In general, identity construction as well as crisis and change in the self-conceptions of the main characters appear to be main features of both Anne Enright’s and Claire Keegan’s fiction. In an interview with Bracken and Cahill (30), Enright makes it clear that her characters’ identities and selves are either linear or non-linear constructions that are developing or changing in the course of the stories:

It’s almost like there are two axes in my work, one of which spreads, which is the moment, a sort of infinite moment that is somehow very difficult to get over or beyond – very pleasurable too. And then this other axis, where I try to construct, or refuse to construct, a linear self that is connected moment by moment through life. The connections are where it gets interesting. [...] I’m interested in the construction of a self. And the word ‘construction’ is also interesting [...], as opposed to an organic self which relates very closely to the body and the inescapability of the body.

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<sup>23</sup> Rev. of *Antarctica*, by Claire Keegan. *Publishers Weekly Forecasts* (July 2001). 03 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-87113-779-1>>.

<sup>24</sup> Mehegan, David. “For this writer, identity is subject to change: Anne Enright pushes back against the past.” *The Boston Globe*. 27 Feb. 2008. 10 March 2013. <[http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2008/02/27/for\\_this\\_writer\\_identity\\_is\\_subject\\_to\\_change/](http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2008/02/27/for_this_writer_identity_is_subject_to_change/)>.

As has already been discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, Enright and Keegan are frequently referred to as postmodern writers, which suggests that a postmodern approach to identity and identity construction is part of their literary work (cf. Bracken and Cahill 2011; Coughlan 2004; Fogarty 2007; Moloney 2003). Before proceeding to the textual analysis, the postmodern concept of identity shall be touched upon briefly:

Broadly speaking, it might be claimed that in postmodern discourse, identity is neither stable nor inborn – like gender is not ‘inborn’, but performed and socially constructed (cf. Beauvoir 1964; Butler 1990) – but it is constructed and it may change. In fact, researchers argue for a plurality of identities, meaning that there is not one true identity that can be ascribed to a person, but there are plural selves that are changing and developing (cf. Brooker vii; Haberstroh and St. Peter 5-6). As far as postmodern literary theory and its concepts of identity are concerned, Docherty (366) claims:

Postmodern characterization advances an attack on the notion of identity, or of an essential Selfhood which is not traduced by a temporal dimension which threatens that Self with heterogeneity. In short, it leads to the elaboration of ‘characters’ [...] whose existence (rather than essence) is characterized by *difference* (rather than identity). Postmodern figures are always differing, not just from other characters, but also from their putative ‘selves’.

In *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996), Stuart Hall explains this idea of identities to be defined by being different from “the other” in great detail. At one point, he (Hall 4-5) stresses that “[i]dentities are constructed through, not outside, difference. [...] Throughout their careers, identities function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capability to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside’ abjected. Every identity has its ‘margin,’ an excess, something more.” Thus, connecting Docherty’s as well as Hall’s remarks on identity to the short stories under discussion, it might be pointed out that their female protagonists are not only characterised by a plurality of selves, but also appear to ground their self-perceptions on the act of distancing themselves from other figures in the texts. For this reason, it is interesting to



discuss which socially constructed identities the central characters have and which crises and changes they experience in their lives.

From the findings of previous chapters concerning characterisation in Anne Enright's and Claire Keegan's short stories, it may be inferred that character development as well as an adequate and feasible description of the protagonists' lives and surroundings are central elements of their texts. In particular, Keegan stresses the importance of these two factors in an interview:

It takes me a lot of time to write and find the voice for somebody," says Keegan, "because I realise I have got to honour my characters and respect their lives as much as one would wish one's own life to be respected, because you are representing somebody. You're saying something about their lives and in a way that's quite an arrogant thing to do, but I think the writing itself, once you enter into it, is quite an experience of not so much humiliation as humility."<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, Enright states that it is essential to her narratives that there is some kind of change or turn, not only in the action, but also in the protagonists' lives: "The only thing that has to happen in the stories it's something must change, that's all that has to happen; and it's kind of hard sometimes to make to happen, didn't have to be big change, just something must change."<sup>26</sup>

For instance, in *Until the Girl Died*, the female protagonist experiences a serious crisis that is caused by her husband's unfaithfulness and the death of one of his affairs. However, it appears that neither her self-perception nor her life seem to change drastically, as she tries very hard to maintain a 'normal' family life. In this context, it may be important to refer to a statement on changes in short stories that Enright makes in an interview: "It's the moment arrived, when [...] something becomes clear, a change becomes clear – it can be extremely

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<sup>25</sup> Somerset, Guy. "Claire Keegan: Irish Short-Story Writer Claire Keegan respects the lives of her characters as much as she'd wish her own life to be respected." *New Zealand Listener*. 25 April 2011. 8 April 2013. <<http://www.listener.co.nz/culture/books/foster-by-claire-keegan/>>.

<sup>26</sup> Beale, Nigel: "Audio Interview with Anne Enright on: What Constitutes a Good Short Story (3)." *Literary Tourist Blog*. Audio File. 16 Dec. 2008. (14:02-14:14). 10 March 2013. <<http://literarytourist.com/2008/12/audio-interview-with-anne-enright-by-nigel-beale/>>.

slight.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, she stresses the fact that her texts are not necessarily about development of, or changes in, the characters’ personalities, but they can be basically related to anything, as for instance the weather.<sup>28</sup>

Given that the female first person narrator constantly changes her opinion on certain subjects, and especially on her husband, not only her narration seems to be unreliable, but also her feelings for him appear to be highly inconsistent:

My husband is a fantastic man. And until the girl died, beetling along in her little Renault Clio on the wrong side of a road in Tuscany, until the girl died, that was enough for me. To be married to a fantastic man who loved me, and was prone, once in a long while, to a little lapse and a lot of Catholic guilt about it. [...] But actually I hated it. It was like living on a page of some horrible Sunday newspaper. Horrible people. Horrible people with their horrible sex lives and their horrible money. No. He works hard my husband and I have always been a great asset to him. And we are ordinary people. And I am proud of that too.

This is only one of the instances in which the main character abruptly switches from one view to another. In fact, it appears that she attempts to be above it all, probably for the sake of her children and also her husband, but cannot fight her weak moments at some points in the story. In general, it may be argued that the characterisation of this central figure fits postmodern notions of identity, since her self-conception is subject to frequent change. For example, at first she seems to know about herself that she is not “the sniffing sort, the type to rage and scream” (Enright 6), but in the end she does panic and she does rummage through the recycling bin for some information on the girl who died (cf. Enright 5, 8). The following statement by Docherty (366) seems to be particularly relevant for Enright’s *Until the Girl Died*: “Postmodern characters most typically fall into incoherence [...]” What is more, at one point in the story, the female protagonist actually tells about her split attitude towards her husband’s disloyal demeanour: “One part of me thought he deserved a holiday, to be honest; that if I had the chance I might take one myself. Another part of me thought, ‘Someone must die.’” (Enright 6)

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<sup>27</sup> Beale: “Audio Interview with Anne Enright.” 14:54-15:03.

<sup>28</sup> cf. Beale: “Audio Interview with Anne Enright.” 14:28-16:29.

Although the female protagonist of *Until the Girl Died* refuses to make serious changes in her life, she can be said to change on a more subtle level, namely on a mental one. What is more, their family life actually has changed since the girl's death, which appears to be an enormous burden on both wife and husband: "The girl was with us, all this time. Dead or alive. She was standing at the bus stop on the corner, she was sitting in our living room watching *Big Brother*, she was being buried, night after night, on the evening news." (Enright 10) At the end, it is the central character who initiates a change that might restore the balance in the family: "I listened to him snuffing and choking in the spray and I realised it was time to put my pride away. It was time to call him back home." (Enright 10) Thus, it may be claimed that this decision made by the female protagonist is a turning point in the story, as the woman stops distancing herself from her husband and starts forgiving him.

Overall, it may be claimed that, in *Until the Girl Died*, the institution of marriage and its traditions are demythologized (cf. Shumaker 119). While knowing that there is something wrong in her marriage and that their problems might not be solved in the short run, this woman does not rebel or break out, but she stays calm and engages in saving her marriage in the long run. In this context, Shumaker (119) writes: "Demythologizing tradition, as Enright does, allies her with the postmodern. [...] Postmodernism's emphasis on demystification, rather than reform, is seen in Enright's fiction." This quote not only once again links Enright's texts to postmodernism as well as the deconstruction of stereotypes, but also shows that changes in her characters' lives do not necessarily mean radical reform, but can also be slight alternations in the characters' sentiments, thoughts or opinions.

A further short story that deals with a marital crisis is *Yesterday's Weather*. Similar to *Until the Girl Died*, a married couple experiences a critical point in their relationship. Here, the crisis is not based on infidelity, but rather on miscommunication and contrary attitudes towards the division of domestic work between husband and wife. Moreover, the birth of their baby might be regarded as the starting point for Hazel's doubts about family life and her future as a wife

and mother: “Was this enough? Was this the way you loved a baby? [...] What would she be able to grow, here?” (Enright 23-24)

Furthermore, the female protagonist’s mood appears to change according to the setting: During their stay in Clonmel, where John’s father, his sister Margaret and her children live, the atmosphere is extremely tense, as instead of telling her husband about her worries and doubts, Hazel keeps them all to herself until she literally explodes: “It seemed that, ever since they had arrived in Clonmel, there was a reason not to say every single thought that came into her head.” (Enright 18) Thus, it seems that both Hazel and John have changed since they arrived at his parent’s house. Until their visit comes to an end, their communication is characterised by accusation and rage, which makes Hazel worry about the influence all this might have on their baby:

He slept through the roaring and the thrown hairbrush, and the storming of his father off to the residents’ bar. He slept through the return of his father twenty seconds later to say something very level and very telling, and the double-fisted assault as his mother pushed him back out to the corridor crying that he could sleep in the fucking bar. [...] Mind you, his screaming sounded the same as every other night’s screaming, she thought, so it was impossible to know how much he had been damaged by it all; by the total collapse of the love that made him. Could anger hurt him, when he had never heard it before? (Enright 22-23)

However, at the end of the story, there is a change of mood, namely when Hazel and John are on their way home:

They were shattered when they got home. John drove as though the road could feel his tyres; the tyres could feel the road. The whole world seemed as tender as they were. At Monasterevin, he reached his hand to touch her cheek, and she held it there with the flat of her own hand while, in the back of the car, the baby still slept. (Enright 24)

It may be inferred from this quote that the moment when John touches Hazel’s cheek at Monasterevin stands for a turning point in the story, since from this situation onwards, love and harmony seem to return to their relationship. Generally, the female protagonist’s moods seem to vary a lot in this short story. In particular, it might be claimed that at least two of her selves are presented in

*Yesterday's Weather*, namely the furious and overemotional Hazel at Clonmel and the calm and prudent Hazel at their home in Lucan.

Crisis and change are also part of the lives and self-perceptions of mother and daughter in *Men and Women*. From the beginning of the short story, the family's patriarchal structure implies that men – and in this case the father – are the parameters of women's identities (cf. Shumaker 117). The male family members have the say, whereas the females are expected to obey. Nevertheless, specifically the daughter, who is the female protagonist of the text, longs for a change in her life: "I am fed up being treated like a child. I wish I was big. I wish I could sit beside the fire and be called up to dinner and draw triangles, lick the nibs of special pencils, sit behind the wheel of a car and have someone open gates that I could drive through." (Keegan 125) What is more, the mother seems to experience a decisive change in her self-conception when she eventually decides to stand up for herself and her children, and, for this reason, contradicts her husband for the first time by refusing to open the gates for him.

In the whole story there is one striking turning point: the dance event at Spellman Hall on New Year's Eve. In particular, it may be stated that this evening initiates a private change in the family: Firstly, the daughter's self-conception seems to undergo a transformation, as she decides to interfere with her father's plans, which suddenly makes her feel strong and powerful: "I get the feeling he's helpless, but I don't care. For the first time in my life I have some power. I can butt in and take over, rescue and be rescued." (Keegan 129) In this particular moment, the female central character's well conceived behaviour seems to fit Eagleton's account of Irish children: "Whatever the explanation, Irish children don't need to be talked down to and can usually hold their own in adult company, without feeling the need to grab attention by parades of pure silliness." (Eagleton, *The Truth about the Irish* 45) Secondly, an embarrassing situation during the tombola at Spellman Hall appears to trigger a crisis in the mother's self-conception: "My mother is standing there in her

elegant clothes and it's all wrong. She doesn't belong up there." (Keegan 131) From this point in the story onwards, she no longer silently accepts her subordinate role, but rebels against her husband, who all of a sudden loses authority and "is getting smaller." (Keegan 134)

In *Antarctica*, it is also a married woman who goes through a crisis as well as a change in her life and self-conception. In fact, this protagonist's problem is a midlife crisis, since she is a middle-aged woman, claiming to be a happily married wife and mother, who suddenly longs for a change in her daily routine. Therefore, she hurls herself into a sexual adventure with a stranger that will change everything. Spending a weekend in the city, an entirely new identity is constructed for this character: While she is a responsible housewife and a caring mother at home, she forgets about this self and becomes a "wild middle-class" (Keegan 6) woman, who dresses extravagantly, gets drunk and has extra-marital sexual intercourse with a complete stranger she picks up in a pub.

Overall, female sexuality and sexual identity appear to be central not only to *Antarctica*, but also to other short stories, such as *Here's to Love* or *Quare Name for a Boy*. Reflecting on the development of sexual identities of Irish women in the late twentieth century, Enright (*Making Babies* 187) states: "The country was screaming at itself about contraception, abortion, and divorce. It was a hideously misogynistic time. Not the best environment for a young woman establishing a sexual identity." This may be one of the reasons why contemporary Irish women writers frequently address the issue of female sexual identity in their texts. As has already been argued in the previous sub-chapter, the female protagonists of *Quare Name for a Boy*, *Antarctica* and *Here's to Love* are very open-minded about topics connected to sexuality. All of them, and also the main character of *Love in the Tall Grass*, had or have pre-marital or extra-marital affairs, about which they seem to be anything but embarrassed. All of these women either seem to already have established their sexual identities, or appear to be in the middle of doing so (cf. Enright, *Making Babies* 187).

The female central figure of *Quare Name for a Boy* may be seen as an example of a character who obviously grounds her identity on difference (cf. Hall 4-5): In perceiving herself to differ from her female relatives in basically every possible aspect, she constructs an image of herself as an emancipated, independent and cosmopolitan woman. That she actively attempts to distance herself from “the other” (cf. Hall 1996; Waugh 1992) female characters becomes clear in the following quote: “And I won’t comfort you. I will not be the woman who shelters her man same as he’s a boy. That part of my people ends with me.” (Keegan 101) Furthermore, it is interesting that the female side characters seem to have a somewhat perverted picture of the protagonist’s identity, since she does not tell them who she actually is: “I unpack my suitcase and the ritual begins. [...] A pair of red high heels to confuse them. They rummage through my things, trying to find out who I am.” (Keegan 96-97)

A decisive moment of change in this woman’s life seems to be her pregnancy, since she will soon be responsible for a child and will have to come to terms with her new identity of a single mother. Furthermore, the instance in which she tells the father of the child about her pregnancy provokes a crisis in their relationship, which, up to the present, has never been linked to any obligations: “I sense this is the last time we will ever be like this. Everything casual between us will end here.” (Keegan 99)

Similar to *Quare Name for a Boy*, Enright’s short story *Green* presents a female protagonist who grounds her identities on the differences to other women in society:

‘You are the future,’ said Sister Albert, sending us back to be hated in hotel bars from Birr to Crossmolina for our T-strap stilettos and our taste in Campari and lime. I’d rather be dead, I said. [...] I said there’s better ways to earn your new Sanderson curtains than on your back – I’d get the money myself. Or no money, if that’s the way I wanted to play it. And I packed my bag for uni and shook the dust of that damn town off my feet. (Enright 133-134)

Here, the first person narrator makes it very clear that she wants to be different from the other girls in town, who simply adapt their dreams and lives to social

expectations. For this reason, the central character leaves her hometown and decides to change her life for the better. However, eleven years later, the protagonist returns and, contrary to her expectations regarding the future, she marries a local man, gives birth to their children and does not leave again: "Because, strange to relate, I did marry a local man. And he does have a four-wheel drive. Which we need for the farm. But whatever way you cut it, eleven years after I left, I was back again in a white dress, walking down the aisle of the town church [...]" (Enright 134) It may be that, therefore, she fears that one day she will no longer be different from the other women who never left town, which leads to a serious crisis in this woman's life and self-perception. Assuming that she bases her identities on the differences to the other female characters, she might even apprehend identity loss. The following quote by Matthew Ryan (168) seems to support this argument: "'Green' presents, in a remarkably condensed and subtle rendering, the ontological problem of constituting the self within social formations [...] which pull the self toward forms of disembodiment. These are the social conditions of globalization." Even more so, he claims that *Green's* central figure has not yet established a confident self and, for this reason, is not self-assured enough to be above the fact that she needs her antagonist's support in order to sell her organic products in town: "[T]he first-person narrator unable to present a sufficiently-formed identity to counter the perceived challenge of Gertie's established position as the town's petit bourgeois." (Matthew Ryan 167) Furthermore, it might be that the protagonist simply has a hard time with accepting her present life as a wife and a mother, who has returned to the place where she was born. Thus, she might feel that she has lost important components of her individuality, since she has to conform to some of the town's unwritten rules – as, for example, to be friendly to Gertie, because she is an important buyer of her organic food – in order to do good business. The problematic issue of accepting one's new selves is also discussed by Shumaker (118): "However, the theft of identity is by nature ironic because identity cannot be stolen, just altered; that one feels one has lost identity merely means that one has not yet accepted one's new, damaged self."



A serious identity crisis that may even result in depression and self-destruction is a central component of the short story *Love in the Tall Grass*, since the life of the female protagonist, Cordelia, takes an awful turn after her lover put a temporary end to their affair. From the beginning, “[t]he doctor threw a tall and steady shadow over her.” (Keegan 26) It might be claimed that Cordelia is a hard-working, independent woman until the doctor comes and weakens her. In fact, from the moment he kisses her for the first time, he has started to leave marks, not only in Cordelia’s drive, but also in her soul:

That afternoon the doctor did not ask for tea. Instead he wound her long yellow hair like a bandage around his hand, and kissed her. It turned dark as night under the tree, so when he looked at the time, he had to put the face of his watch up close to his, then rushed off home, leaving skid-marks in Cordelia’s drive. (Keegan 28)

This scene may already be the first instance of foreshadowing to the unhappy end of their relationship, as after they have stopped kissing, everything turns dark, the atmosphere becomes gloomy and the doctor leaves marks when he is leaving. Moreover, the quote indicates that at that time, Cordelia’s hair, which will turn white in the course of the ten lonely years ahead of her, is still “yellow”. Although Cordelia knows that the doctor has a wife and children, she experiences sentiments of happiness and does not seem to have any worries while he is with her, as she may believe that sooner or later, he will be all hers: “She wanted him to bang on her door in the middle of the night with his fist, to come in with a suitcase in his hand and call her by her name and say, ‘I have come to live with you at my own peril.’” (Keegan 29)

However, her dreams will not be fulfilled in the near future and the story takes a turn for the worse in the following part of the narration:

The doctor called Cordelia into his surgery and in a low, sensitive voice, informed her their affair was over. He joined his hands and pushed his thumbs round in small, anti-clockwise circles. This must be what it’s like to be informed of a terminal illness, she thought. He talked and talked, but Cordelia had stopped listening. She was reading the eye-test chart behind his head. She could read down to the seventh line. Maybe she needed glasses. (Keegan 32-33)

Thus, it may be argued that the doctor's words create a grave crisis for the female main character, who even compares this rather one-sided conversation to being "informed of a terminal illness." (Keegan 33) One explanation for the serious identity crisis Cordelia seems to experience from this turning point onwards may be that she has started to define herself through the relationship with the doctor. Broadly speaking, in this short story, a man seems to completely absorb a woman's self, to take all her energy, including her will to live, and by returning to his wife, he almost destroys her:

Gradually, the bad dream faded. The green curtain and the window furlled backwards into memory, but the promise stoked like a bright blade in Cordelia's head. Cordelia coveted her solitude. [...] Slowly Cordelia became a recluse. [...] Time altered, took on unfathomable dimensions. [...] Nothing and everything has changed. Cordelia feels tired. (Keegan 33-35)

Even before leaving her, he takes something from Cordelia's body, namely a lock of her hair, but does not give anything in return: "He took a small pair of surgical scissors from his pocket and snipped off a lock of Cordelia's hair." (Keegan 29) One possible reading may be that already in this scene, Cordelia gives a part of herself, a part of her body, to the doctor.

The depressive and melancholic self of Cordelia also seems to be reflected in the setting and the general atmosphere that surround her over the larger parts of the story:

A powder of rust-coloured ash fell over the house, accumulated on the sills, the curtain rails. [...] The neglected hedge began to intrude upon the house, grew so thick and close that all the downstairs rooms loomed in constant shadow, and when the sun was going down, strange, monkey-puzzle shadows poured into the sitting room. (Keegan 34-35)

The suggested significance of the setting for the portrayal of a character's feelings is also stressed by Claire Keegan herself, who states in an interview: „I think setting is central to a character's psyche. If you are in the desert and you are too hot you are not going to feel the same way about life as if you are

comfortably situated in front of the fire with a good book and some jazz. So, where you are will to a great extent determine what you feel.<sup>29</sup>

“[O]n New Year’s Eve at the turn of the century” (Keegan 33), when Cordelia walks towards the place where she formerly met the doctor, she remembers how it all began and by doing so she is reminded of her old self, the woman she was before he left her. Furthermore, at Strandhill, when she meets his wife, she slowly starts talking to her, which is quite striking as she probably has not talked to anybody for a long time. At this point of the story, “Cordelia is pleased, but nothing is as she imagined.” (Keegan 38) Thus, it may be that this is a second point of change in the story, since Cordelia opens up again and, finally, admits feelings of pleasure.

In *Here’s to Love*, the female protagonist’s crisis is neither based on unrequited love, nor grounded in an unhappy marriage. In fact, she is a thirty-nine year old woman, who is married to the man she loves: “I do not know why my husband chose to love me, but I know that, for both of us, it is a great romance. [...] We are very happy. Or, no. We are not happy, exactly. But we love each other very much, and this charges our lives with shape and light.” (Enright 68-70) However, the female main character still seems to struggle with this identity of a wife, especially when she has to tell her former boyfriend Shay about her marriage. Given that her younger self never wanted to marry any of her boyfriends, she seemingly does not want to admit that, in the end, she also got married: “[...] I feel accused – of course I do – of making some deal with desire; some compromise. But my life took an unexpected turn and now I think unexpected thoughts.” (Enright 69) One reason why she does not want to tell the truth about her present life may be that she desperately attempts to preserve youthfulness by making her male friends see her the way they used to do. Even more so, by spending time with them, she seems to change into this younger version of herself to some extent: “I am still poised, or I try to be”.

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<sup>29</sup> Van Dusen, Kate. “An Interview with Claire Keegan, Celtic Studies Writer in Residence.” *University of St. Michael’s College in the University of Toronto*. 19 March 2009. 8 April 2013. <[http://stmikes.utoronto.ca/news/archives/09\\_stories/09\\_0330\\_claire\\_keegan.asp](http://stmikes.utoronto.ca/news/archives/09_stories/09_0330_claire_keegan.asp)>.

(Enright 68) At one point in the text, this identity change or switch to another self is directly addressed, namely when the narrator names it a “social self”: “It doesn’t matter to my husband, this social self; he doesn’t care that I am Irish in an old-fashioned way, with a new lick of French.” (Enright 68) Consequently, it may be inferred that this character knows that she embodies more than one single identity.

To conclude, the following interpretations seem to effectively summarise the sources of this female protagonist’s identity crisis: Referring to some of Enright’s short stories, D’hoker (*Distorting Mirrors* 36) points out that “[s]everal of the middle-aged protagonists of the stories in *Taking Pictures* are trying to come to terms with ageing.” Furthermore, Shumaker (107) highlights that “[...] Enright exposes the ludicrousness of women’s attempts to construct an eternally youthful identity that pleases men.” In addition, writing about *Here’s to Love* and other texts by Enright, D’hoker (*Distorting Mirrors* 35) even goes one step further, claiming that “the narrator’s frequent references to ageing suggest a strong link between these modified desires [love, happiness and children] and the awareness of mortality.”

In general, it might be asserted that the link between identity construction and mortality can be found in some of the texts under analysis. In *Here’s to Love*, for instance, the ambiguous final paragraphs about mortality and death leave the reader with a number of open questions: On the one hand, the female protagonist narrates about a stranger who once pointed a gun at her (cf. Enright 75) – a terrifying event, or as Shumaker (121) puts it, one of Enright’s “tragic references.” On the other hand, she reflects about the possible death of her husband: “I walk home to Le Quang Hoa, thinking about his body in death; neat and beautiful on our marriage bed. I open the door and wonder if he is real. And if he is still alive.” (Enright 76)

Linking the threat of mortality to the female character’s identities, Shumaker (121-122) draws the following conclusion: “Anxiety about death prevents

Enright's women from feeling solid, for identity cannot stabilize when feeling threatened by mortality." In fact, references to death are not only present in *Here's to Love*, but also in, for example, *Until the Girl Died*, when a married couple has to deal with the sudden death of a girl with whom the husband betrayed his wife: "Because there's my husband, collapsed against the oatmeal-coloured linen mix, staring mortality in the face." (Enright 7) Moreover, in Keegan's *Love in the Tall Grass* – similar to *Here's to Love* – there is an allusion to death which is created with the help of the image of a gun being held to a mare's head: "A piebald mare whinnies and canters down along the ocean's edge as if she too has dreamt of a man holding a gun to her head." (Keegan 31) Furthermore, the mention of death and hell is central to the short story *Antarctica*, since its protagonist appears to be the only character that is actually on the verge of death:

Cold was moving in, spilling into the house, filling up the rooms. She shivered. Cold air falls, she thought. Eventually the shivering stopped. Chronic numbness spread through her; she imagined the blood slowing in her veins, her heart shrinking. [...] She thought of Antarctica, the snow and ice and the bodies of dead explorers. Then she thought of Hell, and then eternity. (Keegan 20-21)

#### **4.4. Themes and Motifs of Love and Betrayal, Domesticity and Escape**

This final part of chapter four will focus on themes and motifs that are central to the short stories under discussion, and especially to their female protagonists' lives. Given that the major themes are obviously love and betrayal as well as domesticity and escape, these themes will not only be discussed, but also linked to specific motifs, notably unrequited love, solitude, yearning for the beloved and the garden motif.

Broadly speaking, it appears that the theme of love is basically central to all the eight short stories. However, it takes various forms and is related to motifs such as unrequited love and the yearning for the beloved. The theme of love is described by Horst and Ingrid Daemrlich (172) as follows: "It provides the

impulse for an individual figure to break out of the shell of his self-centeredness as well as the bounds set by his family or society, to perceive his own feelings and to share them with another, to grow, [...].” However, love might also entail negative components, such as self-sacrifice and unequal distribution of power between two lovers, as the one might have stronger feelings than the other (cf. Daemmrich 173-174).

Considering the short stories that are subjected to analysis in this thesis, it seems that the negative sides of love are more present in the lives of the female protagonists than the positive ones. For instance, Cordelia’s unrequited love in *Love in the Tall Grass* nearly makes her give up on herself. There is not only an unequal distribution of power between her and the doctor, but also self-destruction and self-abandonment on Cordelia’s part. In fact, throughout the ten years that the main character waited for the doctor, she seemingly never stopped yearning for him – she never stopped yearning for the beloved. Another example of love and imbalanced power hierarchies in a relationship is *Men and Women*: In this short story, wife and husband may have loved each other some day back in time when they married and got two children. However, no traces of this love can be found in the daughter’s narration, which may mean that as long as she can think, they did not express their love: “My parents do not kiss. In all my life, back as far as I remember, I have never seen them touch. Once I took a friend upstairs to show her the house. ‘This is Mammy’s room, and this is Daddy’s room,’ I said.” (Keegan 129)

Nevertheless, other female protagonists are married and are in love with their husbands and still, their happiness seems to be marred for various reasons. In general, the theme of love is often connected to the theme of marriage, about which Seigneuret (819) highlights the following: “Marriage, in literature, has traditionally supplied the happy ending to comedy, connoting social stability, happiness and the renewal of life. [...] In more modern works, the attempt to incorporate the two [,practicalities and love,] into a single relationship is often the cause of tension and conflict.” Referring to the short stories, it may be

claimed that various tensions and conflicts put the love relationships in *Yesterday's Weather* and *Until the Girl Died* to the test. In the former, the central figure Hazel feels left alone by her husband John, who does not sufficiently support her in caring for their baby. In particular, there is a very telling reference to the way Hazel perceives their love, namely when she worries about the feelings of her child: “[...] it was impossible to know how much he had been damaged by it all; by the total collapse of the love that made him. Could anger hurt him, when he had never heard it before?” (Enright 23) In the latter story, the situation seems to be even more difficult, as in this marriage the husband commits adultery. However, it appears that wife and husband still love each other and the female protagonist eventually manages to forgive him: “[...] I realised it was time to put my pride away. It was time to call him back home.” (Enright 10)

It has already been mentioned that *Until the Girl Died* not only deals with the themes of love and marriage, but also with betrayal – and adultery in specific – and it may be asserted that the short story *Until the Girl Died* presents an unusual and rather strange way of coping with betrayal. In the short story *Antarctica*, betrayal takes place in a reversed manner, since it is the wife who decides “to sleep with another man” (Keegan 3), which seems to be “an exciting and dangerous adventure” (Daemmrich 8). Interestingly, Horst and Ingrid Daemmrich (8) write that “[u]ltimately, adultery can be connected with death and the demonic.” This appears to be the case in *Antarctica*, since the protagonist’s last thoughts revolve around death and hell: “Then she thought of Hell, and then eternity.” (Keegan 21)

Furthermore, Horst and Ingrid Daemmrich (10) link adultery to the theme of escape from “the stifling confinement of the marriage contract” and point out that in this case, it can have disastrous consequences for everyone involved (cf. Daemmrich 10). For example, *Antarctica*’s female protagonist seems to commit adultery in order to escape daily routines of domestic life: “She would return to untidy, cluttered rooms, dirty floors, cut knees, a hall with mountain-bikes and

roller-skates. Questions.” (Keegan 13) Here, the female main character breaks out of the conventional image of chastity and domestic responsibility, as she betrays her husband.

It might be claimed that an interplay of the oppositional themes of domesticity and escape is not only manifested in *Antarctica*, but can also be found in *Yesterday's Weather*, *Here's To Love*, *Green* and *Men and Women*.

For instance, already in the beginning of the short story *Yesterday's Weather*, the female protagonist Hazel experiences a specific moment in which she imagines and even wishes to escape from her present life: “She remembered a man in the hotel foyer, very tall, he handled his baby like a newborn lamb; setting it down on its stomach to swim its way across the carpet. And Hazel had, briefly, wanted to be married to him instead.” (Enright 15) In particular, it appears that this thought expresses her doubts about her marriage. Moreover, it might be an indication for the assumption that she desperately needs more support from her husband. In this context, Seigneuret (460) writes: “Escape can also be psychological or spiritual in nature and can take the form of daydream, fantasy, or some other mental activity that provides relief from inner conflict, anxiety, guilt [...]” Thus, it may be concluded that, although the female protagonist of *Yesterday's Weather* does not leave her family, she escapes from time to time within the safe environment of her mind and imagination. A further example for this type of escape may be found in the short story *Green*, namely in the dream the female protagonist has at the very end of the text: “[...] a dream I have of water, an infinity of lettuce, row upon row of the stuff, coming out of a lake smooth as glass, so all you see is the lettuce and the reflection of the lettuce. And maybe, as I fall asleep, me also, floating in there, utterly still amidst the green.” (Enright 138) It might be inferred that, in this dream, she imagines herself floating away from all the trouble, finally finding peace and freedom. In addition, the fact that the female protagonist of *Here's to Love* pictures her husband's “body in death; neat and beautiful”, lying on their bed, may symbolise an inner desire to escape from the confinements of marriage.



Furthermore, in *Green* as well as in *Quare Name for a Boy*, another type of escape is addressed, namely the “departure from a situation, such as a family, a job, a community, or a country, that has become in some way oppressive or intolerable.” (Seigneuret 460) Both female main characters chose to leave their hometown when they were young, as they probably wanted to distance themselves from the traditional social norms that are commonly followed in these places. However, both women return after some time either because of marriage in the case of *Green* or because of pregnancy in *Quare Name for a Boy*. Analyzing themes of escape and return in Enright’s fiction, Ewins (139-140) argues that “[a] specifically Irish home is something Enright’s characters keep returning to, even when ostensibly wanting to leave it behind. The tension between the desire for home and the wish to abandon it is concentrated in the alienation from Irishness within Ireland itself.” Moreover, there seems to be a situation in *Men and Women*, in which the daughter actually wishes to escape from her social background: “Even though I washed the car out, I can smell sheep-shite, a faint, pungent odour that always drags us back to where we come from. I resent this deeply.” (Keegan 126)

The only central character for whom escape does not seem to be an option is the betrayed wife and mother in *Until the Girl Died*. In fact, it might be asserted that this woman by no means wants to give up on her marriage and family life. While the theme of domesticity appears to be central to the short story, the theme of escape is only present in the husband’s acts of unfaithfulness, but seemingly cannot be connected to the female protagonist. In general, it may be assumed that she would be very happy with her role as wife and mother, being placed in the domestic sphere, if her husband did not cheat on her in regular intervals: “He works hard, my husband. And I have always been a great asset to him. And we are ordinary people. And I am proud of that too.” (Enright 4)

At this point, it seems interesting to include one of Eagleton’s (*The Truth about the Irish* 93-94) comments on Irish women, domesticity and happiness, namely his presentation of the striking outcome of an opinion poll on people’s

happiness with life in 1990: “Over nine out of then Irish respondents to the poll indicated that they were happy. [...] Older people were on the whole happier than younger ones, and women who were house-workers were generally happier than those who weren’t.” Thus, as far as Irish womanhood and domesticity are concerned, this quote shows that a lot of Irish women, who do not work outside the home, but engage in housework and childcare, actually seem to be happy with their lives. Of course – as it is the case with all other stereotypical images – this cannot be regarded as generally true, but it indicates that there is another side of the coin, namely that if women (or men) choose to commit parts of their lives to domestic tasks, there is nothing wrong about that. However, the term “choose” needs to be highlighted here, as there has to be the possibility of a free choice for everyone, no matter which sex a person may have or which gender a person performs.

A further interesting motif that may be related to the domestic sphere can be found in *Yesterday’s Weather* and *Love in the Tall Grass*, namely the garden motif, which – as other motifs – has plural meanings that have developed and changed over time. For the two short stories under discussion, however, the most important location is the garden, or rather the state of the garden, is frequently linked to a character’s personality and emotions (cf. Daemmrigh 124). In fact, the two texts seem to make use of the garden motif in contrary ways: In *Yesterday’s Weather*, the garden is depicted as a cultivated, harmonious and beautiful place, as an extension of the house where the female protagonist can realise her own ideas of beauty (cf. Daemmrigh 124-125). The intimate relationship between Hazel and her garden is described in the following passage:

Hazel had a sudden pang for her little garden in Lucan. The seeded grass was sprouting, and the tulips were about to bloom. She had planted the bulbs the week they got the keys: kneeling on the front path, seven months pregnant, digging with the little shovel from the fire-irons; a straight line from the gate to the door of fat, red tulips, the type you get in a park [...] ‘That’s what I love about this place,’ she said. ‘This wonderful stretch of garden.’ (Enright 20)

That the garden mirrors the female main character's sentiments may be inferred from the fact that when they are finally back home after days of trouble and fighting, Hazel discovers her garden to have been troubled too: "When they pulled into the driveway, Hazel saw that her tulips had been blown down – at least, the ones that had opened first. She wondered if the storm had hit here too, and how strong was that wind anyway – was it a usual sort of wind? What would she be able to grow, here?" (Enright 24) Although the garden motif of *Love in the Tall Grass* also reflects the feelings of the story's central figure, it seems to have very different connotations. In fact, after the end of Cordelia's affair with the doctor, not only her mood, but also the picture of her garden changes tremendously. Before the doctor came into her life, "[s]he had always kept the garden, stayed out in the summer with the clippers, trimmed it all back and raked the ear-like laurel leaves off the sandy path, mowed the grass, lit small, inoffensive fires whose smoke poured down beyond the clothes-line." (Keegan 34) However, after he left, her life is characterised by depression and melancholy, and "[t]he neglected hedge began to intrude upon the house, grew so thick and close that all the downstairs rooms loomed in constant shadow, and when the sun was going down, strange, monkey-puzzle shadows poured into the sitting room." (Keegan 34-35) Thus, the neglected and rundown garden now appears to stand for downfall and decay. In addition, the hedge that starts to cover the protagonist's house may be regarded as a border between her and the rest of the world (cf. Daemmrich 126).

Another motif that is part of *Love in the Tall Grass* and can be linked to the protagonist's act of distancing herself from the outside world is solitude, which in this case seems to be the result of a "voluntary withdrawal [...] from active social life." (Daemmrich 167) Although, for instance, the protagonists of *Yesterday's Weather* or *Quare Name for a Boy* also feel deserted at important situations in their lives, they may not necessarily be related to the motif of solitude or loneliness, since they only feel left alone in distinct moments, but they actually have other characters standing by their sides.

## 5. Conclusion

This concluding section is not only intended to summarise the main points that have been made in the preceding chapters, but also meant to relate the findings of this thesis to the context of Irish womanhood in general, and Irish women's writing in particular.

In the short stories under discussion, Claire Keegan and Anne Enright deal with various representations of Irish womanhood and do not merely focus on the bright side of life, but portray life as it may actually be, with all its ups and downs, its rights and wrongs. Topics commonly linked to women in Ireland, such as domesticity, marriage, motherhood, abortion, divorce and also female authorship, are central elements of the texts. For this reason, it may be argued that both authors put the stories and thoughts of women into the centre of their texts and, therefore, contribute to the general feminist, post-feminist and postmodern attempt of transferring "the other" (cf. Hall 1996; Waugh 1992), and in this case female perspectives, from the margins to the centre of Irish literary discourse. In fact, the claim that Anne Enright and Claire Keegan build their short stories around the minds and voices of their central characters has been affirmed in the course of this thesis.

A further conclusion may be drawn on the basis of the characterisations of the female protagonists, namely that a common feature of all the eight women featuring in the narratives is that, no matter how hard they are challenged by unexpected turns in their lives, by unrequited love or by humiliating acts of betrayal, all of them – with the only exception of the main character of *Antarctica* – eventually are able to manage. They are coping with their fates and they are actively dealing with their problems instead of giving up on themselves. Even Cordelia, the main character of Keegan's *Love in the Tall Grass*, who has been engulfed in a serious crisis by the end of her love relationship to a married man, seems to regain bits and pieces of happiness and pleasure at the end of the story: "Cordelia is pleased, but nothing is as she imagined." (Keegan 38)

The portrayals of the female protagonists in the short stories under examination may generally be linked to strength and independence, to a new generation of women who question stereotypical images of Irish womanhood and – as the main character of *Quare Name for a Boy* stresses – distance themselves from the picture of an Irish “woman who shelters her man same as he’s a boy.” (Keegan 101) Although they appear to be – as Enright claims – “damaged” (Moloney, *Anne Enright* 59) to some extent and most of them will probably not be described as heroines, they are still depicted as anything but weak characters. Moments of love, betrayal and doubt can be found in the protagonists’ thoughts and stories, to which themes of either domesticity and/or escape appear to be central – and although the stories’ endings are open, it seems that, as Gratz (115) argues in her thesis on Claire Keegan’s short story collection *Walk the Blue Fields*, there is “a light at the end of the tunnel [...]”

In general, the analysis of the short stories has confirmed the initial proposition that Anne Enright and Claire Keegan engage in post-feminist as well as postmodern writing. In particular, their short stories not only display gaps in narration, but also include elements of deconstruction – especially in connection to gender stereotypes – and postmodern identity construction. Moreover, the texts are characterised by ambiguity as well as open endings and, therefore, all of the stories seem to allow for more than one reading. Reconsidering a quote by Claire Keegan that has already been introduced in the first chapter of this thesis, in which she summarises in few words some essential features of her fiction and its reception: “It’s essentially about trusting in the reader’s intelligence rather than labouring a point. To work on the level of suggestion is what I aim for in all my writing.”<sup>30</sup> Anne Enright as well views the reader as an individual who not only creates specific meanings while reading, but is also part of the creative process that brings a text into being: “Books happen one reader at a time. The writer’s relationship is with the individual reader, not with the crowd.” (Bracken and Cahill 13)

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<sup>30</sup> O’Hagan, Sean. “Claire Keegan: ‘Short stories are limited. I’m cornered into writing what I can.’ *The Observer* 5 Sept. 2010. 01 Feb. 2013.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/sep/05/claire-keegan-short-story-interview/>>.

Finally, as this thesis only dealt with a small selection of Anne Enright's and Claire Keegan's fictional texts, it is important to highlight that there are a variety of texts by both authors worth analysing in future studies. Therefore, it would be very interesting to do future research on similar topics, building on the contribution to the literary discourse on Irish women writers provided by this thesis.

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## **8. Appendix: Plot Summaries**

### **8.1. Selected Short Stories by Anne Enright**

#### **8.1.1. *Green***

The short story *Green* by Anne Enright, which is based on the female protagonist's narration of her past and present personal circumstances, begins with the narrator complaining about the other women living in town, and especially about her antagonist Gertie. In particular, she calls them "vultures" (Enright 133) and describes them as "young women you can see closing up over the years, getting bitter." (Enright 133) In contrast to the main character of the story, these other females have once accepted the fate that has been imposed on them by society and their families, namely to marry a decent man, stay in town and fulfil their roles as wives and mothers. As the protagonist does not want to conform, she decides to leave town and to study at a foreign university. However, after eleven years, she comes back and actually marries a local man, with whom she has children and conducts an organic farm now. Having to sell their products also to Gertie, who runs a well-attended restaurant, makes the narrator furious, as she knows that her organic food is not sufficiently appreciated by this woman. In order to get rid of her rage, she regularly massacres a sycamore in her garden after talking to the much-hated antagonist Gertie. The story ends with the protagonist telling about a dream of water she has once in a while. Here, she dreams about tons of lettuce growing in a lake and herself being in the middle of this green vastness.

#### **8.1.2. *Here's to Love***

In *Here's to Love*, a thirty-nine year old Irish woman living in Paris narrates about her life, her former boyfriends and her husband, sixty-three year old Le Quang Hoa from Saigon. During a conversation with her former boyfriend Shay she not only tells him what she has been up to since they have last met seven years ago, but while talking to him, she also silently reflects on her past in

Ireland, on present days in France and on her marriage. When thinking about her relationship to her husband, she narrates, “We are very happy. Or, no. We are not happy, exactly. But we love each other very much, and this charges our lives with shape and light.” (Enright 70) Although she appears to be satisfied with how things turned out for her, she still seems to look back to her youthful days nostalgically. Meeting her male friends, who report about their unhappy wives and their more or less problematic marriages, seems to make herself feel young and desirable again, as for them, she incorporates a kind of ideal woman, as well as an absolute opposite of their wives. The protagonist pretends to be the girl they know from the past, and therefore, hesitates to tell Shay that she got married – and indeed, after she has told him about the marriage, it seems that his illusions about her are gone and their meeting soon ends. Heading home from the bar, the narrator once again thinks about her husband, who still suffers a lot because of his war experiences. Passing a building in the 5<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement, she recounts an occurrence of a man who seems to have pointed a gun at her from the top of one of the buildings. Moreover, being on her way, she all of a sudden starts wondering if her husband is real at all, which not only makes the ending of the story utterly confusing, but also gives rise to doubts as far as the whole text is concerned.

### **8.1.3. Until the Girl Died**

Enright’s ‘slice of life’ story *Until the Girl Died* is about an Irish woman, mother and wife, who is being betrayed by her husband regularly. The story starts with the female protagonist narrating about her husband’s most recent affair called Samantha. In fact, the girl died in a car accident in Italy, which not only makes her different from all his other “lapses” (Enright 3), but also makes her matter to the nameless female main character. With the help of an interior monologue, the protagonist reflects upon her rather ambivalent feelings towards her husband, who is the father of her three children, and upon men in general. How she finds out that he cheated on her and that the girl died, is told in flashbacks. One day, she finds her man sitting in the living room with a disturbed and sad look on his face. Somehow, she immediately knows what is going on, namely

that he has cheated on her once again. At this point, she tells him that she does not want to hear about it and overtly ignores his suffering. As a consequence, they continue their “normal” life for the sake of the children and do not speak about what has happened. After some days, when the protagonist comes home and sees her husband wearing a suit and his funeral tie, and he tells her that it is just some girl from work who died, everything starts making sense to her. She discovers the truth as she searches through old newspapers and finds a death notice of Samantha. During the following month the couple only communicates about superficial and organisational things. Nevertheless, after this time-span, the main character decides to put away her pride, since she feels sorry for her mourning, desperate husband, who is now looking old to her, and – as she puts it – “call[s] him back home.” (Enright 10) Therefore, she dresses up, buys some lilies and visits the dead girl’s grave. When the female protagonist returns home, she is finally able to call her husband by his name again, which she stopped doing after the tragic incident. At the end, she asks him about what they could do for Easter, which may signal forgiveness and a fresh start.

#### **8.1.4. Yesterday’s Weather**

In the short story *Yesterday’s Weather*, an unnerving day in the family life of the reflector figure Hazel, her husband John and their baby is depicted. They are visiting John’s family in Clonmel, but as Hazel does not really like John’s sister Margaret and seems to feel totally uncomfortable at her place, they only spend their days there and go back to a hotel room in the evening. At John’s parental home, they start quarrelling about what may be called trivialities. Hazel feels left alone as she has to do all the work, preparing the meals and looking after the baby, while John is enjoying himself, playing ball with Margaret’s children. Suddenly, when a ball rolls past Hazel’s feet and John asks her to throw it back, she cannot manage to stay calm any longer, walks towards him, furiously puts the baby into his arms and flounces off to the house. Back at the hotel, the fighting continues and John is off for drinks at the bar. Hazel seems to doubt that she can put up with all this any longer and even questions her love for their child. When John returns, she is still taking care of the baby. Driving home to

their house in Lucan, John touches her cheek and she responds by holding his hand, which may be seen as a sign of reconciliation. Arriving at their place, Hazel sees that her beloved tulips, which she had planted when she was pregnant, have been destroyed. This once again leads her to question her way of living as well as their future as a family. She would like to know how things will turn out in the future, but it is only the past – or as she puts it “yesterday’s weather” (Enright 24) – that is being talked about so frequently.

## **8.2. Selected Short Stories by Claire Keegan**

### **8.2.1. *Antarctica***

Claire Keegan’s *Antarctica* is about a seemingly “happily married woman” (Keegan 3) and mother, who leaves home over the weekend in search for a sexual adventure with a stranger. Therefore, she tells her husband that she is off to the city to buy Christmas presents, and he trusts her. She checks into a hotel room at Vicar’s Close, where she spends her first night. On Saturday morning, she actually takes care of the Christmas shopping, whereas, in the afternoon, she dresses up and goes to a pub where she gets to know a stranger. After playing pool and getting drunk, she leaves with him and finally finds herself in his dark, rather mysterious flat. They end up in bed together and the protagonist spends the evening as well as the night at his place. It is already Sunday morning when she sneaks off while her lover is still asleep to check out of the hotel. While calling her husband from a telephone booth in the hotel, the guy she slept with suddenly appears behind her and urges her to spend some more time with him. After having lunch and getting drunk once more, he seems to show his true colours for the first time, as he forcibly takes her hand and leads her into a wood. However, she accompanies him into the deep woods, where he suddenly pushes her against a tree and makes her say that she will not forget him. And still, she agrees to come to his place for a second time, where he playfully undresses and handcuffs her. Although she slowly starts to panic, she does not actively react against his actions. After having sex, she is left handcuffed and sedated on his bed. As he does not seem to even consider

letting her go, he goes to work and leaves her behind. The protagonist desperately tries to free herself, but does not succeed. The story ends with the protagonist lying naked on the stranger's bed and it is getting colder and colder, since he did not close the window in the adjoining room. Slowly drifting into numbness, her last thoughts are about ice-cold Antarctica, hell and eternity.

### **8.2.2. Love in the Tall Grass**

When Cordelia, the female protagonist as well as the main reflector figure of Keegan's short story *Love in the Tall Grass*, wakes up in the afternoon, she is alone and surrounded by the dark, cold atmosphere of her house. It is New Year's Eve – which will become clear as the story continues – and she gets ready for a long-awaited reunion with a man she met about ten years ago. Who this man is, who is always referred to as “the doctor”, and what he means to Cordelia is told in an extended flashback: They first met when Cordelia sold apples in front of her house and they got along from the very start. As their meetings on Thursdays became a habit, they got to know each other and on Cordelia's thirtieth birthday the doctor suddenly kissed her. However, as he was a married man and had young children, Cordelia had to be – and actually was – satisfied with the fact that they could only have a secret affair. After a while they continued their meetings at Strandhill, because there the doctor could hide his car in the dunes.

After this first flashback, the story proceeds with Cordelia, after ten years of loneliness and misery, heading toward this venue to meet the doctor, who promised the following a decade ago: “In ten years' time the children will be grown and gone. Promise you'll meet me on New Year's Eve at the turn of the century. Meet me that night and I will come home and live with you [...]” (Keegan 33) Arriving at Strandhill, Cordelia surprisingly faces the doctor's wife instead of him. While the two women have a conversation about the past, the doctor arrives as well. Therefore, the story comes to an end in a rather awkward situation with the three of them sitting together and “waiting for somebody to leave.” (Keegan 38)

### **8.2.3. Men and Women**

Claire Keegan's *Men and Women* seems to be about power dynamics in a family living in rural Ireland. The daughter narrates about their life and describes the others, namely her mother and father as well as her elder brother. They are living on a farm with animals and therefore, there is a lot of work that needs to be done on a daily basis. In fact, the women seem to do most of the labour, while the men often sit back and enjoy themselves. Especially the protagonist's brother Seamus does not do a lot, since he is said to be the clever one in the family, who will make a decent career. However, in reality he is just pretending to study and lets the others do all the work. When her father goes to examine some sheep on Saturdays, the girl has to accompany him and help him with the sheep. As she describes their daily routines, it soon becomes clear that this family is different: "And that was when I suspected that our family wasn't normal." (Keegan 130) Her parents do not sleep in the same bed, her father treats her mother disrespectfully and Seamus does the same to her. In her narration, the young girl reflects about these issues in a very mature manner. Except for these descriptions and reflections, there is a decisive event taking place on New Year's Eve: The family goes out to Spellman Hall to celebrate, but while her father keeps dancing with other woman, her mother does not seem to have a good time at all. It gets even worse, when she makes a fool of herself by being set off the stage for having mistaken the tombola numbers. This seems to represent a turning point in the story, as the main character's mother objects her husband – and she does that for the first time in the text – by not opening the gates for him and actually deciding to drive the car away from him. Narration ends with the mother, daughter and son driving away, and the father watching them, standing out in the cold.

### **8.2.4. Quare Name for a Boy**

The short story *Quare Name for a Boy* by Claire Keegan starts with the female protagonist clearly pointing out that she is now going to tell something important. In fact, the first sentence "I have come home to tell you" (Keegan 95)

is already an ambiguous one, as with the “you” she may either directly address the reader or indicate the inception of the conversation with the future father of her child. The unnamed main character narrates about the behaviour and lives of her female relatives and includes many general – and of course subjective – statements about what is typical for Irish women and Irish men. She comes home to Ireland to tell the man with whom she had an affair over Christmas that she is pregnant with his baby. They meet in Dublin and go to Sandycove, a place at the coast, where they engage in superficial chatter and spend the rest of the time in silence. Then they decide to go to a pub in town to have some drinks. In a flashback, the protagonist remembers the week they spent together: “[...] that week between Christmas and the New Year, six days and nights spent at your mother’s empty house, when I wore nothing but your clothes [...]. We used to wake in the middle of those nights and make love and coffee, and you didn’t have much to say but that was fine.” (Keegan 100) Afterwards the protagonist all of a sudden tells the man about the baby. Although he refers to the pregnancy as a “damage” (Keegan 101), the protagonist immediately lets him know that she will keep the baby. He seems to accept her decision and she knows that she does not want him to spend his life with them. Finally, she wonders why she came in the first place and the story ends not only with the central figure drinking her “pint of Irish stout” (Keegan 102), but also with a number of open questions.

## **9. German Abstract**

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit analysiert die Darstellung der weiblichen Protagonistinnen in ausgewählten Kurzgeschichten der beiden zeitgenössischen irischen Autorinnen Anne Enright und Claire Keegan. Obwohl jede der Hauptfiguren der insgesamt acht Kurzgeschichten eine eigene Geschichte und individuelle Charakteristika hat, lassen sich doch viele Gemeinsamkeiten erkennen, welche eine vergleichende Analyse der Texte ermöglichen. Obwohl das Hauptaugenmerk dieser Arbeit auf einer genauen Untersuchung der Charakterisierung der weiblichen Protagonistinnen liegt, sind folgende weitere Schwerpunkte zu erkennen:

Zu Beginn soll ein Einblick in den für die Kurzgeschichten relevanten kulturhistorischen Kontext gegeben werden, welcher ungefähr von 1990 bis heute reicht. Dieser Teil stellt einen groben Überblick über die Geschichte irischer Frauen sowie irischer Schriftstellerinnen des späten 20. und frühen 21. Jahrhunderts dar. Weiters werden die beiden Autorinnen und ihr literarisches Schaffen, welches häufig mit postmodernen und postfeministischen Theorien in Verbindung gebracht wird, vorgestellt. Überdies wird anhand von erzähltheoretischen Überlegungen untersucht, in welcher Form die weiblichen Figuren in den Texten befähigt werden ihre Stimme zu nutzen, um ihre Geschichten, Gedanken und Gefühle zu vermitteln. Außerdem werden ihre Positionen in den fiktionalen Gesellschaften sowie ihre Beziehungen zu den Nebenfiguren beschrieben. In diesem Zusammenhang werden auch stereotypische Vorstellungen von Weiblichkeit – insbesondere im Bezug auf Irland – sowie deren Konstruktion und Dekonstruktion in den Texten, im Lichte neuerer Forschungsliteratur diskutiert. Darüber hinaus werden diverse Lebenskrisen und Identitätskonstruktionen der weiblichen Protagonistinnen jeweils in Relation zu den anderen Kurzgeschichten gesetzt. Da die Geschichten Parallelen im Bezug auf literarische Themen und Motive aufweisen, stellen auch diese eine wichtige Komponente der Arbeit dar.



Um zu den vorhanden Einblicken in die Kurzgeschichten zu gelangen, werden verschiedene Methoden des wissenschaftlichen Arbeitens verwendet. Da eine detaillierte Analyse von acht weiblichen Hauptcharakteren im Vordergrund steht, wird im Großteil dieser Diplomarbeit sehr textnahe gearbeitet, wofür die Methode des „close reading“ herangezogen wird. Weiters werden zentrale Elemente der Erzähltheorien von F.K. Stanzel, M. Fludernik und G. Genette, Gender Theorie und postmoderne Lesarten angewandt.

## **10. Curriculum Vitae**

### **Persönliche Daten**

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### **Schulbildung**

1995-1999: Volksschule Aschbach-Markt, NÖ

1999-2000: Hauptschule Aschbach-Markt, NÖ

2000-2007: Stiftsgymnasium Seitenstetten

06/2007: Reifeprüfung am Stiftsgymnasium Seitenstetten mit ausgezeichnetem Erfolg

### **Akademische Laufbahn**

09/2007 – 01/2008: Studium der Rechtswissenschaften an der Johannes Kepler Universität Linz

03/2008 – 06/2013: Lehramtsstudium Unterrichtsfach Englisch, Unterrichtsfach Deutsch

01/2012 – 06/2012: ERASMUS Auslandssemester Spanien, Universitat de València

10/2012 – 03/2013: Zweitstudium der Romanistik (BA) an der Universität Wien

### **Relevante Praktika**

10/2009 – 02/2010: Pädagogisches Praktikum im Unterrichtsfach Deutsch, GRG21 Ödenburgerstraße 1210 Wien

10/2010 – 02/2011: Fachbezogenes Praktikum im Unterrichtsfach Englisch, GRG21 Bertha von Suttner Schulschiff 1210 Wien

10/2011 – 02/2012: Fachbezogenes Praktikum im Unterrichtsfach Deutsch, BRG18 Schopenhauerstraße 1180 Wien

### **Fremdsprachenkenntnisse**

Deutsch, Englisch, Spanisch

Grundkenntnisse in Französisch, Italienisch, Latein

### **Auszeichnungen**

Studienjahre 2009/10, 2010/11, 2011/12: Leistungsstipendium der Universität Wien für das Lehramtsstudium UF Englisch, UF Deutsch