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Claudia Luppino

1 In Volume V of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, famously devoted to *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, one of the editors refers to Claire Keegan—along with other young women writers—as the author of a first collection of stories, *Antarctica*, whose "quality and wealth [...] guarantee that the future of the short story is in good hands" (Carr 1138). Apart from this illustrious instance, and despite the successful reception of her works by both reviewers and readers, only minimally does Keegan feature in critical studies of contemporary Irish fiction, and an extensive investigation of her subtle and highly poetic stories is still lacking to date.

2 In an attempt to confront the lamentable marginality of this author in the current critical debate around contemporary Irish women writers, this essay will locate Keegan's works in the panorama of the history of the genre that was long regarded as the Irish literary prose form *par excellence*. The intertwining of the old and the new that characterizes her narratives, both at the formal and at the thematic level, will be illustrated through a close reading of her investigation of the shifting balances of gender and generational divides, of the blending of rural and pagan traditions with global consumerism, and of the crucial role that nature and art play for her characters. Keegan's short stories will thus ultimately be considered as a refined specimen of the unique match of tradition and innovation that is the distinctive hallmark of the Irish short story of the twenty-first century.

The Contemporary Short Story by Irish Women Writers: Themes and Techniques

3 Contemporary Irish fiction is marked by a critical attitude towards tradition, which "involves reclaiming and revisioning rather than rejecting [it]" (Peach 11-12). If a vast section of recent scholarship stresses the distinguishing "formally conservative"

character and frequently retrospective outlook of recent fiction (Patten 259), even at times of radical social and cultural change like the Celtic Tiger years (Cleary 208-209, 230), in fact, a specific focus on the genre of the short story demonstrates that historical events and personal memories are certainly pervasive concerns, but that new perspectives and interests are also incorporated. What has gradually emerged in the Irish short stories since the 1980s, especially by women writers, is an outstanding "readiness to tackle current ideas and topics (gender as performance, retrieving women's history, immigration), as well as a willingness to experiment with language and form and embrace complex, non-linear narratives" (Ingman, *History* 255). Typical formal features, such as brevity and immediacy, undoubtedly facilitated such an evolution. The space of the short story is conveniently manageable for experimentation and for the quick acknowledgement of change. As a result, the speaking voice of oral tradition and (revisited versions of) myths, legends, fairy tales and folk themes have featured alongside poignant snapshots of the suppressed desires, haunting memories and buried fears that accompany contemporary life. The short story has managed to comply with the requirements of both tradition and modernity and therefore is, ultimately, the genre that best represents and expresses both.

4 At the thematic level, what Gerry Smyth has trenchantly characterized as "one of the most enduring and resonant of Irish cultural obsessions" (Smyth 55), the family, has constantly been a major concern for Irish prose writers, who have explored family relationships in a large range of situations, usually moving along the family's two constituent axes of gender and generation. Interestingly, the patriarchal structure and the often troubled dynamics of the traditional Irish family have allowed it to serve as a backdrop and a privileged site for the investigation of wider political, generational and cultural issues of identity formation and power distribution. The physical, verbal, and psychological struggles that engage the male and female members of often dysfunctional and dismembered fictional families thus act simultaneously as symptoms and as metaphors of the political and socio-cultural structures of post-independence Ireland, of their deficiencies, historical roots and ideological underpinnings.

5 The condition of women within the family and in society has been another key theme of Irish fiction. This has implied a confrontation with, and a questioning of, the symbolism traditionally associated with women in Irish literature, as well as an "updating," as it were, of fictional female portraits in the light of the secularization and globalization of Irish society and of the increasing presence and weight of women in the public sphere. Mother figures, in particular, have been substantially modified, and the impact of their choices on their children has been put under scrutiny. Ireland itself has long been represented as female: Hibernia, the Poor Old Woman, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, the Dark Rosaleen. Nationalism endowed these images with political value: if Ireland was a victim of Britain's violation, its purity and morality were trademarks of the Irish nation's alterity and integrity, and therefore needed to be preserved and guaranteed. The cult of the Virgin Mary, in turn, added a further layer of symbolism, implementing notions of virtue and purity into this complex intertwining of the private sphere of sexuality with the public one of politics. The icons of femininity that resulted from the conflation of nationalism and Catholicism were Mother Ireland and the Blessed Virgin. Such symbolic constructions also meant that colonial subjugation and gender inequality were associated, the nation's century-long fight for independence moving in parallel with, and adopting similar strategies to, the women's struggle for equal rights (M. O'Connor 133).

The emphasis on virtue and on the need to rid the nation of colonizers, however, meant that the fight for equality was not pursued with as much intensity, despite the hopes fostered by the participation of Irish women in the suffrage movement and in the nationalist struggle. In fact, women's lives in the Irish Free State were characterized by a gradual erosion of political rights (lower pay at work; marriage bar for school teachers and civil servants; restricted access to higher education; forbidden access to contraception, abortion and divorce) and by an increasing restriction to the domestic sphere. Ultimately, it is arguable that nationalism in Ireland disempowered women (Ingman, *Twentieth-Century* 7; Longley; Wills 1127).

6 The traditional domestic, caretaking and maternal responsibilities associated for centuries with women and with their function in society has, in more recent times, proved at odds with their search for, and right to, personal fulfilment and independence, and called for a new conception and a new representation of women. The culturally constructed character of gender has been questioned, and the need has been felt to understand and renegotiate male and female identity and roles. As a result, in the fiction of many contemporary Irish authors, "maternity and the natural world [...] emerge as the locus of dark, occult forces," and characters are torn between "disturbing and unspeakable secrets of the past and the desire for a liberating and satisfying futurity" (Fogarty, "Uncanny Families" 62). A noteworthy instance of the recent fictional probing of feminine subjectivity and motherhood can be found in those stories of mothers without child and on the related motifs of absence and loss (Fogarty, "Uncanny Families" 69; Tuttle Hansen 1-27). While negative portrayals of mothers do not lack in Irish literature, the last twenty years or so have witnessed an increase in cruel, self-absorbed and amoral figures, in stark contrast with the idealized and stereotypical self-sacrificing Irish mother of the nationalist and Catholic tradition. The shocking revelations, in the 1990s, of the abuse perpetrated by men *and* women in Church, and the state-run institutions in particular, appears to have irrevocably altered the notion of femininity as benign and nurturing, and to have prompted an updating of mother-figures on the literary page. Also, and very importantly, recent Irish women's fiction has begun to treat the mother-daughter relationship more extensively and in a gradually more positive light: the relatively late appearance, in Irish literature, of stories focusing on this bond (as opposed to the mother-son relationship), has had "consequences for Irish women's sense of self [which] can only be imagined," and the attention has mostly been put on "mutual hostility and conflict" (Ingman, *Twentieth-Century* 75-76). The mother-daughter confrontation in fiction often takes the shape of a repudiation of the old in search for the new, and results in the daughter's departure, in the attempt to escape her mother's disempowering influence and to avoid repeating her thwarted life. In the fictional production of more recent years, however, daughters have started to prove more and more sympathetic and empathetic to the mothers' social and cultural constraints, and to seek to recover their mother's history and to reclaim their voice, in a quest for identity and self-knowledge which pertains to both (see Fogarty, "Uncanny Families").

7 Another distinctive trait of contemporary Irish women's writing is the use of "traditional sources [...] [and] folk beliefs and narratives [...] as ways of coming to terms with what are sometimes naïvely thought to be typically modern traumas and psychological disruptions," and "to explore the shocks and pleasures which have always patterned women's lives," an approach that revitalizes and revalidates traditions rejecting "the distinction of ancient custom and a dynamic modernity" (Wills 1128). Such a use of

folklore and mythology in the fiction of writers like Éilís Ní Dhuibhne (to mention but one, notable example) can be interpreted as indicative of the attempt to voice long-silenced or repressed histories, but also to resist stereotypical roles and structures, and to experiment with modes of living and thinking that are alternative to the modern and postmodern ones. This consideration is strikingly resonant with the interpretation of women in Ireland as a "temporal anomaly within nationalism" which looks forward towards the future at the same time it wishes to freeze the "values" of the past (McClintock 66). The concept of temporal anomaly, in turn, finds a fascinating counterpart in the conception of ancient and traditional cultural practices and beliefs that survive side by side with modern and global elements as a critical counterpoint and an alternative way of living recently proposed by David Lloyd.

The World of Children, the Interrogation of Femininity, and the Reappraisal of Ancient Traditions: The Old and the New in Claire Keegan's Fiction

8 The thematic and aesthetic concerns outlined so far as characteristic of the Irish short story and its twenty-first century manifestations by women authors appear to surface in Claire Keegan's fiction also. Formal conservatism, the retrospective look afforded by memories and flashbacks, the focus on children and women within the patriarchal family, the survival of ancient rites and traditions alongside the lifestyles and mindsets of the global era, and the use of a very local idiom—all these elements are identifiable in her work.

9 Born and raised in South-East, rural Ireland and educated in Louisiana and Wales, Claire Keegan (b. 1968), to date, has published two collections of short stories, *Antarctica* (1999) and *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007), and the long story *Foster* (2010).[1] Awarded numerous prestigious prizes and identified by reviewers and critics as the literary heir of great masters such as William Trevor, John McGahern[2] and Alistair MacLeod, she has been described as "a great writer" (Ford *et al.*) and "a writer already touched by greatness" (Kiberd). Her fiction has been seen as characterized by "an enviably acute ear for speech, a vivid capacity to invent what people might be thinking that's of no consequence [...] and a bright eye for the unexpectable, fixing detail" (Ford *et al.*). Others praised the "close, lapidary beauty" of Keegan's prose (Enright), and her sparing use of epiphanies "to crystallise the pain as well as the possibilities of different kinds of desire" (Harte). The relatively small number of Keegan's publications so far might, at least partially, justify the lack of an extensive critical study of her fiction; yet the quality of her work calls for more attention. Focusing primarily on the stories with an Irish setting, this article will illustrate the ways in which Keegan, typically choosing the vantage point of children and women, and through the juxtaposition of successive generations and of their conflicting views, follows and challenges the shifting trajectory of the traditional representation of women in Irish cultural discourse.

10 The story entitled "Men and Women" is arguably the most obvious example offered by Keegan's fiction of the emergence of a new female awareness and of the shifting perception of women's position in society and in the family towards the end of the twentieth century, a century for a large part of which Irish women were "imprisoned in stereotypes of Irish womanhood not of their making" (Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction*

6), acquiescing in the rigid and supposedly incontestable gender roles prescribed by the State and the Church that were now questioned and ultimately rejected. The age of the narrator accounts for the limitations of her gaze: "[Santa] leaves me the Tiny Tears doll I asked for, wrapped in the same wrapping paper we have, and I think how the postal system is like magic, how I can send a letter two days before Christmas and it reaches the North Pole overnight, even though it takes a week for a letter to reach England" (*A* 123). Yet, this young girl casts a penetrating look at the relationship between her parents: she notices that, even on Christmas day, her mother wakes up at dawn to cook and to look after the rest of the family, while her husband and son sleep late and then simply enjoy the day off. The girl helps her mother, but unlike her she has difficulties accepting the situation: "'How come they do nothing?' I ask her. [...] 'They're men,' she says, as if this explains everything" (*A* 124). Later in the narrative, the girl's annoyance at the way her father treats her mother, and her wish to actively intervene to change things, open up the possibility of a female strategic empowerment through coalition, which sheds a positive, or confident, light on the potential of the mother-daughter alliance, as seen by the younger generation: "[f]or the first time in my life I have some power. I can butt in and take over, rescue and be rescued" (*A* 129). In a similar fashion, the boy in "Close to the Water's Edge"—one of the few stories with a non-Irish setting and with a male narrator—finds it difficult to understand why his grandmother spent all her life with her husband, something which she saw, on the contrary, as unavoidable: "She said if she'd had her life to live again, she would never have climbed back into that car. [...] Nine children, she bore him. [...] 'Those were the times I lived in. That's what I believed. I thought I didn't have a choice'" (*WBF* 100).

11 The lack of physical contact between their parents is perceived by children in Keegan's stories as a telling index of a loveless, or at the very best complicated, relationship. The young protagonist/narrator of "Men and Women" notices how they "do not kiss. In all my life, back as far as I remember, I have never seen them touch" (*A* 129). Similarly, Ellen, in "Storms," remembers her father's attempt to console his wife after a bad dream as a rare occasion: "my mother curling up on the floor, my father who never spoke a tender word, speaking tender words. Coaxing her, saying her name. Mary, Mayree, ah Maayree. The two people who never touched, whose fingers left the gravy jug before the other's clasp, touching" (*A* 71). After that dream, she goes mad and is confined by her husband first to an upstairs bedroom, then to a hospice, for the rest of her life. Before that happens, however, she tells her daughter how her husband's "hands bruised her for fifteen years" (*A* 73), a violence which could possibly help explain both her final mental collapse and her husband's decision to confine her safely away. If we accept this interpretation, we should certainly look at Ellen's mother as closely related to another character, namely Greer's wife in "A Scent of Winter." This woman is also the victim of a man's violence (in this case a stranger who rapes her in her house) and she also ends up locked in her bedroom, like a "madwoman in the attic," unable to recover from that traumatic experience. Going back to "Storms," it is worth observing how Ellen's fate was the same as many other girls in rural families, who inherited, as it were, their mothers' duties in the care of the men and other children and in the housework after the mothers' death or, as in this case, serious illness. Ellen's attitude, however, is quite different: "It's turning out that I'm taking no nonsense from anybody. They leave their wellingtons outside the door now. And I haven't heard them say the spuds are hard in the middle. I'd swat them with the serving spoon. They know that too" (*A* 75).

12 The protagonist of "Quare Name for a Boy" is an adult woman but, like the girls seen so far, she senses that a more independent life than that of the women of older generations must be possible. She moved to England to try and have a career as a writer; now she is expecting a child from a man she barely knows, and she has no intention to marry him, or to let anything interfere with her search for personal fulfilment and independence: "I will not be the woman who shelters her man same as he's a boy. That part of my people ends with me" (*A* 101). Unlike all the women in her family, she does not want to be an obedient wife and a mother, nor give up all her desires and ambitions to conform to what society expects from women:

> My female relatives [...]'re tweedy, big-boned women who like to think they taught me right from wrong, manners and the merits of hard work. Flat-bellied, temperamental women who've given up and call it happiness. We come from women who comfort men, men who never say no. [...] I'm no spring chicken any more. I should be doing something else by now, latching myself on to some unmarried man with a steady wage and a decent car. [...] Irish girls should dislike England; they should stay home and raise their sons up right, stuff the chicken, snip the parsley, tolerate the blare of the Sunday game. (*A* 95-98)

13 The open and somehow hopeful ending of "Quare Name for a Boy" is in sharp contrast with the closing scene of the title story of Keegan's first collection, *Antarctica*, which sees the protagonist naked and handcuffed to a stranger's bed. Something is missing in the life of this "happily married woman" (*A* 3), who decides to break her routine as a wife and a mother by betraying her husband with an unknown man: "she wanted to do this before she got too old. She was sure she would be disappointed" (*A* 3). Her tragic fate, however, appears to suggest that sexual transgression can only produce catastrophic consequences. A similar conclusion can be drawn from "Love in the Tall Grass," whose protagonist, Cordelia, also fares tragically from her transgression of rules, in this case an affair with a married doctor, after which she ends up cutting all her bonds with the outside world, freezing, as it were, her life while waiting for that man to be available for her again.

14 Although Keegan seems to be more interested in a reappraisal of the mother-daughter relationship and in the possibility of their strategic allegiance against patriarchal constraints, her fiction also offers a few instances of those "updated," or negative mother figures observed earlier. The most outstanding example is certainly represented by "The Parting Gift." The narrative employs an unusual enough second person singular[3] and focuses on a teenager who is about to move from rural Ireland to New York. The shocking revelation that confronts the reader is that this girl was sexually abused by her father for years with her mother's complicit acquiescence:

> Your turn at boarding school never came. By then your father saw no point in educating girls; you'd go off and another man would have the benefit of your education. If you were sent to the day school you could help in the house, the yard. Your father moved into the other room but your mother gave him sex on his birthday. [...] And then that too stopped and you were sent instead, to sleep with your father. It happened once a month or so, and always when Eugene[4] was out. (*WBF* 6)

15 Not only does the mother fail to protect the girl from the father's violence, but she is also responsible for that abuse, imposing on her daughter the duty to satisfy that man's needs in her stead. It is significant that the girl's most vivid memory of this woman is of her drowning some unwanted puppies (*WBF* 7). The second-person narration is maintained conspicuously throughout the whole story and does not seem to imply a generalization,

but is more likely to reflect the narrator's attempt to objectify or to depersonalize her dramatic experience, both as a result of her suffering and alienation and as a strategy for survival.

16 It must be highlighted, however, that the picture of family relationships produced by Keegan's fiction is not an altogether negative one. On the contrary, happy children, surrounded by loving parents and living in harmony with the natural world that surrounds them also populate her short stories, and in fact the reader is often struck by the stark contrast of such positive renderings with the gloomy and shabby interiors, never-ending labour and inescapable misery of so much Irish fiction. "The Ginger Rogers Sermon," for example, beautifully evokes life in pre-Celtic-Tiger rural Ireland and depicts tender and joking parents, playfully nicknaming neighbours and practicing their dances at home in view of a Saturday night out. The story is told, once again, in the first person and by a young girl. Some of the typical devices of oral storytelling are deployed here: a direct address to the audience; the use of the present tense; a colloquial tone. "Don't ask me why we called him Slapper Jim" (*A* 47), the opening sentence reads. Although her parents have a good relationship, this girl, like the girls of other stories by Keegan, finds the traditional male-female divide, and the respective roles associated with that strict gender division, awkward and difficult to understand and accept. Her mother, for example, tries to teach her how to behave properly like a girl: she rips out the last page of *Woman's Weekly*, "so Da can't read about women's problems" (*A* 49), and insists that, instead of cutting wood with the men, her daughter should "flute the pastry edge or wash the car at best is what she thinks. I should tidy my room, practice walking around with a book on my head to help my posture" (*A* 53). When the girl gets her first period, the mother instructs her not to say anything to her father, "always hiding women away, like we're forbidden" (*A* 57).

17 The narrator's use of the present tense is conspicuous throughout the story, with the only exception of the first three paragraphs, where the past tense informs us that she is now an adult recollecting the crucial events that marked the end of her childhood and innocence (*A* 47). Consistently with the structure of a largely simultaneous narration, the story, though told in retrospect, adopts the child's point of view, and the events are disclosed gradually as they occur, as if the girl was recording them day by day. In her description of herself splitting wood sticks with the lumberjack who works for her father, for example, there is no hint of the upcoming tragedy in her solid use of the present tense: "He and I are like two parts of the same machine, fast and smooth. We trust each other" (*A* 52); "Slapper holds my hand and stands me up on the bonnet of the car in the rain, telling me to say the poems. I read them off my memory. He asks me what 'immortal' means, but I don't know" (*A* 56). The use of the present tense also endows the narrative with a static and permanent quality which places it almost outside of time. The happy atmosphere of the story is compromised by the tragic end of the girl's friendship with Slapper Jim: as she grows up, her interest turns into a strong physical attraction and, on a snowy night, she slips into his bed and lets "his will [subside]" (*A* 62). Shortly afterwards, presumably tormented by guilt and shame, Slapper Jim hangs himself on a tree. Interestingly, the narrator-protagonist seems to feel responsible or guilty only when she notices her brother's look: "Eugene standing there looking at me like I did it [...] [his eyes] are full of accusation and blame" (*A* 64).

18 The long story *Foster* is arguably Keegan's most significant illustration of the possibility of familial harmony. Described by a reviewer as "a haunting, crafted narrative" which "has

beauty, harshness, menace and the spine of steel worthy of high art" (Battersby), the story focuses on a very young girl and on the summer she spends with her aunt and uncle, Edna and John Kinsella. Set in the rural South-East of Ireland in the early 1980s (as indicated by several references, most notably to the hunger strikes in the North,[5] *F* 31), the story is told in the first person by the girl, who is initially unsure of what to expect, but soon becomes very fond of these new places and people and of their busy but quiet lifestyle and affectionate behaviour: "this is a different type of house. Here there is room, and time to think. There may even be money to spare" (*F* 13). The story's heavily internal focalization is particularly evident in the descriptions, where both places and people are associated with some characterizing detail or episode that made them memorable for the child who is recounting them, and the adults' behaviour often remains inexplicable. Only in one instance is the underlying presence of an adult author behind the child-narrator betrayed: "[e]verything changes into something else, turns into some version of what it was before" (*F* 26), the girl concludes while trying to fall asleep on the first night at the Kinsellas, thinking about her sisters' clay figures dissolving into mud under the rain. Her comment is perhaps too philosophical for a child her age. The author's overhanging presence, and her skilful role as the conductor of this very refined symphony, can also be perceived on two other occasions. The girl's first entrance into the Kinsellas' house is described like a birth: "[s]he leads me into the house. There's a moment of darkness in the hallway; when I hesitate, she hesitates with me. We walk through the heat of the kitchen where I am told to sit down, to make myself at home. Under the smell of baking there's some disinfectant, some bleach" (*F* 8). The alternation of darkness and light, of coolness and warmth, of smells of food and detergents, and the woman and the child sharing the novelty of being alone together, all this is reminiscent of a birth-scene, the girl's second birth, as it were, to a new life. Similarly, the girl's first walk to a nearby well with Mrs Kinsella, her reflecting herself in the water and her drinking some of it, is characterized like a baptismal rite, marking the beginning of something new, the woman as a godmother for this cathartic moment, in a sublime mixture of fear and pleasure (*F* 23).

19 Another noteworthy aspect of *Foster* is its staging of two sets of parents, which allows an insight and an appreciation of the different expressions of parenthood possible. If the girl's mother is exhausted and overloaded by endless pregnancies and poverty, as opposed to the tidy and peaceful atmosphere that surrounds Edna Kinsella, the most noticeable differences emerge from the comparison between the two father figures: the girl's biological father drops her at the Kinsellas' without saying goodbye and telling them that they can keep her "as long as they like" (*F* 9) and that "[s]he'll ate [sic] but you can work her" (*F* 12); Kinsella, for his part, talks with the girl, jokes with her, patiently teaches her to read, gives her money to buy sweets.

20 As far as language is concerned, Keegan's fiction employs an interesting blending of standard English and Hiberno-English. The language spoken by her characters is deeply rooted in their background in terms of age, education, and geography, and this background, as well as the residual influence of the Gaelic language, are reflected and reproduced accurately in her pages. In "The Ginger Rogers Sermon," for instance, typically Hiberno-English words, such as "yoke" (*A* 48),[6] or graphically rendered Irish sounds, such as "baste" for 'beast' (*A* 54), "me" for "my" (*A* 58), "Jaysus" for "Jesus" (*A* 64), punctuate the narrative. *Foster* also usefully and clearly exemplifies the alternation of the standard English of the descriptions with the colloquialisms and Hiberno-English

structures of direct speech, which is typical not only of Keegan's, but also of many Irish short stories of the past decade. The habit of answering a question by repeating the verb, instead of saying yes or no, for example, can be observed, and typically Irish lexical items feature, such as "ye" for "you" plural, "ate" for "eat," "aye" for "yes," "wud" for "with," "wee" for "little," "girleen" for "little girl" (*F* 16), "aisy" for "easy." Interestingly, language in *Foster* is also the means through which Keegan exposes, as a reviewer observed, "the nastiness of human nature at its most petty" (Battersby). The gossipy, sometimes insensitive and cruel, nature of people transpires in the shopkeepers' curiosity towards Mrs Kinsella in the nearby town of Gorey and in the neighbours' comments at a wake (*F* 53-59). The few stories set in America also reflect the speakers' accents, primarily in the graphical reproduction of their broad vowel sounds, in the frequent lack of agreement between subject and verb, and in the use of double negations and short forms, but ultimately in a more farcical and formulaic, altogether less convincing, fashion than the Irish stories.

21 There is one last characteristic of Claire Keegan's short stories that deserves critical attention. Set in the recent past or in our days, these narratives often blend ingredients that pertain to the globalized, consumerist and secular outlook of twenty-first century Ireland with the narrative strategies, and the very practice, or performance, of more traditional, sometimes ancient, elements of Irish culture, such as pagan rites and beliefs or oral storytelling. The story that perhaps best demonstrates the inclusion of current issues and ideas or, to put it differently, the author's acknowledgement of the changes that have affected the Irish society and lifestyles in very recent years, is the title story in *Walk the Blue Fields*. The focal character is a priest who is uncertain of his vocation: he had an affair with a young girl, but now he is celebrating her wedding. At the meal that follows, the guests are served exotic food items, whose names they can barely pronounce: "'Wouldn't a piece of boiled ham do us? It's far from alvocadoes [sic] we were reared,' she says, looking for praise" (*WBF* 24). Far from the prejudices of most of the guests towards the Chinese healer who lives in the area ("'It's all talk. Sure what use could he be? Hasn't a word of English. There'd be no way of telling him what's ailing ya. [...] Sure he's a Chink: ates [sic] dog and shites tay [sic]!,'" WBF 26), the priest visits the Chinese man, and their encounter prompts an epiphany for the priest, who seems to find peace and satisfaction in a quasi-pantheistic appreciation of the beauty of nature: "The blue night has spread itself darkly over the fields. [...] Where is God? he has asked, and tonight God is answering back. All around the air is sharp with the tang of wild currant bushes. A lamb climbs out of a deep sleep and walks across the blue field. Overhead the stars have rolled into place. God is nature" (*WBF* 38). This celebration of natural beauty as a lay path to spiritual and intellectual happiness is deeply significant, and not dissimilar from the conception of art which the protagonist of "Quare Name for a Boy" seems to embody. Keegan's interest appears to lie not so much in traditional religion and institutionalized religious practices, as in those elements of pagan beliefs and rites that have not completely vanished from the Irish cultural discourse. In this light, *Walk the Blue Fields* hosts several stories where the use of the present tense and the reference to ancient habits and beliefs result in simultaneous narratives that have all the taste of oral tales. Interestingly, the author explains some references to folklore and popular beliefs and sayings in an Appendix to the collection, where a translation of some Irish words that appear in the text is also provided.

22 "Night of the Quicken Trees" is possibly the most significant and representative illustration of the taste of oral tales and folklore that Keegan's fiction can have. The main character, Margaret Flusk, not unlike Cordelia in "Love in the Tall Grass," has had an illegitimate affair with an unavailable man, a priest and a first cousin, from which she was the one who fared worst in the end, bearing and eventually losing a child. Her clothes and behaviour are perceived as wild and strange by the locals, including "Stack, the forty-nine-year-old bachelor who lived next door" (*WBF* 127), sharing his dirty and untidy cottage with his beloved goat, Josephine. Their first contact occurs when she gets rid of her feet water late at night and accidentally throws it on him; as the excerpt from a traditional Irish fairy tale that precedes the story explains, their relationship is therefore marked by bad luck. Margaret's most interesting aspect here is precisely her strong adherence to ancient beliefs and superstitions:

> If she believed in the forces of nature she was yet determined to avoid bad luck. She'd had her share of bad luck so now she never threw out ashes of a Monday or passed a labourer without blessing his work. She shook salt on the hearth, hung a Saint Bridget's cross on the bedroom wall and kept track of changes in the moon. (*WBF* 126)
>
> In all the years she lived in Dunagore, she never lit her own fire, never failed to pull rushes in February and, hard as she tried, could never throw ashes on a Monday or go out as far as the clothesline without placing the tongs across the pram. (*WBF* 157)

23 As is well known in popular belief, being the seventh child, she has healing powers, which her neighbours eagerly avail of, as soon as they find out. She senses things before they happen and she seems to have a very intense bond with natural elements. The frequent references to proverbs and beliefs, some strange animal apparitions, as well as premonitory dreams that turn out to be correct, and "healers and seers [...] [that] actually do heal, and do see" (Enright 2007), confer upon this fascinating story an aura of magic and of traditional storytelling.

24 The other story that powerfully testifies to Keegan's interest in myths and folklore is "The Forester's Daughter." The protagonist, Martha Deegan, is yet another non-conventional mother figure, who looks after her three children with no particular love or care: "When [the dog] gets back, Martha puts the frying pan on the kitchen floor and watches while he licks it clean. Without so much as a wipe she hangs it back up on its hook. Let them all get sick, she thinks. She doesn't care" (*WBF* 64). But what interests us more here is that Martha is a very skilled storyteller, who charms her neighbours when she tells them a story (in her, one could possibly see a likely *alter ego* of Keegan's herself): "On those rare nights they saw her pluck things out of the air and break them open before their eyes. They would leave remembering [...] the woman with the dark brown hair which got looser as the night went on and her pale hands plucking unlikely stories like green plums that ripened with the telling at her hearth" (*WBF* 56); "Martha concentrates on the room. [...] Before she can begin she must find the scent; every story has its own, particular scent" (*WBF* 79). As Anne Enright pointed out, the characters in Keegan's second collection of short stories "have a belief in the redeeming power of tales, especially their own—but, like spells or curses, these must be spoken aloud." In "The Forester's Daughter," the climax is reached when Martha, exasperated by her husband's lack of affection for her and their children, and eager to take her revenge on him after he hurts the daughter's feelings, invites all their neighbours and tells them the story of her betrayal. Though told "in disguise" (*WBF* 83), her story is a *mise en abîme* of the story itself, in that it duplicates what the reader has already learnt about the forester and his wife

and children. Another interesting aspect of "The Forester's Daughter," in terms of narrative techniques, and undeniably a very fascinating one, is the extent and the way in which the narrator penetrates each character's thoughts and presents us with their different perspectives, in turn. A light is thus shed not only on Deegan's hard work and anxiety to extinguish his mortgage, or his idealized memories of childhood; nor on his wife's disillusion and plans to escape; but also on their second son's imaginary world as he plays, and even on the dog, with his thoughts and dreams described in as much detail as those of the human beings around him (*WBF* 64-65). The narrator's omniscience is absolute here, and Keegan's skill obvious. The switching points of view of this story are a challenging formal feature. Writing, for her, can start from looking and following the desire of the observed object, trying to imagine what he or she thinks and wants, and this can result in writing from a dog's point of view.

25 Finally, Martha's affection for her hens is noteworthy, in the light of the frequent association of hens with women in Irish fiction (hens minded by women; "egg money" as a small measure of independence; etc.); this draws a significant parallel between the exploitation of both as mere bodies, for their procreative function (for their egg-laying capacity or for their flesh; see M. O'Connor 143-145). In an insightful study of the role of the animal in relation to gender and cultural identity in the work of Irish women writers, Maureen O'Connor has remarked: "Martha's own radical ideas about the status and worth of the lowly hen, who shares her narrow life of enforced and loveless reproduction, is made clear when, after the fox kills a number of the birds, Martha insists on giving them a proper burial [...]. The waste of meat strikes her husband as crazy" (M. O'Connor 146-148). More generally, the frequent similes and metaphors that associate female characters with animals, notably in women's fiction, are particularly relevant as indexes of the fact that, in the deeply Catholic and conservative Ireland of the mid-twentieth century, women and their bodies were considered important primarily for their role in reproduction. Animals, moreover, particularly domesticated animals, share with women the fate of being subject to the pressures of both nature and man, as well as being relegated in the position of mindless servants.[7] As one scholar observed, "[t]he otherness of women from an androcentric perspective finds a correlate in the more radical otherness of the animal from an anthropocentric perspective" (Scholtmeijer 232; see also Kristeva). In the (post)colonial context, the figure of the animal is usually employed to negotiate colonial questions of control of language and body, and to metaphorically represent violence and appropriation.

26 Introducing her *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women. Nation and Gender*, Heather Ingman has observed that "much Irish women's writing, from all parts of the twentieth century, implicitly or explicitly deals with women trying to find a place for themselves within the narrative of the Irish nation" (1). In the section of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* dedicated to post-1960s women's fiction, Claire Wills remarks on the frank and penetrating exploration of personal issues that has characterized Irish women's imaginative writing in recent decades and their growing concern for "women's search for personal and sexual fulfillment, the desire for economic independence, the problems posed by marital breakdown and unwanted pregnancy, and the painful need to confront social taboos" (1125). In tune with these critical analyses, and as this essay has illustrated, Claire Keegan's subtle and compelling fiction portrays female characters of all ages trying to cope with claustrophobic lives as daughters, mothers and wives, in a variety of situations. These range from their subjugation and marginality at home and in society, to

the violence they suffer from their fathers and husbands; from the contrasting feelings and implications of motherhood (love, sacrifice, loss), to their often uneasy relationship with art; and from dangerous, extra-marital relationships to the issues of madness and superstition. The setting of many of Keegan's stories in the past and in remote rural villages may, at least partially, account for the fact that her female characters are still struggling to accommodate their needs and innermost feelings with still harsh material conditions. Her simultaneous inclusion of traditional and new elements, both at the linguistic and at the thematic level, also proves coherent with the dialogic relationship that the contemporary Irish short story appears to entertain with its most ancient historical and cultural legacies, on the one hand, and with the challenging stimuli offered by global forms, on the other. The resulting intertwining of the old and the new is most charming, and reassuringly ensures that, at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the future of the Irish short story *is* in good hands.

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NOTES

1. In this article, I will refer to these three works through the abbreviations *A*, *WBF*, and *F*, respectively.

2. Keegan has acknowledged the influence of John McGahern's work on several occasions (see, for example, her 2007 interview with Rosita Boland). Such an influence transpires in her choice of settings and in her style, although her thematic concerns and the perspective of her characters are distinguishably those of a younger generation, and gender issues are more centre stage.

3. In the light of the influence, outlined earlier, of John McGahern on Keegan, it is noteworthy that the second person singular is used extensively by McGahern in his 1965 novel, *The Dark*, whose protagonist is also an adolescent that suffers sexual abuse.

4. Eugene is the girl's older brother.

5. Between May and August 1981, ten Irish Republican prisoners starved themselves to death in the prison of Long Kesh outside Belfast; the most famous, and the first to die, was Bobby Sands. The hunger strike was the culmination of a series of protests that started in 1976 to have their status as political prisoners and other basic rights recognized by the British authorities.
6. Dolan's *Dictionary of Hiberno-English* defines "yoke" as "any contrivance or implement; something whose name does not spring immediately to mind" (291).
7. Cows are also particularly effective in expressing female helplessness. This emerges most potently in "Storms," where the protagonist's mother feeds and talks to imaginary cows around their house: "And that was when she started living upstairs" (*A* 72).

ABSTRACTS

Bien que ses recueils de nouvelles, *Antarctique* (1999), *A Travers les Champs Bleus* (2007) et la longue nouvelle *Les Trois Lumières* (2010) aient été bien accueillis par l'ensemble de la critique, il est regrettable qu'il n'existe toujours pas d'étude approfondie sur l'œuvre de Claire Keegan (née en 1968). Tentant de combler cette lacune, cet article place ces nouvelles subtiles et sensibles dans le contexte du débat critique actuel sur les écrivaines irlandaises contemporaines. Il aborde une réflexion sur l'ancrage de la nouvelle dans la tradition du conte oral, et sa promptitude à aborder des problèmes actuels. L'article propose une lecture analytique des nouvelles de Keegan, et s'intéresse en particulier aux thèmes récurrents dans les recueils et aux techniques narratives spécifiques. Une attention particulière est également portée aux divisions entre générations ou entre masculinité et féminité, aux articulations entre traditions rurales et consumérisme mondial, ou encore au rôle crucial que jouent la nature, l'art et la religiosité.

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