Bodies of Shame and the Shame of Bodies: Reading the Gendered Shame Complex in the Fiction of John McGahern and Edna O’Brien

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List of Abbreviations

John McGahern


Edna O’Brian


Abstract

Critical analysis of the representation of shame in modern Irish fiction is noticeable only by its relative absence from the field. Indeed, there is a marked scarcity of scholarship that even acknowledge the presence of shame as a theme, and fewer still that explore its role and function. This project seeks to address this deficit by interrogating the place of shame in a modern Irish context, with specific reference to the work of two of Ireland’s pre-eminent twentieth-century novelists, John McGahern (1934-2006) and Edna O’Brien (b. 1930).

This thesis argues the following: that, firstly, shame – both political and personal – represents a key element in the evolution of the postcolonial Irish cultural imagination; secondly, an approach to the modern Irish novel in terms of shame – or, to be more precise, a gendered shame complex – can lead to a new understanding of the relationship between gender, sexuality and nationality in the country’s cultural and political consciousness; and thirdly, in order to imagine a literature in which the postcolonial residue has been overcome, the concepts of ‘shame’ and ‘postcolonial existence’ must first be uncoupled.

This project examines the presence and function of a shame complex in the works of McGahern and O’Brien using a gendered framework. It analyses both how shame is constructed and instilled in the psychological identity of characters, as well as the political and social utilisation of this transmitted shame complex by prevailing hegemonic power structures. In so doing, this thesis traces what I will argue is a transgenerational shame complex which indicates, on a literary level, a nation already bearing internally generated national scars. It additionally argues that intersectionality – that is, the tendency to accrete multiple power relations such as nation, sexuality and gender – must start to be troubled.

Using a gendered approach, this project examines the different workings of shame in both male and female characters in the work of McGahern and O’Brien. It traces how these differences, however subtle, complicate the stereotypical fixed gender roles promulgated by twentieth-century Irish patriarchal, political, religious and educational discourses. This thesis is principally interested in how the shame complex is employed by both patriarchy and Catholicism to produce and transmit a gendered ideology, and how the characters are portrayed as responding to, subverting or conforming to this ideology.

Shame plays a particularly prominent and powerful role in the regulation and self-regulation of the body to conform to fixed gender roles. In order to examine the militancy with which slippages and non-conformity are persecuted in order to privilege the heteronormative values of the hegemonic discourse, the instability of these roles is probed in order to unpack the culturally elusive but powerful phantom of ‘normal’ which starts to emerge in this period.
Declaration

Some of the ideas in this doctoral thesis have their genesis in a 7000-word long essay I submitted as a requirement for the B.A. English and American Studies (2013) at the University of Manchester. However, there are no substantive instances of thematic overlap between that essay and this thesis, as the material has been so extensively developed that it no longer bears any resemblance to that earlier work.

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Laura Schlüter, née Hair, graduated from the University of Manchester in 2013 with a First Class Bachelor of Arts Degree in English Literature. In 2014, she received her Master’s Degree in Contemporary Literature and Culture with Distinction from the same institution.

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Introduction

The individual can … be shamed by whatever shames another. … This mechanism provides a perfect vehicle for the transmission and preservation of social norms from generation to generation. It also provides a mechanism for the preservation of social norms among adult members of a community, inasmuch as the evocation of shame … provide[s] powerful negative sanctions against the transgression of shared social norms.

Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters*¹

What is a community? How do we define it? What power does it have? More pertinently to this thesis: what is an Irish community and how does it relate to notions of personal and national identity – is it simply a constitutionally recognised body comprising of men and women who call themselves Irish? What, in turn, does it mean to inhabit a male or female body within an Irish community? What – if any – congruence exists between institutional and physical bodies, and what role do these bodies play in the relationship between shame, the sexed body, and gender? Finally, how do these concepts of community, bodies, and nation interact with, conflict against, or reflect mechanisms of power? To answer questions such as these I will explore the operations of communal identity in the works of two significant late twentieth-century Irish writers – John McGahern (1934-2006) and Edna O’Brien (b. 1930).

Ireland’s extensive, emotive and, at times, explosive history in wrestling with the issues pertaining to the concept of community and its relationship to identity renders the country the ideal site to situate questions concerning community formation, reformation and negotiation. Indeed, recent political discussion debating

how Ireland will manage its geopolitical and economic affairs both internally and with the United Kingdom when the latter terminates its membership of the European Union has highlighted how this subject is still being precariously navigated. The fictional works of these two Irish authors variously reflect on, engage with, criticise, and romanticise the notion of an ‘Irish community’ between the early 1960s and the 1998 Peace process. Their writings mirror the wider nation’s concerns as Irish citizens struggle with and process feelings of shame regarding their postcolonial past, significant political upheaval, and abuse scandals in the Catholic Church – years which require urgent re-examination owing to the uncannily similar set of events unfolding today. My close readings of a selection of their novels published between 1960 and 2002 will facilitate an understanding of how local and national identities are managed; which values, norms, and politics are invested and transmitted within those (gendered) identities; how communities – a concept defined in complex and sometimes contradictory ways – sanction, reward and coerce subjects into conforming to these norms; and the consequences for those who resist, refuse, or rebel. This thesis will therefore predominantly focus on the points at which individual and communal notions of identity come into contact or conflict, examine when and how the institutional bodies of government, church, and education apply shaming discourses to the physical body in an attempt to induce conformity, and assess to what extent they are successful in this endeavour.

To understand the operations of shame I turn to the influential theories of Silvan Tomkins. His writings will be fundamental to this thesis as they are among the first scholarly works which not only address the psychological significance of shame, but also explore its social as well as phenomenological function. Tomkins’ assertion that shame acts to transmit and instil hegemonic social norms within members of the
community will be the governing principle of this thesis; I will therefore primarily attend to the political, social, and cultural function of shame as opposed to its phenomenology owing to my primary interest in exploring the role shame plays in community formation. As a result, this thesis will largely concentrate on the effects and outcomes of the evocation of shame in these novelists’ protagonists – alongside the institutions which perpetuate and disseminate it – rather than the inception or theoretical make-up of shame itself. In so doing, I echo the concern of June Price Tangney and her colleagues in their observation that:

[m]ost theory and research on shame and guilt has focused on the events that lead up to these emotional experiences, the phenomenology of these emotions, or the consequences of these emotions for motivation and behaviour. Less attention has been directed toward how people cope with aversive feelings of shame and guilt.²

I aim to redress some of this paucity of attention by not only examining how McGahern and O’Brien’s protagonists ‘cope with aversive feelings of shame’, but also investigating the impact that exposure to prolonged periods of shame – both externally and internally generated – have on the characters’ sense of self in the longer term. In linking Price Tangney’s concerns with Tomkins’ assertion that institutionally embedded shame has a normalising function, I aim to probe what I believe may be a causally linked set of circumstances: that shame has a political function designed to normatively align its citizens’ identities to correspond with hegemonic values.

Price Tangney and her colleagues attempt to firmly differentiate shame and guilt as affects with diverging results. They posit that ‘shame corresponds with attempts to deny, hide, or escape the shame-inducing situation’, whilst contending that guilt is a more adaptive emotion which ‘corresponds with reparative actions

including confessions, apologies, and undoing the consequences of the behaviour’.³ Tomkins argues the converse, asserting that ‘shame and guilt are not distinguished from each other at the level of affect […]. They are one and the same’.⁴ Over the course of this thesis I will suggest that confession rituals – which Price Tangney et al. identify as a positive symptom of adaptive guilt – are in fact deeply shame-inducing experiences; I will thus follow Tomkins’ lead in examining shame as a complex matrix that is associated with, feeds off, and is embedded within other negative affects like fear, guilt, humiliation, contempt, distress, anguish, and disgust. Disgust is an affect which will become particularly prominent in my subsequent exploration of somatic shame as being highly congruent with Julia Kristeva’s theorisation of the abject. In analysing these negative affects as contributing to and functions of a shaming matrix, I further echo Tomkins’ contention that these affects work symbiotically to ensure that the shamed individual feels ‘naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth’.⁵

Timothy Bewes supports Tomkins’ holistic approach to shame, and builds upon Tomkins’ theorisation of shame in his work The Event of Postcolonial Shame:

In dealing with shame in literature, criticism will have to develop formal strategies for getting at the paradox of shame: that the notion of shame is inadequate to the experience, which itself is one of inadequacy, or incommensurability. […] Shame is an event of writing, which means that it is never contained or exhausted by interpretation, nor even by its representation in the work. One of the hopes of the present study is to take a first step towards such a criticism.⁶

I carry forward Bewes’ hopes for his own writing into my own. His observation that shame cannot be fully expressed or contained in literature further underscores the

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⁴ Tomkins, Shame and Its Sisters, p. 133.
⁵ Ibid.
decision to look at shame as a matrix rather than a singular phenomenological event. As Bewes and Tomkins identify, shame produces feelings of utter inadequacy which overwhelm and paralyse many of the protagonists, rendering them unable to distil or separate the affect of shame from guilt, humiliation, fear, contempt, disgust etc. Indeed, I will go on to argue that some of these shame-related affects can amplify each other, yet again indicating that shame resides in the plurality of negative emotions rather than in the singular.

Miryam Clough approaches shame from a similar perspective in her recent work *Shame, the Church, and the Regulation of Female Sexuality*. She recounts how she was ‘[f]orced to abandon [her] original intention of formulating a tidy definition of shame and […] instead recognise shame as a complex system’, which consequently drove her to ‘explore [shame] as it appears in parts and wholes, in individuals, in interpersonal relationships and in social systems’.⁷ I, like Clough, set out with similar intentions and was equally compelled to reformulate my very understanding of shame. The harder I sought to isolate it, the further it seemed to embed, entwine, and bury itself in a wide range of phenomenological, social, historical, and political tranches I had hitherto intended to treat as distinct. Clough’s affirmation of my burgeoning realisation that shame is rarely visible as ‘a whole’ and is largely concealed within ‘individuals, interpersonal relationships and in social systems’ reinforced this thesis’ determination to probe the social function of shame.

This insight is not incompatible with Price Tangney’s investigations. In attending less to the phenomenology of these emotions, I hope to make more progress into what she identifies as a scarcity of material which explores ‘how people

cope with aversive feelings of shame’. In order to analyse the long-term effects of shame, I took the decision to embark upon sustained analyses of a representative selection of McGahern and O’Brien’s protagonists, drawn from a broad range of their respective novelistic outputs. Consequently, some characters (and even some novels) from their oeuvre have been omitted; this was a necessary – albeit reluctant – sacrifice in order to attempt to comprehensively address and redress Price Tangney’s concerns. I have employed a gendered approach to this literary corpus in order to follow and compare protagonists experiencing similar forces of shame. I will shortly examine how and why the Ireland that McGahern and O’Brien grew up in and wrote about was consciously organised by gender, but I would like to additionally stress that this division was utilised to reflect not only the binaries within which the protagonists understand themselves, but also to facilitate the sustained analysis necessary to draw accurate conclusions about the long-term impacts of shame on the individual, community, and nation.

The dangers of homogenising the island of Ireland are self-evident. Whilst it is avoidable for the purposes of this thesis to speak about community in what may initially appear to be broad strokes, my textual analysis will focus on the impact and significance of instances of resistance, dissonance, and dislocation within hegemonic narratives. Throughout my investigations, I take Catherine MacKinnon’s statement as a governing principle: ‘I am thinking all the time about power: the simplicity of the force and the complexity of the authority that make male supremacy a specific politics, and the changing shades of complicity, its feminine face’. Also pondering the issue of the politics of power, Judith Butler observes that ‘[t]he body gains

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meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations. Sexuality is an
historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies and affectivity’. 10
MacKinnon and Butler both posit an intrinsic and asymmetrical relationship between
power, bodies, sexuality, and gender.

In light of these statements, a further set of questions crystallising around the
elusive concept of power becomes imperative: Who/what is asserting authority over
the body? What obligations are placed on that body? By which means or mechanisms
is conformity induced in the body? How are these claims of authority socially,
culturally, and/or historically constructed? What dynamics, discourses or
implications are embedded within these claims? Keeping the gendered body as my
central focus on literary expression in the context of modern Ireland, I aim to
examine the shaming mechanisms/discourses applied to it and trace the sources
which employ these shaming devices. Once I have determined the source(s) of
shame, I will analyse the inferences which can be gleaned about how the power,
politics and cultural dynamics of John McGahern and Edna O’Brien’s Ireland
intersect with their protagonists’ gender, body, and sexual identities to ascertain how
asymmetrical power structures based on gendered shame complexes mould their
psychological identities.

**Binding Binaries and Duelling Dualisms**

I have already stated that I am aware this thesis initially employs a binary structure to
analyse the gendered shame complex in McGahern and O’Brien’s work. I am further
conscious that employing a gendered division in some senses reifies the concepts

'male' and ‘female’ that recent gender theory has sought to undo – or at least loosen – which risks further shackling gender to the body. When examining the hegemonic discourse that insists on rigid gender binaries, Susan Stryker comments that:

[t]he so-called sex of the body is an interpretative fiction that narrates a complex amalgamation of gland secretions and reproductive organs, chromosomes and genes, morphological characteristics and physiognomic features. There are far more than two viable aggregations of a sexed bodily being. At what cost, for what purposes, and through what means do we collapse this diversity of embodiment into the social categories ‘woman’ and ‘man’?\(^\text{11}\)

I fully agree with Stryker’s contention that the sexed body is polymorphous and therefore reductively over-simplified to the male/female binary by medical discourse, and I certainly do not seek to undermine the impulse to disaggregate these concepts. However, as James Cahalan observes, “male’ and ‘female’ are certainly not terms to be discarded [as] they constantly impress themselves upon us in the novels examined here’.\(^\text{12}\) As this thesis will demonstrate, the society of rural Catholic Ireland which these authors depict is saturated with the imposition and forceful policing of gender binaries. In a culture inundated with dichotomies, a dualistic lens is the overriding ontological apparatus these authors and the characters they construct have to conceptualise and understand the world. For this reason, I have taken a binary approach: it is necessary to analyse these protagonists using the terms and structures they use to understand themselves. Therefore, to grasp and reflect how these characters process their environment, it is logical to work within the limits of their binary arrangements.


That is not to say that such an approach will not be troubled, and in so doing I hope to make some progress in answering the rhetorical question Stryker poses regarding the purpose of enforcing sex and gender divisions in society by analysing the means through which this is achieved and identifying those who claim the authority to interpret the body. Cultural discourse dictated by ‘power relations’ ascribes the social categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ to the sexed body. However, given Stryker’s focus on the social signification of the body, it becomes plausible that her protest against the ‘social categories’ of man and woman concerns their performative connotations of masculinity and femininity. As Butler argues, ‘[t]he view that gender is performative [seeks] to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body’. Butler thus draws attention to a set of social significations and conflations that will pervade this thesis. The body is ascribed the label ‘man’ and ‘woman’ by medical and cultural authorities. This assignation is then further overlaid by a series of performative demands that exceed biological difference; gendered hegemonic discourse ascribes masculinity to the male body and femininity to the female body which work, over the course of time, to ‘styliz[e]’ these bodies to reflect discursive/social rather than biological variances.

Through analysing the conflicts that protagonists experience when prevailing hegemonic discourse regarding gender performance does not map onto their lived somatic experience – particularly during adolescence when the body physically and socially transitions from childhood into adulthood – I aim to demonstrate that the assignations ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ deriving from the biologically sexed body are far from stable. I thus echo the sentiments of Hélène Cixous in her analysis of

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James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916): ‘I reproach myself for using the words *men* and *women*. We have difficulties with these words nowadays […]. We always get confused because of these words, but we have to deal with them, we have to struggle with them. […] Please use as many quotation marks as you need to avoid taking these terms too literally’.14 I am conscious that the first part of this thesis examining cultural scripts surrounding the female body will become dominated by O’Brien’s texts, and the second part similarly scrutinizing discourses surrounding the male body by McGahern’s works. This justifies even as it troubles my approach. Given that the female and male authors write respectively feminine and masculine centred novels, this underscores both the presence of exclusionary gender binaries which I will argue is symptomatic of Irish culture and substantiates my assertion that it is through these binaries that Irish subjects define and express themselves as they inhabit their communities.

There is one further complication embedded within dualistic structures best articulated by Anne Fausto-Sterling in her examination of the sex/gender, male/female divisions that are firmly entrenched in Western society:

> [W]ays of understanding how the world works depend heavily on the use of dualisms – pairs of opposing concepts, objects, or belief systems. […] Why worry about using dualisms to parse the world? […] Their use makes invisible the interdependencies of each pair. *This relationship enables sets of pairs to map onto each other.* […] In everyday use, the sets of associations on each side of the list often run together.15

The very ability, even propensity, for sets of binary pairs to rhetorically ‘map onto each other’ is crucial to this thesis. By focussing on each gender consecutively and then simultaneously, I hope to create the space to fully explore the rhetorical, social,

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and institutional pressures which seek to deliberately conflate and collapse sets of binaries with the intention of producing a unified, coherent, calcified gender system through these dualisms.

To further unpack and demonstrate Fausto-Sterling’s claim – and relate it to the culture and society under discussion – it is helpful to address the dichotomies present in Taoiseach (Premier) Eamon de Valera’s 1943 St Patrick’s Day radio address, during which he set out his paradigmatic vision for post-independence Ireland as:

a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose fire sides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live.\(^{16}\)

de Valera’s speech has become iconic and is regularly cited as one of the rhetorical cornerstones which shaped the direction of and aspirations for the newly enfranchised Ireland. However, this address is imbued with dualisms which far exceed nationalistic optimism and are central to crystallising the gender divisions which saturate McGahern and O’Brien’s novels. Buried in the bucolic imagery are some troubling binaries designed to normatively align genders: male/female, young/old, wise/ignorant, and athletic/domestic. ‘Youths’ is not a gender neutral term here: it stands in contrast to ‘maidens’ and functions as a synonym for ‘male’. Thus, de Valera subtly equates ‘youth’ with ‘athletic’ masculinity – a move which tacitly reinforces the ‘Old Woman of Ireland’ imagery already firmly established in nationalist discourse (a motif I shall more fully address shortly). He further labels young women as ‘maidens’, which is a term that instantly evokes images of medieval

\(^{16}\) Eamon de Valera, ‘St. Patrick’s Day Address’, Raidió Teilifís Éireann Archives <https://www.rte.ie> [accessed 09 May 2016].
chivalry. Invoking this literary tradition simultaneously reinforces the idea that women are ornamental, defenceless, and subordinate. It additionally pigeon-holes them in the roles of wives and mothers – alignments that mirror those of the Catholic Church. This parallel is most succinctly addressed by Lori Rogers, who observes that a ‘woman’s only valid role in a Roman Catholic society was Mother, and Ireland was, from its 1916 Rising at the latest, to be a Roman Catholic nation’. Rogers’ pithy summary is one that shall be broadened and deepened in Part 1 of this thesis, and is a determinative paradigm shaping Irish femininity which will pervade much of my subsequent analysis.

Remembering Fausto-Sterling’s warning that sets of binary pairs easily map onto one another, we may rearrange the dualisms present above to read: male-young-intelligent-athletic-dominant; female-old-ignorant-domestic-passive. I contend that the propensity of dichotomous lists to run together, far from being an incidental by-product of a dualistic system, is fundamental to the way in which institutions attempt to position, appropriate, and manipulate bodies – bodies which, through a further co-option of discourse, become conflated and synonymous with gender, sexuality, and identity. A society saturated with binaries is generative of further dualistic rhetoric. Fausto-Sterling asserts that gender dualisms serve a political, socio-economic agenda beyond a Western heteronormative insistence on ‘normal’:

[W]e “do gender” as a part of “doing difference”. We establish identities that include race and class as well as gender, and we do gender differently depending upon our location in racial and class hierarchies.

This observation is supported by Joanne Sharp, who contends that:

18 Fausto-Sterling, Sexing the Body, p. 244.
gender and nationality are significant elements of contemporary subject identity and yet neither […] are a priori categories. Subjects are overdetermined by locations in multiple groups and processes. These multiple identifications are not additive; it is not possible to distil one aspect of identity such as gender and nationality for examination independent of other aspects (socioeconomic position, race, nationality and so forth).¹⁹

Fausto-Sterling and Sharp’s arguments are the starting point for both my methodological approach and the chapters to come. I fully agree with Sharp in her insistence that articulations of gender and nationality are cumulative rather than additive, and that one cannot be examined independently of the other. However, I aim to go beyond her observation and demonstrate that they operate symbiotically, that each is simultaneously imbricated within and formed by the other. I also support Fausto-Sterling’s contention that gendered dualisms serve a political (even ideological) function beyond insisting that bodies conform to Western stereotypes of ‘normal’. Indeed, I suggest that these binaries construct and reinforce one another as much as conform to existing preconceptions in patriarchal heteronormative discourse. In light of this, I will further argue that dichotomies facilitate community (and nation) formation through their ability to act as a shorthand for ‘normal’.

I have taken pains to underscore that binaries are prone to elision. Thus, a society disposed and encouraged to think dualistically is a society already predisposed to conflate sets of unrelated dichotomies. Consequently, the promulgated binary of man/woman that demands correspondingly rigid masculine/feminine performances expands to include other binaries such as English/Irish, Protestant/Catholic, us/them, and insider/outsider. The correlation between dualistic thinking and the creation of an abject is a theme that will pervade this thesis, and is a

congruent impulse explained in its simplest terms by Julia Kristeva: ‘Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either’.\textsuperscript{20} Whilst I will go on to define and discuss the abject at some length, I will offer a shorthand definition here that the abject is that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’.\textsuperscript{21} ‘The abject has only one quality […] – that of being opposed to I’.\textsuperscript{22} The ‘I’ often latches onto the comfort of abjective binaries in order to quickly delineate and defend its borders. ‘Not me. Not that’ thinking escalates to reify and then calcify the dichotomies which de Valera promulgates. Thus, the explicit dualisms which form the undercurrent of his speech which can be read as Irish-male-athletic-young-dominant; female-old-ignorant-domestic-passive rest upon another tacit set of binaries rearranged as: Irish-Catholic-moral-emancipated, English-Protestant-immoral-repressive.

The (inter)relationship between an institutional insistence on highly differentiated, gendered identities is more fully illuminated when viewed through a postcolonial lens: a determinative tenet of Irish identity which I have not yet attended to. The deferral of addressing Ireland’s status as a postcolonial nation, or at least my impulse to remove it as the central issue in this thesis, is one that will be maintained throughout. That is not to say that the impact of postcolonial shame will be dismissed or ignored, but rather that it will be examined as a constitutive strand within a much larger shaming matrix designed to induce gender conformity in Irish subjects. Bewes argues that:

> once we see shame in these structural rather than ethical terms, shame begins to seem not like a response to all that is evil in the world, but its origin. It is no longer possible to assume, for example, that the shame of

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, p. 1.
the postcolonial present rises from the colonial past, and that shame will
disappear once the colonial structures of power have been eradicated.
One would have more justification in arguing the opposite […]23

Bewes’ analysis, particularly his statement that one cannot assume that shame will
disappear once colonial structures of power have been eradicated, is borne out in the
works of these authors. Whilst many of their older, male characters fought in the
euphemistically named “Troubles” that followed the highly emotive, controversial
partitioning of the island of Ireland, postcolonial shame rarely accounts for either the
origins or the sum of their feelings of shame. Moreover, the authors depict adolescent
protagonists who hold deep-rooted and toxic feelings of shame, but who were born
long after the 1922 enfranchising of Ireland indicating, as Bewes contends, that
shame does not ‘disappear once the colonial structures of power have been
eradicated’.

Indeed, the locus of most of the adolescent angst present in McGahern and
O’Brien’s novels is rooted in Catholic doctrine – an institutional structure which
reached the apotheosis of its cultural and political power in Ireland in the
postcolonial period. Bewes subsequently argues that ‘[s]hame and colonialism share
a certain organizing assumption: the conceptual opposition of identity and
difference’.24 I would contend, however, that this is equally true in the relationship
between shame and postcolonialism. As demonstrated in my analysis of de Valera’s
St Patrick’s Day address, rhetoric which would pose as purely nationalistic
nevertheless contains buried paternalistic dualisms which attempt to organise
subjects’ identity beyond national affiliation. Thus, the issue of Ireland’s status as a
postcolonial nation will haunt this thesis rather as it haunts McGahern and O’Brien’s
protagonists: perhaps not always overtly present, but never far from the surface and

23 Bewes, Postcolonial Shame, p. 164.
24 Ibid, p. 165.
always accompanied by, imbricated within, and indicative of a larger matrix of shaming structures.

de Valera was not alone in founding his political claims through Catholic religious beliefs; other Irish republicans vigorously asserted Ireland’s Catholic roots throughout the independence campaign and beyond. Ireland’s spiritual heritage is not in question, but the religious zeal which characterises the early years of the Irish Free State (which became the Republic of Ireland in 1949) is as much due to the desire to firmly differentiate (Catholic) Ireland from (Protestant) Britain when establishing the newly enfranchised nation. Benedict Anderson pithily comments that religion and nationalism sit well together due to their shared preoccupation with death and immortality, a paradox which he claims is resolved by ‘transforming fatality into continuity’. Whilst this comment is laced with sarcasm, it nevertheless holds somewhat true for Ireland. Sara Ahmed more fully expands on how this link is established:

The imagining of a nation space in which ‘we’ belong is not independent of the material deployment of force, and the forms of governmentality which control, not only the boundaries of nation states […] but also the repertoire of images which allows the concept of the nation to come into being in the first place.

Ahmed’s theoretical grounding is given historical context by Rogers in her argument that ‘[t]he state which went from colonial Ireland to the short-lived Poblachta Eiránn (1916) to the Free State (partition) to the Republic of Eire (1949) was a geographical and ideological morass badly in need of a unifying ideology’, and that consequently ‘Irish leaders clung to Ireland’s Catholic heritage’. The government is new and

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relatively inexperienced; its right to exist is also internally contested and has resulted
in the cartographic split of Ireland which sits uneasily with many. The government
retains the ‘material deployment of force’, but the Church controls the ‘repertoire of
images’ through which the nation was imagined into being, and it is arguably only
through those images and legacy that it can be held together by asserting a religious
legitimacy.

This alliance between Church and State largely accounts for why the political
revolution was not followed by a social transformation. Rogers details how:

[in a series of legislative moves crowned by the [heavily Catholic
influenced] 1937 constitution, a purgative domestic policy was pursued
which aimed at strengthening the patriarchal domestic family: homose-
xuality, contraception, abortion and divorce were made
constitutionally illegal in order to curb access to single and/or
alternative lifestyles.]

She argues that as a direct result of this domestic policy, ‘these reforms instilled in
the Irish a mistrust and dislike of modernity itself’. Terence Brown concurs,
arguing that ‘Irish rural life was marked by a profound continuity [of] social patterns
and attitudes’ and that, as a result, the new state was marked by ‘an overwhelming
social and cultural conservatism’. This is a sentiment held by John McGahern
himself, which he voiced on multiple occasions. In an interview with James Whyte in
1992, McGahern stated that:

the society I grew up in was very repressed, economically, sexually,
extending out into all of life. Fear was inculcated, the fear of death
transferred to fear of life. […] I felt that when I was young the situation
was ridiculous. The country was ours. We couldn’t go on blaming
Britain and what an inward looking little Catholic mess we made for
ourselves!’

29 Ibid, p. 27.
31 James Whyte, History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of
In a previous 1990 interview with Julia Carlson, he claimed that following independence:

[n]obody actually took any time to understand what to be Irish was. There was this slogan and fanaticism and a lot of emotion, but there wasn’t any clear idea except what you were against: you were against sexuality, you were against the English[...] […] one was more clearly defined by what one was against than what one was for.  

What is most striking about McGahern’s comment is his feeling that Irish postcolonial society came to be formed by and founded on a series of negatives: what they were not and what they were against rather than a clear idea of what they were. Or, to phrase it more simply, that it was easier to construct and organise a sense of community around being Catholic than not being English. McGahern’s feeling that Irish identity was insecure is posited by Whyte as the very basis for its continuity and conservatism: ‘[t]he dominant ideology of the new state […] equat[ed] Irish with Catholicism, and idealis[ed] a rural life of frugal comforts, lived closed to the soil’. Ireland’s ‘fanatical’ assertion of a Catholic identity is one of the key ideologies that shaped and continues to shape the Irish Constitution and the identities of many of the country’s citizens – clerical abuse scandals and the rise of secularism notwithstanding. It represents one of the few positive constitutive elements of a ‘pure, essential Irishness’.  

The Community

If defining a community through seemingly elusive and abstract criteria makes the concept or reality of a knowable community feel somewhat phantasmal, its power, Butler argues, is quite the reverse. Butler asserts that the power of the

34 Rogers, *Feminine Nation*, p. 19.
community to apply negative sanctions is absolute, that it holds within its grasp not only the authority to proffer and withdraw membership, but the ability to confer and recognise subjecthood itself – the retraction of which is the ultimate sanction:

The power of discourse to materialise its effects is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility. […] The normative force of performativity – its power to establish what qualifies as “being” – works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well.35

She further contends that:

[o]ne “exists” not only by virtue of being recognized, but in a prior sense, of being recognizable. The terms that facilitate recognition are themselves conventional, the effects and instruments of social ritual that decide, often through exclusion and violence, the linguistic condition of survivable subjects.36

Butler highlights a collective manipulation, even coercion, into conformity using the sanctions of exclusion (which we will see at work in McGahern and O’Brien’s depiction of rural communities) and the threat of withdrawing recognition altogether. She also draws attention to the fact that whilst a community must be intelligible to each member based upon tacitly agreed shared conditions of locality and social norms, the collective community has the power to dictate the domain of intelligibility and therefore determines the norms to which a subject must conform if s/he wishes to be part of that group. Thus, concepts of community function at a micro and macro level. Seen in this light, the community becomes a self-producing and self-maintaining system. The regulatory force of the community not only shames its subjects into observing and preserving the ‘shared social norms’ that Tomkins highlights, but has an added ‘powerful negative sanction’ of withdrawing not only

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membership to that group, but also recognition of subjecthood altogether. Should the subject not yield to this pressure, they become the Other.

The regulation of subjects through sanctions reveals a desire to eradicate, or at very least tightly control, differences in and between communities – differences which are, inferentially, regarded as threatening. However, as Sara Ahmed points out, ‘Identity is constituted in the ‘more than one’ of the encounter: the designation of ‘I’ or ‘we’ requires an encounter with others. These others cannot simply be relegated to the outside’. The tension between the inevitability of the community encountering an outside ‘other’ – and even needing the contact for the very purposes of differentiation – is, for Ahmed, one resolved by the figure of ‘the stranger’. Ahmed suggests that the rigid binary of insider/outsider is softened by this figure, who occupies the territory between welcome guest and interloper. The stranger creates a dynamic within Otherness ‘whereby some others are designated as stranger than others’. Her play on the word ‘stranger’ as both noun and adjective to indicate both an outsider and something ‘alien’, ‘unfamiliar’ or ‘abnormal’ reveals that difference is designated as threateningly Other the moment it enters into language. Ahmed also posits that otherness is a spectrum rather than a state, implicitly arguing that the community tacitly prioritises its norms and holds some more inviolate than others. This is something we witness particularly in O’Brien’s fiction, as the issue of unmarried sex is punished above and beyond other transgressed norms.

37 Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, p. 156.
39 Ibid, p. 6 [emphasis original].
40 Oxford English Dictionary <www.oed.com> [accessed 16 September 2018]. All further references will be cited as OED.
Monique Wittig goes one step further in her analysis of difference, and contends that ‘straight society is based on the necessity of the different/other at every level. It cannot work economically, linguistically, or politically without this concept’.\footnote{Monique Wittig, \textit{The Straight Mind and Other Essays} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 28.} Wittig’s assertion has particular pertinence to the formation of Irish communities; the Irish Free State was founded on Catholic ideology which holds heterosexism at its very heart and the 1937 Constitution enshrined heteronormativity in law. As Rogers previously identified, ‘homosexuality, contraception, abortion and divorce were made constitutionally illegal in order to curb access to single and/or alternative lifestyles’ to ensure that only procreative heterosexuality was endorsed by the State.\footnote{Rogers, \textit{Feminine Nation}, p. 24.} James Whyte elucidates further, commenting that:

> [t]he family was the basic social and economic unit in the society which emerged […]. Within the family there was a strict division of labour: the men worked outside in the fields while the women took care of the domestic economy and the children […] The family was hierarchical and patriarchal, with the father as ‘the dominant figure in the family, taking all the decisions.’\footnote{Whyte, \textit{History, Myth, and Ritual}, p. 22.}

Such a founding ideology is the epitome of the ‘straight society’ Wittig describes, which, whether it ‘needs’ to or not, \textit{does} create many Others. Wittig’s contention not only returns us to Butler’s claim that the dominant community sets out the conditions for ‘survivable subjects’ according to its norms and ideals, it also pushes back towards territory I have argued has been present from the outset: that far from inadvertently producing subjects which inhabit positions outside of its prevailing norms, the dominant community requires subjects designated as outsiders in order to cohere. The hegemonic order needs subjects to function not simply as different/other, but Other.
The nation can be seen as an upscaled version of the local community in which the state is a community. Certainly, the same models of constitutive abjection are in operation. If the local community needs an Other, usually fixed as the stranger, through which to establish its boundaries and differentiate its ‘inside’ from the ‘outside’, so does the nation. Here is where binding national myths and traditions become as significant as fixing an abject. Just as the local community seeks to seal itself by abjecting strangers whose faces are not known, the national community employs a series of binding cultural myths/traditions to act as shibboleths. However, given that the Irish Free State was created in 1922 and McGahern was speaking to Carlson about the mentality in 1965, strictly speaking the nation did not have any long-standing national traditions to assert – a situation which perhaps precipitated McGahern’s feeling that Ireland had no sense of (it)self. As a relatively new nation, Ireland found itself in the contradictory bind of being recently enfranchised based upon claims of historicity. Benedict Anderson famously addressed this paradox, contending that ‘[i]f nation-states are widely conceded to be “new” and “historical”, the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and […] glide into a limitless future’.\(^{44}\) This statement has been so widely accepted as to almost pass into the realm of uncontested truth, but the deployment of this discourse produces some interesting results in the case of Ireland. As well as securing England as abject to and for Ireland, there is also an attempt to assert a national identity and create a sense of national community by insisting on and promulgating certain traditions as the historic foundation of the nation: the rural home as the heart of the nation.

\(^{44}\) Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 11.
This mobilisation of discourse in which the microcosm of the local community stands for and represents the macro-community at the level of nation is one that John McGahern also observes, as he states in his interview with James Whyte:

I think the closest we have to a society in Ireland is the family. I see the society as made up of thousands of little republics called families, and I think that the family is an interesting halfway house between the individual and a larger society.45

Nearly all of McGahern’s fictive families are situated in rural Ireland, and nearly all of these families own a farm or work in the agricultural economy. Whilst this is a reflection of his upbringing, it also demonstrates an internalisation of the discourse that the rural home represents the heart of the Irish nation. The congruence between McGahern’s statement that the family represents a ‘little republic’ and his 1990 novel Amongst Women will be pursued in Part 2 of this thesis. However, the view that rural “folk” constitute the core of the nation rests on certain mobilisations of and assumptions surrounding the discourse of ‘home’: positioning the home as the locus of tradition also posits that home is an inherently stable concept. The attempt to establish the home as the locus of stable, static, and undiluted national tradition is the attempt to secure the discourse of the ‘immemorial past’ of the nation – one of the cornerstones that Anderson identifies as the justification for recognised nationhood. Homi Bhabha similarly writes of the ‘heimlich pleasures of the hearth, the unheimlich terror of the space or race of the Other; the comfort of social belonging […] the sense of social order’.46 He then collates them to contrast against the ‘unheimlich terror […] of the Other’, which implicitly stands as an antonym for these things. Without wishing to labour the point, through linguistic subtlety Bhabha has dualistically conflated and aligned the concepts of ‘home’, ‘pleasure’, ‘social

belonging’ and ‘social order’ with all that is desirable, and ‘the Other’, ‘terror’, ‘social outcast’, ‘social upheaval/chaos’ with all that is undesirable.

Such conflations and alignments are not new, but they are problematic.

Ahmed comments:

Such a fear [of the Other] means that the familiar is already designated as safe; one is safe at home, unless there is an intrusion from a stranger […] [which] conceals the danger that may be embedded in the familiar: […] the perception of the rapist as a stranger conceals how most sexual attacks are committed by friends or family.47

For Ahmed, abjecting all that is Other to the self and community sets up a false dichotomy between and conflation of familiar/Other and safe/dangerous. This dichotomy is at work in many of McGahern and O’Brien’s novels – as McGahern himself again acknowledges: ‘Often, unacceptable behaviour is tolerated within a family because everybody knows too much about each other, and it’s often easier to go along with it or circumvent it’.48 I posit that McGahern’s statement further indicates a parallel between the local and national community, as local failure to deal with or even acknowledge institutional and domestic abuse is amplified at a national level. McGahern’s father figures often beat their children in the privacy of the home whilst maintaining an outwardly respectable façade to their communities. O’Brien’s Mary MacNamara in Down by the River (1996) is a textbook example of the danger of this discourse in operation; the family and the home are privileged to such an extent that the possibility that Mary has been raped by her own father is never considered by most and remains permanently unvoiced by the few who uncomfortably suspect the truth. As a result, Mary’s father’s repeated sexual assaults go undetected and unpunished.

47 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, p. 36.
If we thus hold it to be true that society is founded on abjection, it is important to examine what qualifies a subject as abject. Kristeva argues that the abject is that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order[…] the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ which denotes ‘a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me’.\(^{49}\) Her use of the word ‘disturb’ in both its meanings is vital here: that which is abject not only disrupts or interrupts the hegemonic body’s systems – in this case the communal body’s social systems – by refusing to conform, it also troubles and alarms the (ever anxious) dominant order simply by existing. The abject is by nature ‘ambiguous’ and resists being interpreted by the body’s frameworks. As Kristeva phrases it, ‘what is abject […] draws me toward the place where meaning collapses’ and must therefore be ‘ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable[…] it lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated’.\(^{50}\)

Crucially, the abject threatens the ongoing existence of the community in its current form. If or when the abject is integrated, it permanently changes the community’s shape. Kristeva argues that non-conforming subjects are essentially unassimilable; they must therefore be expelled in order to ensure the survival of the group.

Challenges to the community which warrant abjection come in many forms in McGahern and O’Brien’s work, often manifesting as perceived moral threats. The figure of the unmarried mother is a multiple affront to the prevailing Catholic and patriarchal ideologies which pervade the immediate community. Maria Luddy observes that unwed mother represents:

immorality, a drain on public finances and someone in need not only of rescue, but also institutionalisation […]. [T]he unmarried mother […] become […] a symbol of unacceptable sexual activity and a problem

\(^{49}\) Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4; p. 2.

\(^{50}\) Ibid, p. 2; p. 1.
that had the potential to blight not just the reputation of the family but of the nation.\footnote{Maria Luddy, ‘Unmarried Mothers in Ireland, 1880–1973’, \textit{Women’s History Review}, 20 (2011) p. 110.}

Luddy’s assertion that the figure of the unwed mother was regarded as requiring institutionalisation is once I shall return to in Part 1 of this thesis. She refers to Ireland’s long history of incarcerating shameful women and their illegitimate offspring in institutions like the Magdalene Asylums and Industrial schools, which provided a concrete locus for the punishment in the lapses of conformity in Irish women. The Magdalene Laundries/Asylums were where “fallen” women were incarcerated to repent their sins – it was often preferable to homelessness, but sometimes only marginally so. The nuns who ran these asylums had a reputation for severity. Brian Titley elucidates how:

[t]he asylums took in the washing of hotels, hospitals, jails and wealthy families; and the work of scrubbing, ironing and so forth became part the daily routine of penitents. […] The cleaning of dirty laundry was also highly symbolic – an allegory for cleansing sinful stains from the soul. […] The penitents persuaded or compelled to spend a lifetime, or at least many years, in the asylum formed the backbone of this unpaid labour pool.\footnote{Brain Titley, ‘Magdalen Asylums and Moral Regulation in Ireland’ in \textit{Schools as Dangerous Places: A Historical Perspective} eds. Anthony Potts and Tom O’Donoghue (New York: Cambria Press, 2007) p. 120.}

Both McGahern and O’Brien reference these institutions obliquely. O’Brien’s Emma in \textit{A Pagan Place} (1970) is sent to an updated form of the Magdalene Laundry to have her illegitimate child – the Mother and Baby home. This was a so-called softer solution designed to help first-time offenders who could be reintegrated back into the community, and was developed after the Laundries fierce reputation became widely known. Similarly, McGahern’s Bill Evans in \textit{That They May Face The Rising Sun} (2002) exists on the margins of the community. Though he is unwilling to discuss his past, the stories of the cruelty meted out to him as a child in an Industrial School
persist and are retold to all new-comers to the area by way of explanation of his unusual mannerisms.

The concept of marriage is a further institution in which the central aims of the Catholic Church and State are aligned: it sanctions procreative sex before God in the eyes of the church, and which historically controls and channels women as they are always under the jurisdiction of either their father or husband. Moreover, the unwed mother represents the possibility and freedom of women to choose more than one sexual partner, signifying unrestrained enjoyment of sex deemed threatening to patriarchy and sinful to Catholicism. These entwined issues are all tenets of one central concern: the dangers of emancipated and enfranchised women. This returns us once more to Tomkins’ claim that shaming has an inherently social function. The shaming matrix, he suggests, exists to make the subject aware that they can be abjected and thus compels it to change its behaviour; this process simultaneously brings the errant subject back into conformity and reinforces the dominant order:

[T]he fact that the other identifies sufficiently with others to be ashamed rather than to show contempt strengthens any social group and its sense of community. Just as contempt strengthens boundaries and barriers between individuals and groups and is the instrument par excellence for the preservation of hierarchical […] relationships, so is a shared shame a prime instrument for strengthening the sense of mutuality and community […].

Bewes succinctly paraphrases Tomkins’ argument thus: ‘Shame is an experience simultaneously of exclusion and inclusion; it marks us as both inside and outside the community’. However, I believe that Bewes oversimplifies Tomkins’ argument and elides a vital subtlety which is shame’s most powerful weapon: that shame, when brought to bear upon a subject, does not mark it as being definitely or definitively in- or outside the community, but threatens its status. Shame is powerfully in-

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53 Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, p. 156.
54 Bewes, *Postcolonial Shame*, p. 22.
exclusive because it brings the communal tolerance limits, or ‘boundaries’, to the awareness of the subject. In feeling communal censure, subjects become aware they can transition from the inside of the community to the outside, and not necessarily return once the rejection has taken place. Or perhaps more tellingly, if the invitation to feel ashamed is refused and the individual declines to adjust its behaviour or speech, a choice about whether or not to belong to the community has also been made in that refusal. Indeed, McGahern and O’Brien’s novels are littered with characters that push against, attempt to renegotiate, or struggle with these boundaries, and must consequently navigate the path back to acceptance or face rejection depending on the transgression. Hence, as Tomkins argues, the fact that these individuals so closely identify with the community as to modify their behaviour highlights the power of that community, and reveals shame as a potent vehicle which induces conformity to gendered norms.

‘I […] believed I had done something awful’: Censorship in Ireland

The primary topic of the interviews that McGahern gave to both Julia Carlson and James Whyte was the banning of his 1965 novel, The Dark. The context of these interviews reveals another form of abjection in the form of censorship, for abjection occurs not only at the level of subject formation but also at the level of speech. Whilst subjects often regulate their speech in order to conform to hegemonic norms, this control is implicit and self-imposed. When the regulation of speech is explicitly introduced to compel conformity, censorship is the tool by which that constraint is enforced. However, Butler argues that just as defining a subject as abject also creates it, so too does defining abject speech:
The regulation that states what it does not want stated thwarts its own desire, conducting a performative contradiction [...]. Such regulations introduce the censored speech into public discourse, thereby establishing it as a site of contestation, that is, as the scene of public utterance that it sought to preempt.55

I would dispute Butler’s assertion that censoring speech produces the very ideas it seeks to repress – if they did not already exist, why repress them? What it does do, as she correctly identifies, is to turn that speech or concept into a ‘site of contestation’, which thereby increases the prominence and pre-eminence of the abject speech/idea in public consciousness. This is where the instillation of a shame complex into the psychological identity of children and adolescents comes back into focus: the dominant ideologies must control and censor the thoughts of those they seek to influence and reproduce in their own mould before those thoughts become speech or actions. Michael Lewis contends that some institutions will even attempt to sanction subjects’ thoughts as ‘[m]erely thinking about certain things can represent a violation of standards’.56 The Catholic Church does attempt to sanction thoughts which ‘represent a violation of standards’ by designating certain impulses – especially sexual ones – as sinful and therefore shameful. These thoughts must be confessed in order to be absolved, which means that they must be spoken aloud to a priest who can subsequently penalise them with penances. The nature and role of confession, its place in the shame complex and its correlation to hegemonic power (particularly as theorised by Michel Foucault) will be revisited in greater detail in the following chapters, but its importance in the instillation and internalisation of the shame complex must be stressed from the outset.

Unsurprisingly, the Catholic Church failed in its attempt to repress all the thoughts and consequent acts/speech it deemed sinful. The Censorship of

55 Butler, Excitable Speech, p. 130 [emphasis original].
Publications Board, created by the Censorship of Publications Act, was established in 1929 shortly after the achievement of independence seven years previously. Its purpose was to ban any publication it deemed to violate national standards. Donal Ó Drisceoil explains that:

a censorship board of five, appointed every three years by the minister for justice, recommended to the minister the permanent prohibition of any book or periodical if it was deemed to be in its ‘general tendency indecent or obscene’, or if it advocated contraception or abortion. Indecent was defined as ‘suggestive of, or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave’, while obscene was not defined.\(^{57}\)

The Board and the Act it enforced were incredibly vague about defining the terms and criteria which would result in prohibition. The phrases it used – ‘indecent’, ‘obscene’, ‘immorality’, ‘corrupt’ – are highly subjective and ideologically contingent for their (moral) definition. In other words, they are not objective terms by which coherent and consistent standards and/or decisions may be made and are therefore easily manipulable to the will of the one wielding them. The ambiguous nature of the terms is a highly strategic expression of power. Michael Warner examines the use of the word ‘obscene’ in relation to censorship laws in the United States and suggests that the term is ‘designed to shame dissenters into silence’.\(^{58}\)

Warner argues that deploying words like ‘obscene’ subtly but powerfully strengthens the position of those wishing to censor as it is an emotively hyperbolic expression which points to something ‘grossly indecent […] tending to deprave and corrupt those who are likely to read, see, or hear the contents’.\(^{59}\) Whilst this definition again tacitly reveals ‘obscene’ as being morally contingent, its use is also designed to


\(^{59}\) OED <www.oed.com> [accessed 08 July 2015].
further suppress dissent as those who wish to challenge its application leave themselves open to being labelled ‘morally deviant’ by the dominant ideology.

This mechanism, combined with the impossibility of objectively pinning down what ‘obscene’ actually means, doubly strengthens the position of the Irish Censorship Board. Moreover, a book only needed to be reported five times by different members of the public for it to be rendered worthy of investigation; introducing such a low threshold ensured that anything even mildly risqué would be brought to their attention. The Board itself was designed to be weighted in favour of Catholic principles as it consisted of ‘a member of the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland (CTSI) and/or the Knights of St Columbanus as chairman, together with three other Catholics (usually CTSI and/or Knights of Columbanus members), and a token Protestant, represented by a Trinity College Dublin academic’. However, as a ‘four-to-one majority was sufficient to ban a book’, the ‘token Protestant’ could be easily ignored which facilitated the imposition of stringent Catholic ideology when censoring books. In conjunction with the (arguably deliberate) imprecise terminology by which books were deemed worthy of being banned, the overwhelmingly Catholic board could more or less ban any book of its choosing. This function of censorship is one that Warner explicitly highlights:

The law in this area […] allows the majority to impose its will without Constitutional check. Defenders of the law say that it imposes discretion and restraint on everyone. In fact it enlists the government in the politics of shame, making sure that nothing challenging to the tastes of the majority will be allowed to circulate.

Julia Carlson articulates Warner’s theorisation of censorship as an Irish reality. As well as forcefully arguing, as Warner does, that censorship is never about protecting

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60 Ó Drisceoil, ‘The best banned in the land’, p. 147.
61 Ibid.
subjects from apparently harmful material – as the censorship board claimed to be altruistically doing – she also emphasises that this process protects the dominant order by attempting to control and ultimately suppress alternative ideas: ‘censorship in Ireland has never been simply about the banning of books: the paternalism that perpetuates Irish censorship succeeded for many years in blocking the exchange of ideas between Irish society and its writers’.\(^{63}\)

Warner and Carlson thus oppose Butler’s view of censorship. They argue that far from creating the alternative positions it sought to suppress, the Censorship Board was particularly efficient in their repression. Firstly, as Carlson asserts, it allowed ideological ‘paternalism’ to soak further into the psychological foundation of the Irish reading public’s identity as only novels which propagated this ideology were permitted. Secondly, it effectively suppressed the knowledge that the material published was paternalistic because other religious, socio-political standpoints which exposed or subverted the dominant Catholic patriarchal ideologies were ‘blocked’ from entering Irish consciousness in precisely the manner that Warner and Carlson outline. Carlson may overstate the power of censorship in preventing the exchange of new ideas, not least because the Censorship Board no longer exists. However, her claim that it delayed them is supported by the authors she interviews.

Both McGahern and O’Brien fell foul of the Censorship Board and had works banned in 1960 and 1965 respectively. These developments resulted in each of them being regarded as subversive in many socially conservative (and politically influential) quarters, which had practical and psychological consequences for them as citizens and writers. Both gave interviews to Carlson in which they speak of feeling

both ashamed and publicly shamed, even though they rejected the Board and its governing ideologies. O’Brien’s first three novels *The Country Girls* (1960), *Girl with Green Eyes* (1962) and *Girls in their Married Bliss* (1964) – which came to form her *Country Girls* trilogy – were all banned in the Republic of Ireland on publication. However, even by the Censorship Board’s own standards, the grounds for banning O’Brien’s first novel are not entirely clear. Declan Kiberd muses that one motive for censoring the novel might have been the irreverence with which O’Brien depicted family life: ‘In a rural Ireland which piously urged young women to treat their father as a kind of god, it may have seemed highly subversive to depict scenes of family violence and paternal failure as quite routine’. It is true that *The Country Girls* opens with the novel’s protagonist, Caithleen Brady, waking up ‘anxious’ for ‘[t]he old reason’: her father ‘had not come home’ for several days. Her mother ‘hadn’t slept’ for worrying whether her husband would ‘shout, struggle, kill her or apologize’ when she confronts him about how much of their desperately needed savings he has wasted on his ‘drunken’ interlude (*TCG* 4-6). Mr Brady is certainly a figure of ‘paternal failure’, but the novel does not abound with them. Caithleen Brady’s best friend Baba Brennan’s father is a hardworking ‘veterinary surgeon’ who takes care of Caithleen as much as he is able; he and the other local men openly disdain Mr Brady, rendering Brady a pathetic outcast more than the novel’s norm (*TCG* 16).

Kiberd tacitly acknowledges the tenuousness of his argument by subsequently positing that the novel’s offence may instead lie with its author:

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Young women in the new Irish scheme of things were not supposed to write books, least of all stories in which they divulged their innermost thoughts and sexual desires. Rather, they were expected to prepare for motherhood and defer to the clerical authorities. This is not something Edna O’Brien was prepared to do. She developed a reputation for articulating forthright – occasionally contentious – opinions in interviews, prompting critics such as Peggy O’Brien to go as far as to accuse her of adopting a ‘stage-Irish’ persona which is ‘an outrageous concoction of what foreigners expect Irish people to be’ to market her novels in America. Jane Elizabeth Dougherty and Rebecca Pelan argue these diverging and somewhat incompatible narratives have negatively impacted O’Brien’s career. Dougherty comments that O’Brien ‘is a writer who is talked about at least as often as she is written about, and what is said about her is often highly uncomplimentary’ – a narrative which she feels has distracted from her novels and caused ‘her aesthetic achievements [to] continue to be undervalued’. Dougherty refers to the fact that O’Brien became increasingly famous for her sexual appeal and vivacious personality, encouraging publishers to market her work by playing on the same tropes of Irish femininity that she was trying to push back against. This highly gendered focus on the author’s aesthetics rather than the work heightened after O’Brien’s divorce from her husband Ernest Gebler. O’Brien never remarried, and – like many of the unmarried women in her novels – was subject to rumours and gossip about her personal life and sexual relationships which persisted throughout her literary career. Pelan concurs that this level of private rather than professional scrutinization has caused O’Brien to be unfairly ‘judged to

be of inferior quality’ despite being ‘the first Irish woman writer to reach a mass reading audience both within Ireland and abroad’.  

Whilst I support the previous assessments that O’Brien’s refusal to adopt an ‘appropriate’ persona of modest femininity as far as the Censorship Board was concerned approaches the core of the issue as to why *The Country Girls* was banned, there remains one further problem with these analyses: the novel lacks any overtly sexual encounter. It contains, at most, a few scenes with sexual overtones and one of voyeurism. The lack of explicitly sexual scenes has led Ó Drisceoil to comment that the novel was censored because of its ‘frank, honest, and accessible portrayal of female sexuality’.  

According to Ó Drisceoil, not only was the depiction of sexual acts deemed worthy of censoring, so too was any admission that female sexuality even *exists*. This, if true, would create a highly gendered definition and application of ‘obscene’ sexuality by the Board, in which the depiction of sexual acts in men are prohibitive, but sexuality itself prohibitive in women. Kiberd’s claim that Irish women were supposed to be ‘preparing for motherhood’ instead of writing novels adds further weight to Carlson’s claim that censorship was blocking the exchange of progressive ideas; not only did O’Brien’s novel portray women as having sexual desires, it was written by a woman who was carving a role for herself beyond the home.

McGahern’s novel *The Dark* was banned in 1965, for reasons perhaps more immediately evident than O’Brien’s allusively sexual *The Country Girls*. The novel opens with a father beating his son, whom he forces to strip naked, as punishment for

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uttering the word ‘F-U-C-K’.\textsuperscript{71} The son is also sexually abused by his father, and comes to fear he will be similarly abused by a priest; the entire fifth chapter depicts the masturbatory fantasies (and later on in the novel rape fantasies) of the young teenage boy. These chapters, especially the fifth, were reportedly torn out by angry readers when they were sent to the Board for investigation, and swathes of the novel were apparently blanked out with marker pen as they were deemed too shocking to be allowed to remain in legible print. That both McGahern and O’Brien’s books were burnt and/or defaced adds another dimension to the issue of abjection: not only are the ideas in the novel rendered abject by the Censorship Board, but the novel as an artefact is also made abject in the attempts made to efface and deface it.

The effect of public disapprobation on McGahern’s personal and professional life was profound. In addition to the book being banned, he also lost his job as a teacher which he explicitly blames on the Catholic Church – specifically John Charles McQuaid, the influential Archbishop of Dublin from 1940 to 1972 whom Diarmuid Ferriter refers to as ‘the most powerful prelate of his generation’.\textsuperscript{72} The Church controlled the education system as well as the Censorship Board, rendering McGahern doubly vulnerable to the effects of their disapproval. McGahern further offended the Catholic Church by marrying a foreign, non-Catholic woman in a civil rather than religious ceremony in the same year The Dark was published; his marriage was illegitimate in the eyes of the Church and was regarded as compounding evidence of non-Catholic immorality which made him additionally unfit, in their eyes, to teach children. McGahern claims in his interview that the headmaster of the school in which he taught more or less told him that the

\textsuperscript{71} John McGahern, The Dark [1965] (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 7. All further references will be cited as TD in parentheses.

Archbishop had ordered his dismissal, and that he was presented with a *fait accompli*. The local Priest, to whom McGahern tried to appeal to for recourse, had gone away on holiday in what McGahern saw as a convenient, even conspiratorial, way of avoiding any confrontation. His frustration is evident: ‘The point is – I committed no statutory offence. The book was banned, but that’s not an offence. I was not molesting children’. However, the Church had such power over and within the local community that, legal offence or not, McGahern was unable to appeal the decision and ended up leaving not only his post, but also the country.

That McGahern felt expatriated indicates that shame can be simultaneously externally and internally generated, and creates a parallel between the authors and many of their shame-crippled protagonists. The external forces generating shame are manifest: both authors were censored and censured, had their novels defaced by angry members of the public, and received verbal or written abuse. However, that they both moved abroad suggests they also suffered from a burgeoning shame complex. June Price Tangney et al. posit that individuals experiencing ‘vicarious group-based shame’ exhibit the ‘desire to distance oneself from the shame eliciting event’. For McGahern and O’Brien, that event was Ireland itself. In their interviews with Carlson, both authors speak of feeling personally ashamed of being banned, alongside keenly experiencing the public and social opprobrium that was attached to them – even though they rejected the Censorship Board’s governing ideologies. Though O’Brien had actually relocated to London before her novel was banned, she nevertheless recalls how her family ‘were appalled. Everyone in the village was […]. They were ashamed, so I was ashamed and believed I had done something awful’.

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75 Carlson, *Banned in Ireland*, p. 72.
Reacting thus, O’Brien actually demonstrates the internalisation of learned-shame instigated by the moral disapprobation of the community, which Tomkins contends causes subjects to modify their behaviour. Despite disavowing the ideology of the Censorship Board and privately feeling that all she had done was depict ‘two Irish girls full of yearnings and desire’, the force of the community’s sanctioning causes O’Brien to re-evaluate her actions and believe she ‘had done something awful’. In so doing, she indicates a temptation to yield to a shame complex caused by community censure. Nor was this the first time she had publically admitted to harbouring feelings of shame; in her 1976 memoir *Mother Ireland*, O’Brien wrote that:

> [t]he children [of Ireland] inherit a trinity of guilts (a Shamrock): the guilt for Christ’s Passion and Crucifix[ion], the guilt for the plundered land, and the furtive guilt for the mother frequently defiled by the insatiable father. All that scenery, all those undercurrents are too much.\(^{76}\)

O’Brien expands upon the comments made in her interview with Carlson to include more general feelings of shame. Her very articulation of these sentiments further reinforces the need to look at shame as a complex, for O’Brien uses guilt as a synonym for shame. Guilt is defined as the emotion felt when one is ‘[r]esponsibl[e] for an action or event’, yet the incidents that O’Brien cites either happened long before her birth or were beyond her control.\(^{77}\) However, Price Tangney et al. argue that:

> personal causality is not always a prerequisite for the experience of shame or guilt. […] [There is] compelling evidence that group-based shame is most likely elicited when a threatened shared identity is salient – that is, when concerns about maintaining a positive group identity arise.\(^{78}\)

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\(^{76}\) O’Brien, *Mother Ireland*, p. 15.

\(^{77}\) OED <www.oed.com> [accessed 14 September 2017].

\(^{78}\) Price Tangney, ‘Moral Emotions’, pp. 358-359.
Ireland’s status as a postcolonial nation which pervades the background of this thesis once more comes to the fore. The ‘guilt’ O’Brien expresses for ‘the plundered land’ is latent postcolonial shame, which she acknowledges in her reference to the three inherited ‘guilts’ – an image which simultaneously draws on the Catholic Holy Trinity and the Irish national emblem of the ‘Shamrock’ (a sprig of clover easily identified by its three prominently splayed leaves). The congruence between the female body, femininity, and Ireland’s postcolonial identity is a theme I shall address more fully in the following chapter.

O’Brien’s guilt regarding ‘Christ’s […] Crucifixion’ is absorbed religious shame, likely from her schooling (where she also depicts her protagonists as picking up formative shame complexes stimulated by Catholic doctrine). O’Brien describes how her classmates in the single-sex Catholic school she attended would often sing rhymes such as ‘one two three four five six seven, all good children go to heaven, when they die their sins are forgiven, one two three four five six seven’.79 This song also underscores some of the dichotomies already discussed and that will go on to haunt her protagonists: “good” children will go to heaven – but inferentially only if they are Catholic; “bad” children will therefore go to hell; “bad” is defined by frequency and severity of your transgressions; to go to heaven you must not sin; the church defines sin and its teachings must be obeyed to ensure salvation.

O’Brien further explains how at school she was taught that ‘Mothers were best. Mothers worked and worried and sacrificed and had the smallest amount on their plates when the family sat down to eat, mothers wore aprons and slaved and

mothers went to the confraternity on a Sunday’. O’Brien’s second sentence reads like a mantra that has been often cited to her – the lack of punctuation and frequent use of connectives create the impression that it has been written down in a rush, a flowing out of a highly familiar, often repeated maxim. This unhealthy yet idealised image of motherhood accounts for her third inherited guilt of the ‘mother frequently defiled by the insatiable father’; in such a venerated image of motherhood, there is no space for a “real” woman with desires: sexuality must surely be forced on her, for such a woman could not desire. The ‘best’ figure of motherhood she conceives is of someone who is incredibly downtrodden: she ‘work[s]’, is ‘worried’, starves, ‘slave[s]’ and worships. Given that O’Brien constructs characters who have imperfect mothers and go on to become imperfect mothers, the public backlash against her work despite its lack of sexually explicit scenes becomes further illuminated.

Though these themes of postcolonial, religious, and sexual guilt pervade her novels, their origins seem personal – ‘inherited’ – rather than fictive. Indeed, O’Brien apparently harbours a significant quantity of anger and indignation, both for the country she was born into and the way she was treated. The epigraph to her 1976 memoir Mother Ireland is a quotation from Samuel Beckett’s Malone Dies (1951): ‘Let me say before I go any further that I forgive nobody. I wish them all an atrocious life and then the fires and ice of hell […]’. Her choice is notable both for its evident anger and the religious curse which follows. Though O’Brien’s work was censored by the predominantly Catholic Board, she appears not to have entirely turned her back on the Church. The torment she bestows on the people she blames is

80 Ibid, p. 66.
81 Ibid, epigraph.
one she herself defines as peculiarly Irish: ‘superstitious, religious’. Her opening snub simultaneously indicates, implicates, and indicts her Irish roots, exposing her nationality – complete with the inherited shame she wishes to refute – as nevertheless being deeply embedded in her psyche.

McGahern similarly refers to his dismissal as a ‘social disgrace’ which was ‘painful and embarrassing’ to him, articulating alongside O’Brien the beginnings of a shame complex based on the disapproval of his community – though the fact that these feelings are much less developed in him once more indicates a gender bias underpinning shame that I wish to pursue in the third part of this thesis. His decision to leave Ireland again demonstrates the abjecting power of communities – censored and censured, he had little alternative but to emigrate. When discussing the grounds for the censorship, it is worth returning to McGahern’s reflection that the newly enfranchised nation defined itself by what it was ‘against’. McGahern and O’Brien depict their lived and fictive communities as both highly sensitive to change and extremely combative, which in part strengthens the force of rejection to everything considered ‘outside’. At a local level, these communities use shaming techniques to reject and abject subjects who transgress values prioritised by a certain enactment of Catholic and patriarchal doctrine, most notably sexual morality and the family unit.

The Gendered Weight of Irish History

Many of the prejudices faced and frustrations expressed by Edna O’Brien are rooted in the historic canonisation of ‘the female’ in Irish culture. The appropriation

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82 Ibid, p. 11.
83 Carlson, Banned in Ireland, p. 55; p. 59.
and politicisation of the female body by the Catholic Church and State has already received significant critical attention. Nevertheless, it bears re-examining in the context of this discussion for many pertinent reasons. Firstly, I argue that these deeply ingrained and often contradictory attitudes towards the body are fundamental to the shame complexes witnessed in many of McGahern and O’Brien’s female protagonists. Secondly, I contend that the historic and well-worn conflation of the female body, the Catholic Church, and Irish nationalism has appeared to cause many critics to write about the association between these deeply entwined yet separate entities as self-evident in order to avoid seeming passé. Whilst temptingly convenient, such an approach merely entrenches this problematic conflation by failing to interrogate why and how the female body has been reified in this way. Indeed, to escape the weight of this history, many critics have eschewed addressing the body at all in favour of analysing female subjectivities as though they were incorporeal. Irene Gilsenan Nordin addresses and criticises this trend:

> Despite the many attempts in Western thought to do away with corporeality in favour of a disembodied cogito, the body is still inextricably and undeniably part of human existence and experience. [...] From the point of view of gender, re-writing the landscape of the body is an important force in questioning the representation of the body as gendered territory, thus questioning one of the oldest tropes inscribed in the Irish national psyche.\(^{84}\)

I agree with Nordin, and would add that there is an existing tendency to employ an either/or approach in analysing the female body: *either* the body stands as trope/emblem/symbol, *or* as a ‘disembodied cogito’ which exists unburdened by corporeality. This division is, as Nordin observes, artificial, as ‘the body is still inextricably and undeniably part of human existence’.

An exasperated Nordin further observes that:

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[t]hrough successive epochs Ireland has continued to be constructed, emblemised and idealised as a woman: either ‘the Hag’ requiring the sacrifice of her sons to restore her to her former beauty, or ‘the Aisling’, a personified (and beautiful) abstraction of the land. Her names are many but her purpose is singular: to exist as a passive symbol of desire and value in a masculinist/patriarchal context: a body upon which the nationalist drama is inscribed.\textsuperscript{85}

These emblematic metaphors for Ireland are often conflated and have been adapted differently throughout Irish history. The Ireland-as-woman figure is one that has been variously imagined and reimagined since the earliest times. In early Irish poetry, she takes the form of a wizened old hag. In Gaelic verse of the seventeenth century, she becomes the beautiful dream woman of the aisling genre, and later appears as the Sean Bhean Bhocht (Poor Old Woman) or as Roisín Dubh (Little Black Rose). In each case, the allegorical subtext is that this figure requires young men to pledge their lives for her (read Ireland) to restore her to her former glory; she then transforms into a beautiful young woman when their sacrifice is promised or realised. All of these manifestations are, as Nordin details, nationalist constructions with no further depth or purpose than to encourage Irish men to fight and die for Ireland’s independence from British rule. The nationalist purpose of these figures is further underscored by their reminiscence of Anderson’s comment that nation-building and religious imagery ‘transform[s] fatality into continuity’.\textsuperscript{86} W. B. Yeats’ 1902 play \textit{Caithleen Ní Houlihan} represents the most potent expression of this trope and message. The play was so transparently a Republican tool that it was widely cited as contributing to the fervour that caused the 1916 Easter Rising. When that rebellion failed, its leader Patrick Pearse appropriated the Ireland-as-woman trope once more in his poem ‘Mise Éire’, written shortly before his execution, in which the male poet speaks in the voice of Mother Ireland.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{86} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, p. 11.
The enduring cultural and political weight of these various yet extremely potent emblematic representations of Ireland-as-woman has had material consequences for Irish women and their socio-cultural status. The consequent challenge that this rhetorical conflation places upon women is one that Edna O’Brien sardonically observes: ‘Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare’. O’Brien’s extensive list highlights many problematic associations between women and nationality. Her assertion that ‘Ireland has always been a woman’ is quickly followed by a clarification: ‘a womb’. This emphasises how women are quickly reduced to their reproductive function, an image which is reinforced by the unflattering evocation of a ‘cow’ and ‘sow’ to indicate that women are viewed and treated as animals merely useful for breeding. The juxtaposition of ‘bride’ next to ‘harlot’ is a rhetorical parallel to the Catholic virgin/whore dichotomy. Both these tropes shall be extensively revisited in Part 1 of this thesis as they have substantial social and even legal ramifications for many female protagonists. O’Brien’s reference to the ‘Rosaleen’ and ‘gaunt Hag of Beare’ are further rehashings of the Ireland-as-woman motifs identified by Nordin, drawing further attention to the proliferation and saturation of images in which women are ‘a passive symbol of desire […] in a masculinist/patriarchal context: a body upon which the nationalist drama is inscribed’ in Irish culture.

Discussing the poetry of Eavan Boland, whose work trenchantly critiques and subverts the patriarchal nationalist myth-making of Yeats and Pearse, Patricia Hagen and Thomas Zilman argue that a consequence of such a division between body and subjectivity is that:

real women are “never on the scene of the crime” in the Irish literary tradition, [but] their mythic counterparts appear with predictable regularity. The reductive force of the fusion of the feminine and the national, with its corollary invisibility of real, complex women, makes the subversion of this image a natural starting point in [the] act of repossession.  

Such an erroneous and damaging schism between the body and ‘cogito’ contributes to the dearth of material attending to the complex negotiation that Irish women must undertake to make sense of their identity in conjunction with and in the context of their own bodies. In attempting to realign ‘real, complex women’ with their corporeality, it is essential to scrutinise the institutions which have endeavoured to project, stabilize and affix meaning onto female bodies in order to interrogate the politics behind this cultural strategy.

The nationalistic appropriation of women’s gendered bodies became still further embedded in Irish discourse once Ireland’s partial independence from Britain was achieved in 1921. Heather Ingman contends that in pursuit of consolidating and constructing a national identity, the State sought to establish homogeneity by disseminating highly gendered norms as natural:

Through repetition of accepted gender behaviour, men and women help to construct the nation; at the same time, of course, this repetition reinforces the gendered constructs. Fixed constructs of gender have been central to Irish nationalism. […] Women were to be passive embodiments of Irish virtue; men were Mother Ireland’s sons who were to sacrifice their lives for her. […] Sexuality thus became bound up with nationality. A certain female behaviour, based on purity and chastity, guaranteed the purity and alterity of the Irish nation. The sexually loose woman was not only shocking, she was seen as ‘anti-Irish’ or ‘foreign’. Very often she had to be expelled, if not from her country, at least from her family or her community.  

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89 Patricia Hagen and Thomas Zelman, “We were never on the scene of the crime”: Eavan Boland’s Repossession of History’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 37.4 (1991), p. 446.

Ingman’s observation that the propagation of stereotypical gender roles guaranteed the alterity of the nation is congruent with Fausto-Sterling’s claim that we ‘do gender’ as a part of ‘doing difference’.\(^{91}\) Whilst Ingman’s analysis is undoubtedly accurate, she nevertheless creates the impression that the repetition of gendered behaviour reinforcing gendered constructs was an accidental consequence of nation building. This is far from the case, as Joanne Sharp highlights:

> Like national identity, gendered identity takes on its apparently ‘natural’ presence through the repeated performance of gender norms. In the performance of identity in everyday life, the two identifications converge.\(^{92}\)

As the Irish Free State continued to promulgate highly gendered roles for their citizens, passive images of the female body became conveniently synonymous with femininity. The blood-shed which characterised Ireland’s moment of independence and its early years merely reified the pressures on the female body: if ‘Ireland’s men were supposed to (and did) lay down their lives for Ireland’s women’, then the women – ‘with the example of the Virgin Mary set before them’ – had to ‘embody the purity of the Irish nation’ to justify the loss.\(^{93}\) The gendered binary thus became further entrenched in Irish discourse, normalised, and eventually enshrined in law so that, as Fausto-Sterling previously theorised, one dualism props up and propagates the other.\(^{94}\)

Gerardine Meaney, however, adopts a slightly different position and argues that the Catholic fervour in Ireland was caused in part by its desire to cleanse itself from the shame of being a colonized white nation. She asserts:

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\(^{91}\) Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, p. 244.  
\(^{92}\) Sharp, ‘Gendering nationhood’, p. 98.  
\(^{93}\) Ingman, ‘Stretching the Nation’s Boundaries’, p.254.  
\(^{94}\) The gendered nature of work in the Free State was legally reinforced by legislation passed in the 1930s that prohibited female civil servants and primary schoolteachers from working after they got married.
The promulgation of the image of the Virgin Mary as “Queen of Ireland” is on one level just another permutation of the Virgin-Whore dichotomy at the heart of Western culture’s representation of women. That dichotomy acquired a very particular paranoid intensity in twentieth-century Ireland [...] as the compensatory urge to promote an essential Irishness which was purer – in effect whiter – than other European races. [...] The conflation of images of Mother Ireland and Virgin Mary in Irish populist Catholic nationalism deployed the Virgin Mother’s status as the epitome of whiteness as a guarantee of Irish (racial) purity.\textsuperscript{95}

Meaney contends that postcolonial shame is larger in scope and more complicated than Ireland simply extricating itself from the bonds of its colonizer; it is also attempting to free itself from the shame of being a white European colonized nation and thus belonging to the same racial profile as its oppressor. This particular form of “white shame” will be further explored when examining the pressures bought to bear upon the gendered body, but for now I will cite Meaney’s argument as another layer which adds to the calcification of deeply entrenched Mariolatry in Irish culture.

The idolisation and idealisation of the Virgin Mary is the foundation for an Irish feminine shame complex\textsuperscript{96} in much of McGahern and O’Brien’s works as it inculcates in women a set of paradigms which are impossible and therefore unattainable. Rebecca Pelan explores the multiple contradictions and subsequent crisis that such deeply ingrained, zealous Mariolatry posed to feminine identity, arguing that it:

impose[s] on women a dilemma that is unsolvable: to follow the Virgin Mary and remain pure, which involves a renunciation not only of sex but also of motherhood, or to marry and bear children and, thus, be reduced to the sensuality and baseness of Eve. [...] This interpretation of sex as purely functional [...] exacerbated the dilemma confronting Irish women who, taught from birth to aspire to the purity of Mary,


\textsuperscript{96} This phrase can be interpreted to mean both a feminine shame complex explored in an Irish context and an Irish shame complex expressed through gendered embodiment. I do not distinguish between the two as I believe they are, in these novelists’ works, symbiotic.
found themselves unwittingly playing the role of Eve in order to secure a husband in a society that viewed spinsterhood as the most dreadful of fates.\textsuperscript{97}

Pelan raises several important issues I intend to examine as the basis for a feminine shame complex. The first, and most evident, is the paradox of a virgin mother. This unobtainable archetype of Catholic femininity presents women with an unworkable model which inevitably cannot be fulfilled and thus causes the start of an at-times paralysing shame complex. The religious veneration of virginity and idealisation of motherhood is further overlaid by a cultural maligning of spinsterhood, once regarded as a fate no woman would willingly choose. This denigration of spinsterhood often left women with the prospect of either becoming a nun or a married mother. Pelan elaborates on the Irish cultural perceptions which make these contradictions all the more difficult to negotiate; the Christian veneration of the Mother is counterbalanced by the condemnation of Eve, producing a consequential mistrust of sexually active women – another reconstitution of the virgin/whore binary that Meaney outlines. Even whilst criticising this dichotomous paradox, Pelan still couples ‘sensuality’ with ‘baseness’, affirming through repetition the constant association of bodily pleasure with debasement in Irish culture. By equating the shame of being associated with Eve as the shame of being ‘sensuous’, Pelan simultaneously alludes to the somatic characteristics of shame and the female body as the primary locus of the feminine shame complex. The sensory body and the morality imposed on the indulgence of these senses is a continual source of internal and external conflict in both novelists’ works.

The extensive – even overwhelming – canonisation of the female body and corresponding femininity created a somewhat puzzling vacuum regarding the male body and masculinity. Lori Rogers argues that ‘the Free State cemented its policy of […] containing the dangers of women, who functioned as the non-national other in the otherwise very homogenous Irish population, while all real Irishness resided in men’. Referring back to John McGahern’s assertion that Ireland was founded on a series of reactionary negatives, to be an Irish male in this context meant *not* being female. This created a culture of exaggerated masculinity, or hypermasculinity. Whilst I will offer a more comprehensive explanation in Part 2 of this thesis, it is useful at this stage of the discussion to highlight Lynne Segal’s shorthand definition of hypermasculinity as ‘an insecure but rigid acting out of the masculine role, resulting in delinquent styles of behaviour’ in which ‘[t]o be masculine is *not* to be feminine, *not* to be ‘gay’, *not* to be tainted by marks of inferiority – ethnic or otherwise’. In other words, it entails abjecting not just the colonial, but also the feminine, the homosexual and any Other that can be imagined besides.

The abjection of the colonial took on a special significance between England and Ireland due to their geographic, linguistic and cultural proximity. Joseph Valente contends that:

[a]s a home colony, Ireland had long been susceptible to familial metaphors that functioned to naturalize British political sovereignty over its neighbour: for example, the “Sister Isle” and later, with the controversial Act of Union, the wife in a “metropolitan marriage”. […] The feminization of the Irish aimed precisely to place them both in a complementary relation to the British, in which each polis would “naturally” ally itself with the other (like woman and man in the heterosexual Imaginary).

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98 Rogers, *Feminine Nation*, p. 27.
Valente’s observation that the United Kingdom linguistically equated Ireland to female relatives – rhetorically positioning them as weaker – illuminates how Irish masculinity was rendered vulnerable and unstable. Indeed, the word ‘rape’ is frequently employed by colonised nationalists in relation to their colonizing masters, and when considered in the light of Valente’s husband/wife analogy the sensitivity of the situation becomes even clearer. Colonial effeminizing of the colonised antagonistically fuels anxieties surrounding masculine performance, prompting the compensatory hypermasculine performances I examine in Part 2.

Given the troubling political, socio-economic dynamics beginning to unfold and calcify around the body, I shall turn next to analysing each gender consecutively to explore the discursive undertones that underlie each hegemonically required and constructed gendered performance. In Part 1, I will first examine the impact of some of these broader discourses on the female body and identity, scrutinising the considerable weight of historical legislation which restricts the autonomy of female body, before moving on to explore how everyday situations such as clothing oneself reveals the paternalistic and/or Catholic shaming mechanisms operating on that body. I will analyse the moments at which these institutions employ similar shaming tactics, as well the points at which they diverge to reveal different or even conflicting expectations for women – as well as exploring which, if either, discourse emerges as dominant. I will subsequently attend to the pressures which attempt to organise male bodies in Part 2 of this thesis. This will involve an examination of the narratives on which Western conceptions of masculinity are built, as well as analysing how this dynamic is altered when overlaid with Ireland’s status as a newly emerged postcolonial nation. This will culminate in an examination of a peculiarly Irish expression of masculinity commonly termed ‘hypermasculinity’. As with the
discourses which attempt to shame female subjectivities, I will similarly attend to moments of dissonance in and between these powerful ideologies of Catholicism and patriarchy – both disseminated throughout a wide range of institutions – to examine the effect and outcome it has on McGahern and O’Brien’s characters. Finally, in Part 3, I will compare and contrast protagonists of both sexes to explore the impact of gendered shame on their sense of identity and to what extent it ultimately shapes, limits, or alters their lives to expose what I believe is the asymmetrical power structures embedded and disseminated within gendered shame.
Part 1: The Female Body
Fashioning Femininity

In Edna O’Brien’s novel *Down by the River* (1996) the protagonist, Mary MacNamara, is fourteen, pregnant and under legal restraints whilst a court decides whether she has the right to an abortion. Unbeknownst to anyone, the conception occurred after she was raped by her father:

‘Letter for you, Mary,’ […] It was hand delivered and there was a signature on the back. It was from a cousin, a cousin of her father’s, introducing herself because of going to be her guardian for the time being. Her daddy had approved it and the courts had approved it. It was a long letter and it was signed Veronica […]. Pink for a boy and blue for a girl. That is what Veronica said. They would get knitting patterns and two sets of knitting needles […].

The most striking element of this passage is Mary’s absolute powerlessness. A binding settlement was arranged without her knowledge or consent; she has been assigned a guardian who her ‘daddy’ and the courts have approved, yet whom Mary has never previously met. Moreover, the woman to whom these parental responsibilities are reassigned is the same person notifying Mary of this change; she is presented with a *fait accompli* by a stranger who can now legally control her. The patronising tone adopted by the narrator makes it clear that Mary’s opinion is considered both insignificant and irrelevant, even though her life, body, and future are the topics under discussion. The power to determine what is best for Mary rests with her father and the courts, which is a deeply ironic scenario given that she was raped by the former. The fact that the verb ‘approve’ simultaneously means ‘to pronounce [something] to be good’ and ‘to confirm authoritatively, to sanction’ reveals the longstanding co-operation between the values espoused by patriarchal institutions and the law.

Mary is treated more like chattel than a child, an object to

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be relocated at the behest of men. Nor does the scene imply that Mary will recoup any agency once she is transferred to the care of a woman. Through free indirect discourse we see that Veronica condescendingly addresses Mary as an infant who must do as her ‘daddy’ commands, and informs rather than asks Mary how she will spend her time. The cumulative effect is to impress upon the reader that Mary is not in control of her own body. Taking my cue from this representative scene, in this chapter I intend to examine the various and often competing claims of ownership over the female body, explore how those claims are both socially and culturally constructed and analyse the obligations it places on those bodies.

The above scene also makes several oblique references to the gender roles assigned to women in rural Catholic Ireland, roles which Veronica clearly intends to enforce and police. Her insistence that Mary must spend her days knitting baby clothes rather than going to school simultaneously points to the veneration of motherhood within Catholic communities, the steadfast belief that a woman’s position – even duty – is to be a good homemaker, and Ireland’s extensive history in hiding “shameful” women from public view. Veronica’s active part in perpetuating these rigid gender norms further reveals that women can be as complicit in the patriarchal system as men and can similarly espouse patriarchal beliefs. Veronica’s wish for Mary’s unborn child to be placed in “gender appropriate” clothing from birth reveals her desire to transmit these gendered stereotypes to the baby. We can further infer that Veronica believes that the infant’s gender can be normatively aligned through clothing. This conviction will be a central preoccupation of Part 1 of this thesis; I will argue that clothing plays a vital but critically under-examined role in establishing, manipulating and controlling women’s sense of self through their (un)clothed body.
Veronica’s assertion that the clothes will be ‘pink for a boy and blue for a girl’ can be interpreted in two ways. One possible analysis is that Veronica promulgates Mariolatry. The Virgin Mary traditionally wears blue and thus the colour was historically seen as more appropriate for girls, who were urged to take the Virgin as their role model. Nevertheless, to a contemporary audience the inverse stereotype is more familiar and the knowledge that blue and not pink was originally considered more feminine is slipping from popular recall. By portraying Veronica as propagating the old(er) archetype, it can be argued that O’Brien subtly implies that such narrow and rigid notions of stereotypical femininity are as outdated as the gendered archetypal colours Veronica ascribes to new-borns. This theme of trenchant and constraining feminine stereotypes and the scene’s implication that they are inflexibly enforced among Irish communities will also be central to my analysis. I will consider whether McGahern and O’Brien entrench, retrench or subvert prevailing gender norms and examine to what extent these expectations constrain their female characters. This latter line of inquiry will closely follow my investigation into why these norms became embedded in modern Irish society.

On first reading, an overt manifestation of shame does not appear to be present in this passage. However, I contend its presence becomes illuminated when considered in light of Tomkins’ claim that shame is a ‘mechanism [which] provides a perfect vehicle for the transmission and preservation of social norms from generation to generation […] [when] powerful negative sanctions against the transgression of shared social norms [are applied]’. This particular role of shame is demonstrated by the community imposing legal restraints on Mary’s movements which forces her

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103 Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, p. 156.
to progress with the pregnancy after she has transgressed their norms by attempting to abort her foetus. The transmissive function of shame is shown in Veronica’s compulsion to force Mary to instil a highly gendered subjectivity in her baby.

Though shame is often not explicitly manifest, its presence is no less fundamental to my analysis of the pressures exerted over the female body. I contend that integral to all of the cultural and religious claims over women’s bodies is a pervasive but tacit shaming system which causes subjects to self-regulate and adjust their behaviour to conform to prevailing norms. This is achieved by embedding gendered norms into the psyche of children/adolescents like Mary, as self-regulation is ultimately more effective than overtly sanctioning transgressive subjects (which, as Mary discovers, the community is prepared to do). This system only unravels when religious and secular paradigms become visible after they come into conflict, leaving the subject unsure of which model to conform to and thus creating a gap in which the function of gendered norms can be questioned.

(U)ndressing the Female Body: Assembling A Semblance of Identity

Although McGahern and O’Brien both identify the body as the nucleus of the shame complex, they characterise the body as being subject to highly gendered pressures and therefore differently, though no less rigorously, monitored. As previously mentioned, the critical work that attends to women’s daily lives in which they must navigate the weight of meaning attached to their body and make sense of it in context of their lived experience is scant. I wish to redress this paucity and contend that the tension between discordant identities is, in part, managed through clothing. The existing critical material that addresses the role, significance or even
presence of clothing in Irish literature is additionally sparse, which is surprising given the abundance of references made to it in both novelists’ work. This deficit becomes troubling when overlaid with the psychological weight that female protagonists attach to clothing as a means of stabilizing their fluctuating identities in a society that sets contradictory expectations for women. The competing discourses of Catholicism and patriarchy surrounding the female body come to a head over the social monitoring of clothing.

The confluence and subsequent confliction between religious and masculinist discourse is evidenced in Edna O’Brien’s *Country Girls* trilogy. O’Brien’s protagonist, Caithleen Brady, is sent to a Catholic boarding school with her friend Baba Brennan, where the nuns immediately impress upon the girls the critical importance of modesty in women. During their first evening in their new dormitory, Sister Margaret informs them that:

> our convent has always been proud of its modesty. Our girls, above anything else, are good and wholesome and modest. One expression of modesty is the way a girl dresses and undresses. She should do so with decorum and modesty. […] [G]irls are requested to dress and undress under the shelter of their dressing gowns. Girls should face the foot of the bed […] as they might surprise each other if they face the side of the bed. (*TCG* 88)

Sister Margaret repeats the word ‘modest(y)’ four times in as many sentences. Strikingly, she deliberately conflates outer and inner ‘modesty’ to insinuate that the manner in which a girl (un)dresses is indicative of and correlative to her spiritual purity. A carefully (and we may also infer conservatively) dressed girl is ‘wholesome’ and ‘good’: she consequently behaves with ‘decorum’. This implication sets up the contrasting suggestion that the undressed body is indecent and must therefore be hidden, a dichotomous concept reinforced when Sister Margaret requests that the girls (un)dress under their dressing-gowns and face inwards, lest they
'surprise' each other. Her choice of verb reveals the attitude with which she regards the body: ‘surprise’ simultaneously means ‘to takes unawares’, ‘to assail or attack suddenly and without warning’ and an unanticipated act which causes ‘alarm, terror or perplexity’. She again conflates these meanings to reinforce the impression that the body is a shameful weapon which should be treated with suspicion, and therefore (un)dressed cautiously. She later chastises Caithleen for daring to take off her stockings on a chair rather than under her dressing-gown, which makes Caithleen so ashamed that ‘even [her] ear-lobes were blushing’ (TCG 88). Caithleen is pre-pubescent, and is inferentially feeling doubly shamed because she has been admonished in front of her as-yet unknown classmates and because she is fully absorbing the weight of Sister Margaret’s lesson.

This incident is formative in Caithleen’s emerging adolescent identity and Sister Margaret’s relentless emphasis on the body as a locus of shame, as well as her suggestion that identity is something that can be constructed by clothing, is one that Caithleen retains permanently. Gill Valentine argues that this is precisely the purpose of designating certain clothes and body parts as (im)proper and (in)appropriate:

The specific ‘feminine’ ‘shape’ and ‘look’ that is perceived as heterosexually desirable and that is (re)presented and (re)produced through the bio-power channels of fashion, health, diet, fitness and so on […] is about performing a gender identity that is perceived to maintain the unity or coherence of gender, sex, desire by articulating a discrete asymmetrical opposition between the ‘feminine’ self and ‘masculine’ other […]. Thus repetitive performances of hegemonic asymmetrical gender identities […] also produce a host of other assumptions about what constitutes ‘proper’ behaviour/dress in everyday spaces which congeal over time […].

104 OED <www.oed.com> [accessed 05 April 2016].
Sister Margaret unwittingly contributes to Caithleen’s inculcation into a masculinist sexual economy by disseminating her own views on the parts of the body that should be regarded as shameful and which consequently must be ‘appropriately’ covered. Her extensive rhetorical conflation of gender, sexuality, the body and identity means that Caithleen is taught that the parts of her body deemed sexually pleasurable by men represent her entire identity as a woman. The fact that this patriarchal message has been transmitted to Caithleen by a nun – an ordained representative of the Catholic Church – simultaneously indicates that these institutions share ideological commonalities and that patriarchal norms can be disseminated via multiple channels. The successful transmission of Sister Margaret’s message – seen in Caithleen’s enduring reluctance to undress in front of anyone but Baba – means that the transference of hegemonic notions of propriety has led to a calcification, or in Valentine’s terms ‘congealing’, of gendered social norms in the next generation.

Caithleen becomes intensely conscious of visible skin as a sexual boundary after this incident. During an exercise class, she looks around and notices that ‘[s]eventy bottoms were humped in the air and I could see the white thighs of the girl in front of me. That space where their black stocking tops ended which the legs of their knickers did not cover’ (TCG 94). The utilitarian gym short separates from the more sexual undergarment stockings, exposing a part of the leg which makes Caithleen uncomfortable. This portion of the body is rarely uncovered, underscored by the fact that it is particularly ‘white’ owing to a lack of exposure to sunlight. Significantly, Caithleen does not refer to ‘the space’ where the stockings end but ‘that’ space, indicating that this skin has a significance to her which is far from neutral. Caithleen also displays signs of internalised misogyny. She starts by describing the girl in front of her but slips into the plural. When Caithleen talks about
‘their stockings’ and ‘their knickers’ she substitutes the girl for all women and
demonstrates a propensity to generalise in ways I will later explore as typical of male
characters’ disregard for the specificity of individual women. Indeed, she seems
briefly to adopt the perspective of a voyeur. Though she is returned to the present by
Baba’s complaints about being made to exercise, the voice comes ‘from upside
down’ (TCG 94). Though this distortion is arguably caused by nothing more than the
fact that the girls are bent double, we might ask if it is also partly prompted because
Caithleen’s subjectivity has been momentarily displaced by the powerful, male,
voyeuristic gaze that Valentine predicted.

If Caithleen has internalised some misogynistic perspectives, the novel
presents this as unsurprising. The nuns’ dictum of modesty and chastity comes into
constant conflict with masculinist demands which, as Valentine observed, is actually
part of the same ‘bio-power’ that dictates what is ‘perceived as heterosexually
desirable’.  

In attempting to arm the girls against these masculinist demands so that
they remain chaste, the nuns themselves unwittingly teach Caithleen to prioritise
these demands by advising the girls to adjust and protect their identity through their
clothing. In other words, the very advocacy of modesty reinscribes and reifies the
power and importance of the male gaze. For Caithleen, the manipulation of what she
wears by the men in her life starts early, dating from when she comes home for
Christmas after her first term at school. Though on holiday, she is still under pressure
to present herself in a certain way. As Sinéad Mooney accurately observes, ‘[d]ress
can render the body docile through required clothing, but […] non-uniform clothes
simply make the body and the self differently subject to surveillance, differently

106 Valentine, ‘(Re)negotiating the “heterosexual street”’, p. 147.
Caithleen comes home to find a parcel on the bed which she contains ‘a pair of brown, high-heeled suede shoes’ (*TCG* 112). As soon as she puts them on, she notices that her ‘calves had got fatter and [her] legs were nicely shaped. [She] was grown up’ (*TCG* 112). Mooney notes that ‘[t]his adult, newly-sexualised status, which, the narrative stresses, is *produced* by clothing, inaugurates Caithleen’s career as an object of the male gaze, subjected to the series of panoptical male connoisseurs’. 

Caithleen discovers that she can put on new clothes and change the way she is perceived – both by herself and others. This mental transference is the beginning of a deeper, more troubling relationship with clothes.

Her self-evaluation that she ‘was grown up’ is immediately confirmed in her next encounter with Mr Gentleman, whose French name ‘Mr de Maurier’ the locals find unpronounceable and have affectionately reworked to reflect his status in the community (*TCG* 13). He also happens to be someone whom Caithleen has had a schoolgirl crush on for quite some time. She deliberately dresses to please him, wearing her new shoes but no lipstick as during their previous meeting he leaves the instruction that ‘[t]he next time we have lunch, don’t wear lipstick. […] I prefer you without it’ (*TCG* 73). Mr Gentleman reveals a strong sense of entitlement over women’s bodies; he expresses no qualms in issuing instructions to a young girl regarding what he finds most pleasing. Upon seeing her again, he comments: “You got plump […]. You got pretty too – terribly pretty’ […]. There were all sorts of meanings behind his words” (*TCG* 116). In response to this observation, Caithleen replies ‘Yes, I have changed’ (*TCG* 117). The dynamic of their relationship has become undeniably sexual; he holds her hand in his car, kisses her, and professes to

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108 Ibid.
love her. Caithleen immediately connects the kiss to her adult clothing, noting that her toes ‘though they were numb and pinched in the new shoes, responded to that kiss’ (*TCG* 118). Given the wording of Caithleen’s feelings, it is useful to moderate Mooney’s observation that Caithleen’s ‘newly-sexualised’ status is fashioned rather than produced by clothing. Besides its obvious allusion to ‘fashion’ as a textile industry, ‘fashioned’ more accurately reflects Caithleen’s situation because it implies that this status requires work. She does not inhabit the category ‘adult’ simply or easily: the role is initially uncomfortable and ‘pinches’. Instead, it is something Caithleen has to constantly (re)fashion with every meeting, wearing the clothes of the person she wants to be (seen as).

Caithleen commences an affair with Mr Gentleman after she is expelled from school. The conflicting pressures between internalised Catholic doctrine insisting upon spiritual and visual modesty and male pressure to satisfy a voyeuristic gaze in the context of a clandestine affair take their toll on her. In a crystallising moment which occurs whilst Caithleen dresses to go on a date with him, she rejects her own femininity:

> It is the only time I am thankful for being a woman, […] when I draw the curtains, take off my old clothes and prepare to go out. Minute by minute the excitement grows. I brush my hair and […] shadow my lids with black stuff and am astonished by the look of mystery it gives to my eyes. I hate being a woman. Vain and shallow and superficial. (*TCG* 206-207)

Caithleen’s experience of the religious and secular world has reinforced the view that to change her psychological interior she must first change her exterior. She can thus be read as attempting to fashion yet another identity, that of a mysterious, seductive mistress. This role is initially exciting, presumably because changing into someone else allows her to escape an otherwise mundane life. She draws the curtains to hide
from the outside world and takes off her daytime clothes which signify her everyday identity in order to construct a new one. Caithleen’s view of her evening ritual is initially akin to a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly; her room is her chrysalis. The exercise is, as Caithleen ultimately concludes, futile: this new identity is impermanent, insubstantial and hollow. She has merely created façade; the make-up masks and disguises but does not transform her. Her eyes have a ‘look’ of mystery: the very word itself indicates appearance without substance; it is, as Caithleen admits, ‘shallow and superficial’. The short, sharp sentence ‘I hate being a woman’ is arresting, making this the emphasis of the passage and indicating the violence with which Caithleen experiences this self-hatred. However, her use of the word ‘woman’ demonstrates once more the successful cultural collapse of the distinction between sex and gender. The acts which Caithleen rejects are the social customs required to perform femininity: the clothing, hair and make-up routines deemed culturally necessary to make herself sexually pleasing to the heteronormative gaze. She does not express any dissatisfaction with her sexed body, but rather the effort required to inhabit it.

Carrie Paechter argues that any woman’s attempt to rework her identity is, and will always be, fruitless because the gender distinction between masculinity and femininity is not merely binary but dualistic:

A dualistic relation is one in which the subordinate term is negated, rather than the two sides being in equal balance. Femininity is, thus, defined as a lack, an absence of masculinity […]. There can be no hegemonic femininity, because being in a hegemonic position is also about being in a position of power; it is about being able to construct the world for oneself and others so that one’s power is unchallenged and taken (more or less) for granted as part of the order of things. Hyperfemininity, on the other hand, is a powerless position, one that is defined by the absence of the power […].

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This is articulated more succinctly by Catherine MacKinnon:

[S]exuality itself is no longer unimplicated in women’s second-class status. […] [S]exuality appears as the interactive dynamic of gender inequality. Stopped as an attribute of a person, sex inequality takes the form of gender; moving as a relation between people, it takes the form of sexuality. Gender emerges as a congealed form of the sexualisation of the inequality between men and women.\textsuperscript{110}

Paechter and MacKinnon perfectly explain the trajectory of Caithleen’s thought process in the previous scene. Caithleen is adhering to the routines of what Paechter terms ‘hyperfeminity’ by applying make-up, dressing her hair and choosing sexually pleasing outfits. However, far from placing her in a position of power, what Caithleen has come to realise is that no matter how she attempts to alter her identity through these hyperfeminine rituals, she will always be powerless. She is manifestly ‘[un]able to construct the world’ so that her identity is ‘unchallenged’. Her sense of self is consequently negated and subsumed in direct correlation with her adherence to performing hyperfemininity: the more she strives for this feminine ideal, the more her powerlessness is revealed. In maintaining these gendered routines to please Mr Gentleman, Caithleen is essentially sexualising her own subjugation. Faced with such a stark realisation, Caithleen (temporarily) rejects femininity.

Lorna Rooks-Hughes argues that this denunciation of gender is additionally layered with a tacit manifestation of the shame complex, as ‘[d]esire is established as transgressive […]. Abuse and misogyny are internalised in O’Brien’s women and converted to self-hatred, specifically hatred of the gendered body’.\textsuperscript{111} This analysis, one which is also pertinent to my later examination of \textit{A Pagan Place}, further illuminates this scene in which Caithleen is so disgusted by her gender. She is preparing to go out with Mr Gentleman, a relationship which her Catholic teaching

\textsuperscript{110} MacKinnon, \textit{Feminism Unmodified}, p. 6.
tells her is fundamentally wrong. She also desires him, which Catholicism has taught her to suppress. Thus, going on a date with him renders her doubly shameful in the eyes of Catholic doctrine. Caithleen endeavours to change her identity through her clothes and make-up to present a mask of (hyper)femininity to gratify his gaze, a gaze which has instructed her to satisfy him since she was a child and which has always made her feel inadequate. In other words, she goes against her Catholic upbringing to put on an identity to please a man she has never felt good enough for. Caithleen has internalised these multiple and unworkable contradictions which fill her with shame and expresses them as self-hatred.

Her ambivalent relationship with Mr Gentleman culminates in a further paralysing moment for Caithleen when Mr Gentleman coerces her into stripping for him:

‘Show me your body. I’ve never seen your legs or breasts or anything. I’d like to see you’. […] It was difficult. I didn’t like him to see my suspender and things […]. I stood there shivering a little, not knowing what to do with my arms. So I put my hand up to my throat, a gesture I often do when I am at a loss. (TCG 210-211)

The demeaning patriarchal gaze is evident. Mr Gentleman, explicitly voyeuristically, compels a helpless Caithleen to stand naked before him. His use of the imperative ‘show’ clearly reveals he is issuing a command, not a request. Caithleen’s powerlessness is revealed through language which evokes the image of a vulnerable child; she ‘shiver[s]’, ‘not knowing what to do’. Mr Gentleman has stripped her literally and metaphorically, regressing her to childhood. His shaming gaze is compounded by the previously examined internalised view of the body; Caithleen reveals a body which she has been repeatedly taught is an object of shame, causing a fundamental contradiction in discourse: the Catholic compulsion to cover up and the patriarchal demand for satisfaction. Mooney argues that the shame complex runs
deeper, and that ‘[u]ndressed, O’Brien’s women are subject to the scopophilic gaze that threatens to return them to base matter, alarmingly unstructured, fluid, and undifferentiated, dissolving’.\textsuperscript{112} If Caithleen uses clothing to assemble a semblance of identity, then without it she loses \textit{all} identity. Under Mr Gentleman’s gaze she is not only paralysed by shaming discourses but essentially erased by them. Mooney’s claim that without clothing O’Brien’s women return to ‘base matter’ is reminiscent of Pelan’s earlier association between sensuousness and debasement, suggesting that Caithleen is not simply in her ‘raw’ state, but feels \textit{debased} by what is happening to her. This is the view that Charlotte Nunes adheres to, claiming that this ‘expose[s] the deleterious patriarchal strategy of cultivating women’s expectations for enduring romance while simultaneously condemning female sexual desire’.\textsuperscript{113} Read against Mooney’s analysis, Caithleen is ‘deleted’ by Mr Gentleman’s gaze because she has no model for how to proceed. She has been stripped back to the status of a child not simply because she is humiliated and vulnerable, but because the foundations of her identity have been unworkably contradicted.

However, Caithleen does not refuse to comply with Mr Gentleman’s instructions, and even escalates the situation by indicating she would like to see him naked too: “I haven’t seen you.’ ‘Do want to?’ and I nodded’ \textit{(TCG 211)}. Tomkins argues that this behaviour occurs because Caithleen is sexually excited by the experience, which causes a shame-humiliation complex to spiral even whilst she pursues the object arousing both the shame and excitement:

\textit{In shame I wish to continue to look at and be looked at, but I also do not wish to do so. [...] [E]xcitement may break through and displace shame at any moment, but [...] shame is dominant [...]}.Self-

consciousness is heightened by virtue of the unwillingness of the self to renounce the object.\textsuperscript{114}

Caithleen’s actions perfectly comply with Tomkins’ analysis. Caithleen is trapped in an unresolvable paradox; she could refuse to remove her clothing, but both her religious and cultural upbringing has successfully instilled the belief that men have rights over her body. Her unsuccessfully repressed desire for Mr Gentleman compounds her compliance; she is unwilling to renounce him, despite her internal conflict, because she is aroused – demonstrated by her request to see him naked. However, she is highly self-conscious. Despite the excitement threatening to ‘break through’ ‘at any moment’, it never quite does and Caithleen does not permit Mr Gentleman anything more than a kiss. Ultimately, shame remains ‘dominant’ as Tomkins theorises, inhibiting Caithleen from exploring her somatic desires.

Troublingly, Tomkins omits the asymmetric presence of power in the gaze. In arguing that Mr Gentleman compels Caithleen to strip for him, both Mooney and Nunes also rely on but never articulate a tacit exertion of authority in the voyeuristic gaze which underpins Caithleen’s predicament every bit as much as the discord between discourses. Léon Wurmser provides a more detailed analysis of the dynamics at work and attributes a power imbalance to voyeurism that Tomkins neglects:

Looking and exposing are equated with possession and power. […] Seeing means creating and destroying; being seen and exposed means being hypnotised, devoured, and destroyed. […] The threat of this underlying shame is that patients will become lifeless – owing to […] paralyzing shame.\textsuperscript{115}

However, Caithleen’s behaviour is not fully explained by Wurmser’s analysis. Caithleen is not ‘paralyz[ed]’ into inaction but pursues the encounter, indicating her

\textsuperscript{114} Tomkins, \textit{Shame and Its Sisters}, p. 137.
unwillingness to renounce the latent pleasure in Mr Gentleman’s gaze despite the potential destructiveness of it. It also discloses that, in Caithleen, the masculinist demand to please is stronger than the Catholic requirement to be chaste. Wurmser’s argument that ‘being seen and exposed means being […] destroyed’ seems to hold true for Mr Gentleman as well as for Caithleen. Once he has removed his clothes, Caithleen notes that ‘[h]e was not half so distinguished out of his coal-black suit and stiff white shirt’ (*TCG* 211). Her comment suggests that men also augment their identity through clothing, though the fact that Mr Gentleman is more comfortable naked than Caithleen indicates that he reinforces others’ perception of him through his attire, rather than constructs it as Caithleen does. The devouring quality of the voyeuristic relationship which Wurmser points to is more prevalent in Caithleen’s relationship with Eugene Gaillard, which I shall address momentarily.

Caithleen Brady is not the only protagonist to feel the pressure of someone attempting to force a new identity on her by altering her clothing. Baba Brennan’s husband, Frank, consciously manipulates the sensitive subject of ‘appropriate’ attire to subdue, control, and humiliate her. On their honeymoon, Frank sends Baba ‘upstairs to put something respectable on’ when he dislikes the fact that other men are looking at her, yet later tells her to ‘get her Dior on’ (a provocative, backless dress) when he wants to impress some business associates.\(^{116}\) In so doing, he reveals that what he considers appropriate is both inconsistent and bent according to his whims. The close juxtaposition of these scenes allows the reader to draw two conclusions; firstly, that male opinion carries significant weight in the lives of Irish women and, secondly, that what constitutes (in)appropriate clothing remains both prevalent and sensitive in Baba’s consciousness. Described by Caithleen as ‘[c]oy,
pretty, [and] malicious’, Baba has hitherto been depicted as head-strong, even recalcitrant, and does not bow to the opinion of others (TCG 16). Even within their marriage, Baba is more than prepared to fight when she disagrees. The fact that she does not even argue with Frank when he calls her clothing unsuitable indicates that the sense of modesty the nuns embedded in her at school remains lodged in her psyche. Her sullen retort that she ‘owned nothing respectable’ reveals Baba’s reluctant deference to Frank’s judgment. Baba may have refused to bend to the prevailing standards of respectability in what she bought as a single woman, but her acknowledgement of Frank’s claim discloses that she is nevertheless aware of the cultural boundaries of (in)propriety and can be chastised into compliance. Her deference signifies one further dynamic at work in their exchange: that, as her husband, Frank has the right to tell her what to wear. In complying with his demands, Baba effectively accepts that she considers herself to be someone else’s property and that, by getting married, she is no longer fully in control of her own body. Baba’s change of clothes implicitly reveals that she too is putting on a new identity by inhabiting the costume of a wife.

In O’Brien’s A Pagan Place (1970), when the unnamed protagonist’s elder sister, Emma, goes missing after giving birth to her illegitimate child, her mother enlists the girl’s help in an attempt to find her:

Your mother said […] she’d go [to look for Emma], it was a mother’s place. Then she said you could go with her […]. She fished out a brassiere for you, one that Hilda had given her. It was like being promoted, you were promoted to a brassiere. The cups were too deep. She said to wear it outside your vest and you did, though that completely nullified its use. Your diddies were hardly formed.117

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This scene is reminiscent of Caithleen being presented with high-heels in *The Country Girls*. The significance of the bra is unmistakable; the position of eldest daughter is now vacant given that Emma has been disowned. The girl’s mother needs the girl to “grow up” – to help her find (and control) Emma. The girl also carries the sole hopes of rectifying the sullied family name through appropriate behaviour and eventual marriage, as well as being the solitary vehicle for providing legitimate heirs. This is all unspoken, but contained within the symbolism of the bra. The fact that the bra is too big for her represents an invitation and a challenge for her to fill it – to grow up and grow into it. The girl herself senses the significance of this act, and feels that she has ‘promoted’ to a larger role within the family.

Emma also re-establishes her place in the village through clothing when she returns from her hotel service job in Dublin.

When Emma came home she went to the village four or five times a day and sometimes for no errand at all. She changed her clothes before each journey and that was why she was called a fashion plate. (*APP 80*) Emma uses the concept of being fashionable as a synonym for being ‘interesting’. More aware of how to manipulate the link between inner and outer identities than any previous female protagonists, she uses visual intrigue to imply that living in a city has made her a more varied, sophisticated person. However, through free indirect discourse the reader is aware that, like Caithleen, her younger sister is aware that the persona Emma is promulgating is hollow. Though playing the role of helpful daughter, Emma often has no errands and is merely peacocking.

Emma also expresses her resistance to and defiance of her family’s wishes through clothing. She is been sent away to have her baby in the relative anonymity of Dublin; though the text is never specific, the inference is that she is sent to a Mother
and Baby home in a process commonly termed ‘coercive confinement’. The girl’s parents ‘put Emma in lodgings with some devout lady […] who took care of such people. […] [I]t was evident that they had located this lady through a friend of theirs, Father Scanlon’ (APP 122). This was not an uncommon practice during this period in Ireland, and the impulse to remove Emma from public view echoes the treatment of Mary MacNamara’s confinement in Veronica’s home. It is also further underscores the abjective nature of shame: Emma has shamed her family and must be removed.

Emma runs away from the Home shortly after the birth and refuses to see her mother. This is not altogether unsurprising. Luddy observes that ‘[c]oncealment was one of the few ways in which a woman could return to a ‘normal’ life after the birth of an illegitimate child’. Luddy’s use of the word ‘return’ is both literally and metaphorically true for Emma; whilst transgressing the most inviolate social lore of being an unmarried mother, Emma is removed to the margins of the village society. Providing Emma hands her baby over ‘to the State a few seconds after it [i]s born’ – which she does – she can return from her abject liminality to resume her place in the family (APP 131). However, Michael Garrett also highlights that even contemporary reports:

conceded that most ‘girls do not like going to a Mother and Baby Home because they consider that they will have to remain there too long’ […]. In the socially progressive monthly magazine, The Bell, an anonymous author argued that many women refused to go to such homes because it meant ‘in effect, two years imprisonment’.

For Emma, who ‘went to the village four or five times a day […] [and] changed her clothes before each journey’ for the pleasure of being seen, this isolation is

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119 Ibid.
120 Garrett, ‘Excavating the past’, p.363. The work Garrett cites is Cecil Barratt’s Adoption: The Parent, the Child, the Home (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1952) p. 44.
unbearable (APP 80). Indeed, one of the few remarks she makes when the family visit her before the birth is that she ‘would have liked to have seen what the autumn fashions were like’ (APP 130).

Emma discharges herself from hospital unexpectedly – before she is medically advised to do so – and leaves nothing through which she can be traced. Without any other leads, their mother sends the girl to the café that Emma’s landlady has told them she frequents to try and find her. Upon sight, she recognizes immediately that her sister has changed from her experience. The girl is at loss when Emma refuses all contact with the family and burns their mother’s letter without reading it. She further refuses to discuss anything more personal than the ‘nice’ ‘almond’ shape of the girl’s eyes, continually deflecting the girl’s questions by enquiring whether her younger sister is dating yet (APP 151). The girl’s impression is that Emma is ‘brittle’, but that does not stop her being ‘afraid’ the new, highly sexualised persona Emma has created through her clothes (APP 152).

The thing that struck you most was her new poise. She had a navy suit on. It was very youthful. She patted her midriff and said she had got her figure back. That meant the other girls knew about the baby so you congratulated her. She said Poor little mite and that was all […] Emma wore no blouse. The top of her slip was edged with lace in a contrasting shade of pink. It looked like something that had come from America. (APP 150).

Emma alludes to the fact that her birth was difficult. The girl and her mother have discovered from the hospital that the baby ‘is a boy’, weighed ‘five pounds, twelve ounces’ and that Emma has named it ‘St. John Aubrey’ (APP 142). They also learn that it ‘has a blood defect’ which the doctor believes is a result of ‘Emma’s blood and the man’s blood [being] incompatible’ (APP 142). Though the precise details of the complications with Emma’s baby are unspecified – and indeed possibly not understood by the contemporary medical knowledge – this was also not uncommon.
Luddy details how infant mortality rates and complicated births were significantly higher in women giving birth to illegitimate children by a ratio of three to one in the 1920s, and that whilst these statistics did improve over time the odds remained firmly stacked against these babies.\footnote{Luddy, ‘Unmarried Mothers in Ireland’, p. 118.} Emma never received any pre-natal examinations and the details of the birth are scant. Whether the infant’s condition was caused by negligent medical care or pre-existed the birth is impossible to determine. Nevertheless, the child is representative of a statistical pattern which indicates his life chances have already been impacted by being an object of and subject to shame discourses before he was even born.

The girl reveals her own awareness of and prejudice against certain styles of clothing through free indirect discourse. The reference to Emma’s outfit looking like something from ‘America’ seems to simultaneously function as a synonym for cutting-edge fashion and wanton or sexually-loose attire. Though an obvious show of strength after a traumatising birth and a rejection of the social invitation to feel ashamed, Emma’s alluring evening-wear seems more akin to battle armour designed to deflect opprobrium. Overtly flaunting her youth reads as a way of reclaiming it in the context of a society that repeatedly tells unmarried mothers that there is no way back from the shame. Mooney argues that ‘for O’Brien’s heroines […] identity is, at best, a carefully assembled costume’, and this is proven absolutely true by Caithleen and both sisters in \textit{A Pagan Place}.\footnote{Mooney, ‘Sacramental Sleeves’, p. 212.} Indeed, a closer analysis of them has shown the inverse to be true: ‘a carefully assembled costume’ constructs a semblance of identity.
So far, my analysis has focussed on the construction and assembling of identity through clothing as largely employed by women as a means of navigating and coping with the competing demands on their body. This takes on a more sinister twist when Caithleen meets Eugene Gaillard, who attempts to manipulate Caithleen through her attire. The narrative establishes the predatory similarities between Eugene and Mr Gentleman early on. Mr Gentleman’s words to Caithleen ‘You got plump’ when sexualising her during early adolescence are repeated almost exactly by Eugene – ‘You’re such a nice plump girl’ – when trying to persuade Caithleen to sleep with him. However, whereas Mr Gentleman is presented as a selfish, ageing man seeking a relatively harmless fraternisation with a pretty young girl, Eugene sets about dismantling Caithleen’s sense of self in a cold and calculated manner. On one of their earliest dates, he arranges a meeting to buy her a new coat because her ‘old green coat was shabby’ \((GGE\ 29)\). The thinly veiled implication is that in order to be seen with him, a higher standard of dress worn by a more refined type of woman is required: standards which she currently does not meet. In the following weeks of their relationship he proceeds to throw her earrings into the fire because he does not like them and instructs her in what he considers to be the proper way to brush her teeth \((GGE\ 61-62)\). Caithleen describes how ‘Eugene had asked [her] to make-up more discreetly [and] bought [her] paler powder’ because he considers her current look to be overdone \((GGE\ 179)\). He then attempts to dissuade her from wearing high heels by showing her ‘diagrams of ruined feet’ \((GGE\ 180)\). All of these acts are relatively inconsequential (to Caithleen at least), but when added together create a picture of a man insidiously taking control of a younger girl. When Caithleen expresses doubts about the morality of having unmarried sex and refuses to sleep with him, Eugene pointedly loans her a book entitled ‘The Body and Mature

\footnote{Edna O’Brien, \textit{Girl with Green Eyes} [1962] (London: Orion Books, 2007), p.63. All further references will be cited as \textit{GGE} in parentheses.}
Behaviour’ to make her feel childish for refusing him – which is exactly what happens (GGE 71).

As their relationship becomes established, Eugene takes an even firmer hold over Caithleen. Eugene sets about anglicising Caithleen, crystallising the link between her outward form altering her inner sense of self. Within a few weeks of meeting her he has already renamed her ‘Kate, as he said that Caithleen was too ‘Kiltartan’ for his liking’ (GGE 29). In company, Eugene refers to her as his ‘[c]ountry girl[,] [f]resh from the bogs’ and tells her to ‘[r]un upstairs on [he]r peasant legs’ to imply that she is unforgivably provincial when Caithleen is unaware that Eugene wishes her to use a particular set of cups for the English ritual of afternoon tea (GGE 194-195). After enumerating her failings in front of their guests, he turns to them and openly discusses his need to ‘teach [her] how to speak properly’ (GGE 179). What he means by ‘properly’ is in a more middle-class, English manner to match her newly anglicised name and the more “elegant” wardrobe he is constructing for her. Eugene humiliates Caithleen by publicly suggesting that she is his intellectual and social inferior, speaking about and to her as though she was an improperly trained pet rather than his partner. He preys on Caithleen’s vulnerable sense of self, playing on the deep-rooted feelings of what Meaney previously characterised as “white shame”: a fear of being fundamentally inferior – a ‘peasant’ – because she is Irish. Eugene capitalises on this internalized postcolonial shame to control Caithleen. He confirms any underlying racial fear of being inferior by explicitly claiming to be improving and civilizing her. Such is his success that when he ends their relationship at the close of Girl With Green Eyes, Caithleen refers to herself as a ‘wild, debased person’ (GGE 234). Though only three words, her phrase reveals a double shame at having ‘debased’ herself in a Catholic sense by engaging
in sex before marriage, and not being good enough for the English Eugene because she is an inferior ‘wild’ Irishwoman – a term which draws on Eugene’s previous colonial implication that Irishness is inferior to Englishness.

Eugene’s actions have a profound and permanent impact on Caithleen’s identity. He effectively colonises her: his anglicised renaming is something she never sheds, remaining ‘Kate’ throughout the rest of their relationship when it resumes in *Girls in their Married Bliss* (which eventually turns into a brief but destructive marriage) until even Baba begins to call her Kate. Even when Caithleen has emotionally distanced herself from Eugene and starts having an affair, she still does her make-up the way he has instructed. Before meeting up with her lover, ‘she would fly upstairs, make her face up, but not overdo it’ – by not ‘overdo[ing] it’, she is maintaining the values attached to an understated style which Eugene promoted when they first met (*GMB* 14). Eugene takes command of every aspect of Caithleen’s life – her face, her clothes, her hair, her name – to take control of her. By stripping away these external markers of her identity, he erodes and corrodes her sense of self. This is something from which Caithleen never fully recovers. In Nunes’ terms, Eugene’s ‘deleterious patriarchal strategy’ is so successful that Caithleen slowly erases herself over the course of O’Brien’s trilogy: firstly by opting to have a hysterectomy and then by committing suicide.124

**The Sexual Economy**

Eugene Gaillard and Mr Gentleman’s continual manipulation of Caithleen Brady’s sense of identity through her clothing makes explicit what has been implicit

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all along – that the female body is simply another form of currency to be used.

Eugene continually suggests that his love for Caithleen is provisional, though most overtly after they have just had sex for the first time (which Caithleen only permits to happen once he has bought her a wedding ring so they can pretend to be married as Eugene is already married to the absent American, Laura):

‘That ring has to last you a long time,’ he said.
‘How long?’
‘As long as you keep your girlish laughter.’ (GGE 171).

The conditional nature of his love is reinforced to Caithleen moments later:

‘Do you love me?’ I asked again.
‘Ask me that again in ten years’ time, when I know you better’. (GGE 175)

Shirley Peterson accurately observes that Eugene’s ‘ten year deferral of her question indicates that much depends on Kate’s remaining in a child-like – and masochistic – state of paralysis as a kind of commodity for male consumption’.\(^{125}\) Caithleen’s masochistic state of paralysis is ensured in a two-fold structure. Firstly, she is trapped in an emotionally abusive, voyeuristic relationship – a dynamic which Wurmser characterises as containing an inherent imbalance of power: ‘Seeing means creating and destroying; being seen and exposed means being hypnotised, devoured, and destroyed’.\(^{126}\) The more Eugene physically sees of Caithleen’s body externally through their sexual encounters and continues to influence through her outer attire, the more control he takes internally. This control directly corresponds with his power to undermine her sense of self. Secondly, she is already flagellating herself internally for indulging in sexual satisfaction contrary to the demands of her religion. However, the maintenance of her child-like state is impossible. In a society that conflates and equates adulthood with sexuality (seen in Mr Gentleman’s recognition of her as an adult once she starts wearing sexualised clothing), the consummation of their

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\(^{125}\) Shirley Peterson, “‘Meaniacs’ and Martyrs: Sadomasochistic Desire in O’Brien’s The Country Girl Trilogy” in New Critical Perspectives, p. 160.

\(^{126}\) Wurmser, The Mask of Shame, p. 130.
relationship ensures that Eugene will no longer see her as innocent. His desire for a child-bride is also at odds with his desire to make her mature into a sophisticated, civilised adult. In effect, Eugene uses Caithleen’s paralysis to consume her, only to discard her at the end of the novel when he has created something he no longer desires.

Eugene is not the only male to act with a sense of entitlement to a woman’s body; both McGahern and O’Brien depict a culture which is rife with such attitudes. The girl in O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place* mentions casually that the tailor who made her ‘father’s new suit’ ‘had a game leg and when he measured ladies he touched their diddies’ (*APP* 40). Non-consensual groping appears to be such a commonplace event to the girl that a man inappropriately feeling a woman’s breast is no more noteworthy than having a ‘game leg’. Caithleen herself has learned from an early age that any favour or debt must be paid for by some physical or bodily response – usually in the form of a kiss. Her opening exchange with Hickey (the Brady’s farmhand) turns into a subtle contest for power. After Caithleen corrects his assertion that the bird they can hear is not a ‘brown bird’ but a ‘black bird’, Hickey’s instinctive response is to subsume the child’s superior knowledge under a display of his own significance: ‘I have work to do, I don’t go around asking birds their names, ages, hobbies, tastes in snails and so forth. […] I carry this place on my shoulders’ (*TCG* 10). This is not a debt that Caithleen is able to deny, and her tacit acknowledgement of the obligation is exploited by the demand for alternative payment in lieu of wages: “Givvus a birdie’ […] A birdie was his private name for a kiss’ (*TCG* 10). The euphemistic name is significant given the undercurrent of this exchange. Caithleen embarrasses Hickey by correcting his knowledge of bird calls, so Hickey uses the same word to assert his claim over Caithleen’s body as settlement of an (ongoing) debt her family
owe him in which her body acts as fair recompense. Caithleen has been shamed and claimed by the very words she used to express her burgeoning knowledge.

Jack Holland, a local farmer and small-business owner, also frequently demands kisses from Caithleen when she is a young child and later attempts to persuade her to marry him. Romantically attached to Caithleen’s mother, Jack writes to Caithleen at the convent following her mother’s death and after he has bought their family farm – which is sold because Caithleen’s father has mismanaged their finances:

“my dear Caithleen, who is the image and continuation of her mother, I see no reason why you shall not return and inherit your mother’s home and carry on her domestic tradition (TCG 105) [emphasis original].

Jack knows that Caithleen cannot return to purchase the property as he has only been able to acquire the farm because her father is bankrupt. Though not explicit, Caithleen interprets this paragraph as an offer of marriage because the idea that he might ‘give the place back’ free of charge was ‘laugh[able]’ – an impression which is emphasised by his choice to inform her that he has already had ‘an attractive offer from an order of nuns who wish to rent it as a novitiate’ (TCG 106). The word ‘inherit’ indicates that he envisages a legal bind between the two of them, and the only currency Caithleen has left to pay with is, once again, her body. Helen Thompson offers this letter as proof of a male internalising Catholic doctrine surrounding female bodies and sexuality, ‘which functions in the patriarchal mind to separate women’s reproductive and sexual identities’. This, she argues, acts to ensure that Jack ‘sees neither Mrs Brady nor her daughter as having characteristics independent of each other’, but simply as available reproductive women.

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analysis, whilst not one I subscribe to, is plausible. Jack refers to Caithleen as the ‘continuation’ of her mother, supporting Thompson’s claim that he cannot see the difference between them because Catholicism has taught him that women are merely reproductive vessels (TCG 105). However, I do not find this reading convincing; Jack’s assertion that Caithleen is a ‘continuation’ is designed to manipulate her into envisaging herself back in her childhood home – his only leverage for marriage. I posit instead that Jack is a man who has truly absorbed the rigid gender roles ascribed to women in Eamon de Valera’s 1943 St. Patrick’s Day address. Jack wants Caithleen to tend to his ‘domestic’ affairs – as is ‘tradition[al]’ – whilst he focuses on the stereotypically masculine work of farming and running his businesses. Jack, like Mr Gentleman, Eugene, and Hickey, views Caithleen’s body as a commodity which can be bought for the price of returning her own home to her.

Given Caithleen’s early inauguration into a rural, patriarchal economy which regards the female body as fair payment for most debts, it is not surprising – yet, paradoxically, still shocking – to her when her double-date partner, Harry, expects to have sex with her as ‘the price of a good dinner’ (TCG 195). This incident reinforces the differences between Caithleen and Baba’s outlook; whereas Caithleen is once again terrified at the prospect of sexual contact, Baba is relaxed and enjoying herself. Their differing attitude reveals that whilst Caithleen is presented as particularly naive, vulnerable and susceptible to a shame complex, her response is not universal among Irish women. The absence of a mother to help her transition from the Catholic doctrine of the convent into the masculinist world is presented as a possible explanation of why the shame complex is so much stronger in Caithleen than Baba. Whereas Caithleen transposes the religious model of idolisation and idealisation into the patriarchal world – making gods out of Mr Gentleman and then Eugene – Baba’s
self-interested, mercenary attitude and refusal to feel ashamed can be traced in her
mother, Martha Brennan. Rebecca Pelan comments that:

Unlike Caithleen’s “Mama”, Martha divides food evenly among herself
and her children, enjoys depriving her husband of pleasures and advises
her children to “get out of this dive […]”. By no means does O’Brien
suggest in the trilogy that Baba’s sense of self is the ideal, but she does
reveal her as a young girl and, finally, as a woman who, unlike
Caithleen, relies on herself for her own survival.¹²⁹

Pelan refers to the scene in which Caithleen goes to Baba’s house after school to find
Martha ensconced in the bedroom with a ‘cooked chicken on a plate in the centre of
the big bed’ (TCG 39). Baba, Caithleen, Martha and Baba’s brother, Declan, all eat
the chicken secretly in the bedroom ‘so the aul fella won’t get it’, after which they
proceed to consume half a trifle whilst Martha admires her reflection in the mirror
(TCG 40). Baba spitefully lies to her mother and claims that Caithleen does not like
trifle so that she can eat her portion.

Caithleen is shocked by the selfishness of the characters that surround her,
and somewhat confused that Martha delights in punishing her husband – who has
always been very kind to Caithleen – because her own father is unpredictable and
intermittently violent. She compares Martha’s extravagant, vindictive hoarding with
her own mother’s contrasting generosity: ‘I could see Mama piling it up on our
plates, my father’s, my own, Hickey’s, and leaving only a spoonful for herself’ (TCG
41). Caithleen has already begun to dichotomously view Martha as a ‘fast’ woman
who functions as the antonym to her perception of her ‘Mama’ as saintly and self-
sacrificing (TCG 40). However, the difference between these two women is
reinforced in Caithleen’s mind by the clothes they wear as well as their behaviour.
Caithleen encounters Martha staring at her own reflection, ‘wearing red velvet shoes’
and ‘drinking red wine’ whilst eating the stolen chicken (TCG 39). All facets of

scene lead the reader to infer that Martha enjoys all forms of luxury, demands a high-quality lifestyle and is very self-absorbed. However, the negative undertone of the image is compounded when Caithleen states that Martha covers her face in make-up in order to fool ‘strangers’ at the local bar that she was a ‘Madonna’ because she is a woman who only wanted ‘drink and admiration’ from life. This is in direct contrast to her own mother, who is depicted as wearing ‘old rags’ and whose mirror is ‘clouded over’ – a symbol of the family’s relative poverty as well as a metaphor for how rarely Caithleen’s Mama attends to her own reflection (*TCG* 5; 34). Caithleen further demonstrates how deeply Catholic doctrine has saturated her subconscious by repeating the virgin/whore dichotomy which Meaney previously identified as a highly toxic trope.\(^\text{130}\) Too young to understand the nuances of each woman’s character, Caithleen casts Martha as the whorish siren who lures unsuspecting men with her attractive but ultimately false façade as a foil to her martyred, saint-like and pseudo-Virginal ‘Mama’. Helen Thompson argues that the death of Caithleen’s mother ensures that ‘the two mothers function as one feminine model in Caithleen’s mind’.\(^\text{131}\) However, these images are proliferating in Caithleen’s consciousness *before* her mother’s fatal accident, indicating that Caithleen’s propensity to idealise her ‘Mama’ is simultaneously a reaction against Martha’s ‘cold’ mothering style and evidence of how deeply these dualistic images of women pervade the psyche of girls at an early stage (*TCG* 40).

Martha’s pragmatic, if mercenary, materialism is reflected in Baba’s resilience in coping with the hard lot of women. Unlike Caithleen, who falls to pieces when Harry makes a sexual advance, Baba capitalises on the experience by stealing a ‘guest towel, two tomatoes, and a jar of chicken and ham paste’ from her date for the

\(^{130}\) Meaney, ‘Race, Sex and Nation’, pp. 130-131.

evening, Reg (TCG 199). Though Baba is fond of Reg, she makes sure to protect her own interests and achieves some agency through exploiting her own sexual objectification. Baba’s attitude is largely unchanged throughout the trilogy, and though she is partially cowed by her dominant husband Frank, she is nevertheless portrayed as “giving as good as she gets”. Whilst her childhood antagonism towards Caithleen prevents her from representing a feminine ideal, she is, as Pelan argues, a survivor. Thompson extends Pelan’s argument and argues that Caithleen’s transposition of a religious model into the masculinist world is not only due to an absent mother figure to guide her transition but because she has genuinely conflated the Virgin Mary with her own mother, creating a double model of perfection which consequently causes her to experience a crippling sense of ‘failure and subsequent guilt over not being perfect’.132 This analysis, however, is troubling. Whilst Caithleen idealises her mother and parallels can be drawn between the two – particularly in relation to Mrs Brady’s self-sacrificing, passive tendencies and desire to avoid sleeping with her husband – I do not believe that Caithleen has gone so far in her own mind as to equate her mother with the Virgin. Instead, she takes her mother’s example of martyrdom and repeats this pattern in her own life. Caithleen allows Baba to endlessly exploit her as a child and adolescent, the already married and ultimately unavailable Mr Gentleman to lead her on and discard her, and Eugene to control, manipulate and emotionally abuse her. This martyrdom is taken to extremes when she eventually stops fighting for custody of her son with Eugene and sterilises herself. Whilst I shall address the full implications of the trilogy’s conclusion further on, it is important to note here that the difference in agency and outlook between Caithleen and Baba indicates that Caithleen is potentially complicit in some of her own victimisation.

132 Thompson, The Role of Irish Women, p. 27.
Edna O’Brien is not alone in presenting women as objects in the lives of men; John McGahern also depicts a culture where fathers largely regard their daughters as an extension of themselves and their property rather than as individuals with autonomy and agency. This is clearly demonstrated by Mahoney in *The Dark* in his differing reactions to his children’s failed career choices. Joan, his eldest daughter, returns to the family after leaving her apprenticeship at a grocery shop because the owner molested her (another instance of a male in a position of power displaying entitlement to the female body). After initially being pleased to see her, proclaiming her ‘welcome’ and ‘home and safe at last’, Mahoney articulates a more spiteful response once she has gone to bed (*TD* 106-7). He interrogates his son as to why the boy encouraged Joan to come home and learns that the shopkeeper had been ‘interfering with her’ ‘[s]exually’ (*TD* 108). This, however, seems an insufficient reason to Mahoney, who further questions whether the man actually did ‘her any harm’ (*TD* 108). Given that the boy has already specified that she has been touched inappropriately, his negative reply to Mahoney’s question merely denotes that she has not been raped. This appears to be the only form of female ‘harm’ that Mahoney acknowledges; after his son’s affirmation that Joan has not been physically penetrated, Mahoney’s face ‘darkens with hostility’ which the boy reads as ‘an accusation’ that he has brought Joan home prematurely (*TD* 108). Mahoney’s lack of sympathy for Joan’s situation suggests that he either thinks she is complaining unduly about what happened (that the shopkeeper’s uninvited sexual touch was something she should have put up with), or that the incident was in some way her fault: a view symptomatic of the masculinist tendency to victim blame. This is something that Joan seems to anticipate. When the boy asks how much money she has to simultaneously ascertain that they have enough money to return home and that
the shopkeeper has been paying her what is owed, Joan begins ‘apologizing about the sandals and dress she wore’ to excuse why she has not been able to save more of her meagre salary (TD 93). Saving all the money that she is able does not protect her from Mahoney’s vindictive comments once she has gone to bed: ‘What’ll she do now? […] Stay here and wear off the arse of herself sitting on chairs? […] There’s not enough of you to feed, is there?’ (TD 108). Mahoney’s vulgar metaphor of “wearing the arse off herself” to imply that Joan will be gluttonous and lazy is a further disrespectful rhetorical appropriation of her body, displaying once more a male tendency to name and claim the female body for their own purposes.

Mahoney’s response to Joan’s situation is inherently negative and unsympathetic, which sits in direct contrast to his reaction when his son wishes to leave university. Unlike Joan, the boy has not given the post his best efforts and his desire to leave is motivated by a fear of failure, both socially and academically. However, Mahoney is very supportive; he arrives in Galway the morning after his son telegrams his request to return home. Mahoney makes a show of asking for a variety of opinions, but ultimately disregards the boy’s former teacher’s advice that ‘under no circumstances’ should be boy leave university because ‘he had a brilliant career in front of him’, and the Dean of Residence’s input that a ‘scholarship boy’ ‘would probably do well at university’ (TD 184;186). Instead, he prefers to listen to the boy’s argument that with the Electricity Supply Board he could ‘be earning money straight away’ because this option does not ‘involve forking out money’ (TD 184). Whilst admittedly the boy makes the decision that his father was in favour of all along whereas Joan contradicts his wishes, Mahoney nevertheless helps his son with a hitherto unseen gentleness and understanding that was completely absent in his treatment of Joan. The reader is left to infer that he regards Joan as an incapable
and burdensome female who should therefore do as she is bid without complaint, whilst his son receives the respect due a male with a greater degree of autonomy.

There are those who disagree with the view that women are depicted solely as the powerless tools of men. Robert Garratt points to McGahern’s *Amongst Women* as a novel which focuses ‘on the steady overturning of male authority […] by the subversive action of women who quietly and laconically assert their right to opinion and to choice’.\(^{133}\) I would immediately amend Garratt’s statement to the singular: the subversive action of a woman who asserts her right to opinion and choice. That woman is Moran’s second wife, Rose. As Rose delicately negotiates her new role as wife and step-mother, she comes under increasing and unwarranted criticism from Moran, who initially sees her permanent presence as a threat to his absolute control over the household. The tension culminates in an incident where he speaks to her ‘as if he were taking rifle aim’ when she refreshes the tired living room without prior permission.\(^{134}\) Rose refuses to be treated with such needless cruelty and allows a deathly silence to fall over the house to counterbalance the blustering yet blistering rage that Moran employs. Unaccustomed to such a calm reproach, and finding that silence exposes his flaws far more effectively than fury, Moran is forced to backtrack: ‘The whole world knows that the house was never run right until you came’ (*AW* 71). Though the battle is quiet, the victory is resounding: Rose’s ‘place in the house could never be attacked or threatened again’ (*AW* 73). Antoinette Quinn, however, disagrees that this altercation can truly be seen as a triumph for Rose, arguing instead that ‘[w]hat she has settled for […] is the limited right to be treated


\(^{134}\) John McGahern, *Amongst Women* [1990] (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 69. All further references will be cited as *AW* in parentheses.
like a member of Moran’s family, to swim like a fish in his net’. Whilst Quinn is accurate in her observation that Moran will never accept his wife as his equal, I feel she has underestimated the significance of Moran having to apologise. Moran, who prides himself on being the unchallenged head of the household, has lost this high-stakes battle and, with his apology, has conceded the domestic control of the house to Rose. To such a man, any admission of wrongdoing is painful, which lends huge significance to Rose’s seemingly small victory. As the narrator remarks, her place in the household is now beyond contestation even if, as Quinn reflects, it is not necessarily a household anyone but Rose would want to belong to.

Besides Rose – whose assertion of opinion and choice Garratt quickly moderates to ‘subversive subservience’ – there is little evidence of the women in the novel being in control. Garratt’s initial use of the plural would appear to be based on the following scene, which takes place just after Rose and Moran’s marriage:

Rose and the girls smiled as the tea and the plates circled around him. They were already conspirators. They were mastered and yet they were controlling together what they were mastered by. (*AW* 46)

It would be wrong to deny that Garratt’s initial argument that the women cooperate to unobtrusively overturn Moran’s authority is without foundation, but the scene implies that this requires a lot of effort on their part. The lunch appears predominantly to be a performance; the women keep the plates of food ‘circl[ing]’, indicating an almost magician-like desire to keep Moran’s eyes moving to disguise and distract from their true purpose: to keep his spirits up and temper under control. The presence of the verb ‘smiled’ does not appear sincere in context; the women are neither relaxed nor happy, they are not smiling from pleasure or mirth. Juxtaposed


136 Garratt, ‘Representation, Memory, and Trauma’, p. 126.
with the description of the circling plates, it adds weight to the image of Moran’s wife and daughters as circus performers who smile merely to please their audience.

James Whyte is similarly uncomfortable with reading the novel as optimistically as Garratt, arguing that:

McGahern […] cannot be enlisted as a champion of oppressed femininity […] While [Amongst Women] does present us with a picture of oppressed and victimised womanhood, particularly through the figure of the stepmother, McGahern’s fiction does not offer any narratives of liberation. In fact, in can be said that it reinforces the position of the female in a patriarchal society.¹³⁷

In truth, the women in Amongst Women are depicted more like a herd of wildebeest desperately trying to escape being devoured by a predatory lion by banding together, refusing to allow the weakest to be picked off and instead using their numbers to apply pressure and ‘control […] together what they were mastered by’. This is undoubtedly an agency of sorts and inverses Quinn’s image of fish swimming in a net, but whether it can be called evidence of ‘women quietly and laconically asserting their right to opinion and to choice’ as Garratt claims is questionable.¹³⁸ As the narrator observes: ‘they were mastered’.

Moran’s daughters remain compliant into adulthood, until one summer when they all spend a holiday at Great Meadow with their spouses. Sheila’s husband, Sean, irritates Moran by stating that he finds his stable job within the Civil Service dull and asserting that ‘[t]here’s more to life than security’ (AW 158). Moran’s swift rebuke that he ‘expect[s] more maturity than that from members of [his] family’ meets its own unexpected reproof from Sheila, who reminds her father that Sean is only a member of the family ‘if he chooses to be’ (AW 158). Sheila’s words have profound

¹³⁸ Garratt, ‘Representation, Memory, and Trauma’, p. 123.
implications for Moran’s patriarchal view of the world. Instead of being positioned as head of an expanding family with his daughters’ husbands as subsidiaries, Sheila subtly asserts that she has formed a new family with Sean and their continued membership of Moran’s is negotiable. The conflict between Moran and Sean deepens the next day when Moran requests that his guests assist in gathering the hay. Sean – raised in a city and unused to hard manual labour – soon begins to tire of and suffer from the work and turns his attention to flirting with Sheila:

Sheila and her husband were crossing the fence on the edge of the field before they were noticed leaving. [...] No one spoke in the intense uneasiness, but they were forced to follow them in their minds into the house, how they must be shedding their clothes, going naked towards each other … It was more disturbingly present than if it were taking place in the meadow before their very eyes. [...] It was as if the couple were together disregarding the inviolability of the house, its true virginity, with a selfish absorption. [...] Sheila was defiant and determined not to be bullied. In a simple way she was staking out her position within the family. She would belong to the family but not on any terms. (AW 165-7)

Sheila reaches and breaches the borders of Moran’s control in a series of escalating events. Firstly, the hypermasculine ethos that Moran espouses has not been fully transmitted to his daughters. When Sean complains that he is suffering under the physical strain of the work, Sheila responds with pity rather than scorn. She moves him to a separate row where they can work together at a more leisurely pace and engages in overt flirtations which culminate in the couple leaving her father’s domain in the field to have sex. Sheila is not repulsed by her husband’s admission of weakness (as Moran would term it) but ultimately aroused. She literally and metaphorically turns her back on her father in favour of her husband and, in so doing, changes her relationship with the family by successfully flouting and thus diminishing her father’s authority. However, though Sheila does ‘assert [her] right to opinion and to choice’, that choice is very limited: she is choosing which man to align herself with. Though she may have discovered how to be ‘defiant’ and become
‘determined not be bullied’, she has not done it on her own behalf but on behalf of her husband (AW 167). When her moment came to stand up for her own interests and pursue her desire to study medicine, she found that all she could do ‘in the face of violence was to bend’ (AW 54).

Moreover, Sheila ‘stak[es] out her [new] position’ within the family by using her body (AW 167). Despite being an adult, Sheila nevertheless still occupies the role of a child within her father’s house. Great Meadow has been determinedly sexless throughout her childhood – excepting the night that Moran married Rose, during which the children ‘were too nervous and frightened of life to react’ to what they heard (AW 48). The ‘inviolab[le]’ ‘virginity’ which Moran has imposed over Great Meadow is thus transgressed not by Sheila’s words, but by her bodily actions. By leaving her father’s field to have sex with her husband, Sheila is invoking ancient patriarchal lore to enact her rebellion: the marriage ceremony is based upon the principle that a woman belongs to her father until she marries, at which point she belongs to her husband. Sheila’s overt display of sex with her husband to send a message to her father merely highlights her new place in the patriarchal economy: she is now first and foremost a wife before she is a daughter, and it is Moran who has been remiss not to acknowledge his diminished role in her new status. McGahern’s frightening patriarch John Quinn in That They May Face The Rising Sun (2002) also employs similar tactics which I will explore more fully in Part 2 to subordinate his new father-in-law. By invoking patriarchal lore to win her battle, Sheila employs and perpetuates the discourse used by these patriarchs to reduce women to their (claimed) bodies and demonstrates that patriarchy can be espoused and performed by women as much as by men.
Though Moran is outnumbered by his wife and daughters by a ratio of four to one (five to one when accounting for the fact that his youngest son always sides with the women), even Garratt concedes that it is ‘the central figure of Moran who commands the story’. His suffocating control of their lives is metaphorically demonstrated that same summer whilst harvesting the crops:

As Rose and the girls were crossing the swards to the tractor they stumbled over a hen pheasant sitting on her nest. They were startled that she didn’t fly until they saw feathers on the swards. The legs had been cut from under her. Her eyes were shining and alive, a taut stillness over the neck and body, petrified in her instinct. (AW 159)

I contend that the hen pheasant symbolises Moran’s daughters, who have not “flown” in a number of ways. None of them has achieved a career, despite Sheila in particular being more than capable. Had Moran not prevented her study of medicine by declaring that he did not ‘like to see a single [child] trying to outdistance another’ and cut the legs from under her, she may well have “flown” in the profession (AW 89). Instead, all have steady but unremarkable jobs in offices or nursing that they took to escape Great Meadow. However, despite claiming to be so eager to get away, none of Moran’s daughters have ever really “flown the nest”. The girls often return home to escape ‘the pain of individuality’ and find an aloof superiority in belonging to Great Meadow, even as they become desperate to leave again by the end of the visit (AW 85). They remain, like the hen pheasant, paralysed over the nest and petrified in their instinct.

‘Do not appear if you do not want to disappear’: Abject Bodies

It is not surprising that McGahern and especially O’Brien present a strong link between flesh and disgust in the female psyche. In their novels, women are

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139 Garratt, ‘Representation, Memory, and Trauma’, p. 125.
presented with a dichotomous choice in which they must elect either to satisfy 
voyeuristic masculinist demands or Catholic modesty/chastity doctrine. In a society 
that condemns female sexuality whilst venerating motherhood and promotes 
heterosexual marriage partly through ostracising spinsters, this is a choice which is 
compromised from the outset as both outcomes come tinged with social shame. 
Faced with many layers of cultural contradictions, many of the female – and, as I will 
demonstrate in Parts 2 and 3, even male – characters begin to abject their own bodies 
by falsely identifying and blaming it as responsible for the contradiction.

The abjection of the erogenous body is seen most clearly in O’Brien’s 
unnamed female protagonist in A Pagan Place. When her sexual attraction to a 
visiting young and handsome priest is reciprocated, the girl finds herself in a sexual 
encounter that she is totally unprepared for:

> When he opened his belt [...] you tried to impede him from opening his 
bUTTONS because it was nakedness you feared above all. [...] He [...] 
presented himself and said touch it. It was grotesque. The flesh around 
it painted and raw. He said to touch it. You touched it on the snout. 
Your touch was fearful. You begged him to stop. You expelled his 
finger[.] [...] you were petrified and you would not yield. (APP 177)

The abjection here is strikingly evident. The girl overtly states that she finds the 
priest’s penis ‘grotesque’. She ‘fear[s] nakedness’ ‘above all’ and is ‘petrified’ of the 
erotic body. Her frequent repetition of the word ‘touch’ indicates that her horror is 
inherently somatic; she is not so much afraid of what she can see as what she can 
feel. Moreover, the girl appears to no longer think of the priest’s body as human. Her 
use of the word ‘snout’ to describe the tip of his penis is a term most commonly 
associated with pigs, denoting a desire either to sanitise and sanctify the situation by 
mentally equating her actions with petting an animal, or to dissociate the revulsion of 
the scene by relegating it to the level of sub-human. Her observation that his genitals
looks ‘painted’ further indicates that she is unable to cope with the situation and so reassigns the penis to the realm of artificial object.

The girl thus exemplifies Kristeva’s theorisation that once the presence of an abject is registered, the subject expresses its revulsion somatically:

Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. [...] The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, muck. The shame of compromise [...]. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them. [...] “I” want none of that element, sign of their desire. “I” do not want to listen. “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it. 140

Crucially, Kristeva identifies abjective response as somatic rather than cognitive. Once the subject detects the presence of an abject, the body shuts down all other affects – especially desire – so all that remains is an overwhelming sense of repulsion. Disgust is the affect which prevails, causing the subject to expel the abject as far as possible from its borders. The subject’s reaction to ‘turn aside’ ‘desire’ because ‘sickened, it rejects’ is demonstrated in the girl’s expulsion of the priest’s finger from her vagina, which moments before ‘was not an enemy’ (APP 177). She expels the finger because it belongs to the same host as the abject penis; she no longer feels sexual pleasure because she has been overwhelmed by horror. Kristeva also defines the abject in similar terms that Tomkins uses to describe the voyeuristic element in the shame–humiliation relationship, indicating a further congruence between abjection and shame. Just as the ‘fascinated start’ initially attracted Kristeva’s subject to the abject, so too does Tomkins’ patient feel ‘excitement’ at the prospect of ‘look[ing] at and be[ing] looked at’, despite the fact that ‘shame is dominant’. 141 Both are drawn to the element which has the power to psychologically annihilate them.

140 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, pp. 1-3 [my emphasis].
141 Tomkins, Shame and Its Sisters, p. 137.
Kristeva further observes that ‘[a]bjection accompanies all religious structurings’, and ‘[p]rohibitions and conflicts that are specific to a given subject and ritualized by religion for a given type of body will appear as isomorphic with the prohibitions and conflicts of the social group within which they happen’.¹⁴² What Kristeva fails to do in recognising that abjection accompanies certain ‘structurings’ is to push further and identify that the designation of something as abject is an articulation and exercise of power. The compelling and correlative matrix between overarching social structures, sex(uality) and power is explored at length by Michel Foucault, who writes in the first volume of his history of sexuality:

A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged […]: the parents’ bedroom. The rest had only to remain vague; proper demeanour avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitised one’s speech. […] Nothing that was not ordered in terms of generation or transfigured by it could expect sanction or protection. Nor did it merit a hearing. It would be driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. Not only did it not exist, it had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation – whether in acts or in words. Everyone knew, for example, that children had no sex, which is why they were forbidden to talk about it […] and why a general and studied silence was imposed.¹⁴³

Foucault mirrors Kristeva’s language that the abject ‘draws me toward the place where meaning collapses’ in his assessment that sexuality outside of the marital bedroom must be ‘forced to disappear upon its least manifestation’.¹⁴⁴ He further gestures towards the two pillars which hold up the altar of legitimate sex according to the Catholic Church: firstly, sex must be validated through marriage and, secondly, it must be procreative. All other forms must be ‘driven out, denied’ and abjected. Foucault draws attention to the fact that the abject is inherently known; it is never successfully removed from society but ‘made to disappear’ by being driven to

¹⁴² Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 17; p. 68.
¹⁴⁴ Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 2.
the margins and consciously, studiously ignored. Indeed, the extent to which the abject is both familiar and feared is expressed in the paradoxical construction of Foucault’s argument: one cannot ignore and suppress something at the same time. In order to keep the abject at bay, a system of power structures is implicated: social and religious institutions which sanction and legitimate certain forms of sex, public discourse which censors speech, and a community that enforces the values which both creates and denotes the abject by repressing it.

The creation and expulsion of the abject is thus a collaborative effort achieved not through a single locus of power, but multiple exertions of power disseminated through many vessels. In an overwhelmingly Catholic society which condemns desire in all but the narrowest of circumstances and upbraids the body from which desire originates, the body itself becomes the entity which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’.¹⁴⁵ Thus, the focus of the subject’s abjective impulse becomes the body; the cultural condemnation of extra-marital sexual encounters is transposed onto the body so that the body itself becomes the object of fear. This girl’s fear of the naked body in A Pagan Place is undoubtedly compounded by the fact that she transgresses prevailing social norms in every conceivable way: outside of marriage and with a priest. The text consequently creates a parallel between this girl and Caithleen, who also fears nakedness from a young age. As a child she becomes aware that her father ‘wore no pyjamas in bed’ and is ‘ashamed even to think of it’ (TCG 66). However, the toxic shame surrounding the body is even stronger in this girl than Caithleen: she is not merely ashamed of the sexual body, she is ‘petrified’ of it. Whereas Caithleen pursues and perseveres with relationships that become sexual, the girl expels the priest’s finger from her body. Whilst Caithleen

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 4.
explores her sexuality, the girl flees from the situation. Despite feeling aroused by the priest’s touch, she is so disgusted and afraid of his penis that she terminates the pleasure, just as Kristeva theorises.

Even though the girl has run from the encounter, it was witnessed and reported to her parents; her father forcefully beats her as punishment for the tryst. His impulse to inflict violence is reminiscent of Foucault’s theorisation of abjection. Not only is she a child (and ‘everyone kn[o]w[s] [...] that children ha[ve] no sex’), the sex is extra marital and her partner is ordained. The incident is so ‘unthinkable’ – to use Kristeva’s term – that it is being ‘made to disappear upon its least manifestation’ without a ‘hearing’. The beating takes on a trifold significance as she is implicitly punished for having a libido during adolescence, having unsanctioned sexual contact, and for bringing further shame upon a family already steeped in the humiliation of her elder sister’s transgressions:

The slaps resounded all over the house. […] You counted, to give yourself occupation. You timed them. […] Each onslaught was a surprise because he got more impassioned as he went on. The flap between your legs began to heise up and down and you encouraged that and the pleasure that you forsook when you expelled the priest’s finger began again, and the tumult that should have been his to witness took place unbeknownst to him on that rattly bed while other parts of you smart and cried. (APP 180-181)

The girl uses the word ‘surprise’ in a similar way to Sister Margaret when she told the girls in the convent to (un)dress under dressing-gowns. Each strike of her father’s ruler is a shock to her body due to its force, but it is not a surprise because the girl is timing the rhythm of his assault. What is perhaps a surprise is the increasing stimulation the blows are giving her. Thus, the girl attaches the same sexualisation to the word – reinforced by describing her father’s efforts as ‘impassioned’ – that Sister Margaret did. The body is once more presented as an entity which can take and be
taken unawares, assail and be assailed and cause alarm/perplexity to itself and those around it.

The reader again encounters violence within a father/daughter relationship. Indeed, the theme is so often repeated as to be almost universal to the novelists’ works. However, in a reversal of the dynamics witnessed so far, the girl has eroticised her own subordination. She feels she deserves her punishment: the ever prevalent cultural condemnations of extra-marital desire at work have been overlaid and reinforced by her parents disowning her elder sister for getting pregnant when unmarried. Yet this is one step further to feeling that her punishment is justified: the girl has sexualised her own degradation. Whereas she closed down her feelings of sexual pleasure in her earlier encounter, she ‘encourage[s]’ them to the point of orgasm here. The object/cause of her desire becomes muddied by the vague pronouns: ‘the pleasure that you forsook when you expelled the priest’s finger began again, and the tumult that should have been his to witness took place unbeknownst to him on that rattly bed while other parts of you smart and cried (APP 181) Does the ‘him’ that the orgasm occurs ‘unbeknownst to’ refer to her father or the priest? Both men are plausible substitutions for the final ‘him’. It is grammatically impossible to establish if the orgasm is taking place unbeknownst to the priest who started the process hours earlier, or whether it is her father who has no idea that his daughter is climaxing under his ‘impassioned’ beating. If it refers to the priest, then the girl experiences a delayed gratification of the sexual liaison under circumstances that resemble the sadomasochistic desire that Peterson identifies in Caithleen. However, if the ‘him’ refers to her father, then the girl eroticises her status as object (of her father’s rage) rather than subject.
The haphazard application of pronouns and fragmented second-person perspective is a theme I shall return to in Part 3 of this thesis. However, it compounds the impression that the female protagonist in *A Pagan Place* is utterly overwhelmed by bodies – both her own and others. Her vague, at times even incoherent, narration crystallises the central image that Irish women struggle to inhabit, negotiate and experience their bodies as corporeal entities without being engulfed in moral shame which the psyche imposes on these somatic impulses.

Rooks-Hughes expands on the prevalence of somatic abjection in the psychological foundation of O’Brien’s female characters:

> The abject’s arena is the body, specifically the way in which the body is coded, ordered and made meaningful so that the subject can exist. The abject represents the inescapably corporeal: death, animality, materiality. The clean and orderly body braces cohesive identity. Consequently, the objects associated with the abject are the those associated with the erogenous areas of the body, particularly the body’s permeable boundaries. […] The abject manifests itself most clearly in the centrality of […] linking sexuality to annihilation.\(^\text{146}\)

This matrix is articulated by Foucault in a much more forceful manner when he links sexuality to the eradication of the self in what he terms ‘the cycle of prohibition’:

> [T]hou shalt not go near, thou shalt not touch, thou shalt not consume, thou shalt not experience pleasure […]; ultimately thou shalt not exist, except in darkness and secrecy. […] Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed, do not appear if you do not want to disappear. Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification.\(^\text{147}\)

Alongside *A Pagan Place*, O’Brien’s *Country Girls* trilogy clearly associates sexuality with annihilation in the manner that Rooks-Hughes and Foucault outline. Caithleen rejects her own femininity, falls apart when asked to undress in front of Mr Gentleman and describes herself as ‘wild and debased’ after her failed relationship with Eugene. However, she takes one further action that demonstrates a deep-rooted


\(^{147}\) Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, p. 84.
hatred of her own body: she sterilises herself after Eugene divorces her and absconds with their son:

‘Well,’ Kate said. ‘At least I’ve eliminated the risk of making the same mistake again,’ and for some reason the words sent a chill through Baba’s heart. ‘You’ve eliminated something,’ Baba said. […] It was odd for Baba to see Kate like that, all the expected responses were missing, the guilt and doubt and sadness, she was looking at someone of whom too much had been cut away, some important region that they both knew nothing about. (GMB 165)

Given the Catholic and patriarchal discourses previously examined as constraining and restraining the female body to its utilitarian functions, this scene should read as Caithleen’s triumphant reclamation of her own body. She has subverted the various Catholic doctrines which state that a woman’s primary purpose is to marry and bear children, alongside the patriarchal demand that women must provide men with heirs to inherit the land whilst they stay at home to raise those children.

Caithleen has apparently freed herself from all of these repressive and shaming mechanisms which repeatedly trigger the ‘expected responses’ of ‘guilt and doubt and sadness’ that Baba anticipates, and has placed her own agenda first; she is in control of her body for the first time in her life. Peterson comments that:

we might […] explain Kate’s action as ‘an effort to exert control from a powerless position’ with the goal reconceived from ‘pleasure in pain’ to pleasure ‘as the goal itself” even at the cost of pain and self-destruction. […] In an odd way, then, Kate’s masochism seems oddly satisfying, even assertive.\(^{148}\)

The problem with this reading is that it does not ring true. Whilst the scene should read this way, it does not. Caithleen exercises some agency from a powerless position, but she gets no pleasure from it whatsoever. The only impression left is one of utter self-destruction. Whilst Baba notes that she is free from the expected shame responses, what results is not happiness or triumph but a kind of death-in-life which

\(^{148}\) Peterson, ‘Sadomasochistic Desire’, p. 165.
Baba finds chilling. In Foucault’s terms, Caithleen has transgressed too many social norms and she must now ‘disappear’: her ‘existence will be maintained only at the cost of [her] nullification’. Caithleen instead seems to exemplify Judith Butler’s claim that a ‘female body that is freed from the shackles of paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law’s self-amplification and proliferation’. Instead of freeing herself, Caithleen has ‘cut too much away’ in removing her womb and, with no reproductive function, is in a zombie-like catatonic state. Significantly, Baba notes that what has been ‘eliminated’ is ‘some important region’ essential to women. In characterising Caithleen thus, O’Brien also espouses the toxic tropes that a woman is only valid so long as she can reproduce, demonstrating once more that woman can internalise and espouse patriarchal views. The womb is here depicted as something fundamental to femininity which, when absent, renders women inherently lesser, diminished, ‘eliminated’. Without that ‘important region’ to signify future motherhood, Caithleen becomes a non-person unfit and unable to inhabit the category woman.

Sandra Manoogian Pearce argues O’Brien imparts a vision of stronger femininity in Baba rather than Caithleen. She claims that Baba is the prototype who enables future O’Brien protagonists who are ‘isolated, lonely women [to] find self-redemption through reconciliation – either with themselves or through others – [to] emerg[e] as strong, independent women’. This reading is also problematic as the inverse is demonstrated in the resolution of the trilogy. Baba has always been depicted as highly social and gregarious, spending her youth going out in Dublin

\[149\] Butler, Gender Trouble, pp. 126-127.
with various dates and friends; it is only after her marriage that Baba becomes increasingly bored and lonely. Moreover, Baba’s ‘redemption through reconciliation’ with her husband occurs only when she accepts her allotted gender role – becoming a mother tames the wayward and feisty Baba and eases the strain in her marriage (despite the baby not being his):

In the end Frank received [the baby] like his own and made an even greater consequence of being a parent than if he had actually been one. And Baba, never one to be held down by punishment, was cornered in the end by niceness, weakness, dependence. (GMB 157)

Whilst the narrator claims that Baba has been ‘cornered’ by her actions into ‘weakness’ and ‘dependence’, she is nevertheless nicer because of it. The arrival of the baby normalises Frank and Baba’s marriage by realigning their gender roles with comfortable stereotypes: Frank reforms from his domineering, bullying ways into a responsible parent and Baba stops being fiercely independent and accepts her role as a mother and wife. Order has been restored and domestic harmony largely returns to their marriage. The narrator’s repetition of the phrase ‘in the end’ introduces and emphasises a tone of inevitability to the situation, implying that Baba, though headstrong in her youth, has given in to her normal, “natural”, feminine, motherly instincts. The conflation of normal with natural, and feminine with motherly, is yet another echo of the sentiments set out in de Valera’s St Patrick’s Day address. In direct contrast to Pearce’s assertion, by portraying Baba thus O’Brien takes her only strong female character in this trilogy and explicitly shows that she is happier, reconciled with her husband and consequently redeemed when she accepts her assigned role of subservient wife and mother and gives up that independence. In combination with Caithleen being portrayed as experiencing death-in-life after her hysterectomy, O’Brien undercuts her entire trilogy exploring the emerging sexuality of two adolescent girls in rural Ireland by firmly placing Baba back within
established order and punishing Caithleen for transgressing. Whether deliberately or unwittingly, O’Brien sharply reinscribes the established gender norms for women and reinforces the discourses operating on their bodies.

‘Pink for a boy and blue for a girl’: Entrenching the old tropes?

Edna O’Brien’s conclusion to her *Country Girls* trilogy has coloured the analysis of her subsequent novels. Determinedly continuing to write about (the role of) women, many critics read O’Brien’s continuation of theme as a persistence in fictively writing women back into the home under the rule of domineering fathers and husbands. Joanne Hayden wrote a review of O’Brien’s later trilogy about 1990s Ireland, in which she criticises *Down by the River* for offering a ‘vision of Ireland […] still rooted in the 50s and 60s’.151 Hayden’s view is valid in part. Nowhere is the implication that women are regarded as the property of men more clearly delineated than in the novel’s opening, in which Mary MacNamara’s father rapes her during an inspection of his land. Nevertheless, Hayden’s opinion that O’Brien is living in the past because she has written a novel in which patriarchy retains an unrelenting stranglehold on rural Ireland is hugely undermined by the fact that the novel is based on a real event, the details of which are pertinent to the analysis of this novel.

*Down by the River* is a fictive interpretation of the ‘X case’ that rocked Ireland in 1992. The information released to the media was that a fourteen-year-old girl known only as Miss X (to protect her identity) was raped by her neighbour and became pregnant. Miss X told her mother that she was feeling suicidal because of the

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unwanted pregnancy, and as abortion was illegal in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the family travelled to England for an abortion. Before the planned abortion was carried out, the family asked the Garda Síochána if DNA from the aborted foetus would be admissible as evidence in court to help convict the neighbour, who was denying all charges. Hearing that Miss X planned to have an abortion, the Attorney General sought an injunction under the Eighth Amendment of Article 40.3.3 of the Constitution of Ireland (which outlaws abortion) and consequently prevented Miss X from having the procedure carried out. The High Court injunction was appealed to the Supreme Court, which overturned it by a majority of four to one; the majority opinion held that a woman had a right to an abortion only if there was medical risk to her life by continuing with the pregnancy. This right did not exist if there was a risk to her health but not her life; however it did exist if the risk was the possibility of suicide. In May 2018, the Irish electorate voted decisively to repeal this Amendment in a national referendum, thirty-five years after it was inserted into the Constitution. Miss X reportedly miscarried shortly after the judgement.\footnote{Lisa Smyth, Abortion and Nation: The Politics of Reproduction in Contemporary Ireland (London: Routledge, 2005).}

Read in this context, the theme of O’Brien’s novel is recast from a (re)presentation of a protagonist who is another coin in the sexual economy to a sustained analysis of the lack of rights and freedoms a woman has over her own body, and a subsequent scrutiny of who “owns” the female body. In this novel, the answer is everyone but Mary. Mary is not just her father’s sexual property, she is also his legal chattel. She is forced to return to Ireland because her attempt to get an abortion (with her neighbour Betty’s help) is prematurely discovered – Betty left ‘the name and address’ of the clinic ‘in the wastepaper basket’, which was then found by
two anti-abortionists (*DBTR* 157). They ‘went to the guards’ and ‘[t]he guards went to [Mary’s] father’ (*DBTR* 158). Pretending to be an indignant parent who has no idea that Mary must have become pregnant when she ran away to Galway and stayed with ‘a hippy’, James MacNamara signs a document to force Mary to come home (*DBTR* 158). The State is enabled to compel Mary to return to Ireland and continue with her pregnancy under the aforementioned Article 40.3.3 of the Constitution.

Mary, left with no alternative, flies home with Betty to discover that her father has transferred her to the care of the anti-abortion group. As she steps off the plane they circle below, ‘all vying with each other as to who was in charge, who owned her’ (*DBTR* 171). Such is the force of their self-righteous, triumphant attitude at having forced her to return to Ireland that even the mild-mannered Mary is roused into defiance: ‘It’s not your child,’ [Roisin] said suddenly to Mary. [...] ‘It’s not yours either,’ Mary said’ (*DBTR* 175). Mary subtly but effectively articulates the core of the issue; though Roisin argues that the foetus should be considered as an independent life, that foetus is in Mary’s body and yet Mary is the person with the fewest rights here.

Picking up on the insensitive co-option of Mary’s body in the pursuit of a wider political point, Sophia Hillan-King asserts that it is these “right-thinking” women who are ‘the worst of all’ and ‘who, in a parody of nurturing Mary and her unborn child, damage both far more than the abuse of her father ever could’. 153 Though the anti-abortion group are guilty of extreme callousness in their treatment of Mary, given the brutality of being raped by her father I think it is safe to say that Hillan-King overstates her case. I am, however, interested in why she calls them ‘right-thinking’, even if it is in inverted commas. The anti-abortion group forcefully

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aligns motherhood with femininity; another anti-abortionist named Eilie explicitly tells Mary that ‘women [a]re defined by motherhood’ (*DBTR* 172). This group polices prevailing gender norms by consciously aligning femininity with motherhood in order to manipulate pregnant women into conforming to their beliefs. Indeed, this group is the most obvious example of Tomkins’ claim that the ‘shame complex’ functions as the ‘perfect vehicle for the transmission and preservation of social norms from generation to generation […] [through] powerful negative sanctions against the transgression of shared social norms’. 154 Thus, Hillan-King’s characterisation of these women as ‘right-thinking’, even if she troubles it with inverted commas, is itself troubling. It demonstrates that binaries do indeed map onto each other in the way that Fausto-Sterling described earlier, as Hillan-King continues to subconsciously align motherhood, femininity and natural in spite of the monstrous vigilante form it takes here.

Diarmuid Ferriter comments that ‘[w]hile it is true that there was little open discussion before the 1970s about sexual crime; it is not true that there was no awareness […]. There was [simply] little will to confront these issues’. 155 This behaviour is exemplified by Mary’s Headmaster, who feels uncomfortable with the story circulating that Mary became pregnant in Galway. He tries to articulate a ‘hunch’ which he is ‘not sure [he] can put into words’ that there might be something more ‘devastating’ and ‘shameful’ going on because Mary has never been seen with a boyfriend before (*DBTR* 170). However, he is quickly silenced by the mother of Mary’s friend, who argues that ‘[i]f it was that she would have gone to someone’ (*DBTR* 170). Both of them refuse to utter what ‘that’ is: she has been raped by her father. Foucault identifies silence as a form of complicity, commenting that:

154 Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, p. 156.
[s]ilence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name […] is less about the absolute limit of discourse […] than an element that functions alongside the things said […]. There is not one silence but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.\(^{156}\)

Though the Headmaster feels that something is wrong with the given narrative, the truth would be ‘shameful’; he accepts the mother’s contention that Mary would speak out if something was wrong because it is easier to process.

As Mary’s case escalates through the courts, the debate as to who owns her body passes up to a hypocritical politician (whose long-standing mistress asks why, when so many women travel to England unchallenged, there should be ‘one law for us and one for some poor girl’), and lawyers who regard her as ‘some little slut about to pour piss on the nation’s breast’ (\textit{DBTR} 180; 190). All of these men in positions of trust and authority over Mary fail to thoroughly investigate of her case, happy to make generalisations and assumptions about her in order to make her fit their narrow vision for Ireland. Irene Gedalof argues that:

\begin{quote}
the way in which the female body, symbolic representations of Woman, and women’s activities are repeatedly appropriated as markers of national, racial, religious and ethnic communities […] demonstrat[es] the deeply constraining, always problematic and sometimes deadly effects on women of their symbolic and strategic positioning as resources for the reproduction of particular versions of community belonging.\(^{157}\)
\end{quote}

In many ways, Mary MacNamara is the textual embodiment of Gedalof’s argument, and her situation allows two of the four types of communities Gedalof lists to exert their will over Mary to make a wider point. The newly independent Irish State took its legislative shape and governing ideologies from the Catholic Church, meaning that the religious and national communities here share a common aim with regard to

\(^{156}\) Foucault, \textit{Will to Knowledge}, p. 27.
Mary: to prevent her from having an abortion. In Catholic doctrine and Irish law (as it then stood), ensuring the reproduction of the community in its own image involves controlling reproduction itself through forbidding the use of contraception and abortion. However, it is not Mary herself who matters to the campaigning anti-abortion group or to the senior legal/state figures presiding over her case in court, but what she stands for. Openly seizing on her case to make an example, her body is made to stand for all female bodies. Mary is depersonalised and made an emblem for these groups, effacing her on every level. Her body is con- and re-strained for the purpose of reproducing the Catholic community, but the specificity of that body is elided and subverted into the emblematic constraint of every female body. Mary is thus reduced to a corporeal vessel (the most potent and disempowering of Catholic symbols) to be projected onto and inscribed with meaning, denying her any autonomy and/or individual recognition. The force of the community’s efforts to ensure conformity and perpetuation creates the ultimate paradox: Mary is everyone and no one.

This paradoxically effacing image of Mary is reinforced when the media label her case the ‘Magdalene versus the nation’ trial (DBTR 212). Unlike the contemporary X case it echoes, ‘Magdalene’ is an inherently loaded code name. It alludes to Mary Magdalene, the biblical prostitute who travelled with Jesus and washed his feet at the foot of the cross. Brian Titley observes that she was often cited as a paradigm for “fallen women” as an example of a ‘beata peccatrix’: ‘the Saint offered the hope of redemption to all sinners; she was a reminder of the problem of female sexuality and proof that it could be subdued.’\(^{158}\) The didactic overtone combined with the fact both women share a first name makes the allusion both

\(^{158}\) Titley, ‘Magdalen Asylums’, p. 120.
politically convenient and expedient. However, ‘Magdalene’ is also reminiscent of the Magdalene Laundries, where “fallen”, shameful women were incarcerated to repent their sins. Though not in an asylum, Mary has been incarcerated at Veronica’s and is held prisoner by her own body as the unwanted foetus continues to develop under the watchful eye of the anti-abortionists. Thus, the trial styled as ‘Magdalene versus in the nation’ again linguistically effaces Mary as she is made to represent all shameful women the State deems to require reforming – forcibly, if need be – through the allegory of Mary Magdalene. As Jane Elizabeth Dougherty succinctly observes: ‘Mary is language’s object and victim, rather than its subject and originator’. Given that the language of the law and religion in Ireland is consciously patricentric at that time, Dougherty draws further attention to the (inter)relationship between power, gender, sexuality and the body in O’Brien’s novel. By fictively recreating a widely publicised case, O’Brien raises crucial issues about who seeks and/or claims to control the female body as well as highlighting the entrenched and oppressive models of femininity in modern Irish society. In this novel, Mary is a mere chattel passed around whilst men she has never met decide what she can or cannot do with/to her own body.

If Edna O’Brien indicts the legal frameworks shaped by conservative institutions constraining women’s bodies in Down by the River, her 2002 novel In The Forest indicts the wider Irish community for continuing to hold on to old prejudices concerning unmarried women with children. As with Down by the River, any accusation that O’Brien’s notion of Irish society is outdated is again undermined by the fact that this novel is a fictional representation of a real event that polarised a nation: Brendan O’Donnell’s abduction and subsequent murder of Imelda Riney, her

159 Dougherty, ‘Never Tear the Linnet from the Leaf’, p. 85.
son Liam, and Father Joe Walshe. Fintan O’Toole, however, attacked this novel from quite a different perspective. O’Toole, in contrast to Hayden, argues that O’Brien’s novel is not outmoded but unethical, and that writing about events which are recent and raw ‘to avoid the trap of merely recycling the perceptions of the 1950s and 1960s […] cross[es] the boundary’ between ‘public material and ‘private grief’. He goes on to describe the novel as a ‘moral mistake’: ‘[t]he imperative at work here appears to be far more to do with the selling than with the writing of a book’.

However, O’Toole’s criticism is undermined by the fact that he fails to make a coherent distinction between ‘ethical’ and ‘unethical’ material, given that he supports her adaption of the X Case in *Down by the River* and her portrayal of the Irish National Liberation Army leader Dominic McGlinchey in *House of Splendid Isolation*.

He differentiates *In The Forest* from the aforementioned novels on the grounds that:

[t]he murders themselves were not, like the Bloody Sunday killings […] historic events with long-term political consequences that need to be examined. They were a dreadful catastrophe visited on innocent people by a disturbed, deranged man. They did not and do not have a public meaning.

O’Toole’s critique of O’Brien’s novels is inconsistent because he fails to adequately define ‘public meaning’. His description of the murder of Imelda Riney, her son, and Father Joe Walshe as a ‘catastrophe visited on innocent people’ makes it sound like it was random, as though they were unlucky victims of a weather event or freak accident. They were murdered, just like the victims of the ‘Bloody Sunday killings’:

What makes the murder of some civilians more ‘meaning[ful]’ that others? Why are

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161 Ibid.

162 Ibid.
their deaths less ‘historic’? Pelan echoes my sentiments in her acerbic rebuttal to O’Toole’s article:

What arises for me in O’Toole’s reading is, frankly, astonishment at how it can continue to escape the notice of an otherwise astute critic […] that for over forty years Edna O’Brien has displayed an almost pathological need to enter the no-go zones that O’Toole refers to, precisely for the purpose of asking questions about the use of power.163

*In The Forest* poses challenging questions not just about the use of power in Irish society, but its *abuse*. O’Brien’s first searing indictment in this novel is to effectively accuse Irish society of creating the monster that later haunts them. Though undoubtedly a sociopathic, psychopathic and possibly schizophrenic serial killer, Michen (O’Brien’s textual interpretation of O’Donnell) is nevertheless a product of his society. Michen hints but never explicitly states that he shot at his father with a loaded gun because he witnessed his father violently abusing his mother. This terror is compounded by feelings of abandonment when his mother sends him to hide in the nearby forest, a move the young child does not understand is meant to protect him. As has been amply demonstrated in this chapter, violence against women is shown to abound in domestic settings but is always hidden from the community (who do not look too closely anyway, as seen in Mary MacNamara’s abuse).

Edna O’Brien’s novels have always divided opinion. Her first trilogy was banned in Ireland, indicating that her work was considered controversial for its time. However, the conclusion to her *Country Girls* trilogy is actually quite conservative and re-establishes many of the old tropes surrounding women. Her latter novels have also divided critical opinion. Hayden claims that O’Brien’s ‘vision of Ireland is still rooted in the 50s and 60s’ and O’Toole argues that one of them should never have been written; conversely, Hillan-King asserts they deal ‘with the very issues that still

lie at the heart of Irish life’ and Pelan contends they pose interrogative questions regarding the (mis)use of power in Ireland. In my analysis of *Down by the River* and *In The Forest* I have supported and further developed Hillan-King and Pelan’s readings, arguing that the very fact these events happened indicates the continuing relevance of her themes. Nevertheless, the controversy surrounding her work means that although O’Brien has been one of Ireland’s most prolific authors, she has never become part of the establishment or as easily absorbed into the Irish canon as her major influence James Joyce, or her contemporary Seamus Heaney. The ongoing debates surrounding her work is evidence that O’Brien is, in one way or another, always uncomfortable to read. Whether in the context of the 1960s when her early work was censored, or in the at-times passionate disputes over her later work, O’Brien seems to constantly hit upon the raw nerves of the day. This, if nothing else, both proves her ongoing relevance and the fact that representations of female bodies, sexuality and subjectivity still divides and affronts public opinion. The legacies of shaming religious, patriarchal and State discourses still require navigating and negotiating in modern Ireland.

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Part 2: The Male Body
‘I’m not half the man you are’: Anxious Masculinities, Anxious Men

In John McGahern’s novel *The Dark* (1965), the patriarchal, abusive father Mahoney relentlessly terrorises his children. Mahoney reserves his most vicious verbal assaults for his eldest son, who has been identified by his school as academically gifted. When it becomes clear that his son has a realistic, even probable, prospect of winning a scholarship to attend university, Mahoney turns his violence inwards, becomes intoxicated, and reveals a hitherto unseen vulnerable side to his children:

“I went to school too. This is my life, and this kitchen in the townland of Cloone is my stage, and I am playing my life out here on,” and he stood, the eyes wild, as if grappling for the lines. “And no one sees me but a crowd of childer,” the voice trailed bitterly. “But it’s important, it’s important to me, it’s the only life I’ve got, it’s more important than anything else in the world to me. I went to school too,” and he started to sob drunkenly […]. (TD 128)

Mahoney discloses a deep-rooted, crushing sense of failure originating from multiple sources which erode his sense of masculinity. The most striking element of his testimony is his sense of disempowerment and marginalisation. He repeats the word ‘important’ three times in one sentence, rhetorically attempting to establish and bolster his own significance. Mahoney evidently feels unimportant, ignored and forgotten. Moreover, given that the family anticipates the imminent news of his eldest son’s scholarship, Mahoney’s repetition of the phrase ‘I went to school too’ further indicates that he believes his own potential has been squandered, and that his achievements are soon to be eclipsed by his gifted son.

Mahoney attempts to validate his own educational worth in relation to his son’s (predicted) achievement. His description of ‘the townland of Cloone’ as the
stage on which he plays out his life is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, in which Jaques claims that ‘All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players’. The congruence between Jaques’ metaphor and Mahoney’s is more than passing, and the fact that Mahoney appears to be ‘grappling for the lines’ reinforces the possibility that he is trying to recall the soliloquy. The literary allusion is perhaps employed by Mahoney to add weight to his assertion that he ‘went to school too’. Whereas most parents would be proud of their son’s success, Mahoney’s sense of self is so fragile that he cannot withstand any competition, even from a child.

Mahoney’s lament that ‘no one sees [him] but a crowd of childer’ has, I contend, a two-fold significance. Firstly, it emphasises his liminality. He has no regular social interaction with any friends, co-workers (he is a farmer), or other adults more generally; he therefore sees no one but his own children every day. Secondly, it tacitly further exposes his insecure sense of masculinity. As identified in Part 1, the domestic sphere in 1960s Ireland was defined as exclusively feminine; in de Valera’s bucolic vision of Ireland, the young, athletic males would work the land whilst the women raised the children. In this family, however, the mother has died. Mahoney is forced to play both mother and father, and, with four children too young to look after themselves, the (stereo)typical female tasks such as childcare, cooking and laundry are left to him. He struggles to balance these divergent roles and their incompatible gendered expectations; the necessity of performing feminine tasks in a society which sets up the feminine as abject to all that is masculine implicitly yet critically undermines his own sense of masculinity. Although he is a farmer,

Mahoney names and claims the kitchen as his arena, which is fundamentally at odds with the masculinist discourse set out by de Valera.

That Mahoney’s life has not gone according to plan is also revealed in the structure of his outburst, providing a rare hint that this often vicious patriarch is a desperately insecure man. Mahoney drunkenly staggers, ‘eyes wild, as if grappling for the lines’. To have lines as if in a play one must contribute to an overarching narrative, which begs the question as to whether Mahoney is consciously aware of the cultural script he believes he is required to perform – an impression underscored by his description of Cloone as a ‘stage’. If Mahoney regards himself as an actor on a stage, then he is performing his life to an invisible but tangible audience. It could be argued that he regards his children as his audience and had hoped for better, but given the desperation of his cry I do not think they are the primary spectators against whom Mahoney gauges his skill as an actor. There is a more expansive sense of audience at play here which implicitly assesses his gender performance. It is unclear whether Mahoney regards this as the local community, which may view him as an effeminized widower, or the national, whom de Valera charges with rebuilding Ireland in a highly stylized, gendered manner, but Mahoney’s sense of being watched and judged as deficient remains.

His anxiety that his gender performance does not conform to the expectations of an invisible, watchful, policing jury creates an unexpected parallel with my previous analysis of feminine gender performances, as does the accompanying shame in feeling that he has fallen short of the unarticulated yet omnipresent criteria required to fulfil the gendered brief. In a fleeting but drunkenly lucid moment, Mahoney gestures towards the various sources of masculine shame that I will explore
throughout the rest of McGahern’s novels: disempowerment, marginalisation, the pressures of hypermasculinity and postcolonial shame – themes not overtly present here but, I contend, establish the underlying source of spiralling shame witnessed in this outburst.

An analysis of masculine shame might initially appear to contradict some of my previous work, in which I suggested that patriarchal lore is, in conjunction with Catholic doctrine, one of the biggest structural facets responsible for the suppression of women in these novelists’ work. It is critical to establish here that ‘men’, ‘masculinity’ and ‘patriarchy’ are not the synonymous and amorphous categories which some hegemonic modes of their expression make them appear to be. On the contrary, these key concepts are separate entities and must be treated as such, even as certain discursive deployments encourage slippages. In so doing, I aim to follow the attempts of theorists such as J. Halberstam who succinctly and pertinently claims that masculinity ‘is not the social and cultural and indeed political expression of maleness’ and ‘must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects’.  

166 Halberstam further contends that ‘although we seem to have a difficult time defining masculinity, as a society we seem to have little trouble in recognizing it’.  
167 This latter observation offers the first glimpse into why an outwardly dominant, even tyrannical, patriarch such as Mahoney articulates feelings of failure and shame in attempting to live up to masculine standards. During his drunken rant he clearly expresses a sense that things have gone wrong, yet he has no coherent idea of what a correct performance would entail. This is a theme I will

167 Ibid.
broaden in relation to fathers portrayed in other novels, who also utter feelings of failure without defining success.

It is also helpful at this juncture to unpack the concept of patriarchy. Whilst operating in a more or less homogenous way when exerting pressure on Irish women, it is shown to function differently in the shaming pressures brought to bear upon men. The first crucial element of patriarchy as a theoretical category is that, like men/male/masculinity, it is socially, culturally and historically contingent. Mártín Mac an Ghail and Chris Haywood argue:

there is a need to disaggregate the overinflated concept of patriarchy, [as] these relations are multidimensional and differentially experienced and responded to within specific historical contexts and social locations. In other words, differentiated forms of male power can only be explained by an analysis which takes into consideration the specific conditions that give rise to these situations.¹⁶⁸

They further observe that:

both men and women are subject to patriarchal discourses. […] Thus, through the identification of particular patriarchally defined genders, men and women are ascribed legitimate ways of doing masculinity and femininity.¹⁶⁹

Mac an Ghail and Haywood identify two concepts which will be integral as this chapter proceeds. Firstly, patriarchy is an institutionally embedded concept that pressurises and induces shame in men every bit as much as women. If there are legitimate ways of performing masculinity then there are also illegitimate ways, and the hegemonic order will reprimand all non-conforming subjects. In conjunction with Halberstam’s argument that masculinity cannot be reduced to the male body, I will begin to speak of masculinities rather than masculinity, and explore which masculine performances/identities are privileged over others, and why. Secondly, in order to

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 25.
fully understand the patriarchal matrix operating on both genders, it is important to undertake a more thoroughgoing analysis of the socio-historical contexts which gave rise to specific articulations of masculinity in Irish society.

‘A generation wild with ideals’: Ireland’s Postcolonial Shame

To ascertain how male gendered identities became so concrete in post-independence Ireland, it is helpful to cite Raewyn Connell, who argues that ‘hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual’.

As seen when examining how the stereotype of the haggard old woman was established and reified, there was a close correspondence between cultural ideals and institutional power in Ireland. Ireland had been enfranchised largely due to Guerrilla warfare, and the postcolonial military community which helped shape the early days of the new State was keen to abject all that was associated with the colonial era. Englishness and/or femininity were rejected in favour of a new-found, hastily assembled notion of exaggerated Irish masculinity.

This desire to create such a rigid model of masculinity is arguably a mark of transgenerational postcolonial shame. This particular expression of shame was foregrounded in Eugene Gaillard’s treatment of Caithleen Brady in O’Brien’s Country Girl trilogy when he employs the racial insult of being an Irish ‘peasant’ ‘fresh from the bogs’ to demean her (GGE 194-5). Meaney posits that the:

psychodynamic of colonial and postcolonial identity often produces in the formerly colonized the desire to assert a rigid and confined

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masculine identity, against the colonizers’ stereotype of their subjects as feminine, wild, ungovernable [...] as guarantor to the precarious masculinity of the new state.\textsuperscript{171}

Deployed alongside effeminization and not explicitly identified by Meaney is the paradoxical animalisation of the colonised nation. The slur ‘pigs’ was the pejorative most often used by the British to insult the Irish. Sarah Townsend comments that ‘the Irish pig functioned as a popular racial caricature, encapsulating in animal form the colonized country’s perceived failings: dirtiness, laziness, evolutionary lowliness, and lack of refinement’\textsuperscript{172}. Eugene frequently implies but never employs this racial slight during his relationship with Caithleen. This places the colonised subject ‘with a nearly insoluble double bind [...] a performative contradiction in which the assertion of one forfeited or belied the other’.\textsuperscript{173} In other words, by asserting its masculinity and fighting for freedom, the colonised nation conforms to its savage, bestial stereotype; by seeking a peaceful enfranchisement through legal channels, the coloniser claims the effeminacy of the colonised has been proven.

Joseph Valente argues that this paradoxical deadlock was broken because the British conflated the racial and emasculating elements of colonial discourse when labelling them ‘genetically feminine’ and that, ‘[b]y inscribing the presumed inferiority of the Irish in biological terms, this shift of register lent their political subordination an air of inner necessity, historical inevitability, and, above all, permanence’.\textsuperscript{174} Valente’s observation that these

\textsuperscript{173} Valente, \textit{The Myth of Manliness}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid, p. 12 [emphasis original].
two elements became amalgamated mirrors the anxieties which manifest most commonly in McGahern and O’Brien’s male characters. In the passage previously analysed, Mahoney displays a profound discomfit as well as dissatisfaction with being associated with the domestic, indicating he feels both effeminate and marginalised – anxieties prompted by an unarticulated but culturally pervasive postcolonial unease. The disconcertment of McGahern’s father figures in domestic settings will be further analysed, but here I suggest we see Mahoney’s domestic disquiet as further proof that Ireland’s status as a postcolonial nation caused a compensatory assertion of hegemonic masculine performance in male subjects in the manner that Meaney and Valente theorise.

The shame and dissatisfaction that male protagonists express in relation to the nation do not end with the 1922 creation of the Irish Free State. Indeed, McGahern’s comment that Ireland had no sense of itself except as ‘not England’ cited in the introduction reveals the extent to which postcolonial shame had a tight grip on the psychological identity of its citizens. The postcolonial nature of modern Ireland explored by both novelists can be usefully examined in light of Bewes’ argument that ‘[i]t is no longer possible to assume […] the shame of the postcolonial present arises from the postcolonial past, and that shame will disappear once colonial structures of power have been eradicated’.¹⁷⁵ McGahern pursues this perspective in his novels The Barracks and Amongst Women. His protagonists Reegan and Moran express profound and strikingly similar dissatisfactions with the present. Both men fought as paramilitaries during the struggle for independence, both fail to prosper in the new state, and both conflate a sense of personal and national failure.

¹⁷⁵ Bewes, Postcolonial Shame, p. 164.
Reegan joins the police force after peace is declared; although his career begins promisingly and he receives a few quick promotions, he eventually becomes side-lined in a small village force with very little to do:

[H]e’d been born into a generation wild with ideals: they’d free Ireland, they’d be a nation once again: […] he donned the uniform of the Garda Siochana and swore to preserve the peace of The Irish Free State […] getting petty promotion immediately because he’d won officers rank in the fighting, but there he stayed – to watch the Civil War and the fighting that followed in silent disgust. […] Marriage and children had tethered him in this village, and the children remembered the bitterness of his laugh the day he threw them his medal with coloured ribbon for their play. He was obeying officers younger than himself, he who had been in charge of ambushes at twenty. 176

Reegan has formed a psychological association between his ‘wild ideals’ for the nation and his own career. Just as he had glittering ambitions for a post-independence Ireland, he evidently thought he would advance through the police ranks and into a senior position. The appearance of the word ‘petty’ as the adjective for his promotion is surprising, and draws attention to the subtly but continually shifting perspective in this passage. This word is clearly applied retroactively; Reegan admits he had hitherto prevented his children from playing with the medal, implying that it was previously cherished as a memento from a similarly prized promotion. The children note a ‘bitterness’ in his symbolic “junking” of this medal which betrays that contemporaneous circumstances have cheapened the value of the memory. Juxtaposed with his use of ‘petty’, a picture forms in which the present-day disillusioned and resentful Reegan allows his current perceptions to jaundice his view of the past.

Reegan, like Mahoney, expresses feelings of marginalisation. It irks him that he must take orders from younger men when he was ‘in charge of ambushes at

twenty’. As will be witnessed in Moran shortly, Reegan fails to realise that military competency does not necessarily make someone successful in civilian life; the skills required in a military officer are not those that make a suitable police chief. As is characteristic of Reegan, he neglects to look inward as to why he has failed to succeed but instead projects blame onto those around him. Frustrated by the mundane complications of everyday life, he scapegoats his wife and children; a terminally ill (second) wife and daily chores do not compare to the vainglorious exhilarations of war. Reegan confesses that it is:

> a thousand times easier to lie in a ditch with a rifle [...] you had the heat of some purpose, a job to do, and to some extent your life was in your own hands: but this, this … This wasn’t life or it was all a hell of a flop. (TB 110)

His life as a guerrilla fighter provided everything that he regards his present life as lacking: adrenaline, a clear task, a strong sense of purpose and a greater degree of autonomy. Reegan finds it difficult to take orders from younger men as he regards his service as a freedom fighter to have been insufficiently rewarded. The daily grind of domestic life coupled with his failure to rise through the police force lead him to the conclusion that his life is ‘a hell of a flop’.

The lack of autonomy Reegan currently experiences and his consequential “rose-tinted” view of the struggle for independence prompts the additional scapegoating of his immediate superior officer in the police force, Quirke, whom Reegan blames for his liminality even more than his wife and children. The degree of responsibility that Reegan bears for the antipathy in this relationship will be examined later, but it is worthwhile highlighting that he is not alone in feeling disenfranchised in this village force. As Reegan regales his colleagues with the tale
of a recent clash with the superintendent, it becomes clear that others feel similarly aggrieved:

Mullins burst out in a drunken passion that, ‘They can’t ride rough-shod over us these days. Them days are gone. […]’ ‘You’d be surprised what they can do,’ Casey argued with unusual conviction. ‘Things don’t change that quick. They might luk different, that’s all. But if you wance cross them they’ll get rid of you. […] Power, let me tell you, always stands up for power.’ […] Examples began to be quoted […] – with nothing proven, no one’s mind or convictions altered in any way, it becoming simply the brute clash of ego against ego, any care for tolerance or meaning or truth ground under their blind passion to dominate. (TB 27-8)

There are a number of telling dynamics at work in this exchange. At the outset of the discussion, all parties agree that Quirke attempts to ‘ride rough shod’ over them. Though Casey appears to dissent, his assertion that ‘power always stands up for power’ reinforces Reegan’s primary assertion that Quirke is behaving unjustly. The antagonism that follows is sparked by Casey’s assessment that the powerful members of any institution can treat them badly and get away with it. The assembled men are feeling disenfranchised and have voiced their support for Reegan’s subversion; Casey then bleakly assesses that they are all powerless, will remain so, and that their current situation is not so very different from ‘them days’ – implicitly British rule – despite how things might ‘luk’.

What ensues is essentially an argument the sake it; it would appear that Casey’s analysis of their lives is so accurate and depressing that the men attempt to dominate one another in the absence of any other available expression of agency. As the narrator points out, nothing is achieved – no one is open to changing his mind. The purpose of the squabble is to exercise a ‘blind passion to dominate’ in a ‘brute clash of ego against ego’. I will later characterise this sort of behaviour as typically hypermasculine: as the men become increasingly anxious that their masculine
performance is insufficient when measured against parameters like commercial success, they increase their levels of aggression to (re)claim whatever is left of the available territory. This characterisation of hypermasculinity certainly maps the trajectory of this clash: no one disagrees until Casey contends that the situation is both hopeless and intractable, at which point the conversation descends into a futile fight in the search for a victor.

McGahern’s Moran in Amongst Women exhibits almost identical patterns of behaviour. Moran expresses an intense disillusioned anger that he has not prospered in the enfranchised Ireland he fought for, and that an independent Ireland is not as prosperous as he hoped:

What did we get for it? A country, if you’d believe them. Some of our own johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen. More than half my own family work in England. What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod. (AW 5)

He later complains that:

[m]any of them who had pensions and medals later couldn’t tell one end of a gun from the other. Many who had actually fought got nothing. An early grave or an emigrant ship. Sometimes I get sick when I see what I fought for. (AW 15)

A tension develops in the novel in which England is viewed as representing both salvation and failure. This haunts Moran, as the fact that his children emigrate to England means admitting that, in his eyes, an enfranchised Ireland is incapable of providing for its own citizens. Here we must refer back to shame as a complex, for McGahern’s protagonist Moran matches the profile of one whom Tomkins’ theorises is experiencing a shame–humiliation spiral. Moran suffers acutely by conflating the personal and national: he is humiliated because he feels he neglected to achieve his full potential after coming out of the army and also feels shame that Ireland cannot seem to stem emigration.
Moran, like Reegan, channels and converts his shame–humiliation into shame–contempt/rage by paranoiacally believing that he was prevented from advancing by some elusive higher power and pouring scorn on the new government. Tomkins explains this compounding effect of shame thus:

The monopolistic growth of shame and self-contempt is produced by the compounding of shame and self-contempt. When the child feels ashamed and discouraged after failure, his shame is increased by heaping shame or contempt upon shame. He is shamed because he has failed or surrendered or both. [...] In this way shame and failure are used to amplify each other.  

Moran occupies the position of the child, but the shame he experiences is not his alone. He conflates his own perceived shame at not being more successful with the lack of prosperity of the nation, a conflation induced by his own success within the army and the seeming cessation of progress (both personally and nationally) since he left it. Indeed, Moran’s adoption of military rhetoric in civilian life (he refers to his children as ‘the troops’) is ironically reflected in Tomkins’ use of the word ‘surrendered’: Moran surrenders to his marginalised position, but finds this liminality unbearable. Instead, he disavows these feelings by retreating (another military tactic) further into the shelter of Great Meadow and deriding the current administration from that refuge for what he perceives as botching independence.

This disavowal and redirection of his shame moves him into the realm of June Price Tangney’s theory that:

shame-prone individuals are not only more prone to anger in general; they are also more likely to do unconstructive things with their anger [...] Across individuals of all ages, [...] shame-proneness was clearly related to maladaptive and nonconstructive responses to anger – including malevolent intentions; direct, indirect and displaced.

177 Tomkins, Shame and Its Sisters, p. 173.
aggression; self-directed hostility; and negative long-term consequences.\textsuperscript{178} 

Price Tangney’s assertion is akin to Segal’s earlier observation that hypermasculinity ‘result[s] in delinquent styles of behaviour’ – an indication that shame and hypermasculinity are interlinked. Moran is characterised by violent and unpredictable mood swings which he (mis)directs toward members of family, speaking to his wife ‘as if he were taking rifle aim’ (\textit{AW} 69).

Moran’s temperament is so wildly unpredictable that, when juxtaposed with his frequent use of military references, it suggests he is suffering from unprocessed trauma. An incident in which Moran shoots a jackdaw from the living room window strongly evidences traumatised behavioural patterns:

[A] single shotgun blast came from the front window. […] He was standing at the open window in his pyjamas, the shotgun in his hand, staring out at the front field where the black splash of the jackdaw lay on the white ground beneath the ash tree. […]

‘That bloody bird has been annoying me for days.’ […]

‘You didn’t miss anyhow.’ Rose was intent on laughing away the incongruity of the situation. […]

‘The closest I ever got to any man was when I had him in the sights of the rifle and I never missed.’ (\textit{AW} 6-7)

This episode occurs the morning after Moran discusses his time spent as a freedom fighter and his subsequent disillusionment with post-independence Ireland. Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart argue that ‘traumatic memory […] occurs automatically in situations which are reminiscent of the original traumatic situation. These circumstances trigger the traumatic memory […], when one element of a traumatic experience is evoked, all other elements follow automatically’.\textsuperscript{179} As this is the first occasion Moran has ever spoken to his family about his experiences of war,


it is also the first time that the traumatic memory has been resurrected. Having evoked one element of the memory, Moran then re-enacts the rest of it in much the manner that van der Kolk and van der Hart describe by actually performing a military act. Though claiming he has fired his rifle because he was annoyed by ‘the bloody bird’, his immediate reply when Rose congratulates him on his aim is to speak once more about his time spent as a guerrilla fighter – indicating that this experience, rather than the jackdaw, is foremost in his mind.

However, we might ask what exactly has traumatised Moran. Arguably he is not troubled by the memories of acts he committed with his rifle since, just like Reegan, he states that for him and his lieutenant McQuaid ‘the war was the best part of our lives. Things were never so simple and clear again’ (AW 6). Whilst this might be bravado, the pride with which Moran remembers his accuracy implies his claim is genuine. What Moran complains about most bitterly is his perceived failure of the independent nation, indicating this is the root of his distress. Like Reegan, once the ‘simple and clear’ aim of establishing independence from Britain had been achieved, his life becomes less straightforward both personally and politically. Moran’s use of the pronoun ‘our’ when making this claim is also quite telling of his wish to disavow his shame. McQuaid becomes a successful businessman post-independence and is unlikely to reflect on the war as the best part of his life, which makes his inclusion in Moran’s statement incongruous. Moran shelters in the collective authority of ‘our’ by asserting the views of an imagined plurality to divert attention away from his personal grievances. He displays signs of being haunted by postcolonial shame to the point of being traumatised by it, which has left him with a residual monopolistic shame – borderline trauma – complex.
A crucial question posed at the close of the novel is the extent to which Moran’s traumatised shame complex becomes transgenerational when he dies. His daughters gather at his graveside, reflecting that:

It was as if their first love and allegiance had been pledged uncompromisingly to this one house and man and that they knew that he had always been at the very living centre of all parts of their lives. Now not only had they never broken that pledge but they were renewing it for a second time [...] [A]s they left him under the yew, it was as if each of them in their different ways had become Daddy. [...] Maggie spoke for them all. ‘He’ll never leave us now.’ (AW 183)

The invisible narrator employs free indirect discourse to portray the girls as a collective displaying communal emotion(s) rather than individuals. Whyte comments that the deployment of this narrative technique is particularly powerful in Amongst Women because it allows the reader to go beyond ‘merely looking at things from their viewpoint, as it is related to us by the narrator; we are actually seeing through their language’. Whyte’s argument is powerfully demonstrated in this passage; the perspective is not of a single individual but represents the group. This impression is reinforced by frequent uses of the pronouns ‘them’, ‘their’ and ‘they’, creating a feeling of indistinguishable unity. This is made explicit when Maggie speaks ‘for them all.’ However, this collective language has already begun to alter; their grief is framed in the militaristic terms of ‘allegiance’ and a ‘pledge’ which has been renewed, indicating a taking up of his mantle and battles rather than the laying to rest of old ghosts and grudges. These phrases are out of kilter with the girls’ usual idioms, but echo Moran’s accurately.

The unexplained shift in their dialogue heavily suggests that the girls have started to absorb Moran’s speech patterns as each starts to ‘become Daddy’. Laurie Vickroy argues that the:

180 Whyte, History, Myth, and Ritual, p. 207.
[t]ransference of traumatic responses can continue for generations. [...] The children of survivors are deeply affected by their parents’ experience, as manifested in [...] emotional constriction bought on by excessive parental suffering [...]. Moreover, children can inherit patterns of traumatic response.  

Vickroy’s comment is highly congruent with Tomkins’ assertion that shame transmits and preserves social norms. Given that Moran exhibits the symptoms of monopolistic shame and trauma, it is not surprising that both elements are inextricably intertwined in his daughters’ reaction to his death. The possible transference of traumatised shame manifesting as ‘emotional constriction’ is already implied by the girls’ indistinguishable responses. Whilst this can be interpreted as a display of sibling unity caused by the common grief at the loss of their father, it can also be seen as evidence that the girls have inherited Moran’s toxic complexes.

The potential transmission of a transgenerational shame complex is further highlighted in the symbolism surrounding Moran’s funeral. Moran is buried under the yew tree which is the metaphorical heart of Great Meadow. This choice is initially surprising given his rigid insistence on Catholic rituals within the house, but becomes less so we consider that Moran was ‘the very living centre of all parts of their lives’ (AW 183). Great Meadow is the heart of their family, and the yew tree stands over the ‘open gate’ leading to the farm: to bury Moran under that tree reifies his position at the core of their existence (AW 3). Nevertheless, yew trees are typically durable but extremely poisonous, and so are their seeds. If Moran is the figurative yew tree in their life – ever-present but ultimately toxic – then they inherit that toxicity as his “seeds”. The image of each of them ‘becoming Daddy’ whilst silently renewing their allegiance to him at his graveside underscores his noxious influence. Whether any of the girls inherit his disillusioned postcolonial despair is

left unclear, but the active militaristic terms with which they affirm their love and
grief leave the possibility distinctly open.

The description of the girls as ‘becoming Daddy’ goes beyond the
transference of shame. It also returns us to Halberstam’s claim that masculinity ‘is
not the social and cultural and indeed political expression of maleness’ and ‘must not
and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects’.\textsuperscript{182} If
masculinity, and by extension patriarchy, is not tied to the male body, then it can, as
Halberstam goes on to argue, be performed by women. Paechter disagrees with this
theorisation, contending that ‘[f]emininities are not constructed in the ways
masculinities are; they do not confer cultural power, nor are they able to guarantee
patriarchy. They are, instead, constructed as a variety of negations of the
masculine’.\textsuperscript{183} The weakness in Paechter’s analysis has already been foregrounded in
O’Brien’s character Veronica, who firmly attempts to ‘guarantee’ patriarchal values
by transmitting gender stereotypes to Mary’s unborn child in \textit{Down by the River}.
Moran’s daughters’ actions further confirm Halberstam’s and not Paechter’s reading
by demonstrating an almost immediate internalisation and perpetuation of Moran’s
patriarchal ‘contempt for women’ upon his death (\textit{AW} 91). As the girls stand by their
father’s grave Sheila looks over at their brother and husbands, who are entertaining
the children and laughing. Noting the ‘slow frivolity of their pace’, she comments:
‘Will you look at the men. They’re more like a crowd of women. […] [Y]ou’d think
they were coming from a dance.’ (\textit{AW} 184) Sheila emasculates the men by
rhetorically \textit{lowering} them to the status of women. Her gaze is more akin to a
patriarch’s judgement than a loving wife. Her derogatory comment also serves to
reinforce the stereotypical connections between physical weaknesses (their slow

\textsuperscript{182} Halberstam, \textit{Female Masculinity}, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{183} Paechter, ‘power, identities and gender’, p. 256.
pace), responsibility for children and frivolity with femininity – a stereotype Moran insisted his wife and daughters perform. Given this, the scene suggests that Sheila has ‘become Daddy’ by adopting his misogyny. In closing the novel with these words, McGahern does not linger on this image nor proceed to show what a patriarchal woman might look like, but he does leave the reader with the arresting impression that the wheels of patriarchy are kept in motion by women as much as men – an image which directly opposes to Paechter’s claim. Moran’s daughters do not ‘negate’ his patriarchal ‘contempt for women’, they adopt it. Framed thus, this incident is one of the most crystallising scenes McGahern offers to demonstrate that patriarchy is a discourse that manipulates gender performances by permeating the psyches of both sexes and operates quite independently of masculinity, maleness or men.

When analysing protagonists such as Reegan and Moran as shaped by postcolonial shame, it is essential to resist over-simplifying or ignoring certain aspects of their character in order to conform to a postcolonial framework. This is a view supported by Fintan Walsh, who suggests that:

the male figures [often present themselves as] burdened with work and relationships, with each identifying himself as a hapless victim of outside forces. In reality, however, victimization emerges as more of an elected subject position.\textsuperscript{184}

His analysis certainly withstands scrutiny in the case of these men. Reegan presents himself as burdened by his relationships, claiming that his wife and children have tethered him to the village. He also regards his relationship with his superintendent as the reason he has not been promoted, claiming, much like Moran, that his success was blocked by this man’s personal vendetta against him. However, though Reegan

is not alone in feeling disempowered within the police force, he is the only one among them who actively provokes his superior officer, seeking rather than responding to confrontation. Constantly referring to the superintendent as ‘the bastard Quirke’ in front of friends and family, Reegan delights in mimicking him behind his back and needling him whenever they meet (TB 12). Indeed, in many of their exchanges Quirke ‘wanted to show Reegan that they weren’t enemies, but in a team together’, but Reegan perseveres in regarding him as an opponent and snubs any overtures of friendship (TB 131). Therefore, his complaint that he has been overlooked for promotion is an entirely self-made problem; his choice to continue antagonising Quirke, in spite of his wife’s and colleagues’ warnings, makes his stagnant job the ‘elected subject position’ that Walsh describes.

Moran is similarly responsible for many of the problems he complains about. He is quick to assert his academic credentials, claiming that he was more suitable for promotion than other candidates because he had:

gone to school longer than the others. […] I could read maps, calculate distances. You’d never think it but McQuaid, like many of the others, was more or less illiterate, though he could add and subtract quick enough when it came to his pocket. (AW 5)

Moran reveals his inability to accept anyone as an equal, which eventually leads to the termination of his friendship with McQuaid when Moran’s resentful bitterness that McQuaid has been more successful than him spills over into open hostility between them. McQuaid leaves, never to return. The seeds for this disagreement are already visible in Moran’s description of his platoon to his children. Like Mahoney, he considers himself an intelligent man who has been overlooked. Instead of crediting McQuaid with an aptitude for mental arithmetic despite his lack of formal schooling, Moran prefers to manipulate this talent by depicting it as mercenary self-
interest and ultimately proof of a Machiavellian disposition. Despite his insistence that he was ‘stopped’ from succeeding, it is evident to both his family and the reader that Moran is simply incapable of getting along with others (AW 5). This is something he grudgingly acknowledges, admitting that ‘in peacetime you have to arselick and know the right people if you want to get on. I was never any good at getting on with people’ (AW 6). Even then, Moran cannot resist skewing the situation to his benefit. He depicts affability as ‘arselicking’ and in so doing recasts his inability to communicate successfully as a form of integrity. He continues to subtly present himself as a victim, as ‘knowing the right people’ implies having upper/middle class connections unavailable to a working class farmer. His need to always be superior to those around him means that he is in no small way responsible for the family’s isolation.

Caroline Magennis adds another dimension to the debate, arguing that ‘victimhood is a complex issue’ because:

[v]ictim status […] is fundamentally at odds with hegemonic masculine identity […]. A problem also exists though, with the fact that victims of violence, particularly state violence, were often perpetrators of violence, thus complicating their status as victims.185

Reegan and especially Moran are undeniably concerned with their hypermasculine performances; neither will tolerate any perceived threat to their total control of the family. Both men refuse to acknowledge their wives as equals. Interestingly, Reegan’s wife, Elizabeth, was a nurse before her marriage and Moran’s wife, Rose, was a nanny to the children of a wealthy English family; both women adopt the role of senior servant in their respective households. Inverting Magennis’ image, Reegan and Moran were perpetrators of state violence who go to identify themselves as

victims. Given their need to be indisputably in control, it is incongruous that these self-identified patriarchal men would portray themselves as victims since this, as Magennis identifies, contrasts with the hegemonic masculine desire to be seen as dominant. Indeed, a victim is essentially dominated.

There are two ways to interpret this paradox. The first is to adopt Walsh’s position and posit that these men create the perfect excuse as to why they have not been more successful; they can luxuriate in blaming those around them without accepting any responsibility by presenting themselves as victims. This view certainly holds water, and I have demonstrated that Reegan and Moran are fundamentally accountable for most of their tribulations. However, both men exhibit incredibly self-destructive tendencies. Reegan obstinately alienates the only man who can promote him and Moran wilfully estranges his only friend. In light of Magennis’ argument, it is worth questioning whether their self-destructive impulses are borne out of continued postcolonial shame. This view is one that Ashis Nandy subscribes to, arguing that:

the victims of a culture of hyper-masculinity […] protect themselves by simultaneously conforming to the stereotype of the rulers, by over-stressing those aspects of the self which they share with the powerful, and by protecting in the corner of their heart a secret defiance […] and unspoken belief that [they are] morally and culturally superior, caught on the wrong side of history.186

This statement perfectly summarizes the behaviour of both men. Reegan and Moran cling to, employ and exaggerate hypermasculine traits to mask deeper insecurities whilst simultaneously – and paradoxically – believing in their superiority to those around them. Ultimately, Walsh, Magennis and Nandy’s analyses are all plausible; the novels hold these ambivalences in perfect balance. It is tempting to side with

Walsh and contend that these men are responsible for their own failings, especially given the aggression, rudeness and – at times – violence that characterises their behaviour. They are often very unlikeable men, which adds to the attraction of placing the blame squarely with them. However, when the immediate historical context that precedes these novels is juxtaposed with Magennis’ observation that an elected victim status is incongruous with hegemonic masculinity and Nandy’s rationalisation of destructive hypermasculine behaviour, it becomes impossible to ignore the possibility that these men are suffering from chronic postcolonial shame. The reader is left with unsolvable dilemma: do they fail because of their residual shame or are they shamed by failure? McGahern’s refusal to resolve this ambivalence adds to the richness of the text and mirrors the complexity of masculine performances; there are several inextricable but deeply entwined elements at play most of the time, and one cannot be extricated from the others.

**Hypermascularity**

The Irish response to an effeminising postcolonial discourse, compounded by what Meaney characterises as a form of white shame, was to cultivate a hypermasculine gender identity. If, as Meaney previously identified, the Virgin Mary was to function as the hyperfeminine paradigm in the newly enfranchised Catholic Irish Free State, then de Valera set out the duty of Irish males to embody the contrasting hypermasculine counterpart in his previously analysed 1943 St. Patrick’s Day address.\(^{187}\) This immediately presents the Irish male population with a problem: to define hypermasculine, one must first define masculine. As Halberstam theorised and Moran’s daughters demonstrate, the (stereo)typical performances of patriarchy

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\(^{187}\) Meaney, ‘Race, Sex and Nation’, p. 128.
and misogyny can be performed, promulgated and disseminated by bodies which are not male. The problem also returns us squarely to Halberstam’s observation that ‘although we seem to have a difficult time defining masculinity, as a society we seem to have little trouble in recognizing it’. Connell posits that ‘masculinity is what men ought to be’ even if ‘[f]ew men actually match the ‘blueprint’.

Segal points out that what ‘men ought to be’ is a series of negatives: ‘not feminine, not “gay”, not to be tainted with any marks of “inferiority” – ethnic or otherwise’. As with femininity, masculinity also appears to be founded on a binary process of abjection, except that Irish men are arguably at a disadvantage as they are branded with ‘ethnic inferiority’ by postcolonial discourse. Reading Halberstam, Connell and Segal in tandem, we glimpse the premise for the near-panic that many of McGahern’s men express regarding their masculine performance. Referring back to Mahoney’s drunken speech at the outset of this chapter, his borderline hysteria becomes legible – a society which demands that masculinity can only be fully achieved by abjecting stereotypically feminine qualities risks nullifying the masculinity of a single father who must care for his young children.

Connell poses the question ‘What is ‘normative’ about a norm hardly anyone meets?’ This is answered quite emphatically by Edna O’Brien in her acerbic depiction of Baba Brennan’s husband Frank: nothing. Frank is simultaneously presented as self-consciously hypermasculine and ridiculous. Despite his regular displays of dominance, aggression and stilted chivalry detailed in Part 1 of this thesis, he has no knowledge of women’s bodies. On their wedding night, Baba starts menstruating. She recounts how ‘[h]e wanted to call a doctor’ and thinks that the

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188 Halberstam, Female Masculinities, p. 1.
189 Connell, Masculinities, p. 70.
190 Segal, Slow Motion, p. xxxiv.
191 Connell, Masculinities, p. 70.
bleeding has been caused by eating foreign food; when Baba tries to explain her situation using the contemporary euphemism ‘the curse’, he looks at her ‘as if [she] was a witch or something’ (GMB 39). Baba then asks why his mother has never spoken to him about women’s bodies, and in his embarrassment his temper flares. He shouts that his mother ‘was a good woman who baked the best bread in Ireland’, and when Baba – perhaps tactlessly – replies that there is more to marriage than making good bread, he becomes ‘vicious’ (GMB 39). When they do have intercourse, it becomes increasingly clear to Baba that Frank, despite his masculine bluster, does not know how to please a woman sexually:

> When we did [have sex] a few nights later it was pretty uneventful. For me that is. He said what was wrong with me. I said it wasn’t as simple as he thought and that for women hand manipulation, coaxing et cetera had to come into it. He said I made us sound like a bleeding motor engine. (GMB 39-40)

Frank is a character who self-consciously and deliberately performs the culturally prescribed masculine script. Despite behaving in a manner to demonstrate that he is, in Segal’s terms, ‘not feminine, not “gay”, not […] tainted with any marks of “inferiority”’, he appears – to Baba’s eyes at least – ridiculous.

> Segal expands on this paradox, contending that ‘masculinity is structured through contradiction. The more it asserts itself, the more it calls itself into question. [...] Masculinity is a quality of being which is always incomplete’. Frank has abjected femininity so successfully that he has no knowledge of women and thereby undermines his own sexual expertise; as he excels in one area of (hyper)masculinity, he undermines another. Ironically, by over-performing his masculinity he can no longer function as a husband that Baba regards as sufficiently masculine. As their marriage progresses, Frank continues this battle to (over)compensate for his

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192 Segal, *Slow Motion*, p. 123.
perceived weaknesses. It becomes evident that Frank is sterile, which critically damages his masculine pride. Though he owns and runs a successful building firm, he nevertheless proceeds to regularly consume too much alcohol and ‘look at some little man who was the father of five and say ‘I’m not half the man you are” (GMB 40). Frank thus demonstrates an awareness of a hierarchy of masculine traits; despite his commercial success and physical prowess compared to the ‘little man’, in his mind this does not counterbalance his inability to father children and he therefore regards himself as lesser by contrast. In an effort to neutralise his increasing feelings of inadequacy, he intensifies his displays of dominance over Baba which culminates in her being ‘forced to strip once on the imprimatur of [her] husband because three of his friends bet [she] had no navel’ (GMB 37). Given the absurd premise of the bet, Frank’s ‘imprimatur’ that Baba should strip in front of his friends becomes an exercise in power and boasting. The boost to Frank’s ego is twofold: he can subordinate the feisty Baba, and his friends can witness his wife’s beauty with (presumable) envy. Baba, like Caithleen before her, must strip before the voyeuristic gaze of men and emphasises the trend emerging in this thesis that women are, by and large, subject to even the most weak and insecure of men due to the asymmetrical distribution of power in the patriarchal systems at work.

Frank, in many ways, over-conforms to type. That Frank is such a perfect example of Segal and Connell’s theorisation is what makes him a slightly two-dimensional character. The quality of O’Brien’s male characters has been repeatedly questioned throughout her career. Peggy O’Brien explores the issue of the (lack of) depth in some of Edna O’Brien’s characterisation, arguing that at times she seems to
endorse a sort of ‘reduct[ive]’ ‘stage-Irishness’. However, she later allows that ‘O’Brien’s […] writing is not the product of deliberate looking at something but distracted movement away from [some]thing’. Nandy views this ‘distracted movement’ as indicative of Edna O’Brien’s status as a postcolonial author. Nandy, whilst admittedly writing about authors in a specifically Indian context, argues that their writing is characterised by ‘chaotic, individuated, ‘pathological’ protests against hyper-masculinity’. In Nandy’s reading, the fact that O’Brien writes a ‘chaotic’ (or to Peggy O’Brien’s mind, unconvincing) hypermasculine character is symptomatic of the fact that she is attempting to process her own postcolonial heritage. We can also include John McGahern in this category, for his repeated return to characteristically-similar hypermasculine fathers can equally be described as a ‘pathological’ processing of a postcolonial wound. Frank can be seen as a creation borne not from O’Brien’s study of hypermasculinity but the impulse to escape it. Whilst he is undeniably flat at times, that does not mean his character has nothing to contribute.

The culture of hypermasculinity is shown to be particularly damaging to McGahern’s fathers, most of whom find sustained emotional contact with their families difficult. Reegan, Moran and Mahoney are all widowers with young children and struggle with the challenge this poses to their masculinity. Siobhán Holland contends that ‘[t]hese men do not experience the authority available to them in the domestic scene as natural, inevitable or fitting’. I would suggest that the conflation of these terms is what produces the toxic anxiety betrayed by these men. Gender

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194 Ibid, p. 482.
195 Nandy, The Intimate Enemy, p. 36.
theorists such as Butler and Halberstam have long argued there is nothing natural about assigned gender roles, and that constructions of gender which align binary sexes with given roles are socially, even politically, contingent. This is succinctly expressed by Angela Martin, who elucidates that:

The production of certain kinds of ‘heterosexualised bodies’ is analogous to the production of ‘docile bodies’ – a certain corporeality emerges simultaneously with a particular power regime. To say the bodies are heterosexualised in the process of being produced as docile is to acknowledge that gender identity and constructions of masculinity and femininity ultimately underline regimes of power. [...] Sexually specific bodies were constructed and given meaning, as heterosexualised subjectivities were simultaneously inscribed.197

I have already established the significant degree of co-operation between State and Church to create and disseminate highly gendered roles for Irish citizens. Thus, what Holland argues that McGahern’s fathers find inherently ‘unnatural’ is nothing that has arisen naturally; they are uncomfortable with domesticity because they have been inculcated to be so. The most illuminating of Holland’s phrases is ‘fitting’; here she hits upon a sense of what is considered appropriate which implies the notion that their roles as fathers – or what they think their roles as fathers should be – has been a process of social instruction. Their sense of what is natural is comprised of – and conflated with – what they deem to be fitting; it is an impulse which neither arises nor proceeds from them, but rather precedes them. Reegan and Moran deliberately sidestep this threat to their identity by remarrying to provide their children with a mother figure, whilst Mahoney attempts to manage alone – to disastrous effect.

Mahoney’s isolation in The Dark ensures that he never meets anyone whom he might persuade to marry him – either for love or convenience. Despite performing basic domestic tasks for his children, the compromise this poses to his self-esteem

causes a pendulum-like need to (re)assert his masculinity through endemic and systemic displays of chronic violence. Mahoney, as witnessed in the opening sequence of this chapter, expresses a male shame complex based on self-contempt through the self’s perception of failure to achieve the standards set by hegemonic hypermasculinity. This parallel between shame and violence returns us once more to Price-Tangney’s assertion that ‘shame-prone individuals are not only more prone to anger in general; they are also more likely to do unconstructive things with their anger […] including […] direct, indirect and displaced aggression’. Such a connection between shame and rage, also demonstrably present in McGahern’s Moran, warrants an examination of the scene in which Mahoney assaults his eldest daughter:

He swung her around by the hair. Her feet left the ground. He started to swing her round by the dark hair, mouthing, “I’ll teach you to lie. Talk about people behind their backs […]” and she was screaming. […] Then her heels left the ground and swung, the eyes staring wide with terror out of the face, and the screaming. (TD 35)

Following the conclusions drawn in Part 1 that males regularly display a sense of entitlement to the female body, I suggest it is not a coincidence that it is Joan and not his son who is subjected to this brutal attack.

However, we must examine Mahoney’s state of mind when this assault takes place. He is a single father with four children to care and provide for, and a farmer who appears to work his land single-handedly. Therefore, he is solely responsible for the fortunes of the family. The strain surfaces in a previous scene, when despite the fact that ‘[t]heir clothes started to grow heavy with rain’ and ‘[t]he wind numbed the side of their faces’, Mahoney ‘would not leave off’ relentlessly driving the family to pick the potatoes because, if they are not picked in time, they will start to rot in the

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ground and the crop will be useless (TD 27). Though Mahoney unfairly calls for help from his young children, this is arguably because there is no one else to ask; if the potatoes are not harvested, they cannot be sold and there will be no profit. Mahoney is tired, his nerves are frayed and he must play both mother and father in a society which only sanctions one the latter role. As a consequence of his exhaustion Mahoney becomes antagonistic towards his children, who respond by emotionally distancing themselves from him. The boy admits that they have ‘frozen him out’ and that Mahoney ‘had to play patience alone all the time’ (TD 34). The text thus creates the space to examine Mahoney as a fatigued parent who is working to his limit to provide for his children both financially and domestically. In his internal shame-rage that he must perform feminine tasks he considers inappropriate and finds uncomfortable, he misdirects that shame-rage onto his children. In turn, they ostracise him because they are too young to understand the dynamics at work, compounding Mahoney’s feelings of loneliness and rejection.

This analysis is given further credence in the mismatch between the pretext for the beating, and what Mahoney says during the violence itself. The incident occurs because Mahoney overhears Joan saying that ‘it’d always be like this in this house’ to her siblings in response to Mahoney’s explosive outburst after tripping over a bucket left by the door (TD 35). Mahoney’s response is instantaneous: ‘Did you know there’s only one thing you should use ALWAYS about and that’s God. He always was and always will be, for ever and ever, Amen,’ he shouted, half-frothing at the nonsense rhetoric.’ (TD 35) Reactions like these lead Holland to comment that:

Mahoney […] seeks to bolster his position by aligning himself with men who exercise power beyond the home. […] He establishes his authority by borrowing from the familiar discourses of the Church, the education system, and revolutionary struggle. Through the citation of discourses used by powerful public men, Mahoney is attempting to
consolidate and augment the authority he acquires as a father in a domestic context.\textsuperscript{199}

However, I do not feel this explanation fully accounts for what transpires here. Whilst Mahoney may nonsensically cite Joan’s use of ‘always’ as the pretext for his violence, what he actually says during his attack is ‘I’ll teach you to […] talk about people behind their backs’ (TD 35). I contend that the reader witnesses a man who is deeply hurt by his daughter’s words and does not know how to respond. Whilst his reaction clearly exceeds any offence that Joan caused by muttering something under her breath, in combination with the grim portrayal of potato picking in the relentless weather and his son’s admission that the children were forcing him to spend increasing amounts of time alone, I suggest that a hurt and slightly desperate father snaps upon believing that his children ‘talk about [him] behind [his] back’ (TD 35).

This more sympathetic analysis is pursued by Alan Bairner, who urges the reader to ‘remember that some of those men who […] engage in domestic violence […] do so not because they are powerful, other than in a purely physical sense, but precisely because they feel that they lack power’.\textsuperscript{200} Bairner’s line of analysis is not incompatible with Holland’s comments when she argues that Mahoney needs to ‘bolster’ his position: both readings suggest that far from being an all-powerful patriarch, Mahoney is actually rather weak.

The desire to strengthen his position can further be seen in Mahoney’s response to being successfully challenged by his son: ‘You’d lift a hand to your father only for you’re too yellow […] and you’re the one that’s going to school, the makings of a priest. A fine cuckoo they’ll have then. […] I’d have smashed you to

\textsuperscript{199} Holland, ‘Marvellous Fathers’, p. 188.

pieces, [...] you pup’ (TD 37). Connell discusses the (gendered) nature of insults, stating:

Some heterosexual men and boys are expelled from the circle of legitimacy. This process is marked by a rich vocabulary of abuse: wimp, milksop, nerd, turkey, sissy [...] and so on. [...] The symbolic blurring with femininity is obvious.\(^{201}\)

His argument is usefully overlaid and read in conjunction with Stryker’s assertion that:

gender [...] function[s] as part of a more extensive apparatus of social domination and control. [...] Because genders are categories through which we recognise others (as well as ourselves), because they are categories without which we have great difficulty in recognising personhood at all, gender also functions as a mechanism of control [...]. Stripping away gender, and misattributing gender are practices of social domination, regulation and control that threaten social abjection.\(^{202}\)

Mahoney employs well-worn insults to belittle his son. His comment that the boy is ‘too yellow’ implies cowardice and weakness – traits both diametrically incompatible with a hypermasculine identity and which renders the slur effeminising. However, Mahoney goes beyond removing gender recognition and dehumanises him. Mahoney’s deployment of the term ‘cuckoo’ draws on the phrase “cuckoo in the nest”. This idiom evolved from the breeding habits of the cuckoo bird, which lays its eggs in others birds’ nests: the chick hatches before the eggs of the host bird and subsequently destroys the other eggs in that nest. This has become a metaphor for a corrupt person in a group and thus Mahoney’s deployment of the image serves to imply that his son is unfit for the priesthood owing to his base nature. Mahoney’s subsequent insult of ‘pup’ blurs animalising and infantilising discourses. The term ‘dog’ is a derogatory expression denoting sub-human, aggressive behaviour. Mahoney’s attribution of the infantile form to his son rhetorically bolsters his own position as – to use another idiom – “top dog” and re-enforces his assertion that his

\(^{201}\) Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 79.
son is weak. It is also ironic in context, given that it is he and not the boy who has engaged in a sub-human display of violence.

There is, however, a third explanation for Mahoney’s behaviour. I argue that rather than solely trying to bolster his authority and alongside feeling rejected and lonely, Mahoney also attempts to masculinise his behaviour. As Holland comments, he aligns himself with and borrows from the discourse of ‘public men’ – the public rather than private being the stereotypical sphere for males. He typically uses the language of the Church, the education system and the military; all are traditionally strong patriarchal institutions which promote hypermasculinity. Mahoney’s choice to align himself with these patriarchal institutions points to an attempt to masculinise his position: he emphasizes his role as a father to offset his shame in also being a mother. The strategy of rejecting the feminine is explored by Segal, who contends that:

a ‘pure’ masculinity cannot be asserted except in relation to what is defined as its opposite. It depends on the perpetual renunciation of femininity. No one can be ‘that male’ without constantly doing violence to the most basic of human attributes: the capacity of sensitivity to oneself and others, for tenderness and empathy, the reality of fear and weakness […] – all, of course, quintessentially feminine.

Segal returns us to the binary nature of Irish society that has been shown to underpin so much of McGahern and O’Brien’s writing. She also succinctly expresses what I see as the core of this conflict. Mahoney displays signs of wanting to be affectionate with his children; shortly before this episode he takes them on a fishing trip. The free indirect discourse utilised in the narration shows the children having fun as a group, enjoying Mahoney’s better mood. Indeed, the frequent employment of the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’ make the children indistinct from each other and consequently

204 Segal, *Slow Motion*, p. 114.
highly reminiscent of Moran’s children, whose father is similarly known for his unpredictable mood swings (TD 12). However, without a counterbalancing feminine presence in the household, Mahoney’s renunciation of femininity becomes increasingly difficult. As Mahoney cannot refuse to perform the effeminising domestic chores, he must renounce the ‘quintessentially feminine’ attributes of sensitivity, empathy and tenderness towards his children in order to realign his masculinity with normative expectations. The children sense this internal conflict and silently agree among themselves that ‘[h]e couldn’t have it both ways. He’d put himself on the outside and there they’d make him stay’ (TD 11). The conflict over his own masculinity which causes his changeable behaviour with his children further locks him into a negative cycle of distance and coldness with them too, until the unacknowledged hurt over the withdrawal of their love spills over into the brutal conflict with Joan.

However, the space The Dark creates which allows the reader to view Mahoney a little more sympathetically remains radically undercut by the horrifying display of violence at the outset of the novel. In the opening scene, Mahoney punishes his son for using the ‘profane’ word ‘F-U-C-K’ by simulating a beating of his naked body with a leather strap (TD 7):

“No, Daddy, no. I didn’t mean,” he gave one last whimper but he had to lie in the chair, lie there and wait as a broken animal. Something in him snapped. He couldn’t control his water and it flowed from him over the leather of the seat. He’d never imagined horror such as this, waiting naked for the leather to come down on his flesh, would it ever come, it was impossible and nothing could be much worse than this waiting. (TD 9)

The violence here is twofold: the threat of physical pain and psychological terror. Mahoney deliberately humiliates his son, forcing the boy to strip himself naked to receive his own beating and placing him stretched out on an armchair in his sisters’
room with the warning: ‘[t]his’ll have to be witnessed’ (*TD* 8). The boy has been placed upon a stage to be ridiculed, humiliated, and made an example out of in front of an audience; a spectacle of punishment. The boy is so terrified he cannot even finish the sentence that might grant him clemency: ‘I didn’t mean’. Denis Sampson argues that:

> The physical and psychological violence unleashed by the father in the guise of a moral custodian “to teach a lesson” quickly reduces both father and son to involuntary states of being below the level of conscious thought. [...] The central image in this opening scene is of articulate consciousness overwhelmed by visceral experience [...].

Sampson’s description of Mahoney as masquerading ‘in the guise of a moral custodian’ is significant as it hints once more at the integral element of performance that accompanies (hyper)masculine actions. Mahoney’s choice of ‘profane’ to describe the swear word deliberately equates his son’s utterance with an irrereligious one, as ‘profane’ connotes and derives from the act of ‘desecrating what is holy’. Yet, this reason is never referred to again; the father repeatedly mentions the need to ‘teach a lesson’ without citing the crime, indicating that his moral stance was merely a pretext. The scene centres on Mahoney exerting his authority rather than the boy’s offence; he watches the boy strip ‘as if the stripping by his will alone gave him pleasure’ and summons his daughters to witness a demonstration of his power rather than a punishment. Whilst Sampson rightly argues that the boy is depicted as ‘below the level of conscious thought’ – a ‘broken animal’ who has lost control of his bodily functions and speech – I would suggest that Mahoney is not. His passion is described as ‘measured’, indicating a significant degree of control in his actions (*TD* 8-9).

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A parallel thus emerges between the patriarchal use of Catholic doctrine to control identity with O’Brien’s *The Country Girls*. The boy is as shamed and humiliated by his father’s gaze on his naked body as Caithleen is by Mr Gentleman, the fundamental difference being that the boy *is* a child and Caithleen is reduced to being *childlike*. Read in this context, there is a basis for arguing that female identity is never allowed to progress beyond that of a child’s, constantly eroded and returned to childhood by shame. June Price Tangney argues that ‘severely punitive parenting practices may engender in children feelings of helplessness and self-blame, which may then lead to a globalised sense of shame’. For the boy, this humiliation as a child foregrounds his self-loathing as an adolescent. Sampson’s description of ‘articulate consciousness overwhelmed by visceral experience’ is one I shall revisit as I contend this produces somatic shame in the boy, who is unable to come to terms with or explain this phenomenon. Nevertheless, Mahoney’s actions in this scene support Holland’s previous analysis. He borrows the discourse of sin and punishment from the Catholic church in order to terrorise his children. Mahoney’s need for witnesses and a stage is prophetic, and mirrors the language he later uses to express his feelings of disempowerment in the extract cited at the outset of this chapter. By juxtaposing these scenes, it becomes clear that setting, staging and performance are deeply engrained in Mahoney’s psyche. His choice to align himself with the powerfully patriarchal institutions of church and education seems far from coincidental. In this moment his borrowed rhetoric simultaneously lends him the weight and authority of those bodies.

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Whilst Reegan and Moran remarry to circumvent the need to “mother” their children, this does not resolve all of the challenges that fatherhood poses to hegemonic masculinity. Segal comments that:

>[f]atherhood may yield men new confirmation of their importance to, or power over, women and children. Yet it also brings with it many new vulnerabilities – feelings of shame and inadequacy for those men who may lack the capacity to support their families in the desired style.\(^{208}\)

This argument is typified by these two men. Both feel the need to dominate their wives and children, partly through co-opted religious rituals which serve to reinforce patriarchal hierarchy. However, as Holland theorises, this near total control is not enough to alleviate their financial insecurities. Reegan becomes so obsessed with planting and cutting turf in his allotments to earn some extra money that he overworks his children whilst his wife is in hospital:

>They were left with no energy to face their lessons and got into trouble at school the next day. Their faces began to shut, a mask on the weariness and bitterness, they laughed little [...]. Reegan saw nothing. All he saw was the turf saved [...]. He had nothing to say to Elizabeth. He hoped she’d be home soon and then he had to fill the pages with gossip. [...] This letter didn’t rouse anything, except his dislike of intimacy [...]. (TB 126-127)

Reegan, conditioned and shaped by masculinist cultural expectations which he expresses as a ‘dislike of intimacy’, is blind to the needs of his children. He cannot read the exhaustion in their faces, nor their growing emotional distance to him. Neither can he summon the emotional literacy necessary to support his wife, Elizabeth, in hospital – he never visits, rarely writes and feels no attachment to her in the letters he does send. He fills the letter with stereotypically feminine content such as ‘gossip’ but puts nothing of his own fears, hopes or expectations in it. Interestingly, the history of the word ‘gossip’ reflects the increasingly narrowly prescribed gender roles in Western society. Throughout the Middle Ages it meant a

\(^{208}\) Segal, *Slow Motion*, p. 43.
‘familiar acquaintance, friend’ which was ‘formerly applied to both sexes, now only […] to women’, yet has become synonymous with ‘idle talk; trifling or groundless rumour; tittle-tattle’. Though ‘gossiping’ has acquired a negative connotation, the subject(s) of gossip can only be obtained through conversation and social interaction. That Reegan is in possession of this news indicates that on some level he has been engaging with other people and therefore craves emotional bonds with his peers, yet justifies this perceived weakness by distancing himself from it and dismissing it as feminine news to keep Elizabeth entertained.

Despite these glimmers of social bonding, Reegan remains largely closed off and tunnel-visioned in his pursuit of extra income:

All he wanted was money. If he had enough money he could kick the job into their teeth and go. He’d almost scraped enough together for that as it was but now Elizabeth was ill. He should have gone while he was still single; but he’d not give up – […] every year he made more money out of the turf and this year he’d rented more turf banks than ever […]. He was growing old and he had never been his own boss. (TB 109-110)

What Reegan articulates, contrary to Segal’s theorisation, is the desire not to earn money for his family but for himself. Consistent with his belief that his wife and children are burdensome, he regards Elizabeth’s (terminal) illness as a financial strain which will further bind him to the village and his job as a policeman. Reegan’s desire for money chimes precisely with his postcolonial frustrations: his belief that Ireland would prosper alongside his career has amounted nothing, as has his expectations for financial gain within the system. Although drawing validation from exercising the power that having a wife and children bestow him, he does not feel the accompanying obligation that Segal describes. Reegan is presented as frustrated and marginalised, yet exceptionally selfish.

Moran draws similar validation from wielding power over his wife and children through the micro-management of their daily lives and is correspondingly preoccupied with his family’s finances. However, unlike Reegan, he is unwilling to make money under any circumstances; Moran refuses to accept the Irish Republican Army pension he is owed due to his powerful feelings of disillusionment with post-independence Ireland. Whilst his refusal to accept money proffered by a source he regards as unethical can be viewed as principled, it is also, as McQuaid points out, selfish as the money ‘would buy something for the girls, or put someone through school even if you didn’t want to take it for yourself’ (AW 20). It would have funded the university place that Sheila so desperately wanted and that Moran denied her. Regardless of the source of Moran’s discomfit with money, the effect is the same on his family as Reegan’s; Moran’s stubborn, even selfish, pride means that the whole family suffers.

The uncompromising paradox that McGahern presents in his early works, in which Irish fathers struggle (and ultimately fail) to resolve hypermasculine demands with tender familial bonds, appears to be troubled – and to some extent subverted – in John Quinn, a character from McGahern’s last novel That They May Face The Rising Sun (2002). Quinn is a father of eight who, after his first wife dies, becomes their sole carer. However, unlike Reegan, Moran or Mahoney, Quinn successfully adapts to meet his domestic demands despite having a much larger family. Jamesie, the village gossip, describes how Quinn:

turned himself into a middling cook after the mother died and had always a pot of something tasty bubbling by the fire. The children were all strong and good-looking, wonderful workers, and John showered them with praise so they’d try and outdo one another. Naturally he
didn’t forget himself when handing the praise around and he learned to sew and cobble.\textsuperscript{210}

The contrast between John Quinn’s style of parenting to the patriarchs previously examined is immediately striking. Whereas the others constantly insult or undermine their children in order to bolster their own fragile self-esteem, John Quinn showers his children with praise. This appears to have an impact on their health; whereas McGahern depicts Reegan’s children as having no energy and Mahoney’s children growing numb in the rain, Quinn’s children are ‘strong and good-looking, wonderful workers’ (\textit{TB} 127). Moreover, whilst his cooking is initially described as ‘middling’, this assessment is quickly adjusted to ‘tasty’ which implies that John Quinn actually possess above average skills; Jamesie’s reluctance to attribute this proficiency to him may be in part down to the unconventionality of a good male cook, or Jamesie’s personal dislike of Quinn which I shall explore momentarily. Quinn also acquires stereotypically feminine skills which McGahern’s other father figures are never presented as having (inferentially, because they would never consider performing an action \textit{that} feminine): he learns to sew.

Additionally, unlike the fathers examined thus far, Quinn openly and unashamedly loves his children. The local teacher, ‘a Missus Kilboy’, is described as ‘a terror with cane’ who once beat Quinn’s two youngest daughters until ‘their hands were so swollen they weren’t able to hold their spoons to eat the [sic] dinner’ (\textit{TRS} 32-33). Even Jamesie, who dislikes Quinn, is forced to express admiration regarding Quinn’s response; whereas other ‘[p]eople were afraid to speak out’, John Quinn openly confronts the teacher whilst her class look on (\textit{TRS} 32):

\textsuperscript{210} John McGahern, \textit{That They May Face The Rising Sun} [2002] (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 32. All further references will be cited as \textit{TRS} in parentheses.
Now, Mistress, if this ever happens again I’m afraid it’ll go a lot further than this and it could be that when the courts are finished with the case you could be looking for another position. That’d be a pity in a small place like this where everybody is happy and getting on well together. It can bring in bad feelings between people. And sometimes these are hard to forget. Now my pair of little girls are coming back to school tomorrow and nothing like this must ever happen again. (TRS 33)

Although John Quinn is not well educated – reflected in his non-standard grammatical constructions – he deals with Miss Kilboy in a subtle yet undeniably intimidating manner. He goes beyond threatening her with legal action and speaks not only as if his suing of her is predetermined but also that his victory is inevitable. His comment that ‘it would be a shame in a place like this’ may initially seem pacifying or de-escalatory. However, that too contains its own veiled threat. Quinn reminds her that in a small village gossip can spread far, fast, and enduringly – the fact that Jamesie appears to recollect this incident with clarity many years later stands testament to the truth of Quinn’s implication. If the teacher should acquire a bad reputation, the inference is that this will follow her throughout her career unless she relocates. This reading is further supported in Quinn’s decision to ensure that his warning is observed by the other children; not only have they witnessed her humiliation in being publicly admonished, but they will also presumably carry this message home to their parents and – now that one parent has had the bravery to speak out – more will likely follow suit. Her ability to harm Quinn’s children is critically weakened, and the manner of his confrontation has likely ensured that the other children will consequentially be treated better.

This is not to say that John Quinn is a modern man free from the pressures of hypermasculinity. His style of parenting – whilst producing healthier and, implicitly, happier children than Reegan, Moran, or Mahoney – is not free from self-interest. Quinn’s habit of pouring praise upon those who have pleased him encourages the
children to ‘try and outdo one another’ in competition for his affection. In this regard, he proves far more effective in inserting himself at the centre of the family than Moran and Mahoney, whose incessant discouragement of their children produces regular displays of sibling unity. Quinn inverses this dynamic and inserts himself as a powerful source of positivity in their lives, which encourages them to supplant each other for extended time in the spotlight.

Arguably, Quinn is free to express more stereotypically feminine emotions and perform quintessentially female tasks because he has thoroughly (over)compensated in other areas. His propensity to counterbalance masculine and feminine traits is foregrounded above: he acquires the masculine skill of cobbling as well as the feminine art of sewing, a combination which creates a gender neutral impression of needing be economical when raising eight children alone. Moreover, Jamesie’s stories of Quinn’s benevolent disposition as a father are preceded by one which details his brutality as a husband. Jamesie recounts how Quinn married his first wife and mother of his children, Margaret, and explains that he selected her purely because of her wealth and land. After a short and aggressive courtship, they marry. However, before she can return to her family home for the wedding reception, Quinn takes her to one side and rapes her in front of the entire wedding party:

It was over before anybody rightly knew. He lifted her blue dress up over her head and put her down on the blanket. The screech she let out would put your heart crossways. John Quinn stood between her and the house while he was fixing his trousers and belt. […] The mother and father stood there like a pair of ghosts. Not a word was spoken (TRS 30).

Quinn’s public and violent assault of his new wife is a blatant power play. Jamesie explains that ‘[i]n those days when a man married into a house he had little shout’ and that by behaving thus ‘he was showing who was going to be boss […] from that
day out’ (TRS 31). Quinn’s brutal behaviour appears to continue beyond this one act; Jamesie recalls how there were rumours that ‘he didn’t let Margaret wear knickers in the house so he could do her there and then whenever he wanted, against the table or the wall and all the better if it was in front of the old pair’ (TRS 31). Quinn utilises patriarchal discourse to the utmost to claim the maximum amount of power for himself. Paternal lore, which was previously enshrined in law, states that women are the property of their father until they married, at which point they become the property of their husbands. Quinn chooses to take this literally, publicly raping his wife in front of their friends and family to simultaneously demonstrate his newfound and total power over her, and her father’s corresponding powerlessness. If the rumours are true and this behaviour continued (and Quinn’s first act indicates that this is in line with his character) then his repeated rape of his wife in front of her parents continually re-establishes his dominance over her, and by extension, them.

Though shocked and appalled by Quinn’s behaviour, Jamesie nevertheless contributes to the discourse which sanctions it. His description of Quinn’s assault as “doing” Margaret is both euphemistic and disrespectful. Whilst Jamesie arguably employs the phrase to soften the horror of the story, it nevertheless functions to downgrade the severity of the assault by positioning the act as consensual sex rather than rape. The phrase also operates in the “laddish”, hypermasculine discourse used to describe sex, which contains the latent asymmetrical power structures that states that men own women and which draws on the stereotypes of active men and passive women: men ‘do’ women, and women are ‘done’ by men. The verb ‘do’ is most commonly associated with an activity, which rhetorically lowers Margaret to the status of object rather than subject. Though ostensibly disavowing Quinn’s patriarchal politics, Jamesie’s choice of words dehumanises Margaret and refreshes
the discourses used to subdue her. The object of Quinn’s power play and then an object in Jamesie’s tale, Margaret never achieves the status of subject.

Following these preliminary tales which outline both the best and worst of Quinn’s character, Quinn behaves in a manner comparable to McGahern’s other father figures. He manipulates Catholic doctrine to serve his own ends every bit as much as Moran and Mahoney. Quinn is presented as a man constantly in search of both marriage and sex, which he brazenly justifies to his neighbours by citing the constant refrain: ‘The Lord God has said in the Holy Book “Tis not good for a man to live alone,” and I have always taken that Commandment to heart’ (TRS 23). He repeats this exhortation in nearly every dialogue he participates in, defending his choice to take a second and third wife before eventually seeking out a fourth in the novel’s closing stages. Although his first wife dies, the second and third leave him soon after the marriage takes place and succeed, to varying degrees, in thwarting his intention to claim their wealth and land. When Rutledge asks Quinn what he means when he said the second marriage was not a success, Quinn replies that ‘[w]hat God intended men and women to do she said no taste for. What was meant to be happy and natural was for her a penance’ (TRS 24). Though Quinn cites these pieties regularly, the only Commandments he prizes are those which he reads as condoning his voracious sexual appetite and quest for wealthy women.

Given that these endeavours are largely unsuccessful and embarrassing, Eamonn Hughes argues that John Quinn is not so much bad as sad:

John Quinn’s brutal lust is offset by the fact that the main episodes dealing with him are in fact about his sexual frustration. He may have used public marital rape to dominate his first wife […] but his second and third wives leave him and he appears most often in the text as a
man in search of sex or, perhaps as important to him, of what he regards as his rightful share of his wives’ property.\textsuperscript{211}

Hughes is correct in the chronology of his assertion, but not, I would argue, in his assessment of their significance. His use of the word ‘offset’ seems to function as a synonym for ‘mitigated’, and that somehow the callousness with which Quinn treats his first wife is partially annulled by the fact that the actions of his subsequent wives make him look pathetic. Hughes’ evaluation judges Quinn’s actions by their outcomes rather than their motives. The ruthlessness with which Quinn chooses his subsequent wives mirrors that of his first: he selects women who have land and money which he believes he can commandeer through marriage. Though ultimately outmanoeuvred by women cleverer than he is, the reader can safely presume that, had Quinn been given the chance, he would have treated these women with equal cruelty. Though Jamesie has not had a chance to recount the story of Quinn’s first wife to Ruttledge (and therefore the reader) when he is first introduced, Quinn’s comment that his second wife ‘[had no taste for] [w]hat God intended men and women to do’ is retrospectively transformed in light of Jamesie’s story regarding the repeated raping of his first wife, and appears to be a tacit admission that his second wife found his sexual behaviour unacceptable (\textit{TRS 24}). Had Quinn’s subsequent wives not successfully placed themselves beyond his grasp, Hughes’ assessment that Quinn is more sad than bad would be without foundation; given the chance, Quinn would have repeated his previous patterns of behaviour.

Though his mercenary masquerade fails to fool anyone, it does successfully save him from the open censure of his neighbours. Kate and Ruttledge may be sickened by Quinn’s subsequent request for them to find him a wife once he tells

\textsuperscript{211} Eamonn Hughes, ‘Time, Sex and Death in ‘That They May Face The Rising Sun”, \textit{Irish University Review}, 35.1 (2005), p. 159.
them his second wife has absconded, but neither says so openly. Kate removes herself from the situation because she ‘couldn’t bear to be in the same room with him’ (*TRS* 25). Quinn bats away her tacit criticism with the comment: ‘I put my cards on the table. There’s nothing underhand about the way I do business’ (*TRS* 24). He thus manipulates her unspoken disapproval to imply that her feminine sensibilities have been offended and that she cannot operate in the masculine world of business and transaction, especially when sex is the service being exchanged. Ruttledge also fails to comment on the situation, allowing Quinn to think that they will discuss it as a couple before telling Kate after his departure that ‘we’ll do nothing’ (*TRS* 25). Even Jamesie, who strongly dislikes Quinn, chooses inaction over confrontation; when Ruttledge asks how to deal with him, Jamesie simply replies: ‘You don’t’ (*TRS* 25). By failing to condemn him openly, all of them unwittingly contribute to the wall of silence that Quinn chooses to interpret as approval. Indeed, the village’s collective inaction is reminiscent of Quinn’s threat to the school mistress that it would ‘be a pity in a small place like this where everybody is happy and getting on well together’ if there was a quarrel (*TRS* 33). Quinn’s bullish and brazen manner softened with trite pieties successfully ensures that, despite his love of his children and good care of them, he is actually one of McGahern’s most disturbing hypermasculine figures.

**Competing Masculinities, Competitive Men**

The picture of masculinity that emerges in this chapter disrupts the homogeny seen earlier in this thesis. What seemed like ‘the unholy Trinitarian alliance between domestic fathers, institutional patriarchy and the church’ that oppressed women,
fractures when analysing the pressures brought to bear upon men’s gender
behaviour. This observation, Connell argues, is insufficient:

To recognise diversity in masculinities is not enough. We must also
recognise the relations between the different kinds of masculinity:
relations of alliance, dominance and subordination. These relationships
are constructed through practices that include and exclude, that
intimidate and exploit.

I would add that the aspect of alliance which is prioritised is altered depending on the
relations between the subjects. When analysing the matrix of patriarchal power from
the perspective of female and adolescent protagonists, the ‘unholy alliance’ between
domestic fathers, institutional patriarchy and the church identified by Holland is
imperative owing to the imbalance of power between male and female subjects. In
other words, whether intentionally or not, most of the male characters scrutinised so
far cooperate to suppress or at least manipulate female subjects using overt shaming
mechanisms built into the patriarchal systems – particularly, but not exclusively,
Catholic doctrine. As has already been examined, Mahoney spouts ‘nonsense
rhetoric’ by seizing on Joan’s use of the word ‘always’ in order to (re)assert his
frustrated authority over his children (TD 35).

Moran also appropriates Catholic ritual to serve his own ends; the nightly
rosary prayer reinforces his dominance in and over the house. He cites Father
Peyton’s popular idiom ‘the family that prays together stays together’ when meeting
his daughter Mona’s new boyfriend Mark, presumably to give the impression of
humble devoutness (AW 137). In practice, the prayer demonstrates and strengthens
the power dynamics within the family as each Mystery is spoken by a different
family member in a hierarchical structure according to age and importance (Moran,

212 Siobhán Holland, ‘Re-citing the Rosary: Women, Catholicism and Agency in Brian Moore’s Cold
Heaven and John McGahern’s Amongst Women’, in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes
213 Connell, Masculinities, p. 37.
Rose, eldest to youngest child). Quinn argues that the hierarchical nature of the prayer lends itself to the expression of patriarchal as much as religious power:

The internal structure of this prayer, the Creed with which it opens, the ‘Our Father’ and ‘Glory be to God the Father’ that enclose each decade, emphasize Divine fatherhood. Though the Rosary repeatedly pronounces Mary as ‘blessed … amongst women,’ because she was chosen to be the mother of Christ, in the Moran household, the character, blessed amongst women, is Moran himself. So the paternal symbolically ousts the maternal. Ironically, the misogynistic Moran pays daily lip service to motherhood. [...] The Rosary is peculiarly identified with Moran, an economical, realist device for connecting Catholicism, patrocentrism [sic], and the mesmeric rhythms of shared family experience.  

Quinn identifies the novel’s title Amongst Women as drawing on the Catholic ‘Ave Maria’ prayer: ‘Hail Mary, full of grace […] Blessed art thou among women’. With such an obvious allusion, the novel ironically poses the question: Who is blessed among these women? The answer of course is, as Quinn states, Moran himself. This (re)assurance is something that requires the women’s constant repetition as he relentlessly asks ‘Who cares anyhow?’ in order to extort the desired reply: ‘We care. We care very much. We love you’ (AW 4). By co-opting and transforming this nightly prayer to the Mother into an articulation of patriarchal authority, Moran supplants the maternal with the paternal. Indeed, such is the force of the paternal in their lives that there is no mention made of their absent mother throughout the entire novel; nor do the children ever bestow this title on their step-mother, Rose. The role of the mother is symbolically, metaphorically and verbally defunct as Moran not only co-opts the power of the maternal in Catholicism, he supplants and subordinates it.

The hierarchical nature of the rosary has one further purpose not identified by Quinn: that of reminding guests of their status as outsiders. This secondary function is brought to prominence when Maggie’s boyfriend, Mark, does not know the words

214 Quinn, ‘A Prayer For My Daughters’, p. 86.
to his allotted Mystery. This causes an awkward pause which Maggie attempts to cover by providing the words to the forgotten refrain, but the unspoken question “what kind of family does this boy come from?” rings uncomfortably loudly through the silent room when Moran raises an eyebrow at the mistake. Ahmed argues that this function of ritual is far from accidental as ‘the stranger functions […] to establish and define the ‘I’. This ‘I’ translates swiftly into a ‘we’.” Moran has again appropriated the Catholic ritual of reciting the rosary to achieve one further end: Mark’s mistake has clearly demarcated him as “other” which reifies Moran’s position as the ‘I’ which forms the eye of the family. This quickly becomes the ‘we’ of the family when the uncomfortable silence reigns despite Maggie’s attempt to mask the error – the ‘we’ of the family coalesces around this ritual: we are “good” Catholics, we know these Catholic refrains and you, the outsider, do not. In this instance, Catholic and patriarchal discourse sit in alliance to crystallise the patricentric hierarchy of the family.

However, the tidy system of alliance between Church, State and patriarchy working to promote Irish, Catholic values becomes much less cohesive when these ultimately separate discourses are set in competition or conflict with one another. The root of struggle partially lies in Mac an Ghail and Haywood’s argument discussed previously that the term ‘patriarchy’ is far from the hegemonic, unified ideal often presented because ‘relations [of power] are multidimensional and differentially experienced and responded to within specific historical contexts and social locations’.

The desire for the dominant order to present a cohesive ideal is set against the reality of multifaceted performances of that paradigm. This is something that Connell comes to acknowledge, and softens his earlier theorisation:

216 Mac an Ghail, Contemporary Masculinities and Femininities, p. 24.
Part of the struggle for hegemony in the gender order is the use of culture for such disciplinary purposes: setting standards, claiming popular assent and discrediting those who fall short. The production of *exemplary masculinities* is thus integral to the politics of hegemonic masculinity.\(^\text{217}\)

Connell’s assessment lays the foundation for what I wish to examine. The cultural force disciplining Irish subjects in McGahern and O’Brien’s works is almost universally the Catholic Church, which claimed (and largely had) popular assent from Irish citizens. However, the latent competition between masculinities that I wish to explore resides in the production of ‘exemplary masculinities’ promulgated by both Church and State which have thus far have been shown to work more or less cooperatively: the ideal of the Priest and the domestic father.

The desire to tightly control the behaviour of women is, I argue, the sum total of what these paradigms have in common. The values venerated by the priesthood are (besides a fervent faith in God) scholarliness, abstinence and temperance. In contrast, the values most prized by hypermasculinity are virility and fertility. Moreover, given that in McGahern and O’Brien’s novels the Irish father is most often depicted as a farmer, the values that become conflated with the father figure are strength, practicality and common sense. These sets of values are virtually direct opposites of each other and, when they come into contact or conflict, are largely incompatible. The domestic fathers examined previously all express feelings of latent shame from a position of seemingly total autocratic power as a patriarch, indicating a higher shaming power at work and a social obligation to adhere to standards beyond the parameters they set out for themselves and their family. In short, they articulate an awareness of hierarchical masculine structures which, despite their socially privileged statuses as father, they do not ultimately sit atop of. Though Moran and

\(^{217}\) Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 214 [my emphasis].
Mahoney both borrow the language of the Catholic Church to bolster (and, I contend, masculinise) their position as domestic fathers, when directly confronted with a priest Mahoney is forced to concede to the priest’s greater social authority.

The tension and competition for dominance in the exercise of power is seen most clearly in McGahern’s *The Dark*. Mahoney’s cousin, Father Gerald, visits the family every year. Mahoney dislikes the visits because, family or not, Father Gerald wields the power of the clergy and must be shown deference. Mahoney must ensure that there is ‘an appearance of a welcome’ by using the best china, killing a hen and ensuring that there is always a large fire burning in the grate – all expensive gestures (*TD* 24). One autumn, Mahoney and Father Gerald begin to wrestle over Mahoney’s son’s future. Mahoney appears to have the same enthusiasm regarding his children’s academic success as Moran. When Father Gerald asks the boy what he wants to ‘be in the world’, the boy tries to sidestep an ensuing conflict by diplomatically replying: ‘Whatever I’m let be’ (*TD* 24). This pleases Mahoney, who immediately asserts that ‘[h]e’ll be like me I suppose. He’ll wear out his bones on the few acres around this house and be buried at the end of the road’, followed up with the assessment that if his son is ‘not buried for love’s sake [he]’ll be buried for the stink’s sake’ (*TD* 25). This is, by any standard, a rather bleak assessment of a life and provides Father Gerald with a wide opening to suggest (though, given his status, we may read assert) that, as head of his class, the boy has an opportunity to become a priest. Mahoney, owing to ‘his fear of a priest’s power’, is unable to shut down the possibility once it has been raised; the boy promptly wins a scholarship to the Brother’s College, though there ‘wasn’t much rejoicing’ from Mahoney over the news (*TD* 24-25).
This episode sets up a permanent and increasingly passionate feud between father and son. Though Sheila yields to Moran’s pressure in *Amongst Women* and declines her university place, the boy – with the explicit backing of a priest – withstands his father’s disapproval and studies tirelessly for a second scholarship which will pay for his university tuition. Mahoney, bitter that he was unable to continue with his own education despite claiming to be ‘head of [his] class once’, mocks any attempt his son makes to study (*TD* 25). Mahoney repeatedly asserts that his son will never get a job with his qualifications and continually undermines the boy’s self-esteem: ‘You’ll probably wind up with nothing in the heel of the hunt anyhow’ (*TD* 125). Mahoney further antagonises the situation by saying that, regardless of the boy’s final grade, he will not be offered a place at university because ‘the marks can be fiddled if you’ve got the pull’ (*TD* 125). Mahoney’s attack is double-edged: he demoralises the boy’s confidence in his own ability, and cements that doubt by arguing that even if his eventual grade is passable, he does not have enough social leverage to qualify for a second scholarship. Mahoney’s assertion that wealth and rank count for more than natural ability is reminiscent of Moran’s quip that to succeed you need to ‘know the right people’; that both of these insecure patriarchs draw on the same excuse to simultaneously justify their own liminality and undermine their children’s self-esteem indicates a parallel in their underlying psychological make-up (*AW* 6).

Mahoney’s determined dismissal of his son’s chances corrodes the boy’s sense of identity, producing a sense of self-contempt caused by shame. Tomkins posits that:

> in later childhood and adolescence […] the individual experiences more and more shame because he cannot compete successfully with his peers. […] [H]is image of himself becomes more and more clear and
stable – he is an inferior person. [...] By now the distress-contempt-shame complex has been reinterpreted and much amplified [...] strengthening the image of the self as inferior.218

Such a pattern has already been traced. Mahoney continually dismisses his son’s ability, strengthening the boy’s own fears that he is not good enough until he suffers a similar paralysis of will before his exams that Caithleen does under the eye of Mr Gentleman (TD 141). However, his transition into adolescence means that this paralysis is not insuperable. Whereas, as a woman, Caithleen never progresses beyond patriarchal humiliation, the boy is no longer a child. His identity evolves beyond patriarchal shame and assumes an agency denied to both Caithleen Brady and Sheila Moran— he successfully passes his exams and moves beyond the reach of his father’s shaming gaze.

Though the boy defies his father’s attempts to prevent him from attending university and force him to become a farmer, he also turns his back on the priesthood. The Dark is the novel in both authors’ oeuvre that most explicitly explores the conflict between Catholic doctrine and the lived body. The boy is, like Caithleen, subject to a crippling shame complex produced by his inability to resolve Catholic teaching on the body with his own somatic impulses. The shame attached to the body and the expression of sexual desire makes Catholicism as deeply a malignant force in his life as Caithleen’s. He experiences a constant battle between bodily urges and the will to restrain until, as Sampson phrased it earlier, articulate reasoning becomes overwhelmed by visceral experience:

Five sins already today, filthiness spilling five times, but did it matter, the first sin was as damning as a hundred and one, but five sins a day made thirty-five in a week, they’d not be easy to confess. [...] A shudder started at what the priest would say. (TD 31)

218 Tomkins, Shame and Its Sisters, pp. 123-124.
The boy’s distress is palpable; the breakdown of grammatical structure and sense mirrors the boy’s disintegration under his own self-loathing until the pace is slowed by the final sentence. This sentence stands alone in the text, giving it emphasis on the page as the boy dwells on his coming shame at confession. His numerical focus reveals not only his preoccupation with enumerating his sins, but also the way they are multiplying and spiralling in his own mind. Michael Warner contends that:

[when a given sexual norm has such deep layers of sedimentation, or blankets enough territory to seem universal, the effort of wriggling out from under it can be enormous. The burden becomes even heavier when one must first overcome shame, or break with a tacit force of sexual morality that other people take to be obvious.]

Shame, as Tomkins has already posited, is not designed to be easily overcome:

The monopolistic growth of shame and self-contempt is produced by the compounding of shame and self-contempt. When the child feels ashamed and discouraged after failure, his shame is increased by heaping shame and contempt upon shame.

This symbiotically destructive pattern is evident in the boy, who feels this perceived failure even more acutely due to his contemplation of entering the priesthood. He embarks upon self-defeating cycle of restraint, masturbation (produced by ‘a simple fit of boredom or unhappiness’) and ashamed self-contempt until he feels ‘haunted by the repeated hypocrisy of [his] life, anguish of the struggle towards repeated failure’ (TD 53-54). He perfectly enacts Tomkins’ theorisation of a self-contemptuous expression of shame by compounding his initial guilt at failing by loathing himself and adding shame to shame. The boy’s inability to overcome his malignant sexual shame is, as Warner posits, because the Catholic dictums surrounding sexual behaviour are so ossified that for him to even to contemplate confessing that he has contravened them is enough to induce near panic. Patriarchy and Catholicism instil a harrowing shame complex in the boy. His failure to satisfy

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219 Warner, Trouble With Normal, p. 6.
220 Tomkins, Shame and Its Sisters, p. 173.
his father’s patriarchal expectations and subsequent bullying engenders the unhappiness which provokes the masturbation, which in turn produces shame at having failed to adhere to Catholic doctrine. The boy’s behaviour also marks another characteristic mechanism in communal sanctioning of behaviour through shaming tactics that Lewis identified in the introduction of this thesis: the boy has transitioned from regulation from a priest to attempted self-regulation.

The malignancy of Catholicism in the boy’s life is compounded by his profound attraction to it, expressed not only in his consideration of the priesthood but also the euphoria he feels after confession: ‘[s]uch relief had come to you, fear and darkness gone, never would you sin again. The pleasures seemed so mean and grimy against the sheer delight of peace’ (TD 42). The dirty, shameful view of the body seen in The Country Girls trilogy is also expressed by the boy: bodily pleasure is viewed as ‘grimy’ (echoing the ‘filthiness’ of masturbation) against the purity of being cleansed in confession. This merely serves to more deeply inscribe his sense of failure; there can only be a negative trajectory of sin and guilt before his next visit, sullying the purity. This is something the boy comes to dread: ‘No ecstasy after confession anymore. […] How long would it last, a month or a week or days? […] [He’d] no control over [his] lusts’ (TD 54). In an attempt to break the vicious cycle of self-hatred, the boy starts to reject the ritual. Michel Foucault argues that the very act of confession is itself a way of inscribing shame in confessors:

The obligation to confess is now […] so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, “demands” only to surface […]. The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship for one does not confess without the presence […] of a partner is not simply an interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes
and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile [...] 221

The compulsion to confess entails the ‘speaking subject’ to judge itself guilty and beg for forgiveness, a process which reinforces the power imbalance between judge and pennant. The words ‘confession’, ‘penance’ and ‘punishment’ are inherently loaded concepts, connoting not only ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ but also power – the powerlessness of requiring clemency and the power to grant it. Such is the deeply ingrained nature of the confession ritual in the boy’s psyche that he neither queries its role or purpose, nor the legitimacy of the dictums passed on his body. He unquestioningly assimilates this discourse and hates himself with increasing vehemence for failing, which further serves to produce a shame complex through humiliation. The relationship between confessor and the priest is one in which the terms patriarchal terms ‘father’ and ‘child’ are also applied. However, this terminology temporarily renders explicit the conflict and hierarchy between patriarchy and Catholicism, for even the most tyrannical and powerful of patriarchal fathers must attend confession and be labelled as (and demoted to) a ‘child’.

Unlike McGahern’s other novels – in which it is clear that the citation of Catholic doctrine in the house is designed merely to complement patriarchal control – the competition between patriarchy and Catholicism for control of the boy in The Dark may initially appear inconclusive. The boy leans on the authority of a priest to defy his father and apply for a scholarship to sit his final exams to subsequently turn his back on the priesthood and apply to university. Only in the novel’s closing moments do we see any resolution to this tension as the boy appears grow into his masculine authority. In the intervening period between sitting his exams and receiving the results, he assists Mahoney on the farm:

221 Foucault, Will To Knowledge, pp. 60-62.
There was the delight of power and ease in every muscle now, he’d grown fit and hard [...]. There was a savage delight in this power and animal strength, the total unconsciousness of the night afterwards. [...] He was a man now. He was among men. He was able to take a man’s place. (TD 148-149)

Free indirect discourse allows the reader to see the increasing pleasure that the boy takes in his temporary masculine identity as a farmer. ‘Delight’ is modified to ‘savage delight’; the boy’s shifting language implies that his masculine identity is beginning to align with hegemonic patriarchy. The boy may have formerly spurned Mahoney’s displays of ‘savage’ control in favour of a priestly, and subsequently scholarly, masculine paradigm, but his position appears to have altered. The boy twice cites his gratification in power and specifically links it with ‘animal’ strength, denoting a developing affinity with the brute force he once found abhorrent in Mahoney.

Not only does the boy relish the physical dominance that manual labour has afforded his body, he seems to also enjoy other patriarchal markers. The boy speaks of the relief of ‘unconsciousness’; whilst this can be read as his respite in sleep caused by physical exhaustion compared to the broken nights that exam stress brought on, the scene seems to bestow a wider significance on the expression. The choice of the term ‘unconsciousness’ rather than ‘rest’ or ‘sleep’ denotes a lack of self-reflection or self-awareness – the boy finds relief in the ‘unconscious’ acting out of hegemonic masculinity. Given the extended tussle the boy has undertaken by resisting his father’s normative expectations for him and aligning himself first with the church and then with scholars, this new performance is arguably far from ‘unconscious’ in so far as the word connotes an ‘oblivious’ or ‘unwitting’ act – the boy has actively chosen to take on hegemonic attributes. This impression is compounded by his frequent repetition of ‘man’. His use of the word extends far
beyond an awareness of having transitioned out of puberty. The boy’s deployment of the term is laden with hegemonic connections that he previously fought so hard to loosen: that physical power is the primary marker of masculinity and the exertion of that power means to ‘take a man’s place’ in the world. His juxtaposition of hegemonic masculinity with ‘unconsciousness’ creates the most troubling implication of all: that the boy has assimilated his father’s promulgation of dominant patriarchy as ‘natural’. This alignment is apparently facilitated by the fact that this expression of masculinity is rooted in the land: whilst the boy learns how to farm, his body toughens as a consequence of the physical work. This parallel between learning (and enjoying) the rhythms of the farm and a growing physical strength encourages the boy to conflate and internalise both as ‘natural’.

The boy also appears to offer an ironic reflection on Moran’s performance of dominant masculinity. He defines (hegemonic) masculinity as being ‘among men’, which contrasts sharply to Moran who roots his expression of masculinity in being Amongst Women. Whereas the boy has been engaged in a sustained battle with his father which has resulted in a temporary truce and successful partnership between the two of them, Moran, by contrast, has rhetorically ousted and supplanted the mother: the Virgin Mary. Moran is neither literally nor symbolically ‘among men’: he interacts most often with his wife and daughters, has lost contact with his eldest son and cannot cohabit with his youngest – all of which inferentially undercuts his hegemonic performance in the boy’s eyes. For the boy, it is his father’s validation which finally renders him a man, and the validation of other men is something that Moran has never been able to win.
Whilst the boy’s newfound delight in his hypermasculine body might seem initially surprising, the possibility that the boy contains this latent identification with hegemonic masculinity is present in his earlier confrontation with Mahoney. When he steps in to shield Joan from Mahoney’s vicious attack, there is a subtle shift in the boy’s language which indicates a dormant misogyny he may not be aware he possesses:

[Mahoney] swung her around by the hair […] and she was screaming. […] Then her heels left the ground and swung, the eyes staring wide with terror out of the face, and the screaming. You couldn’t bear anymore this time. (TD 35)

In a grammatical slip parallel to Caithleen’s in Part 1 (TCG 94), the pronouns ‘her’ and ‘she’ which the boy applies to Joan shifts in the latter part of the final sentence to a generic ‘the’. The violence becomes depersonalised so that his detailing of the specific violence enacted upon Joan – ‘her […] hair’, ‘her heels, ‘she was screaming’ – is replaced by generalised violence: ‘the eyes staring wide’, ‘the face’ and ‘the screaming’. There are two possible interpretations of this slippage; the first is that as the horror of the scene escalates, the boy starts to dissociate the violence in response to the unfolding situation. This can be substantiated by the fact that the boy does not use the first person: the narrator says ‘you couldn’t bear anymore’ rather than ‘I couldn’t bear anymore’. The boy’s tendency to shift between first-, second- and third-person narration will be addressed comprehensively in the Part 3 of this thesis. However, it is worth momentarily flagging his reluctance to inhabit an active ‘I’ perspective throughout Joan’s attack, given that this encounter immediately follows one of the very few first-person chapter narrations. Michael Toolan argues that ‘[t]he use of you is also a retreat from personal culpability and responsibility […]’. To switch from I […] to you is symptomatic of a narrator’s mordant passivity and
acquiescence’. This seems an unfair summation; the boy successfully intervenes to help Joan because he ‘couldn’t bear anymore’. I would contend that his use of the unstable ‘you’ indicates the boy’s struggle to process the abuse.

Whilst I maintain that the boy’s use of the second-person is more generally a sign of dissociative trauma – a line of argument I shall explore in depth further on – my reading is undoubtedly troubled in this particular confrontation. After overpowering his father, the boy takes control of the situation: “Get her a drink of water,’ you asked and one of the girls obeyed as decisively as if you were Mahoney’ (TD 37). There are a few subtle clues that the boy’s actions and his beliefs do not quite marry. The boy states that he has ‘asked’ one of his sisters to fetch Joan a glass of water, but his use of the imperative ‘get’ signals that the has actually issued an order. Moreover, the boy refers to his sisters as ‘girls’, indicating the same merging of undifferentiated identities that Jack Holland is accused of doing in The Country Girls by Helen Thompson when referring to Caithleen as ‘the continuation of her mother’ (TCG 105). This explains why his sisters ‘obeyed’ his command – not request – ‘as decisively as if [he] were Mahoney’. Instead of being the reasonable sibling stepping in to shelter the others from endemic violence, the boy displays unwitting get increasing signs of being the young alpha male come to throw down the elder and take his place.

The final conversation between father and son appears to offer the most resounding conclusion as to the outcome of the battle between patriarchy and Catholicism in the boy’s identity. After striving so hard, revising relentlessly and endlessly fighting with his father to be allowed to go, the boy drops out of university

after a few weeks to commence a job with the Electricity Supply Board (E.S.B.).

Mahoney, relieved at his decision, comes to collect his son; the closing tableau of the novel depicts father and son returning home and reminiscing about the boy’s youth:

‘Things happened in all that time, none of us are saints. Tempers were lost. You don’t hold any of that against me, I don’t hold anything against you.’

‘No. I wouldn’t have been bought up any other way or by any other father. […] I’ll always love you too. You know that.’ (TD 191)

This exchange is surprising. It is possible to read it as a mark of maturity: in becoming an adult, the boy is able to progress beyond his adolescent angst and accept that, despite the bad times, his father loves him and worked hard to support the family. To John Cronin, the novel’s conclusion is thoroughly unconvincing:

I find this confused and unsatisfactory. The boy’s change of mood […] is neither explained on this particular occasion nor justified in terms of the previous portrayal of the character. There is inconsistency of character and incident here. […] The novelist fails utterly to justify this particular epiphany.223

It is difficult to refute Cronin’s scepticism; given the scenes of bitter rivalry, mistrust and abuse which have passed between them, it seems unlikely that the boy would adopt such a conciliatory position. There is nothing overt which appears to justify such an about change of attitude, let alone the statement that he would not have been ‘bought up […] by any other father’. The recurring scenes of violence and sexual abuse which characterise the boy’s adolescence seem to have been whitewashed from history and add to Cronin’s feeling that the scene is inconsistent with the rest of the novel. It is true that Mahoney is sensitive and supportive once the boy expresses a wish to leave university, but the boy is well aware that this is what his father has wanted all along – Mahoney is only too happy to be proven ultimately correct that university is not the right place for his son. There is, as Cronin highlights, nothing which seems to ‘justify this particular epiphany’.

Nevertheless, the scene makes more sense when viewed in terms of the boy finally succumbing to and internalising the shame complex he has been fending off throughout the novel and which comes to the fore at the university. Whilst there, the boy cannot socialise. He fails to meet a new acquaintance at the appointed hour to attend a local dance and hides in the toilets instead:

> [E]very step brought you nearer to your first dance and you wished they went in the opposite direction. [...] You crossed to the other side of the road, glad of any excuse of delay, the blood pounding at the temples, you felt you could sit all night on the lavatory bowl. The hands were trembling. [...] “You can’t face it,” the nerves shivered. (TD 176)

The boy exhibits many symptoms associated with a panic attack, which the mental health charity Mind states may include ‘a pounding heartbeat, feeling faint, sweating, nausea, [...] feeling unable to breathe, shaky limbs [...] [and] feeling like you’re not connected to your body’.\(^{224}\) The boy actually uses the word ‘pounding’ to describe the sensation of blood rushing through his temples; his hands are trembling and his nerves are so on edge they have been personified. He also demonstrates something akin to somatic disconnection; his language once again slips between the second and third person and his body is described impersonally: ‘the blood’, ‘the hands’, ‘the nerves’. This is highly characteristic of the boy in moments of acute stress, and, as has been observed throughout this thesis, shows signs of dissociative trauma.

Previously in the novel the boy had used the ‘lavatory’ to seek ‘refuge’ in the ‘comforting darkness’ to ‘grop[e] [his] way [...] back to some sort of calm’ after one of his father’s beatings (TD 10). This time the usual site of composure is insufficient to rebalance the boy’s emotional state and he succumbs to panic, avoids his acquaintance and writes to his father that he wants to leave. In Sampson’s terms, this

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\(^{224}\) Mind [https://www.mind.org.uk] [accessed 13 July 2017].
is the ultimate example of ‘articulate consciousness overwhelmed by visceral experience’, and one that the boy is ultimately unable to recover from.\textsuperscript{225} Analysing the boy’s impulse to soothe himself in the lavatory as a child, Sampson posits that:

> Individual freedom is associated with “calm” in the face of turmoil and confusion, and “comforting darkness” seems to facilitate the achievement of this freedom by reducing the boy’s vulnerability to the free play of instincts, his own and those of others, except for one – the yearning to be free of frustrating tension.\textsuperscript{226}

The change of the symbolic function of the toilet from a site of stabilisation to defeat indicates that something has fundamentally shifted within the boy’s psyche. If, as Sampson posits, the boy retreats to the ‘comforting darkness’ of the toilet to rid himself of all but the desire ‘to be free of frustrating tension’, then it is perhaps possible that the boy has realised he will never be free from these tensions and anxieties. His inability to recompose himself in his erstwhile sanctuary indicates that he has finally internalised a shame complex.

Nandy goes one step further and argues that somatic dissociation is the hallmark of a postcolonial shame complex:

> Such a splitting of one’s self, to protect one’s sanity and to ensure survival, makes the subject an object to himself and disaffiliates the violence and the humiliation he suffers […]. It is an attempt to survive by inducing in oneself a psychosomatic state which would render one’s immediate context partly dreamlike or unreal.\textsuperscript{227}

The boy exhibits certain elements of Nandy’s theorisation of postcolonial ‘splitting’. He does appear to somatically dissociate in moments of acute violence, stress and humiliation – but this is the limit of his behavioural compliance. These moments of disaffiliation appear entirely unconnected to a postcolonial context; they occur in situations in which his subjecthood is threatened or overwhelmed and are triggered

\textsuperscript{225} Sampson, \textit{Outstaring Nature’s Eye}, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{227} Nandy, \textit{The Intimate Enemy}, p. 109.
by interpersonal violence or crippling self-doubt. Whilst Mahoney might be inflicting these instances of rage and (trans-generational) humiliation due to his own postcolonial shame, the fits they inspire do not transmit this shame in the same way that Moran appears to transpose it onto his daughters. Moreover, the ‘psychosomatic state’ in which the boy secedes from his lived body do not function to sensually soften or blur his reality and do not ‘render [his] immediate context’ as ‘dreamlike’ or ‘unreal’: these moments are visceral, overwhelming, paralysing and exceptionally real to him. The boy’s experience of somatic dissociation is therefore far more reminiscent of a panic-attack than the postcolonially-induced event that Nandy theorises, indicating that his particular shame complex is unconnected to his status as a postcolonial citizen.

Even as this analysis works to partially refute Cronin’s assertion that nothing occurs to justify such a change in the boy, it does not initially explain the extent of the transformation. In order to more fully position why the boy’s internalisation of a shame complex facilitates his reconciliation with his father, it is important to return to Tomkins’ theorisation of the function of shame in conjunction with humiliation.

The individual can now be shamed by what shames another. This one in turn will have transmitted a shame he may have learned from another. [...] [T]his mechanism provides the perfect vehicle for the transmission and preservation of social norms from generation to generation.228

The boy’s a panic attack triggered by the prospect of going to a dance and dropping out of university indicates that years of patriarchal shaming have destroyed his confidence. During the intervening period between sitting his exams and starting university, the boy also discovered that within the microcosm of the family unconsciously complying with hegemonic masculinity is infinitely easier than resisting it. Thus, the boy’s internalisation of a shame complex could be seen

228 Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, p. 156.
simultaneously as an ultimate compliance with hegemonic masculinity and the transmission of patriarchal values from one generation to the next. Such a reading bridges the gap in the text that Cronin finds baffling and goes beyond explaining the boy’s reconciliation with his father; read thus, the text creates a space in which the boy not only empathises with Mahoney, he looks set to become him. This chimes with McGahern’s resolution to *Amongst Women*, in which Moran’s daughters ‘become Daddy’ after his death. In McGahern’s novels, the wheels of patriarchy – no matter how hotly contested and renegotiated by each generation and despite the competition with Catholicism – keep turning: assimilated and embedded in male and female subjectivities alike.
Part 3: Comparing Bodies, Competing Bodies
The (In)equality of Sexual Abuse

An empty place, […] the knowing part of her body getting separated from what was happening down there. It does not hurt if you say it does not hurt. It does not hurt if you are not you. […] Nothing ever the same again and a feeling as of having half-died.

*Down by the River*

The old horror as hands were put about him and the other face closed on his […] [H]ands drew him closer. They began to move in caress on the back, shoving up the nightshirt, downwards lightly to the thighs and heavily up again, the voice echoing rhythmically the movement of the hands.

*The Dark*

Edna O’Brien’s Mary MacNamara in *Down by the River* and John McGahern’s boy in *The Dark* are both sexually abused by their fathers, though in different contexts and to different degrees. Mary is repeatedly raped by her father throughout her adolescence and eventually becomes pregnant as a result of one of his assaults.

Developing the tendency seen in Part 1 of this thesis for men to view women’s bodies as currency in the rural economy, Mary’s father appears to have fully internalised these attitudes and demonstrates a toxic conflation between power, property, and sexuality. By contrast, I posit that the boy’s abuse is rooted in a particularly Catholic context; in a society which has absorbed the promulgated doctrine of somatic shame and identifies the body as the locus of sin, repressed sexuality bursts from the father as much as from the son.

In the opening scene of O’Brien’s *Down by the River*, Mary’s father, James MacNamara, measures out the boundaries of his property and then rapes her:

Pounds, shillings and pence danced before his eyes[;] […] he spun the metal tape in a wide and apostolic arc, a wand, pronouncing his claim over the deserted but fabled landscape, over the furze and fern, lakewater and bogwater, bogwort, myrtle, sphagnum, the warblers’ and the bitterns’ cry; his empire. He struck out with it then waved and dallied it to verify both his powers and the riches which had lain so
long, prone and concealed, waiting for the thrust of the slane. (DBTR 2-3)

The interconnection between possession, power, and sexuality present in James MacNamara’s mind is made apparent through free indirect discourse. He takes pleasure in demarcating all that is his, even pronouncing possession over the ‘cry’ of wild birds that happen to live on the land. This loudly professed ownership of the terrain and its inhabitants is consolidated into a unifying entity of power: it is ‘his empire’. The evocation of ‘empire’ is arresting. Not only does it conjure a historical image of colonisers naming and claiming that which they had no right to – rather like the birdsong – it also reminds the reader of Ireland’s own postcolonial history: a history which seems to some extent to be repeating itself as different men project their dubious claims onto the countryside. The terms which Mary’s father uses to describe the land are noticeably phallic: the riches are ‘prone’ and ‘concealed’, and must be revealed in the ‘thrust of the slane’. The pleasure he takes in possessing things is not merely a platonic love of power but inherently sexual. The description of the spinning ‘tape’ as ‘apostolic’ is notable in its incongruity. It appears to further betray James MacNamara’s mind-set; arguably, he feels that as a man he is entitled – “ordained” – to claim all he perceives as rightfully his because the instrument used to demarcate the borders is, in his mind, “blessed”. Whilst undoubtedly a corruption of Catholic doctrine, Mary’s father nevertheless seems to feel that his absolute patriarchal control is sanctioned by the Church.

That the rape happens immediately after this obvious display of power is significant; he regards Mary – his daughter – as another possession. Just as he took sexual pleasure in listing the various things he owns in the field to Mary, he is driven to take sexual pleasure in her:
It does not hurt if you say it does not hurt. It does not hurt if you are not you. [...] “What would your mother say … Dirty little thing.” He crosses to the lake, wading through the thick lattice of bulrushes and she thinks he is washing now in the brackenish water, swabbing himself with the saucer leaf of the water-lily and that on him will linger the sweet lotus of that flower. Everything is drying, coagulating. (*DBTR* 5)

The aftermath of the rape sees her father revisiting the places he professes to own. In his initial inventory he mentions the water and greenery, and he returns there afterwards to clean himself up. In so doing, he leaves a proprietary residue over those items as a final reminder of who they belong to, marking his territory with his semen as well as his measuring tape. This impression is reinforced by the ‘coagulation’ that Mary senses happening. Whilst it seemingly refers to the drying of his semen, in her father’s mind his ‘empire’ is coalescing in the aftermath of the incident. James MacNamara further employs the shaming religious discourse surrounding the female body witnessed in Part 1. By referring to her as a ‘dirty little thing’, he suggests that she is responsible for what has happened because, as a young woman, she is inherently tempting. This imagery underpins much of the narrative pertaining to original sin, a doctrine which is widely cited as having ‘contributed to sexism and the victimisation of women by blaming Eve for the fall and insisting that female subordination is divinely willed’. 229

Mary appears to internalise her father’s blame; in the aftermath of the rape, she likens herself to a ‘cake at a party which seemed to be uncut but when she bought her face up close to it, every piece had been severed, every severed pieced, side by side, a wicked decoy’ (*DBTR* 5-6). Though too young to fully understand what has transpired, Mary nevertheless comprehends enough to view herself as irrevocably damaged. The repetition of the word ‘severed’ in quick succession reveals the

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violence underpinning the analogy; unlike the birthday cake, which has merely been sliced, she views herself as having been butchered by her father’s assault – a term which is reminiscent of her feeling of ‘having half-died’. She, like Caithleen Brady in *The Country Girls*, has already internalised Catholic dogma surrounding the body: to the outside world she may initially look as perfect as the birthday cake, but beneath the exterior she perceives herself as sullied, impure, a ‘wicked decoy’ to the unsuspecting.

Increasingly subject to her father’s desires, Mary becomes pregnant after one of his assaults. In a cruel parody of the ardently anti-abortionist Roisin’s claim that ‘an abortion won’t unrape [a woman], all an abortion will do is compound the crime’, Mary experiences the inverse: she is effectively raped again because she is pregnant (*DBTR* 24):

> ‘I’ll make short work of it,’ he said, grabbing the broken and splintered broom handle which might have been waiting for the grotesque right. [...] Thrusting it inside her the whirling of it in exact ratio to his crazed words, his intent far exceeding anything the implement could do, because in truth he did not know what he was doing, fear and delirium having engulfed him. [...] She could not tell how deeply it had plunged, all she felt was the wooden teeth cutting and the splinters snagging [...]. (*DBTR* 121)

Mary’s father once more treats her like an object. He viciously takes control of her body yet again to satiate his desire, this time not motivated by lust but ‘fear’ of being found out. He is heedless of the fact that attempting a home abortion with such a crude instrument could easily kill his daughter as the drive to erase the evidence of his crimes easily overpowers any concern for his daughter’s well-being. Indeed, any thought that his actions could have fatal consequences or permanent implications for Mary’s health are entirely absent from this scene; her father is in a ‘crazed’ ‘delirium’ entirely bought on by the selfish need for his assault to remain undetected.
The frenzy partly results from his inability to acknowledge to himself that he regularly rapes his own daughter – a fact which he had previously ‘walled up’ and which he must now face ‘like a man awakening from a dream’ (DBTR 121). He neglects even to speak to Mary after the incident which further accentuates her status as object rather than subject in his eyes. Instead, he goes off to bury the broken handle, desperate only to ‘obliterate the substance’ that exists as proof of what has transpired (DBTR 121). His primeval, brutal behaviour compounds the reading that James MacNamara fails to see Mary as an autonomous individual but merely as an extension of his property and receptacle of his desire. Since he regards her body as his to violate (a memory which he then conveniently abjects), he feels similarly entitled to dispose of any undesirable outcomes; Mary functions as an object designed to both gratify and confirm his conflation of sex, power and property.

McGahern’s Mahoney also sexually abuses his son in The Dark. Early on in the novel, he wakes his son up and ‘caresses’ him before going to sleep; the language is heavily laden with sexual imagery:

[H]ands drew him closer. They began to move in caress on the back, shoving up the nightshirt, downwards lightly to the thighs and heavily up again, the voice echoing rhythmically the movement of the hands. […] The hands moved more tensely. The breathing quickened. “You like that. It’s good for you,” the voice breathed jerkily now to the stroking hands. “I like that.” There was nothing else to say, it was better not to think or care […]. (TD 20)

The rhythmic hands and quickened breath in combination with the area that Mahoney touches imply involuntary masturbation. This is evidently not the first time the boy has been abused as he refers to it as an ‘old horror’ (TD 20). The boy describes the experience as ‘a kind of pleasure if thought and loathing could be shut out’, obliquely referring to a mechanical somatic pleasure with conscious disgust at the abuse (TD 20). The perspective is fragmented; whereas the previous chapters use
the third person clearly narrated from an outside perspective, the heavy use of free indirect discourse makes it difficult to tell if the perspective is third person or first. The insistent use of ‘the’ rather than ‘his’ to describe body parts indicates the boy’s desire to shut down all elements of the encounter which force him to acknowledge who is perpetrating the act: a characteristic which I have already argued is indicative of dissociative trauma and a narrative technique I shall address in greater depth shortly.

Echoing the tendencies of Caithleen in *The Country Girls* and the girl in *A Pagan Place*, the boy begins to articulate abjective feelings towards the body: ‘The lips closed and the breath went as his arms crushed, now the repulsion of the mad flesh crushing in the struggle for breath’ (*TD* 21). As previously witnessed in the girl in *A Pagan Place* when she orgasms under her father’s beating, the boy has stripped back his language to a point where the reader is no longer able to confidently identify which pronouns pertain to which character. Whose ‘lips closed’? Whose ‘breath went’? Whose arms crushed who? Given the nature of the scene the boy describes the reader may infer that Mahoney has crushed the air out of his son as he approaches climax, but the unstable grammatical construction of the sentence resists any attempt to be certain. This confusion is compounded when the boy articulates his ‘repulsion of the mad flesh’. It is again unclear whose ‘mad flesh’ he is repulsed by – his own, for responding to his father’s unwanted abuse? Or Mahoney’s for continually violating him? As with the girl in *A Pagan Place*, perhaps the boy himself does not fully know. Strikingly, the boy repeats variations of the word ‘crushed’ twice in quick succession, creating a parallel with Mary when she feels ‘severed’ by the rape. Alongside his broken grammar, his language indicates that he feels physically and mentally ‘crushed’ by the incident.
The boy is further abused by Mahoney’s cousin, Father Gerald. His status as priest and family-member renders him a paragon of virtue and success in the boy’s eyes. The trust that the boy places in Father Gerald after he helps him win the battle against Mahoney to continue his education is violated when Father Gerald asks the boy to visit him during the summer and climbs into his bed. The boy is initially reassured by his presence, but:

soon suspicion grew in the place of terror, what could the priest want in the room at this hour, the things that have to happen. […] You stiffened when his arm went about your shoulder, was this to be another of the midnight horrors with your father. (TD 70)

The boy does not pose this last thought as a rhetorical question but as a statement, apparently accepting rather than questioning that something unpleasant will occur. His tolerance of abuse, rooted in his father’s sexual exploitation of him as a young child, has become subconsciously internalised as a ‘thing that ha[s] to happen’; the boy has come to accept, even expect, that father figures will abuse him.

However, apparently changing course, Father Gerald instead turns the conversation onto sexuality, forcing the boy to reveal his sexual experiences and desires:

“Have you ever kissed a girl?” it came with the shock of a blow.
“No, father. Never.”
“Have you ever wanted or desired to kiss?”
“Yes, father,” the tears flowed hopelessly, just broken, he was cutting through to the nothingness and squalor of your life, you were […] as low as the dirt. (TD 72)

The boy’s differing response to the changing situation is marked. When threatened with sexual abuse the boy resigns himself to ‘the things that have to happen’, but when asked to bare his soul instead of his body the boy is unable to cope and
experiences the mental assault with the same force as ‘the shock of a blow’. This is something that Mary Ann Melfi also notices:

[t]he boy feels more threatened by the subtle molestation of his character than of his body, which speaks volumes about where the real damage is being inflicted on him. […] His apparent search for a loftier father figure begins to yield chronic disappointment. The ruined dream of the priesthood adds to the dragging weight of abominations his psyche must overcome.230

Melfi’s assessment that the boy is more distressed at being asked to discuss his sexual fantasies than at the prospect of being sexually abused is pertinent, as is her contention that the internally generated damage is far more scarring than the external. The boy has evidently normalised physical abuse, which exposes the extent of psychological trauma and feelings of low self-worth already present. Father Gerald’s abuse entrenches and calcifies his disappointment in all father figures, but also destroys his idealisation of the priesthood which had heretofore been an elevating aspiration out of the dark violence of his family life.

The boy in turn asks Father Gerald if he experiences feelings of lust as well, seeking validation that his somatic struggle is normal from the man whose example he wishes to emulate: ‘everything was open, you could share your lives, both of you fellow-passengers in the same rocked boat’ (TD 73). Father Gerald fails to match the boy’s honesty with his own, causing ‘such silence’ that the boy ‘winced’, feeling he ‘had committed an impertinence, you were by no means in the same boat, you were out there alone with your sins’ (TD 73). The boy is once more crushed – this time by psychological abuse. He feels that Father Gerald ‘had broken [his] life to the dirt […], stripped [him] down to the last squalor’ (TD 74-75). Borrowing Sampson’s terms, the boy’s ‘articulate consciousness’ that ‘no flesh was superior to other flesh’

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is ‘overwhelmed by [his] visceral experience’ of ‘shame: what must the priest think of you’ (*TD* 75).\(^{231}\) Interestingly, the boy oscillates between shame-rage and shame-humiliation in a manner reminiscent of Moran in *Amongst Women*, but unlike Moran, the boy’s capacity for greater introspection largely ensures that shame-humiliation takes root rather than Moran’s propensity for explosive rage.

Despite knowing that Father Gerald has not been open with him, shame overwhelms the boy’s capacity to reason and reduces him to feeling like ‘dirt’ – the Catholic pronunciation on bodily sin. He consequently has two exploitative fathers: biological and spiritual. Brian Liddy goes further than this and argues that the two fathers effectively protect each other with the introduction of a third father, God:

> The church, if not responsible for the molestation by Mahoney’s father, is responsible for the young protagonist’s inability to deal realistically with those molestations […]. [T]he molestations of the father cannot be condemned – indeed they cannot be considered – because they are in direct conflict with his duty as a child of God.\(^{232}\)

If the boy cannot condemn abuse at the hands of his father due to a commandment, then he certainly cannot deal with the abuse of a priest, the Catholic conduit to God. Catholic doctrine renders the boy unable to cope with any form of abuse by manipulating and citing the word of the ultimate father: God. However, I would extend Liddy’s argument further and argue that the church is responsible for the father’s abuse by attaching shame to the expression of bodily impulses: if repressed sexuality bursts from the boy at times when he can no longer control it, it follows that the same sexuality should erupt from the father. The widowed father is subject to the same sexual desires as the boy and lives in the same Catholic society that condemns extra-marital relations. Without an outlet for those desires, he inflicts them


on the boy. This is a line of argument which Denis Sampson also pursues, commenting that ‘[t]he father’s power is associated with “measure passion”, “blood”, and animals instincts reflecting frustrated sexuality’.\(^{233}\) Mahoney is, in this reading, as much a victim to Catholic discourse as the boy.

This issue of trans-generational abuse is explored by Liddy, who contends that it will not stop with the boy:

> We pity the boy for his molestation at the hands of his father, his physical and mental fear of the priest; but, shaped by violence, the boy instigates violence towards women of his own mind and, though victim himself, merges with the cycle of the victimiser.\(^{234}\)

This is undeniably true. When picturing his life as a priest, the boy fantasises about violating a girl in the confession box:

> She’d give you the fulfilment you craved. […] Would you sit quiet and excite your own seed in the box with your hand pressing against the wood and let it flow in the darkness […]. Or would you burst out of the box and take her in madness? […] Would she cry too when you the priest tore off her clothes and took her on the stone floor of the church? \(^{(TD 55)}\)

The boy debates in his mind whether his sexually starved future self would masturbate over the girl’s story or rape her. His troubled syntax once more gives the reader a clue; when discussing the possibility of rape he consistently uses question marks, indicating that in his mind this is far from certain and therefore an extreme possibility, whereas the possibility of surreptitiously masturbating whilst listening to her story is formulated like a question but without a question mark. It therefore reads like a statement, indicating that this is the more likely outcome of the two. However, the boy acknowledges that both would be a violation: his query is simply how far it might go. His ability to see himself perpetuating the violence inflicted on him, and the partial exculpation or at least explanation of the father’s behaviour, moves the

\(^{234}\) Liddy, ‘State and Church’, p. 115.
issue from a double oppression enacted on the boy to a wider issue of the “cycle” of trans-generational shame producing trans-generational abuse expressed as sexual shame in *The Dark* and postcolonial shame in *Amongst Women*.

That Mary in O’Brien’s *Down by the River* and McGahern’s boy in *The Dark* are both abused by their fathers would initially appear to contradict the supposition that there is a systemic gender imbalance at work and encourage an exploration of alternative explanations. One further commonality that Mary and the boy possess is that they are both children, inviting the reader to question whether children – regardless of their sex – are equally exploited by adults in McGahern and O’Brien’s depiction of rural Irish society. Nandy explores the role of childhood in Western society, arguing that towards the end of the Renaissance the way in which European nations viewed children fundamentally and permanently altered:

> Childhood now no longer seemed only a happy, blissful prototype of beatific angels, as it had in the peasant cultures of Europe only a century early. It increasingly looked like a blank slate on which adults must write their moral codes – an inferior version of maturity, less productive and ethical, and badly contaminated by the playful, irresponsible and spontaneous aspects of human nature.  

He notes that the shift in attitude regarding childhood was accompanied by one further social change:

> A parallel [...] development in Europe was the emergence of the modern concept of womanhood, underwritten by the changing concept of the Christian godhead which, under the influence of Protestantism, became more masculine.  

Nandy’s arguments, whilst not explicitly related to child abuse, nevertheless explore the core beliefs underpinning a society in which child abuse takes place. Nandy identifies several key concepts which begin to explain how this abuse went undiscovered: children were seen as ‘inferior’ in post-Renaissance European

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236 Ibid.
societies. They were viewed as ‘less productive’ than their parents and therefore burdensome. This is a view that Mahoney constantly cites to his children in The Dark: ‘O God, such a misfortunate crowd of ignoramuses to be saddled with, […]. Too useless to do anything’ (TD 14). Nandy also contends that children became viewed as less ‘ethical’ and ‘irresponsible’ – a shift which has quite a profound impact on the way a society treats children. The inference is that an unethical child is prone to lying and is therefore untrustworthy. This creates an atmosphere in which an abused infant may struggle to admit what is happening to them on the grounds that they may not be believed. Such a philosophy also creates the contrasting (equally false) suggestion that adults are largely truthful. Mary is particularly influenced by the implications underpinning this discourse in Down by the River; few people ever ask her directly who the father of her child is, and certainly no one in a position of authority whereas her father’s word is believed without question.

Nandy’s argument that childhood ‘increasingly looked like a blank slate on which adults must write their moral code’ has a range of implications for the protagonists. Firstly, it underscores Liddy’s argument that in The Dark ‘[t]he church, […] is responsible for the young protagonist’s inability to deal realistically with those molestations […] because [it is] in direct conflict with his duty as a child of God’. A society that indoctrinates children to unquestioningly respect their parents does not provide the scope for them to cope with or process parental failure without acute feelings of shame. Secondly, it is uncannily reminiscent of Tomkins’ claim that shame is ‘the perfect vehicle for the transmission and preservation of social norms from generation to generation’. The congruence between these two positions serves to further strengthen the notion that shame functions as a tool to maintain the

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237 Liddy, ‘State and Church’, p. 113.
238 Tomkins, Shame and Its Sisters, p. 156.
hegemonic order by inculcating dominant norms and values in the subjectivities of adolescents. Examined from this perspective, the context of the protagonists’ abuse highlighted at the outset of this chapter becomes highly relevant: Mary is abused by her father because she is viewed more as an object than a subject – dominating his daughter is rooted in his hypermasculine need to express and demonstrate his power. Though Nandy identified the masculinisation of Christianity as the hallmark of Protestantism, Ireland’s status as a postcolonial nation resulted in its male citizens feeling the need to (hyper)masculinise to compensate for the effeminising discourses of postcolonialism. In a society that does not value women and views them to a large extent as responsible for and contaminated by original sin, it is not surprising that Mary receives more violent, frequent, and sustained attacks than the boy. By contrast, that the boy’s abuse is rooted in and arose from a peculiarly Catholic context; Catholicism, far more than Protestantism, targets the sexual body as the site of shameful sin and focus for suppression. Repressed sexuality erupts from father, son, and threatens to escape from Father Gerald. However, the sexual abuse ceases as the boy gets older. Though the boy never elaborates as to why, it is implicitly because he successfully overpowered his father when shielding his sister from a brutal attack; Mahoney is not physically able to sexually abuse the boy beyond a certain stage of adolescence because he has lost the physical advantage. Thus, by virtue of his sex, the boy is saved from the prolonged abuse that Mary sustains.

‘The struggle towards repeated failure’: McGahern’s Boy and O’Brien’s Girl

A sustained comparative reading of the boy in McGahern’s The Dark and the girl in O’Brien’s A Pagan Place is illuminating for two reasons. Firstly, to refute the
potential inference that such a heretofore binary interrogation may encourage the idea that these gendered shame complexes are entirely separate from each other.

Secondly, to assess if – or to what extent – the outcome of a successfully transmitted shame complex recreates the gendered asymmetric balance of power present in contemporary social institutions. This extended juxtaposition is prompted by the many similarities between McGahern’s boy and O’Brien’s girl despite their gender difference. Most noticeably, neither character is named. Equally compelling is the fact that both refuse to inhabit a first-person perspective despite being the narrators of their own story; they are both attracted to Catholic Church as a vocation; and they both articulate feeling of religiously-rooted somatic shame about their sexual bodies.

A cursory assessment of their similar characteristics and trajectories appears to suggest they have more common with each other than other protagonists of the same sex, and creates the grounds to inquire whether, despite its gendered articulation, institutional shame operates to similar effect in both genders.

That both protagonists remain unnamed is striking. For the boy in McGahern’s *The Dark*, this initially appears to be borne out of both adolescent angst and struggle to wrest his independence from his father. These are factors that Stanley van der Ziel also identifies:

The lack of a Christian name is not only an indication of an uncertain identity, but also […] a sign of an inextricable and profound identification with the figure of the father who is referred to by the same name – Mahoney-père, after all, also lacks the distinguishing feature of a Christian name in the novel. Thus the son’s very identity becomes blurred with that of the father. In this way the problematic nature of the son’s attempt to break away from the father and to develop his own separate sense of individuality […] is complicated by the imperfect method of naming in the novel.  

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Whilst I agree that the absence of a Christian name complicates the reader’s conceptualisation of the boy and the critic’s ability to write about him, I question to what extent ‘the son’s very identity becomes blurred with that of the father’. I posit instead that this ‘blurring’ is to no small extent facilitated by van der Ziel’s decision to name the boy ‘young Mahoney’ at the outset of his article and to subsequently drop the modifier, eventually referring to both men as ‘Mahoney’. Nor is van der Ziel alone in terming the boy thus, Sampson and Liddy also routinely refer to him as ‘young Mahoney’. This decision artificially and unnecessarily fuses the characters together, hence why I have referred to the protagonist as ‘the boy’ throughout this thesis and retained the name ‘Mahoney’ to refer to only his father. Though mine is at times a more complicated ‘method of naming’ for this novel, given the boy’s passionate and embittered struggle with his father the text in no way justifies any critic’s labelling of him as ‘young Mahoney’, and certainly not simply as ‘Mahoney’. Though I agree with van der Ziel’s assertion that the boy’s lack of name is ‘inextricable[y]’ rooted in his relationship to and with his father, I contend that it is the boy’s misidentification with his father that prompts his uncertain identity.

The boy’s dream of joining the priesthood is far more rooted in defying Mahoney’s expectation that ‘[h]e’ll be like me’ than any fervent desire to devote his life to Christianity (TD 25). This becomes increasingly clear over the course of the novel as the boy oscillates between envisioning himself as a priest, a doctor and a university graduate before finally settling on a career with the Electricity Supply Board. When the boy begins to doubt the wisdom of his intention to become a priest, he is more preoccupied with ascertaining which of his available options will most differentiate him from his father rather than his suitability to the career:

240 Ibid, p. 104; p. 106.
A priest could have no anguish, he’d given up happiness, his fixed life moving in the calm and certainty to its end, cursed by no earthly love or longing, all had been chosen years before. Yet your father was no priest [...] he’d married and had children come, and he didn’t seem to have got much sweetness. But what had your father’s life to do with your life? If you married you would plant a tree to deny and break finally your father’s power, completely supplant it by the graciousness and marvel of your life, but as a priest you’d remain just fruit of the cursed house gone to God. (*TD* 83-84)

The boy’s confused imagery, troubling syntax, and self-defeating logic belie his true motivation. Those committed to a religious rather than secular existence believe they have given up transitory earthly pleasures for the sake of a far greater and longer lasting happiness in the next life. The boy, however, seems to have no real concept of any Catholic afterlife and is fixated purely on his mortal existence. The sole benefit he accords to being a priest is serenity; he believes the lives of priests are uncomplicated by ‘earthly love or longing’ and unfold ‘certainly’ – a word which in context functions as a synonym for ‘drearly’. Indeed, the adjectives which would usually describe the priesthood – ‘graciousness’, ‘marvel’ – the boy ascribes to marriage. In a further inverting of stereotypical imagery, the boy claims that joining the priesthood will ensure that he ‘remain[s]’ forever ‘cursed’, which stands in opposition to the religious conviction that those who commit to the priesthood are cleansed. This statement again indicates that he considers his status as Mahoney’s ‘cursed’ son to be more determinant of his identity than Catholicism, further underscoring the view that patriarchy is a more potent psychological marker than religion in the boy’s identity. The boy also voids the power of his own rhetorical question: by asking what his father’s life has to do with his own, the boy seems to linguistically distance himself from Mahoney by stating that his father’s fate need not be his own. However, in his very next sentence he restates his need to break Mahoney’s power over him, undermining his previous implication that the trajectories of their lives are unconnected.
The boy’s supposition that by marrying and then fathering his own children he would ‘plant a tree to deny and break’ his father’s authority is remarkably reminiscent of Sheila in *Amongst Women* when she contends that she and her husband are continuing members of Moran’s family by choice. In so doing, Sheila shatters Moran’s fantasy that he is much like the yew tree which sits at the centre of his farm, and that his daughters and their spouses are off-shoots of *his* expanding family (*AW 158*). The boy articulates similar but stronger sentiments. Whereas Sheila positions her continued membership of Moran’s family as negotiable depending on his behaviour, the boy suggests that fathering a new family will irreparably shatter Mahoney’s power. In becoming a father, the boy believes he will no longer be a child.

Van der Ziel’s observation that the boy’s father, Mahoney, also lacks a Christian name is astute and cultivates an idea I previously posited that the boy shows *signs* of becoming Mahoney. Michael Toolan observes similar warning-signs in the echoing behaviour between father and son:

The novel does not […] chart a young man’s escape from frustration to some muted peace and self-fulfilment. The dark is still very much present at the novel’s close, although its nature may have altered, in that it is now generated within the young man as much as in the world around him. The character we witness at the book’s close is a sort of cripple, inordinately passive, his imagination and humanity, so long repressed, now appallingly deadened.242

Images of ‘deadening’ abound as the novel draws to a close. The boy drops out of university for a desk job in the civil service with ‘a state of mind’ that nothing much matters anymore. He reconciles with his father – the very figure whom the boy blames for most of his adolescent trauma (*TD 188*). It is therefore difficult for the

reader to escape the impression that, with the boy’s intellect and potential, he will end up bored, frustrated and unfulfilled. These are almost precisely the characteristics of his father, which leaves the reader to wonder if one day the boy will drunkenly sob that ‘he went to school too’ as his own child looks set to surpass him, or bitterly complain that ‘I was head of my class once too and far it got me’ when well-meaning relatives or teachers suggest that his future offspring is destined for greater things (TD 128: 25). These are all suppositions, but possibilities which McGahern leaves open.

Just as McGahern depicts the reliable, even reassuring, cyclicality of seasons which govern the lives of Mahoney and his son on the farm, so too does it seem possible that their lives might be similarly cyclical. The closing images of the boy setting off for his new job in the ‘rain’ with the ‘foreboding’ ‘sodden leaves’ of Autumn ‘falling’ does nothing to dispel the gloomy – dark – shadow of van der Ziel’s and Toolan’s projection of transgenerational disappointment facilitated by transgenerational shame (TD 188). Whilst the boy dimly notes that it is a ‘cliché’ to associate his fate with the weather and season, it does not lift his ‘terror of an unclear recognition’ that his reconciliation with his father coincides with the season of slow death before the emergence of new life (TD 188). The boy’s ‘unclear recognition’ is never clarified, but the text certainly registers a distinct parallel between the boy’s ‘foreboding’ Autumnal departure and his decision to settle for a safe job and head to Dublin where he will presumably find a wife – both images register a slow but inevitable death. The cumulative imagery supports van der Ziel’s view that one unnamed Mahoney may slide seamlessly into another, undifferentiated by Christian names because ‘nobody’s life [i]s more than a direction’ (TD 188).
Though the boy rages and wrestles with the weight of navigating his own sense of self against that of his father’s, he nevertheless benefits from being the pre-eminent member of his family – the most intelligent, the eldest child and only son. The same cannot be said of O’Brien’s girl in *A Pagan Place*. Not only does the girl fail to credit herself with a first name, she does not provide a surname either. Moreover, the girl similarly fails to attribute a Christian or surname to either of her parents, more often than not referring to them as ‘she’ and ‘he’ or by their official titles ‘mother’ and ‘father’ rather than any affectionate derivative. The name that dominates the family is that of her elder sister, Emma. The girl admits early on that she believes Emma was her father’s ‘favorite. He called her Whitehead’ on account of her ‘platinum hair’ (*APP* 5; 191). Emma ‘got the watch’ despite the fact that there ‘was not much jewelry lying about the house, [just] his gold watch, some necklaces [and] some loose pearls’ (*APP* 5). Emma was born in New York when the girl’s parents relocated in an attempt to ‘make their fortune’; the girl believes that Emma was ‘a love child’ conceived in happiness and optimism, whilst she was the accident in Ireland who caused her mother to need stitches after she was born and which the nurse ‘made a botch of’ (*APP* 21-22). The inference is that the girl both feels responsible in some way, and that the lasting physical damage has affected how much her mother loves her.

Convinced that her sister is everyone’s favourite, the girl spends her childhood wishing she was Emma:

The older you got the more you aped Emma, you wanted to be blond like Emma, to be a whitehead, to have a watch, to have a cyst, to have a shorthand speed of ninety words per minute. (*APP* 72)

Given how the girl has previously introduced some of these items and names, it appears that what she actually craves is the affection that these things signify. She
uses her father’s pet name for Emma, ‘whitehead’, to imply that the attraction of being blond is not aesthetic but because she connects the hair colour with being cherished. Similarly, she appears to envy Emma’s watch not for its financial value but because Emma was the child prized enough to be bestowed a rare item of value in an otherwise poverty-stricken house. Though the text does not explicitly clarify the matter, the inference is that their father gave Emma his own gold watch. She even covets Emma’s medical anomalies, clearly convinced that every attribute which would make her more like her highly esteemed sister must be purely positive. The girl’s feeling of inferiority persists throughout the novel; when Emma’s friends remark that the girl is ‘not the least bit like Emma’, she immediately assumes they mean she is ‘not so pretty’ (APP 151).

Nor does the novel dispel the girl’s impression that she is second best where her parents are concerned. Whilst the girl’s father shouts at her for unconsciously tapping her chest in time to the ‘sanctus bell’ over dinner, her mother distractedly wonders what desserts she ought to have in the house when Emma returns home from her cleaning job for a hotel in Dublin (APP 56-58). The family provide Emma with the nearest they can afford to a feast to celebrate her return: ‘In one room there was lemonade, in another a fruit cake, in another cold mutton, all in honor of Emma’ (APP 79). Emma thoroughly enjoys being the central focus:

Emma conducted the conversation. She told how two American soldiers went to an ice-cream parlor in the city and asked for two nice cups of coffee like the sweet American girls and was asked by the waitress Black or White sir? […] Your father asked Emma to tell it again and begged everyone else to shut up. He was very testy and wanted Emma to talk exclusively to him. (APP 85)

Emma holds court, ensuring that she remains the centre of the gathering’s attention by ‘conducting’ – effectively manipulating – the conversation. Despite having told a
relatively dull story, Emma captivates her audience by attempting to appear as if she knows exotic people. There is no factual basis for this story; Emma does not claim to have met these soldiers, nor to have spoken to anyone who did – she merely states that two American soldiers went to an ice-cream parlour without offering any detail about how she knows this or why the anecdote is relevant. Her father, confirming the girl’s feeling that Emma is his ‘favorite’, is eager to hear anything she has to say and predisposed to be fascinated by it. He seeks to monopolise Emma and tells ‘everyone else to shut up’, which further fuels what the girl feels are Emma’s pretensions: ‘Emma called your mother Mummy, and your father Daddy’ (APP 86). From the manner in which it is reported, this affectation is clearly new and the girl finds it grating but it goes unchecked by both parents. Instead, she ‘blinked to get attention and your father told you to stop blinking. Emma sent you upstairs for her handbag’ (APP 86). From the moment Emma arrives home, she issues her younger sister with orders which their parents also allow. Their father in particular is so transfixed by Emma that even registering his younger daughter’s presence induces him to express irritation with her.

During the early part of the novel, Emma’s actions, opinions, and preferences dominate the lives of everyone around her; her name appears on nearly every page. The girl is utterly dwarfed both by Emma’s presence and absence. When Emma is away, her parents wonder how to please her when she comes to visit and, when present, everyone devotes themselves full time to satisfying her whims. Even when it transpires that Emma has been having sex with as many men as she can in Dublin and is pregnant by one of them (though she does not know which), the family remains consumed by Emma: initially by the desire to abject her and then the need to bring her back. The girl, by contrast, is textually effaced. No one refers to her, she is
rarely spoken to and there is no consideration given as to what her (dis)likes, preferences, or opinions are. When Emma emerges as “fallen”, the girl does not fare any better. She is a by-product of the family, an after-thought. In this light, Emma appears almost parasitical; she not only overshadows her younger sister, she seems to rob her entire family of their very identity. Just as Mahoney textually dominates his son because the reader has no frame of reference for naming the boy except in relation to his father, the girl’s family have no identity except through Emma: Emma’s sister, Emma’s mother, Emma’s father.

Being defined in relation to others is something the girl never sheds. When she joins a nunnery on impulse, her mother gifts her ‘a wallet with EDM written in gold. It stood for Enfant de Marie’ (APP 205). Given that the girl will be assigned a new name after she successfully noviciates, her mother acknowledges her simply as ‘a child of Mary’. In contrast, when the family’s farm hand (known by his nickname ‘Nigger’) builds the girl a trunk and prints her name ‘in capital letters on the lid’, the girl refuses even to state what that name is and feels ‘ashamed’ that her name is ‘so boldly printed’ (APP 205). The implication is that the girl’s identity has been so worn down by years of being overlooked, overshadowed, and emotionally neglected that, when faced with her own name on her own trunk, the effect is so disconcerting that it appears ‘bold’ and embarrassing. Though her father accompanies her to the taxi to say goodbye, ‘[t]he handkerchief that he cried into was a scrap from the cretonne that she [the girl’s mother] had used to make curtains just before Emma’s homecoming’ (APP 205-6). Emma even manages to overshadow the girl’s departure, despite being in disgrace and having minimal contact with the family at this point. The girl’s father grieves his second child’s exit using a token pocketed to celebrate his love for the first. Emma’s name is the final one given in the novel and even sits
on the final page; the resulting impression imparted to the reader is the abjected
Emma continues to dominate the family’s consciousness ‘from [her] place of
banishment’. 243

Significantly, the girl states that ‘[i]n the convent a name awaited you, a
saint’s name, but you didn’t know it yet’ (APP 205). Despite the brevity of her
comment, there are several substantial inferences to be drawn. The initial effect of
the comment is to compound the impression created by her mother’s gift (which
cited her initials anonymously as ‘EDM’) that she will continue to be defined through
and effaced by the identity of others – in this case, that of the convent. She will shed
her birth name and spend the rest of her life using the ‘saint’s name’ the order will
give her. However, counteracting that impression is the girl’s conceptualisation of
this rite of passage. She noticeably states that ‘a name’ and not a new name awaits
her. The parallel (and conflation) between a name and an identity is set up for in
similar terms as for the boy in the The Dark. In the most literal of senses, the girl
does already have a name: her family’s farmhand has written that name on her case.
However, she has continually declined to acknowledge it and has never been
addressed by that name, despite the fact that the family’s conversation is littered with
references to Emma. That the girl feels ‘a name’ awaits her seems to sit in direct
correlation to her feeling of purpose: she will acquire ‘a saint’s name’ alongside a
vocation, an education, and a clear objective. Though she will lose her birth name,
her horizons have considerably enlarged – thus far, the girl has only left her small
village to travel to Dublin in order to locate her errant sister. Joining the convent
means that she will be sent to noviciate in Brussels and, if she successfully graduates
to join the order, could go to ‘Bethlehem, China, Burma, Korea, the Philippines,

Africa, [or] the pagan Orient’ as a missionary: all places well beyond her reach if she were to remain in her village (APP 190-191). Though the novel does not follow the girl beyond the commencement of her training, the lingering impression is that she may well identify with her ‘saint’s name’ and corresponding identity far more than her birth name, which offers her neither individuality nor autonomy. Just as the boy must negotiate his burgeoning identity under the weight of his father’s dwarfinfluence, the girl must prevent hers from being smothered by her sister.

In conjunction with both protagonists’ namelessness is the fractured perspective with which they narrate their stories. McGahern’s *The Dark* is narrated from multiple narrative standpoints, sliding between first-, second-, and third-person. The effect is somewhat disorientating, leading van der Ziel to posit that:

Young Mahoney does not appear to be sure whether he is a fictional character being narrated (in the third-person ‘he’ form), a narrator telling his own story (in the first-person ‘I’ form), or whether his story is a self-confession or self-accusation (in the second-person ‘you’ form). [...] Mahoney seems uncomfortable using the first person (which he only deploys for three of the thirty-one chapters [...]), the narrator is constantly searching for the right pronoun, the right narrative perspective for his story.244

Van der Ziel concludes that the novel’s splintered perspective attests to and dramatises the fact that *The Dark* is about the boy’s ‘fundamental inability to make any choices’ by ‘revealing [the] chaos’ within.245 However, I contend the boy’s ‘inability’ – as van der Ziel terms it – to maintain a unified viewpoint on his life has further significance than that of merely exposing his indecision. Though van der Ziel correctly observes that the ratio of first-, second-, and third-person narration is heavily imbalanced, he does not explore this observation any further by relating it to the novel’s content or mapping the distribution of these scattered perspectives. Of the

244 van der Ziel, ‘All this Talk and Struggle’, p. 109.
remaining twenty-eight chapters, fifteen are narrated in the second-person and thirteen from a third-person perspective; this initially appears to indicate a more or less even split in the boy’s consciousness. Observing the distribution of these narrative viewpoints illuminates a relevant trend: nearly all of the central chapters are narrated in the second-person and the framing chapters at the beginning and end occur in the third-person.

Brian Richardson also notes this trend and argues that ‘[t]hough it is difficult to identify a clear thematic pattern that governs these pronominal shifts, it appears that “you” narrations predominates when the protagonist is establishing his own subjectivity against the voices, names and desires that others seek to impose on him’. 246 I would argue the converse: the boy adopts the “you” voice precisely when these forces threaten to overwhelm him. Firstly, all scenes of violence – whether verbal or physical, personal or interpersonal – are narrated in the second-person: Father Gerald’s attempted sexual abuse which shatters the boy’s view of the priesthood, the boy’s consequential yet agonising decision not to become a priest, his discovery that Joan is being sexually abused by her employer, Mahoney’s frenzied attack on Joan, his relentless bullying of the boy whilst he tries to study, and the boy’s realisation that he is going to drop out of university are all written in the second-person. This suggests that the boy is suffering from a shame complex so insidiously pervasive that it positions him as traumatised. Cathy Caruth’s argues that ‘in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it’. 247 This supports Melfi’s argument that:

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The shifts in narrative style suggest the fragmentation of his perspective and a kind of cognitive dissociation from a reality which cannot be endured. [...] The boy is capable of telling his own tale only by distancing himself in this way from his experience of hunger, emotional and physical abuse, overwork, and sexual exploitation.\footnote{Melfi, ‘The “Fascination of Abomination”’, \textit{South Atlantic Review}, p. 113.}

I concur with Melfi’s reading of the shifting narrative perspectives, and would add that the second-person narrative form particularly emphasises Caruth’s theorisation of trauma. Unable to report the events in the first-person, the boy even finds the stable third-person perspective inaccessible to him in these unbearable moments. Instead, the trauma is displaced into an unstable, distanced, second-person viewpoint. The cumulative effect leaves the reader with the impression that the boy is not simply indecisive – as he is described by van der Ziel – but, as Melfi states, fundamentally unable to process and report the events around him without emotionally and linguistically distancing himself from them.

Moreover, given that van der Ziel characterises the second-person as the ‘self-confession or self-accusation’ perspective, it is worthwhile noting that most of the boy’s self-loathing regarding his shame over his inability to control his bodily urges occur in the second person. The seventh chapter charts the boy’s ‘fear and shame […] of having to describe’ his ‘[s]ins of lust after women every day’ to a priest, which feels like ‘a kind of death’ that is transformed into ‘[s]uch relief’ that he renews his commitment to ‘never […] sin again’ so as not to sully the ‘sheer delight of peace, pure as snow’ with ‘grimy’ impulses of the body (\textit{TD} 40–42). By the tenth chapter this commitment is already proving impossible. The boy’s repeated repression of his bodily impulses provokes a somatic backlash in the form of an outburst of desire which results in extended masturbatory fantasies that border on rape. As weeks of abstinence give way to ‘weeks of [masturbating] orgy’ sparked by
‘unhappiness’, the boy becomes ‘haunted by the repeated hypocrisy of [his] life, anguish of the struggle towards repeated failure’ (TD 54). As Tomkins has previously argued:

[t]he monopolistic growth of shame and self-contempt is produced by the compounding of shame and self-contempt. When the child feels ashamed and discouraged after failure, his shame is increased by heaping shame or contempt upon shame. He is shamed because he has failed or surrendered or both. [...] In this way shame and failure are used to amplify each other.  

The boy’s unrealistic expectations for himself contribute towards his toxic internalised shame. These cycles of self-loathing, -hatred, and -contempt occur virtually simultaneously with the violence in his household, contributing to the layers of stress, shame, and trauma in the boy’s psyche. Hence, it is highly significant that these chapters are written in the dissociative second-person. Anne Goarzin comments that ‘[m]ore often than not, McGahern's characters are confronted with the impossibility of naming precisely, of representing notions they can hardly grasp’. However, when Goarzin’s observation is expanded to incorporate subjects as well as objects, the boy’s failure to state his own name becomes parallel with his sustained second-person narration: the boy cannot name himself ‘precisely’ because he does not understand himself as an autonomous subject. Referring back to Melfi’s observation that the boy is more comfortable viewing himself as an object (of abuse) rather than baring his secrets to Father Gerald, we might infer that the boy has internalised the mental, physical and sexual abuse inflicted on him to such an extent that he has come to view himself as an object, the recipient of ‘the things that have to happen’ (TD 70). When required to view himself as an autonomous subject, the shame and trauma of these events overwhelm and lead to paralysing indecision.

249 Tomkins, Shame and Its Sisters, p. 173.
This contrasts markedly to the boy’s use of third-person perspective, which frames the novel and also coincides with instances where he is not under so much pressure. At the outset of the novel the boy is too young to have considered his future; when asked by Father Gerald what he would like to become, he responds: ‘I don’t know, Father. Whatever I’m let be I suppose’ (TD 24). It is only when Father Gerald insists that the boy has academic potential that the boy begins to consider the possibilities of the priesthood and further education; with that comes the following realisation that his final examination results will be a significant factor that shapes his life. The symbiotic pressures of life-altering decisions and career-affecting exam results begin to send the boy into a panicked spiral. Immediately after this conversation (excepting an intervening first-person chapter I shall address momentarily) the boy takes up a second-person narrative which persists almost ubiquitously until the novel’s close. Similarly, after the boy has sat his examinations and is therefore unable to influence the course of his own life any further, the third-person narrative resumes – this also coincides with the boy’s epiphany I addressed in Part 2 that is it easier to comply with, and even begin to enjoy, hegemonic masculinity when he assists his father on the farm.

The third-person narration persists until the boy arrives at university, only to have ‘[t]he dream’ ‘torn piecemeal […] before the week was over’ (TD 172). A second-person perspective briefly resumes, in line with the boy’s tendency to dissociate from highly stressful events whilst they unfold. However, once he telegrams to request Mahoney’s permission to drop-out and the formalities are finalised, third-person narration once more resumes as the shame and stress of failure subside and the insipid security of the civil service becomes his new reality. Thus, the switch between second- and third-person is more significant than van der Ziel
initially allows. Whilst it does reflect the boy’s inability to make decisions, it also parallels the elements of his character that have been traced throughout this thesis: the shame of failing to live up to Catholic doctrine is layered with his father’s shaming tactics when bullying the boy. He is unable to maintain the cohesion of a third person perspective and slips into a ‘self-confess[ing]’ or ‘self-accusatory’ dissociative narrative style.

The boy’s use of the first-person is no less revealing. Though only three of the thirty-one chapters are written from this perspective, two contain what I contend is a crucial commonality in depicting instances where the boy accepts rather than rejects his body and its accompanying desires. As I highlighted at the outset of this thesis, the fifth chapter of *The Dark* achieved notoriety for its explicit masturbatory content and was repeatedly torn out and blackened by marker pen. However, this chapter remains one of the few instances where the boy inhabits his own subjectivity without distancing the events through third-person narration or displacing it into the second:

One day she would come to me, a dream of flesh in woman, in frothing flimsiness of lace, cold silk against my hands. […] She stirs to life, I have excited her, she too is crazy, get hands under her. One day she must come to me. I pump madly on the mattress, fighting up under her nightdress, trying to get into her, before too late, swoon of death into the softness of her flesh. […] “I love you, I love you, oh my love, I love you to the end of the world, my love.” The pulsing dies away, a last gentle fluttering, and I can at last lie quiet. (*TD* 30-31)

Though repugnant to many of McGahern’s contemporary readers (and to the Censorship Board), the passage exhibits many healthier tendencies than some of the boy’s later toxic fantasies. This scene stands in sharp contrast to the rape fantasy examined previously, in which the boy mentally unleashes his projected repressed desire as a priest and questions whether, when a girl comes to confess a sexual sin,
he would be so aroused that he would attack her or retain enough self-control to quietly ejaculate whilst listening to her story (TD 55). The boy acknowledges both acts as non-consensual and violating. Though elements of compromised consent are still present here, this is arguably due to being brought up in a society saturated with misogynistic depictions of women which he has internalised. The boy endeavours to construct a healthy encounter. He pictures being in love with this woman and attempts, in his inexperienced mind, to create a scene in which he is returning as well as receiving sexual pleasure by fantasising that has ‘excited’ his lover to the point where she is ‘crazy’ for his touch. Significantly, when he finishes indulging his bodily desire the boy finds himself at peace. Though acknowledging that he has ‘committed five sins since morning’, the boy has not yet started to punish himself with bouts of toxic self-loathing and ‘lies quiet’ having satiated his sexual needs (TD 31).

Chapter twenty-two is the next scene in which the boy inhabits a first-person perspective, and it has many commonalities with the one previously examined:

A girl in the hay, breasts and lips and thighs, a heart-shaped locket swinging in the valley of her breasts, I’d catch it with the teeth, the gold hard but warm from her flesh. The hay comes sharp against my skin once I get my trousers free. The mirage girl is in the hay, shaking hay into my eyes and hair, and she struggles and laughs as I catch her, and she yields, “My love,” and folds my lips in a kiss. […] “My love. My love. My love,” I mutter, the lips roving on the hay, the seed pumping free, and it was over. (TD 142)

As with the previous scene, the boy’s fantasy is not trouble-free. He has reduced the girl to her ‘breasts and lips and thighs’ and envisages himself in a dominating position where he catches the girl whilst she ‘struggles’ with him before ultimately ‘yield[ing]’ to the encounter. It is undoubtedly a fantasy based on dubious consent. However, the boy is a victim of sexual abuse: expressed assent has never factored
into his education about sex. He does not have a healthy image of two people mutually agreeing to an encounter on which to base his fantasies, but he nevertheless attempts to construct one. The boy again masturbates to a scene in which the desire is reciprocated. He fantasises that the girl calls him ‘My love’ and that he returns this compliment to her, implying he desires to be in a committed relationship. Though he imagines catching this girl whilst she struggles, the context he envisages is more akin to horseplay than genuine resistance; he pictures the mirage-girl playfully shaking hay at him and laughing. Some residual sexual shame arguably does persist. The boy holds back from fully committing to his fantasy by characteristically dissociating some of his body parts: he still refers to ‘the teeth’ instead of using the first-person pronoun ‘my’ when describing the non-normative, non-procreative erotic act of biting mirage-girl’s necklace. However, the dissociation is only partial; he still states that he wants to touch ‘her breasts’ and ‘her flesh’, and have the girl caress ‘my eyes and hair’ and ‘my lips’ in return. Such an admission is the closest the boy ever comes to articulating his own needs in the first-person, and the areas he wishes to be touched – eyes, hair, lips – are intimate rather than sexual. Notably, he does not state he wishes the girl to caress his penis at any point, which further underscores a deeper desire for a relationship rather than base sexual gratification.

Building on his previous first-person sexual indulgences, the boy resists the urge to label his somatic impulses as a sin this time. Whilst before he felt guilty after his ‘five sins’ and ‘shudder[s] […] at what the priest would say’, he nevertheless holds back from self-hatred for his actions and focuses purely on the terror of confessing them. In this scene, however, the boy refuses to attribute the language of Catholic shame to his activities (TD 31). Though he acknowledges ‘a dry depression settling’ over him, this is because he has to sit his final examinations the next day
and he is nervous (TD 142). Given the boy’s previous pattern of behaviour – toxic angst and self-destructive paralysis when momentous events happen – the reader may reasonably expect the boy to disintegrate under these nerves. However, the boy manages a ‘grim smile’ as he muses over what his semen may taste like to the cattle and concedes that, in that moment, he was ‘at peace’ with the situation (TD 142).

Such an admission, particularly when paired with the previous first-person masturbation scene, suggests that when the boy acknowledges rather than suppresses his burgeoning sexuality he fully inhabits his own subjectivity. The boy’s ability to occupy a first-person perspective in these moments indicates a rare internal cohesion rather than embittered struggle between the somatic and mental self. It is only when the boy accepts rather than rejects his body and attempts to free himself from religiously induced somatic shame that he can occupy his own perspective. Though the final first-person chapter does not contain compounding evidence of bodily acceptance, it directly follows the one in which the boy seems finally to give up his toxic cycle of somatic repression and shame-induced hatred of himself for failing to control his body. The ‘peace’ of accepting his body carries over into the next chapter, during which the boy narrates sitting his dreaded and decisive examinations in the first-person – a feat which a few chapters before seemed impossible. Though the boy cannot maintain this cohesive perspective, it marks a shift in his trajectory: there are no further bouts of crippling somatic shame after this moment. Given his upbringing, it is implausible that the boy could completely overthrow such formative shame regarding sex(uality). However, the change in tone indicates he has at least been able to lessen its chokehold.
The boy’s fractured narration stands somewhat in contrast to the girl in *A Pagan Place*, who occupies a second-person perspective throughout the entire novel. This unusual narrative style has received little sustained critical attention. David Herman notes that ‘O’Brien’s novel would seem to be a “mixed” second-person fiction, one that oscillates between the standard and autotelic modes’. Herman appears to take a sarcastic swipe at fellow critic Uri Margolin for his extensive ‘hermeneutic inventory’ – asking the reader to ‘note that [Margolin’s] questions concern the exact scope of the address functions attaching to textual you’, which he appears to feel stands in the way of Margolin’s analysis of the function of the ‘you’ form. However, it appears that he is guilty of this himself. Herman structures his article around the ‘five functional types of textual you […] (1) generalized you (2) fictional reference (3) fictionalized (= horizontal) address (4) apostrophic (= vertical) address (5) double deictic you’, despite claiming that the ‘double deictic you […] compels us to question the idea that we can clearly demarcate texts and contexts and to dispute ‘the idea that a linguistic string (a sentence) can be fully analysed without taking ‘context’ into account’.

In structuring his reading quite rigidly around these five elements of the primary functions of second-person narration, Herman fails to take the girl’s literary ‘context’ into account at all. For instance, he chooses the example of the girl stating: ‘Your mother said they would not force you, they were not believers in force’ (*APP* 168). Herman’s analysis of this sentence is as follows:

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The locution just cited seems to combine elements of (1) the self-address that sometimes occurs within the quoted monologues representing consciousness in third-person contexts [...] with elements of (2) those representations of consciousness in first-person contexts in which ‘a first-person compulsively buttonholes a second person who seems to be simultaneously inside and outside the fictional scene, inside and outside the speaking self’.\(^{254}\)

Whilst his analysis of the grammatical and linguistic features of the girl’s statement is correct, Herman relegates the plot as background noise and chooses not to address it. The girl has just failed an exam, which the teacher recommends she does not retake; her mother says that her parents will not force her. She fails the exam owing to severe emotional stress: Emma has been sent away in disgrace to have her baby secretly in Dublin and subsequently cuts all ties with the family. The girl’s mother, upset at how events have transpired, declares that the failed visit to persuade Emma to come home signals ‘the end of an epoch’ (APP 156). Whilst their mother never specifies what she means by this, the girl understands it to signify that Emma and her baby ‘would never be mentioned again’ (APP 156). The girl’s father concurs with the mother’s analysis by being ‘reluctant to mention Emma’; when he does, he ‘could not bring himself to utter her name’ (APP 157).

The events which precede the girl’s academic failure are, I contend, far more relevant to the trajectory of the second-person perspective maintained throughout. Again, everything is all about Emma. This confirms my earlier analysis of the girl’s namelessness as stemming from being smothered under the weight of Emma’s vivacious, capricious, but all-consuming personality. Additionally, the girl is also grieving: she has lost all connection with her sister whom she loves, despite the understandable envy also present in their relationship. I would argue the girl’s second-person perspective is, like the boy in *The Dark*, rooted in psychological

scarring – in her case owing to constantly feeling overlooked, under-valued, and neglected. This context, which Herman overlooks, is not secondary to her perspective but fundamental and sits in direct correlation to her namelessness – underscored by the fact that she lacks both a Christian and surname. Without any markers of identity (that she wishes to claim), the girl has no basis on which to establish a cohesive ‘I’ persona. Whereas the boy slides in and out of his own subjectivity as he navigates his sense of self to encompass both mind and body, and negotiates that tenuous self against the domineering presence of his father, the girl has no such recourse. Her parents seem to equally lack a sense of self. Without Emma – the only scaffold the girl has for her identity – it is not surprising she starts to flounder.

The final characteristic that both the boy and the girl have in common is their attraction to the Catholic Church as a career. Pertinently, neither of them is particularly motivated by religious fervour. This is also the element of their similarity which most obviously underscores a gender imbalance in the mechanisms of shame, as an examination of namelessness and narrative perspective has proven reasonably comparable in its working and outcome. On the one hand, the girl is disconnected from her own identity in the sense that she has no name and maintains a dissociative second-person perspective throughout; on the other, the boy expresses more overt feelings of toxic shame. Though the boy is closer to claiming a name and narrating his life from the first-person than the girl, the differences between them are not overwhelming thus far. What truly underscores the gender imbalance with regard to shame is their motivation for joining the church. For the boy in McGahern’s The Dark, the incentive is the opportunities that this lifestyle choice can offer him. As Melfi succinctly phrases it: ‘young Mahoney’s academic studies become his
potential ticket out’ of a life of drudgery.\textsuperscript{255} Father Gerald singles the boy out as a suitable candidate for the priesthood because of his academic ability rather than his religiosity: being academically gifted means that the boy ‘may not have to slave on any farm’ (\textit{TD} 25). The boy similarly sees the church as a way out, mentally noting that ‘[h]e’d go free in God’s name’ from the life of hard labour endured by Mahoney (\textit{TD} 25). The church offers the boy a sense of purpose, individuality, and a clean break with his father. However, as he becomes increasingly disillusioned with the idea, he then sets his ambitions on studying at university in Galway before settling for a job with the civil service. Though admittedly he romanticizes the vocation when he is younger, the priesthood is ultimately a career goal which can be replaced.

The girl’s decision to join a convent appears impulsive, but on closer inspection is a path that has been quietly laid for some time. Despite admitting to herself twice that she would like to become ‘a domestic economy instructress’, unlike the boy no one ever asks her what she would like to do with her life because they are so bound up with Emma (\textit{APP} 28; 185). The situation becomes worse after Emma’s pregnancy and resulting child. Despite the fact that the girl, unlike Emma, terminates her only sexual encounter because she is repelled by the priest’s ‘grotesque’ penis, she is brutally beaten by her father to the point where he leaves ‘lumps’, ‘blisters’, ‘nodules’ and deep bruising (\textit{APP} 177). When faced with the severity of the beating he inflicted the next morning, her father defends his actions:

\begin{quote}
He admitted that he was hot tempered but he had meant no harm, that it was for your benefit and was to instill [sic] into you good conduct. He said one prodigal in the family was enough. Maybe you had wanted to vie with Emma in iniquity. (\textit{APP} 183-184)
\end{quote}

The father’s punishment is framed in expressly religious terms: his justification of violence on the grounds that ‘one prodigal’ child was enough refers to Jesus’ Parable

\textsuperscript{255}Melfi, ‘The “Fascination of Abomination”’, p. 112.
of the Lost Son – ironic, given that the parable’s message is to forgive errant children.\textsuperscript{256} Moreover, the prevailing misogynistic opinions that women’s sexuality is rooted in the sin of Eve explored in Part 1 of this thesis underpins this episode. The father accuses the girl of wanting to ‘vie with Emma in iniquity’, suspicion alone being enough to condemn her. Instilling ‘good conduct’ into women means ensuring they are above even the suggestion of sexuality. A sexually aware daughter is a ‘prodigal’ child. Like Caithleen Brady in \textit{The Country Girls}, the girl has also internalised this discourse. She never directly confronts her father over the violence nor blames him for it because she privately feels he was right: ‘You held your tongue. You were like Emma, with a secret sewn into you’ (\textit{APP} 183). The reader is aware that the girl is \textit{not} like Emma; she was manipulated into the sexual liaison and did everything is her power to terminate it – despite initially being aroused – because the shame of pre-marital sex overwhelmed her. The priest touched her without given consent, but this does not mitigate the girl’s sense of shame.

Mirroring Mary MacNamara’s response in \textit{Down by the River}, the fact that she \textit{has} been sexually touched renders her damaged even to her own eyes. Years of Catholic indoctrination have taught the girl that any form of extra-marital sexual contact is a sin. The girl begins to punish herself for the encounter, trying to cleanse away what she perceives as a stain on her character:

\begin{quote}
The thing you had to be was fervent and more fervent and most fervent. You gargled with salt and water. You used lukewarm water because it tasted vile. You endeavoured to be sick then. You couldn’t put your fingers down your throat but you could put a goose quill down there, and you did […]]. It took some time for your stomach to settle before you could eat a piece of cake and begin the penance again. You meant to put wire in your throat […] but you failed to achieve that. Another terrible flavour was sulphur and you ate it dry and it got behind your nose and throat and nearly suffocated you. (\textit{APP} 184)
\end{quote}

The girl’s behavioural patterns are typical symptoms of shame. Collating evidence from a vast array of clinical studies, June Price Tangney and her colleagues conclude that ‘[r]esearch over the past two decades consistently indicates that proneness to shame is related to a wide variety of psychological symptoms […] [ranging] from low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety to eating disorder symptoms and posttraumatic stress disorder’. The girl exhibits many of these traits in her improvised self-flagellation, undertaken to rectify the smear she perceives on her soul through punishing her body – the original object of offence. Some of her actions are also potentially fatal; inserting wire in her throat and/or consuming compounds she does not fully understand could place her life at risk. Moreover, she experiments with what a contemporary audience would diagnose as bulimia: she deliberately consumes food in order to make herself vomit. That she performs this as an act of corporeal punishment rather than through any fixation with her weight does not change the significance of her endeavours – nor do Price Tangney and her colleagues indicate any correlation between shame, eating disorder symptoms and the desire to lose weight. Thus, given the background of self-punishment caused through a desire to be ‘fervent’, it is less surprising that the girl volunteers to noviciate when the visiting nun describes the gruelling training in Belgium in relative isolation.

Having signed up for the convent, the girl redoubles her efforts of self-denial and abstinence:

When you fitted on the dark clothes it added years to you. You could have been in mourning. […] You gave up sweet things. You set yourself tasks, penances. When you were moved to speak you held your tongue. Everything you did was the opposite to what you wanted to do. (APP 198)

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The girl appears committed to punishing herself for the rest of her life. She does not describe any sense of discomfit or loss that the clothing required of a nun dramatically ages her; her tone is neutral, even bordering on pleased. Her decision to give up ‘sweet things’ and her freedom of speech has not been requested by the convent; until she joins, she is free to dress and behave as she wishes. Her choice to pursue her earlier course of self-flagellation is entirely her own, apparently rooted in her earlier feelings of low self-worth.

There are other subtle clues as to why the girl may have decided to spontaneously join the nunnery. The nun explains that a girl may have to give up ‘[a] mother’s love, an earthly marriage, fame and fortune’ in order to pursue ‘the only true sweetness’ of ‘Christ’s love’ (APP 191). However, most of these the girl has never had or does not want. As has been previously argued, the girl has never felt loved by either of her parents and regards herself as the “second” child in every sense of the word: second born and second best. Given the traumatic sexual encounter with the priest which she rejected and received a savage beating for anyway, it can be assumed that the girl’s already abjective feelings towards the male body have been thoroughly compounded by this incident. In this context, an earthly marriage would not be as hard for her to give up as the boy (who is drawn to the female body despite his feelings of guilt and shame). ‘Fame and fortune’, alongside luxury and hedonism, were Emma’s goals and values, and the girl has seen Emma fall from the favourite child to the one that no one ever refers to. She has also witnessed the collateral pain, grief, and disappointment that Emma inflicted on her family through pursuing this lifestyle. The things that the nun states one must give up are not particularly difficult for this girl to imagine.
On the other hand, the convent has much to offer her. The nun promises her a ‘harvest of love’ from God, something which has been markedly absent in the girl’s life thus far (APP 191). The nun further ‘explained that if girls went [to the convent] they were educated for free with a view to becoming novices. It was like a summer’s day inside your head’ (APP 193). The nuns offer even more than the girl had hoped for – she will not have to settle for a life as a domestic economy teacher because she can have a thorough education as a nun. Though the boy has the options of university and civil service jobs open to him, as the second daughter of neglectful parents with an elder sister in disgrace, no one is interested in the girl’s career prospects. This is her only way out. Whereas the boy’s “settling” for a job in the civil service, is likened to Autumn – a slow death of his potential – the girl associates her decision with ‘summer’; in the convent her (cap)abilities can blossom and her horizons will broaden beyond the narrow expectations she hitherto envisaged. This positive imagery is reinforced by the girl’s feeling that ‘in the convent a name awaited’ her rather than stating a new name awaited her: she will finally get a sense of identity and purpose, even if it was potentially borne out of a need to punish herself.

Flagellatory fervour is not the girl’s only motivation. When the nuns come to the girl’s house to discuss her decision with her family, the girl is finally the centre of her parents’ attention:

You kept thinking towards a distant moment with you on a priedieu and nuns all around you, singing, and your parents and Emma in the gallery crying. You wanted to go there then. (APP 196)

The premise of the scene that the girl envisages is exactly the same as the one from her childhood, all that has changed are the details. Whereas before she dreamed of lightening her hair to become her father’s ‘whitehead’, this time she dreams of becoming a nun (APP 72). The end goal is unchanged: the girl seeks recognition.
What has altered is her definition and parameters of that recognition. Her final dream has a few crucial differences to the one in which she became more like Emma. This time, she has surpassed the fallen Emma; this time, she has succeeded in her own terms; and this time, her vision is achievable. The girl’s fantasy crystallises the impression that all she wants is to step out of her sister’s shadow and be noticed: she wants ‘a name’ (APP 205).

Thus, though displaying similar symptoms of shame, McGahern’s boy and O’Brien’s girl are on inverse rather than concurrent trajectories owing to their gender. The boy is attracted to the priesthood as an outlet for his ambition: becoming a priest will afford him an education, a revered position in the community and, mostly seductively of all, a change to overshadow and break with his domineering father. When he becomes disillusioned with this dream, he pursues an academic career with a civil service job as a backup. Whilst shame ultimately robs him of his full potential, the boy has a vast array of opportunities open to him that are simply unavailable to O’Brien’s girl. Indeed, in a sharp contrast, the girl is cornered into joining the convent precisely because of her lack of alternatives: becoming a nun is the only way she can broaden her horizons, get an education, find a name and step out of her sister’s smothering shadow. Given the sexual liaison that precedes her spontaneous decision to sign up, the girl can even be seen as a proverbial sacrificial lamb that must pay for female sexuality. Such a reading exposes the female body as the primary – even primal – locus of female shame. Whereas the boy’s sexuality results in the emergence of an identity and the adoption of a first-person narrative voice, the girl’s sexuality sentences her to a lifetime as a nun. The boy exercises his ambition through his priestly dreams, and the girl pays for a brief (and traumatic) erotic encounter with hers.
Though both express similar symptoms of shame with their namelessness and fractured perspectives, the outcomes are very different – this difference is rooted in their gender and representative of the findings of this thesis as a whole. The expression, even feeling, of sexuality in the female body is repeatedly punished. Caithleen’s sense of shame regarding her desiring body and trauma of indulging it is resolved in her self-sterilisation. The girl has one sexual tryst which, with the weight of sister’s disgrace behind it, means she must pay for it with her future. Though she has some opportunities available to her in the convent, as Father Gerald bluntly says to the boy: Priests go abroad as their ‘the last resort. They do good work but […]’ the second-raters [are] for Africa’ – the girl’s best outcome is the boy’s second-rate option (TD 49). At the outset of this thesis I cited Silvan Tomkins’ argument that the shaming ‘mechanism[s] provides a perfect vehicle for the transmission and preservation of social norms from generation to generation’. This has proven to be both highly effective, and revealed that the norms being preserved are the sexual, emotional and physical repression of women.

258 Tomkins, Shame and Its Sisters, p. 156.
Conclusion

Is shame gendered? Is gender shamed? These questions might seem tautological. Yet, scrutiny of shame in relation to gender has exposed a matrix of shaming structures embedded within John McGahern and Edna O’Brien’s depiction of rural Irish Catholic communities in their novels. An initial investigation into the dynamic solely between shame and gender swiftly revealed that this relationship is inextricably entangled with several other seemingly discrete concepts such as power, bodies, community, politics, postcolonialism, and socio-economic contexts. The exploration of the former could not be disaggregated from its engagement in the latter, confirming that ‘it is not possible to distil one aspect of identity such as gender and nationality for examination independent of other aspects’. Moreover, given that shame is itself a matrix – often residing alongside or masquerading as other negative affects such as fear, guilt, humiliation, contempt, distress, anguish, and disgust – we are also returned to Miryam Clough’s observation that ‘shame defies the possibility of neat categorisation or tight definition’. Thus, not only was my opening impulse to explore gender and shame independently of other markers of subjectivity corrected to incorporate nearly every aspect of identity, but shame itself proved impossible to isolate as a discrete affect. However, by pursuing a holistic approach to shame, this thesis has made significant inroads into examining how shame operates in individuals, their interpersonal relationships, and their social frameworks to expose the social, political and cultural functions of shame.

In McGahern and O’Brien’s novels, shame is gendered in more than one sense. Different sexes are undoubtedly recipients of distinct shaming

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260 Clough, Regulation of Female Sexuality, p. 31.
mechanisms which target gender; for example, hypermasculine shame and the impossibility of emulating virgin motherhood are discourses which only serve to shame one particular sex into complying with its corresponding prescribed gender identity. However, despite both sexes demonstrating at-times toxic and paralysing shame complexes, when evaluating the community as a whole it becomes apparent that a pervasive shame-culture maintains and even entrenches gender inequality. This is highlighted most evidently in Part 3 of this thesis, which exposed the disparity between the boy in *The Dark* and the girl in *A Pagan Place*. Both protagonists exhibit acute signs of Catholic-influenced somatic shame; both protagonists abject their sexual impulses; both suffer from shame to the extent they have no clearly identifiable narrative voice; both have no name; and yet the girl still emerges worse off from her experiences.

In every instance the boy has more opportunities than the girl. Though they articulate equal feelings of somatic shame, the boy learns to employ reason over emotion and begins to consciously dissociate himself from the overwhelming self-hatred of his body. The girl, however, is so overcome by feelings of self-abasement that she punishes her body by starving and attempting to poison it before signing up for a convent in a remote part of Belgium to permanently atone for her perceived transgression. Moreover, though the church appeals to the boy and girl as a career, the girl’s “best case” scenario is the boy’s “worst case” option. The girl is sold the possibility of international travel as one of the biggest benefits of joining the cloister, whilst Father Gerald admits to the boy that only the ‘second-raters’ are sent to ‘Africa’ and he should think of it his ‘last resort’ (*TD* 49). The boy has multiple
options – priesthood, university, the civil service – and by learning to lean on varying authority figures to countermand his father’s domineering presence, he is able to navigate the system. The girl has only two options: join the nunnery, or stay and live permanently as a disgraced younger sister. The social stigma of feminine shame proves too strong to withstand, whereas the boy’s greater agency allows him to withstand Catholic shame and take an independent job in Dublin, the girl accepts a place in a remote nunnery.

Nor does this impression alter much when comparing the boy to The Country Girls’ Caithleen Brady. The boy comes to terms with his somatic shame and is able to sustain two concurrent chapters in first-person narration, a step which I have argued intimates a burgeoning acceptance and eventual amalgamation of what Irene Nordin terms the ‘disembodied cogito’ with a corporeal self. In contrast (and despite having her own name), Caithleen is so overwhelmed by sexual shame – a feeling compounded by her lover, Eugene Gaillard’s, ruthless manipulation of her emotions – that she sterilises herself, leaving her in a state that makes her look like ‘someone of whom too much had been cut away’ (GMB 165). Caithleen’s actions point to the fact that, like her nameless counterpart in A Pagan Place, the weight of shame surrounding the female body is too much to withstand, making it impossible for her to navigate a path between her lived body and ideal version of femininity.

Given that these novels were written between 1960 and 1970, it is tempting to argue that this inequality lessens over time. However, McGahern

261 Nordin, Contemporary Irish Poetry, p. 1.
and O’Brien depict the social structures in rural Catholic communities as slow, reluctant, and even slightly impervious to change. Social and institutional shaming of female sexuality is so persistent that it pushes O’Brien’s characters up to and beyond the brink of mortality in her novels. In the epilogue to *The Country Girls* trilogy, Baba Brennan intimates that Caithleen accidentally committed suicide when she cut her wrists in Waterloo station because she so desperately wanted a man to rescue her and ‘swoop her off to a life of certainty and bliss’ – she dies because the narrative she was promulgated from birth is not real.\(^{262}\) Mary MacNamara in *Down by River* (1996) is driven to attempt to take her own life because the heavily Catholic-influenced Irish Constitution forbids abortion, forcing Mary to have to carry her foetus – the product of incestuous rape – to term. Her eventual miscarriage is depicted as the result of chronic stress, induced as much by the cold and judgemental indifference of patriarchal institutions like the police and justice system as the horror of having to bear her father’s child. That O’Brien’s novel is based on the X Case of 1992 further points to the continuing presence of shaming females in Ireland.

Despite the many attempts by critics to brand her as “out of date”, given that abortion in Ireland will still not be officially legalised at the time of this thesis’ submission, it is hard to disagree with O’Brien that sexual shame remains a stubbornly entrenched social and cultural issue in twenty-first century Ireland.\(^{263}\)

This prejudice against female sexuality peaks in the figure of the unmarried mother, and is ultimately responsible for Eily Ryan’s death in *In The*


\(^{263}\) The reforms to the Eighth Amendment are scheduled to come into force on the 1st January, 2019.
Forest (2002). Despite knowing that a mentally unstable, violent assailant is currently residing in the area, the Garda refuse to take Eily and her son’s disappearance seriously because they regard any unmarried woman with a child as inherently undependable. Their attitude changes swiftly to acute concern once a local priest fails to attend Mass – the sharp inference being that a man of the cloth, unlike an unmarried mother, is never unreliable. By the time the disappearances are treated as linked criminal events, all three hostages are dead. In order to stave off feelings of guilt or insinuations of professional malpractice, the sergeant cites Eily’s diary as proof that she was ‘filth, Eve, taken from the rib of Adam, to wreak unchastity upon the world’ (ITF 181).

O’Brien based both novels on contemporary events, underscoring the ongoing and potentially fatal consequences of shaming female sexuality within rural Irish communities.

Similarly, McGahern’s final novel That They May Face the Rising Sun (2002) depicts social pressures, themes, and structures that have remained largely unchanged since the publication of his censored novel, The Dark (1965). McGahern, like O’Brien, does not depict the power of communal censure as lessening over the decades. That They May Face The Rising Sun portrays the patriarchal bully, John Quinn, as successfully threatening the local school teacher by implying that he will get her sacked, ruin her reputation, and prevent her from working within a certain radius of the village if she does not comply with his instructions. Though the reader may sympathise with Quinn’s desire to shield his daughters from the teacher’s corporeal punishments, he nevertheless uses communal pressure rather than official channels to settle the dispute. Quinn uses similar tactics to shelter himself from censure over his
relentless pursuit for a wife and his brutal treatment of those who unwittingly
fall into his trap. He constantly cites the refrain ‘The Lord God has said in the
Holy Book “Tis not good for a man to live alone,” and I have always taken that
Commandment to heart’ to excuse his behaviour (TRS 23). Though used in a
wholly inappropriate manner and taken out of context, his paternalistic pursuit
of sex thinly disguised as Catholic piety places him beyond public
condemnation. Despite finding his behaviour repugnant, those around him feel
unable to articulate this openly.

Quinn’s successful employment of Catholic doctrine as a shield for
aggressive patriarchal values again hints at multiple undercurrents persisting in
rural communities. Firstly, no one wishes to be seen as potentially going
against Catholic teaching; secondly, whilst Quinn’s maltreatment of women is
seen as distasteful it is not viewed as unacceptable, indicating that a
heteronormative gender imbalance in which women are viewed as the property
of or lesser to men still persists in the community – this is underscored by
Jamesie’s euphemistic and disrespectful use of “laddish” discourse to recount
rumours of repeated rape. Thirdly, it encapsulates a theme running throughout
both McGahern and O’Brien’s work – that the collective power of the
community is able to overwhelm the individual and shame them into silence.
Quinn has learned how to harness that power by citing and manipulating
idealised paradigms within Irish communities – the family, marriage, and
Catholicism – to silence his critics. Rather than representing a step forward,
John Quinn is one of McGahern’s most brutal, calculating, and manipulative
hypermuscle men.
Though McGahern and O’Brien regularly cite the social norms applied
to shame them into conformity in their novels, these values are not
spontaneously or randomly decided but exercises in power circumscribed by
institutional bodies. This prompted my investigation into which institutional
bodies are claiming authority over Irish subjects in these novelists’ works, and
the obligations they place on the subject. It soon became clear that there is an
echo between the concept of the institutional body and the corporeal body, and
that the institutional body employs a mirroring set of shaming structures,
impulse control, and negative feedback loops to sanction and subdue the
physical body. The most overt and therefore easily identifiable institution is the
Catholic Church. However, as I argue throughout, the way in which Catholic
doctrine was institutionalised by the newly enfranchised Irish state reveals that
the particular deployment of Catholicism in the new republic was deeply bound
with its colonial history and postcolonial present. Thus the priorities lauded,
promulgated, and protected by the institutions of both State and Church are
also inherently political.

Religion, State, and postcolonial shame are consequently deeply
entwined, forming an inextricable bond best elucidated by Gerardine Meaney
who argues that, in order to offset the “white shame” of being colonised by
members of the same race, ‘there was a compensatory urge to promote an
essential Irishness which was purer – in effect whiter – than other European
races’.264 One consequence of this postcolonial dynamic observed in these
authors’ works was the creation of highly sensitive, reactive communities. As
John McGahern observed, part of the appeal of a deeply religious, Catholic,

Ireland was that this self-image allowed many to entrench a sharp distinction in their minds between the (pious) Irish and the (irreligious) English. When read alongside Sara Ahmed’s theorisation of the role of stranger or interloper within communities, further light was shed on both the proliferation of a heightened sense of ‘us’ in relation to ‘them’. This led to a false sense of security regarding the safety of ‘home’ and a resulting social blindness of the reality of domestic violence and sexual abuse within the family unit.

However, the abjective nature of a postcolonial society shaped by Catholic doctrine extended far beyond producing a country with a distinct culture from England. Meaney further identified that the discourse between coloniser/colonised often results in the latter’s ‘desire to assert a rigid and confined masculine identity, against the colonizers’ stereotype of their subjects as feminine, wild, ungovernable’.

In Ireland, this produced a compensatory culture of hypermasculinity – a culture that was also enabled and protected by Catholicism. The Catholic practice of Mariolatry – a hyperfeminine ideal – allowed a contrasting hypermasculine paradigm to flourish. This overlapped with and became embedded within the postcolonial “white” shame with the Irish State, allowing an intersectional shared interest in defining, regulating and enforcing stereotypical gender roles within Irish subjects.

Both novelists portray communities in which male subjects feel that all traits of femininity must be abjected in order to secure their masculinity. These dynamics are particularly apparent in McGahern’s father figures, who regularly conflate postcolonial shame with hypermasculine anxiety. In The Barracks,

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265 Ibid, p. 128.
Reegan regards his (terminally ill) wife and children as chronic burdens who drain his financial resources. He fantasises about saving enough money to walk away from his life and reminisces about the perceived simplicity of the civil war. However, whilst commercial success is a benchmark of hegemonic masculinity and therefore financial stress a sign of masculine failure, Reegan’s anxiety and anger over his relative poverty are induced and compounded by postcolonial shame. For Reegan, the civil war also represented a time of freedom and prosperity in his personal life; he was swiftly promoted within the Garda Síochána and regarded post-independence Ireland as a “promised land” in which he would prosper. His concerns are echoed almost precisely by Amongst Women’s Michael Moran, who was a guerrilla fighter also side-lined after the war. He too resents the form a newly enfranchised Ireland has taken, and acutely begrudges the fact that many of his children end up working in England. He considers the lack of employment opportunities in Ireland proof that the new state is nepotistic and anti-meritocratic, as well as validating English claims that the Irish were incapable of self-government. Like Reegan, he fantasises about his perceived sense of agency during the war, which is undercut by a sense of injustice that his friend McQuaid – who was his military inferior – has vastly outperformed him in civilian life due to his charm and commercial nous.

Both men evidence June Price-Tangney’s assertion that ‘shame-prone individuals are not only more prone to anger in general; they are also more likely to do unconstructive things with their anger […] including […] direct,
indirect and displaced aggression’. They are highly fractious, but displace their postcolonial and (hyper)masculine shame into domestic aggression to maintain the illusion of agency. Antoinette Quinn characterises Moran’s policy of autocratic isolationism as a ‘diminished form of home rule’; her pun on ‘home rule’ as a form of Irish self-government and domestic tyranny once again highlights the overlap between the institutional and physical entities. Reegan and Moran simultaneously conflate their sense of freedom, clarity of purpose and rapidity of progression in the army with their hopes for Ireland as a newly enfranchised nation; both men equally conflate the complexity of civilian life, their inability to adapt to the new order and cessation of achievements with a sense that the new republic has failed, but more fundamentally has failed to live up to its own image.

The social discourse of hypermasculinity enforces the need for complementary but contrasting displays of femininity. This is also rooted in the principle of abjection, as a masculine abjection of the feminine is only possible when femininity is clearly defined. Catholicism offered a paradigmatic model of femininity through Mariolatry, providing another touchstone through which Church and State complemented each other. Edna O’Brien herself states that she learnt from the nuns at school that women should aspire to be mothers because ‘[m]others were the best’. This mantra was overlaid with further social conditioning that, alongside going to ‘confraternity on a Sunday’, mothers were the primary carers, cooks, and cleaners of the household who ‘worked and worried and sacrificed and had the smallest amount on their plates when the family sat down to eat, […] wore aprons

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and slaved’ and were therefore permanently exhausted. These messages underscore the social understanding that the domestic sphere, particularly the kitchen, is a feminine space.

Such inculcations are witnessed in Caithleen Brady in *The Country Girls* trilogy, who cannot resolve the shame-inducing conflict between the paradoxical theological paradigm of maternal chastity and the patriarchal sexualisation of her body. She internalises and accepts Eugene’s gender and racial stereotyping of her as a ‘wild, debased person’ (*GGE* 234). The image of herself Eugene offers corresponds to the message imparted to Caithleen at the convent school that ‘girls, above anything else, are good and wholesome and modest’ (*TCG* 88). The early inculcation of this message perhaps explains why Caithleen fails to realise that it is Eugene who pushed for a sexual relationship, and reiterates the gender bias underpinning sexuality in which women, represented biblically through Eve, are blamed for the Fall.

Caithleen’s feelings of latent sexual and postcolonial shame escalate into self-loathing, particularly of her corporeal form. She punishes her body accordingly and sterilises herself. In removing her womb, she removes the organ that both Catholicism and patriarchal discourse consider key to her femininity. Without it, she cannot be the mother figure venerated in Catholicism, nor can she be the patriarchal wife who provides legitimate heirs. She renders her femininity void in both discourses and thus forces her body to conform to her own shame-ridden view of herself: worthless and unproductive. Her best-friend Baba Brennan, the erstwhile rebel against social conformity, is depicted as both completed and redeemed by

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269 Ibid.
motherhood – a move which simultaneously retroactively casts her wayward youth as a cry for maternal fulfilment rather than social change and extinguishes the primary voice of female resistance and critique in the trilogy.

The social obligations and psychological pressures these related paradoxical paradigms put the female body under are immense. One way in which women attempt to navigate the perceived shame of their own body is through clothing, which functions as a visual shorthand and symbol of what sort of women they are. In Part 1 of this thesis I examined how Martha Brennan’s wanton luxury renders her the figurative ‘whore’ against Caithleen’s Mama’s poverty-induced threadbare ‘virginity’ (the virgin/whore dichotomy is yet another social discourse that the female characters must navigate). I argue that Caithleen also attempts to traverse this precarious path using clothing: she pulls outfits on and off like identities. This process is one that Caithleen – inadvertently – learnt from the nuns whilst at school. The doctrinal teaching that girls are responsible for how men view their body is internalised by Caithleen and Baba to mean that they can regulate male desire by dressing (im)modestly. Caithleen worries about the sexual and social implications of her appearance for the rest of the trilogy. She attempts to pull together versions of feminine identity that she believes will please the men in her life, but ultimately finds these identities elusive and hollow. This anxiety is exploited by the predatory figures of Mr Gentleman and Eugene Gaillard, who attempt to mould Caithleen’s identity through instructing her on the ‘appropriate’ hair and make-up to be worn in their company.

The gendered nature of shame is apparent in every stage of McGahern and O’Brien’s career as well as in their novels, and is exposed most overtly in the
Censorship Board’s initial decision to ban the novelists’ works in the early 1960s. Whereas McGahern’s novel *The Dark* was banned for sexual obscenity, O’Brien’s novel *The Country Girl* contains no such explicit passages. This has led critics such as Donal Ó Drisceoil and Declan Kiberd to speculate that the novel either offended the Censorship Board by merely invoking female sexuality or because it was written by a woman who unashamedly aspired to more than motherhood. This divergence of standards has been maintained in the critical response to both authors. Over the course of time John McGahern has been welcomed into the Irish canon, celebrated as ‘the best writer’ by the multiple-award winning writer Hilary Mantel\(^\text{270}\), and hailed as ‘the Irish novelist everyone should read’ by leading contemporary Irish author, Colm Tóibín.\(^\text{271}\) The newer generation of Irish writers have also praised his genius.

Donal Ryan not only lists McGahern as one of his influences, but eulogised his fiction in an article for *The Irish Times*, claiming it:

> serves a noble purpose, to oust secrecy, to obliterate shame, to stand as mirror to the soul of man and reflect him back to himself; to delineate his terrible propensity for violence and abuse and to use narrative as a blessed valve to relieve the awful pressure of the ignored, pent-up, unspoken pain of existence.\(^\text{272}\)

Ryan barely touches on the controversies which ended McGahern’s teaching and almost his literary career. McGahern’s brushes with the censorship Board are skated over in a few brief sentences and any mention that his wife was once considered a contentious choice is absent. McGahern’s so called “transgressions” have been largely forgotten with the passage of time, and he is

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admired by Ryan as ‘hero’ who had the ‘guts’ to write about ordinary people.\textsuperscript{273}

Edna O’Brien has never been welcomed into the literary fold quite so fulsomely; her persona, aesthetics, and personal life continue to distract from her work. Still writing and publishing in her eighties (her most recent novel \textit{The Little Red Chairs} was released in 2015), this disparity might be owing to the fact her body of work continues to expand and will be eulogised upon her passing. However, her existing novels are not awash with the same levels of effusive praise from esteemed authors – for example, the cover of her 1976 autobiography is adorned with a bland quotation from William Trevor which simply asserts that the work is ‘Edna O’Brien at her best’.\textsuperscript{274} Her more recent autobiography \textit{Country Girl} (2012) contains a statement from Seamus Heaney on the inside cover jacket in which he praises her ‘lyric language which is all the more trustworthy because it issues from a sensibility that has known the costs as well as the rewards of being alive’.\textsuperscript{275} Whilst offering much warmer praise than Trevor, Heaney does not offer the same plaudits as the long line of eminent novelists declaring McGahern as one of the greatest Irish writers of all time. As Rebecca Pelan has pointed out, this is all despite the fact that Edna O’Brien is ‘the first Irish woman writer to reach a mass reading audience both within Ireland and abroad’, rendering her absence from the Irish canon puzzling at best and overtly sexist at worst.\textsuperscript{276}

\textsuperscript{273} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{274} O’Brien, \textit{Mother Ireland}, Front Cover.
\textsuperscript{276} Pelan, ‘Edna O’Brien’s ‘Stage Irish’ Persona’, p. 68.
Moreover, not only has O’Brien constantly had her personal life under the microscope, she has also been continually vilified for her choice of material. As was examined in Part 1 of this thesis, her novel *Down by the River* was criticised for presenting a ‘vision of Ireland […] still rooted in the 50s and 60s’ by Joanna Hayden, despite the fact that the novel was based upon contemporary events.\(^{277}\) This is in sharp contrast to John McGahern’s final novel *That They May Face The Rising Sun*, which was contrastingly praised for its sense of timelessness and lauded by *The Irish Times*’ Conor McCloskey for its ‘respect for custom and tradition’.\(^ {278}\) Similarly, Fintan O’Toole labelled O’Brien’s novel *In The Forest* a ‘moral mistake’ for fictionalising the Brendan O’Donnell murders, yet he exempts and exculpates (male) authors John Banville and Eoin McNamee from his criticism in spite of the fact that they have also both written novels also fictionalising Irish tragedies.\(^ {279}\) Declan Kiberd’s observation that the offence may lie more with the author than the novel seems as applicable to O’Toole’s criticisms in 2012 as the Censorship Board in 1960.\(^ {280}\) Divergent, even hypocritical, standards appear to plague O’Brien’s career; she is condemned for fictional realism whilst McGahern is commended, and denigrated for fictionalising tragic events whilst other male authors are excused.

Thus, the seemingly discrete concepts of corporeal and institutional bodies are in fact symbiotic. The institutions of Church and State work to discursively produce the gendered bodies in their communities largely through the instruments of

\(^{277}\) Hayden, ‘Unveiling the Naked Truth of Rural Life’, p. 40.
\(^ {280}\) Kiberd, ‘Growing up Absurd’, p. 144.
education and religion; the ideology is absorbed by the protagonists as children and enforced through a system of shame. This system is initially imposed through acts such as confession, and as the aversion to the imposed shame grows the regulation becomes internal as the subject begins to self-regulate its actions towards a system of conformity. Hence, a series of seemingly innocuous acts become highly significant – or signified: the way one dresses, the way one touches one’s own body and even the thoughts in one’s own mind are weighted acts of conformity or rebellion. As Tomkins states, the choice about whether one belongs to the community are accepted or rejected in the choice to succumb to or reject the invitation to feel (a)shamed.

The symbiotic nature of the relationship between physical and institutional bodies is responsible for the stasis witnessed in the works of McGahern and O’Brien. The physical bodies which conform to the religious and political ideologies also perpetuate and prop it up; the institutions which disseminate these ideologies collapse without bodies to conform to and perform its doctrine. In McGahern and O’Brien’s modern Ireland, this balance is delicately maintained which ensures that nothing significantly changes: neither the social ideologies which underpin the community’s governing values nor the asymmetric distribution of gendered shame. The outcomes of social, religious, patriarchal, postcolonial, and somatic shame are always more acute in the novelists’ female characters, because the weight of that shame is so much greater to begin with. Whilst most of the authors’ male protagonists can survive and navigate their shame complexes, many of their female characters are subsumed and subjugated under its overriding, abiding influence; the male characters have an agency regularly unavailable to the female. Neither novelist presents a female character who successfully resolves their shame complex:
Caithleen dies, Baba conforms, the girl is exiled to Belgium and Moran’s daughters absorb and perpetuate his misogyny.

Bodies, gendered expression of those bodies, and the spaces those bodies inhabit within communities are inherently political in the works of John McGahern and Edna O’Brien. Shame acts simultaneously to draw the characters’ – and the readers’ – attention to those politics even as it attempts to pull those bodies back into conformity. Both authors dramatise the crushing weight of social signification on the human body, and how it is made to symbolise, represent, navigate and perform a series of gendered demands which far exceed its somatic composition. Paradoxically, the shaming systems embedded within institutional bodies which discursively tie gender to the body also emphasises the disconnection between gender and body. As authors, they went beyond the phenomenological power of shame as an affect and probed its function as an effect: the effect of power and an effective means of regulation. John McGahern and Edna O’Brien depict protagonists who embody gendered shame in modern Ireland. Those bodies are dormant, not defeated. The characters who inhabit these bodies demonstrate an increasing awareness of the power of that body to subvert the unyielding ideologies of an Ireland on the brink of significant social, political, and economic change.
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