Giving Shape to the Moment:

The Art of Mary O’Donnell, Poet, Novelist and Short-Story Writer

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5 ‘Lifting Facades’: Mary O’Donnell’s Short-Story Writing[71]

María Elena Jaime de Pablos

The Mask as a Symbol of the Suppression of the Individual Self in O’Donnell’s Writing

Mary O’Donnell has written two collections of short stories: *Strong Pagans* (1991) and *Storm over Belfast* (2008). The focus of these compelling, vibrant, and well-crafted stories ‘is turned towards an interrogation of the world, usually through the eyes of a central female character’ (O’Donnell 2009: 172). Their protagonists are sometimes portrayed as undergoing a personal crisis, not infrequently generated or worsened by either physical or psychical disorders. These stories are spaces for reflection upon the ‘I and my circumstances’ – in fact, many are written in the first person – in which the ‘I’ lets his/her unconscious flow in search of meaning in an absurd, grotesque, often nonsensical, inhuman and postmodern world.

These characters, however, try to conform initially and avoid revealing their true selves by wearing a mask, a ‘public face’, which leads us to observe human existence as a performance of extraordinary dimensions. This mask, which symbolizes the suppression of the individual self and the outward acceptance of a role, designed and imposed by the social order, dehumanizes people and induces them to experience identity problems.

In an interview with Mary O’Donnell carried out by Helen Thompson, Thompson draws attention to how O’Donnell ‘focus[es] on facades people create to maintain the appearance of normal relationships’, to which the writer responds that she does that ‘without ridiculing them – unless they are intrinsically so’ – and adds that ‘Lifting facades has to be one of the joys of being a writer’ (in Thompson 2003: 124-5).

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[71] The author wishes to acknowledge the funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Research Project “Bodies in Transit 2”, ref. FFI2017-84555-C2-1-P) and the European Regional Development Fund for the writing of this essay.

But can individuals really liberate themselves from their masks and be authentic without being socially punished or, alternatively, without going mad? Mary O'Donnell poses this question over and over again in her short stories, implicitly or explicitly, as in 'Aphrodite Pauses, Mid-life', from *Storm over Belfast*, in which the main character, Carol, wonders 'what […] is the alternative to a public face? War? Enmity? Madness?' (O'Donnell 2008: 209). The writer herself uses her characters to form a radical critique of a postmodern society in which isolation, egotism, discrimination, violence and falsehood seriously limit the possibilities for the self-realization and happiness that all individuals should be entitled to.

During an interview on 19 March 2017,[72] O'Donnell referred to the influence of the American writer Flannery O'Connor, whose ideas about the revelation of the truth and justice in her stories rang true for O'Donnell in her own writing. As a result, in several stories, justice is seen to be done and unbalanced situations are rebalanced as a result of a character's actions.

Lifting Facades and Short-Story Writing: *Strong Pagans* and *Storm over Belfast*

In these two collections of short stories, as in her other works, O'Donnell shows her 'willingness to tackle challenging topics such as the evolving role of women in Irish society, sexuality, religion, intergenerational relationships, menopause, immigration and patriarchy' (Maher 2015). All these topics allow her to explore national identity 'in the context of the conflict between traditional Catholic Ireland and a radically changing nation' (Comerford 2006: 282-3), female identity 'largely associated with the ability to reproduce' (2006: 281) and the question of female genius and how this is perceived by a male-dominated society in which women writers receive much less public recognition.[73]

The protagonists of her stories – educated, young, middle-aged and elderly outsiders, misfits or strangers in her own homeland – are mainly women. Employing Heather Ingman's words, O'Donnell makes 'use of the realist mode to explore [these] women's lives and the female consciousness in a way that often implicitly and sometimes explicitly challenges the religious [cultural] and political [received ideas]' (Ingman 2013: xv). She finds models for her characters in German writers such as Frisch Dürrenmatt, Böll and Elias Canetti, whose works are 'like an intellectual and emotional liberation' for her.[74]

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[72] Personal conversation with Mary O'Donnell on 19 March 2017. Printed with her permission.

[73] O'Donnell affirms that 'Female literary writers are indeed largely underrated unless they win a very big prize or unless they write formulaic books. It is largely male names which are referred to when literature is being discussed and what it has to say' (in Libran Writer (Lia Mills) 2014).

The stories in *Strong Pagans* include pieces written from the early 1980s right up to 1990s, a period during which Ireland was only beginning to shake off deeply engrained social repressions. In this context, we can observe that many of her characters, particularly the women, are at odds with the world around them. They live in a society which is neither liberal nor forgiving of women of ambition. Her characters are frequently courageous, defiant people who resist certain cultural norms, although they themselves are outwardly quite 'normal'.

By the time *Storm over Belfast* was published in 2008, Ireland had undergone major changes, partly as a result of its then burgeoning economic status, which itself ushered in a period of new freedoms, but also as a result of the natural evolution and implementation of new, more liberal legislations regarding personal rights. According to Derek Hand, the stories in this collection are 'mostly of the Irish professional classes, such as academics and radio producers. Many stories have at their centres artist figures, with writers especially being focused on' (2008).[75]

The Ireland portrayed in this second collection of short stories is more secularized. Its characters no longer inhabit a traditional environment. Sexual morality, for one thing, is not an issue. Women are no longer required to be fertile in order to be seen as fully functioning members of society. However, despite the fact the litmus test of what is correct and acceptable is now registering different colours, O'Donnell's female protagonists are still resisting something.

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[74] Mary O'Donnell studied German at Maynooth University. In an interview (19 March 2017), O'Donnell remarked that 'German literature was like an intellectual and emotional liberation for me. The ideas I encountered in, for example, Frisch Dürrenmatt, Böll and Elias Canetti, revealed a world which – although it was often a topsy-turvy, odd-angled one, made more sense to me than the so-called logic of the Irish everyday in the 1970s and 1980s.'

[75] Quotation taken from Mary O'Donnell's official website.

Strong Pagans

Mary O'Donnell's first collection of short fiction, *Strong Pagans*, was published in 1991. It contains seventeen stories. The opening piece, 'Breath of the Living', addresses 'the issue of infertility […] to critique traditional views of motherhood' (Fogarty 2002: 110). It centres on thirty-three-year-old Elaine Nelson, a German teacher who is content with her marriage and career. Life is satisfying and she is a part-time jazz guitarist. One weekend she visit her parents in the countryside. They quietly disapprove of her freedom as a wife and, in a perhaps unintentionally cruel twist of conversation, her mother remarks that not having children may affect the way her husband David sees her and puts pressure on Elaine to adopt a child. But Elaine has recently read a newspaper item about a Kenyan woman who was publicly stoned and battered because of allegedly having slept with ten men and becoming, as a consequence, barren. In Elaine's case, her own parents become the symbolic stoners and accusers. The role and power of a dream are significant in this story, as Elaine dreams about an old Irish myth of a cow pursuing its dead calf over a cliff. Maternity and instinct are dominant themes throughout.

The protagonists of the satirical, dystopian story 'The Deathday Party', Dr Dermot and Grace Baxter, share two features with Elaine and David Nelson in that they are 'models of successful modern coupledom' (O'Donnell 1991: 24) and have no children: 'They hadn't been chosen as breeders, partly because of Grace's superior skills as a linguist' (1991: 24). This is ironic in futuristic, speculative fiction, as it appears that Grace's intellect is placed in opposition to the possibility of child-bearing. But this does not seem to affect their marital relationship, which is based on affection, satisfactory sex and fun. In fact, they inhabit a future Irish society in which people are informed of the day on which they will die. In this society, the person's life is celebrated and there is a massive party before he or she is taken away to be summarily executed. O'Donnell has commented that the idea and inspiration for this story came from a play by the German language writer Elias Canetti, who portrays a similarly dystopian society in *Die Befristeten*. In Canetti's characters' society, the only taboo revolves around discovering the date of their own deaths. Each character carries an amulet containing this date of death and, provided they ignore this information and get on with life in whatever way they wish, they are free to indulge themselves without restraint as they live in a hedonistic society.

From Dermot's point of view – he is preoccupied with revising his 'life of achievement and fun' (25) – at his own funeral, he reflects that 'they'd had it good, he and Grace' (18).

Likewise, in 'The Deathday Party',[76] there are no taboos in the usual sense of a taboo, except for one thing: the characters are prevented from using certain words in ordinary conversation, such as 'love' and 'meaning', and indeed in this society the intellectual is suspect. Every event in the lives of Dermot and Grace has been recorded by some invisible Big Brother presence. Ironically, their names echo the lovers of Irish legend, Dermot and Grace, except that in this case, Dermot and Grace are certainly not free to wander away and think about notions of love.

When the story opens, Dermot's impending death has just been announced on the Evening Deathlines and the couple is in the midst of preparations for what will be a hedonistic send-off party in his honour. How those who are to die are brought to their death is revealed later in the story. The party itself, and all the activities associated with it, act as a distraction from the inevitable moment of death.

Dermot's idealistic sister Beatrice is unhappy with Dermot's behaviour. She expects her brother, 'an exemplary non-thinker' (232-3), to change the course of his life, which paradoxically is now extinct: 'You've never outgrown the olds ways, Dermot. You're still a believer, a thinker, a searcher like me' (26). Through Beatrice, the reader comes to realize that the 'old ways' to which she refers are the ways of the thinker, the intellectual, who has no place in this grotesque society. As a result of her rebelliousness at Dermot's Deathday Party, Beatrice is forcibly removed from the scene and represents the female as individual and heroic.

'Widow' is the next story in the collection. Alan Jordan has died and his funeral is depicted. The dead man is also an unfaithful husband, but this time it is the widow, Lisa, who analyses their marital relationship: 'they'd had what seemed to be infinite freedom' (38). Unlike traditional widows, 'women who would never enjoy a man's company or friendship for fear of what people might think' (43), she, at thirty-five, tries to relieve her grief and sense of loneliness by having sex with different men: 'It was her turn to mollify the dark spectre, her turn to court favours of the unknown, to escort a sensed but unseen figure beyond the portals of desire' (46). This particular story can be seen to reflect the final residues of social judgement which characterized certain aspects of life in Ireland until the 1990s. The widow, an unrepentantly sexual being, is not prepared to play the traditional role of the sorrowing one, instead finding some consolation in the arms of a satisfying younger man met at a party. The fact that the story concludes just after the moment of orgasm suggests that she is about to move forward and gradually shed her grief.

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[76] The story was eventually adapted by O'Donnell as a radio play, with some development of the action, and it was broadcast by RTÉ national radio in 1995.

The fourth story in the book, 'Every day is Tuesday', deals with marital life, but also mental illness. The protagonist, who is given no name and has no job, is a psychotic male who undergoes episodes during which he believes himself to be God and, therefore, expects reverential treatment: 'I shall master them, shall make them bow before me' (50). He hates people in general for being 'blasted hypocrites' (49) and 'parasites' (49) and women in particular as they are 'sisters of satan' (57), 'an insult to perfection' (56). Born into a family in which his father ill-treated his mother in his presence, he reproduces the paternal pattern by dominating his wife with a single purpose: she 'must accept [him] as her master, acknowledge [his] dominion over her' (52) and fulfil a mission, giving him a son, who happens to be born on a Tuesday. Although he is verbally rather than physically abusive, his wife, one of the many sacrificial wives and mothers in Ireland who are forced not only to silently accept domestic seclusion, but also tyrannical authority, is transformed from a good-humoured single woman with a rapturous humanity to a married melancholic subject who needs to resort to medication to cope with the hardships of dysfunctional family life.

In 'Snow', a slightly ridiculous middle-aged Irish poet and novelist, Richard Rawson, launches *Obelisk:*[77] *the Irish Short Story Magazine* at a function room in a hotel. This publication, which aspires to be a landmark in in the genre, since it includes the works of 'the best living writers' (72) Ireland has produced, has an aim: 'to stir the conscience of a people whose primary concern is to pay homage to the great Janus-head of Relevance and Mammon' (72), people who live 'in a culture which is anti-creative' (71). A hypocritical, pretentious and biased artistic world is presented by a protagonist who also falls prey to opinions and appearances. The protagonist himself is not self-critical and the narrative can be seen as O'Donnell's critique of the puffed-up rhetoric and ritual of an enclosed, post-colonial literary society. While trying to please a wife, whose company only irritates Richard, he remembers the encounter he had with a lover, Gabriela Levy, a reporter sixteen years his junior, when they were snowbound in the mountains. In her presence, he feels strong enough to face his wife, a disastrous financial situation and the artists he despises, paradoxically described as 'his own kind' (70). But O'Donnell is making a comment about the misogyny and vanity of the world of publishing in this story. Her male protagonist Richard hankers for nothing more than being published in England, yet senses that he has been written out, which, the narrative suggests, he probably has.

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[77] A symbol of triumph and power with phallic connotations.

'Come-In-I've Hanged Myself' is also a story about Irish family dysfunctionality. A sixteen-year-old Martin misses an absent father who lives in London and a mentally ill mother who is in a psychiatric ward. When sent by social services to live with Mike and Lorna, a middle-class couple who cohabit harmoniously, Martin behaves in a negative way – even aggressively – which is misunderstood by the well-intentioned Luke and Lorna. The generation, class and education gap between the adolescent and his guardians provoke a communication failure which sets them apart. While Luke and Lorna perceive Martin as a 'strange bird, an alien creature' (83) with problems of 'insecurity, fear, immaturity, no experience of a loving home. And an appalling appearance' (86), the boy describes them as 'a pair of cranks who couldn't have their own [children]; […] batty [people]' (88-9), 'headers' (91).

Martin stands for the abject, in Kristeva's terminology, which challenges the stability linked to the symbolic order that Luke and Lorna, with 'their civilised masks' (91), represent. However, the couple representing 'normal people' are not better than he who represents abjection. Martin employs hate speech and nasty gestures to interrelate with Luke and Lorna, but despite their best intentions, they are unable to probe him in order to identify his actual needs. In the end, Lorna fights back bitterly, with words which illustrate some of her own attitudes, potentially harmful words which only reaffirm 'the image of self-loathing and repulsion which he harboured towards himself' (90). Their house is no longer 'A place of reason and salvation', but at least, says Lorna, they stand now for 'Two point five: average family' (91). O'Donnell has spoken about having read the American South writer, Flannery O'Connor, whose works often culminate in either revelation or retribution, especially in the form of scenes involving an encounter between a so-called normal character and a misfit.

‘Halley’s Comet’ abounds with disappointment and misunderstanding as Liz, a second-person protagonist, recounts her experience of different employers. She describes herself as living ‘like a peach-coloured glasshouse orchid, safe and unchallenged’ (97) until she moves from countryside to city ‘to succeed, to be all-rounders both at work and socially’ (95). In the city, she experiences an unbearable ‘rip-roaring teasing and rivalry’ (97), which frustrates her expectations. She discovers what life is meant to be for women:

> A bit of skitting around for a few years. Then the hysteria of falling in love, of ‘going steady’, a Christmas engagement which might include a watch as well as as the ring, worries about pregnancy (‘It sort of – happened – like – I didn’t mean it to –’), and marriage the following March twelve months, before the end of the tax year, in the event of those worries being allayed. […] Then there’d be a baby and a christening, then another baby and another christening, *ad infinitum, ad nauseam*. Because again, it was natural. (97-8)

At the age of thirty, her world has fallen apart. She is frustrated from a professional point of view: she already knows ‘the real Hades and all its ugly portents’ (102), doing secretarial work in an architect’s office, where she practises ‘the art of subservience and willingness’ (95), which she learned at ‘the Holy Scourge Academy of Smiles and Politesse’ (95). From a social point of view, she has met all sorts of ‘shysters, neurotics and sexual deviants’, because she has the extraordinary capacity to listen to them (102). Most upsettingly, she is accused of wrongdoing and theft she had no part in, but this too is part of a catalogue of misunderstandings in which women, it seems, are generally subservient figures, especially in office life.

As she finds coping with life on earth, where ‘appearances [are] everything’ (99), to be ‘a bewildering and wearing trial’ (102), she looks at the sky for relief and muses occasionally over Halley’s Comet, a symbol of reliability, ‘strength and eternity’ (98), which gives humans ‘the mighty sense of not being alone. Of movement, of evolution, of life to infinity’ (104).

She also finds relief in German literature, particularly in stories which offer aspirational models of resistance:

> Oddsballs; misfits; romanticists; springtime, life-loving rams, who tangled head-on – those who dared to say and do the wrong thing, pleasing nobody, although sometimes they pleased themselves. […] And this comforted, like a balm, sweet and aromatic. Was a golden light beamed on your face, undeniably precious. (100-1)

An ex-priest, Con, is the narrator of the eighth story in *Strong Pagans*, 'The Estuary'. Married to Kate, he is an 'astute judge of social behaviour' (108) and the father of two children. He ponders marital life, a life of 'constant picking and snagging' (108), according to him, to which both actively contribute: 'I'm as bad as she is' (113). In search of peace, he goes to the estuary where Davida, the woman with whom he had an affair while still a priest, drowned herself. He feels that he is part of this place (114), where memories of Davida reconcile him with the female sex. This natural landscape turns out to be so spiritually liberating that it provides him with an element of redemption from oppressive thoughts and also acts as a refuge from social convention and even, it is implied, his volatile marriage. This story illustrates the complexity of marriage, which is rarely conventional in O'Donnell's hands. It is a cause of isolation for her protagonists. It is also sometimes a contested territory in which both partners struggle for dominance.

Like Con, Arianna McGregor, the bohemian protagonist of 'The Inheritance', revisits her past when she visits a place very dear to her, the house in which she grew up and produced the paintings she associates with her 'controversial red phase' (120). The house is now owned by the upwardly mobile Marie, who has turned it into a conventional bourgeois residence, with wine racks and floral prints abhorred by Arianna. By thus altering the house, Marie has inadvertently eroded Arianna's identity as she has destroyed 'the jewel of [Arianna's] experience' (130), brushed 'the nerve of her past' (126) and reduced her 'to a caricature, a typical, introspective neurotic' (126).

Arianna and Marie represent two different prototypes of femininity: whereas the former stands for the rebellious single woman who does not respect conventions, the female genius who seeks self-realization through art, the latter incarnates the role of the traditional middle-class housewife whose aim in life is to make those around her feel a sense of stability and comfort. Though both of them have apparently achieved their respective goals in life – one as a successful painter, the other as a successful wife and mother of four children – neither of them seems to be entirely happy with the result. At the end of the story, Arianna behaves in a childish way; she cannot accept reality and must, therefore, make real efforts to conceal her 'state of fury and jealousy' (130) for what she considers a 'crime of territorialism' (125) and Marie must hide her personal frustration when she is called by her husband, who announces that, once more, he will not return home at the expected time. She has reason to suspect, it is inferred by the narrative, that her husband is having an affair.

'Scavengers' is another story about family dysfunctionality and gender violence. Laura tells the story of her mother, Tony, a woman who was ill treated by an alcoholic husband, and the impact this had on her own life. She has suffered and cried for her mother; she has had no chance to grow as a happy child because she has been living a 'Night-mare' (141). Even so, she has a propensity to analyse words as a means of soothing herself when faced with things that she cannot cope with. For example, she divides the words 'nightmare' into two parts because she is studying Latin and she is very conscious of the sea or *mare* and the atmosphere it creates in her seaside town. She has had to mature prematurely in order to be of any help to her mother. When her father dies and her mother falls in love with another alcoholic, the musician Dorian, Laura's anxiety grows: 'something hateful and familiar begins to circle your brain' (142). However, she seems somehow to understand her mother's subservient attitude first to her husband and then to Dorian as he charms and courts her. The mother is drawn to what she considers to be Dorian's 'genius' and, ironically, so is Laura, who observes that when women lack affection and attention, they may feel attached to men who praise them. She herself is attracted to Dorian and notes: 'You are hungry for praise. Even these meagre crumbs satisfy. You learn what it is to scavenge, to gnaw on pickings, nibble on bones' (136). Laura comes to the conclusion that 'love is as sombre as it is riotous' (135).

Love and marriage are also the themes of 'The Adulteress'. The protagonist is a twenty-four-year-old woman whose self-esteem has plummeted over the course of a year due to 'the difficult adjustments of marriage' (147). While her husband works, she aims find intellectual fulfilment studying at Maynooth University, where she meets Professor

Rainer, ‘blonde, exotic, tantalising’ (149), whom she considers to be ‘the artist in the stereotypical sense of the word’ (148). He teaches her about a central concept in medieval German literature: courtly love, or *Minne*, as it is known, and in doing so they engage in a platonic relationship. She feels ‘that delicious vitality which comes from being desired-and-desiring’ (149). This relation turns her into an adulterous woman in religious terms. But she experiences no sense of being sinful, because she thinks that people ‘are all polygamous’ (153) by nature, only forced into monogamy by circumstances. The relationship between the protagonist and Rainer comes to an end when she fails his exam. He no longer represents an object of desire but a source of ‘academic and (temporary) emotional disaster’ (159). After analysing how things developed, she comes to the conclusion that she is the only one to blame for this disaster: ‘My mistake […] was that I was – am – a romantic’ (159). Tired of a ‘dull, anonymous’ life (147), she wants to enter a path of passion and adventure which unfortunately takes her nowhere. Romanticism prevents her from facing the truth and acting according to common sense. She abandons university studies and accepts a secretarial job – to her mind, non-creative, repetitive, dull work. She has learnt and assimilated the lesson, so that the next time she sees Rainer, she completely ignores him.

Like the student in the previous story, Hanna, the idealistic protagonist of ‘Honey Island’, loves literature and art; like her, she is married, without children. Marriage troubles set Hanna and her husband Aengus apart and they try to find pleasure in extramarital relationships. As Aengus can move more freely, he can have an affair with a woman in the mainland town. Hanna, anchored to Honey Island – a place that represents the traditional Irish way of life and therefore is much appreciated by tourists – where she runs a craft shop, must wait for someone to knock at her door. Eventually, Vaclav, a Czech artist renting the workshop on the island, conquers Hanna’s heart by flattering her with ‘good conversation and nice words’ (167). When Hanna discovers Aengus’s adulterous behaviour by chance, she feels forced to confess him her own. A ‘rumpus’ follows. It is not easy for either them to accept that there were other relationships in their marriage, that they are not the perfect partners they thought they were. However, they forgive each other and stick together, despite the fact they suspect their affairs ‘will come and go between them, like tides beyond their control’ (171).

‘The Other Country’ also deals with themes of marriage troubles and adultery, as well as racism. Madeline and Andy have a little daughter, Zoë, whom they adopted from Laos. At the beginning of the story, Zoë must receive hospital care because a joint in her thumb was severed while playing with another child. Madeline ponders racism when she notices the way the hospital staff look at her daughter. She feels she recognizes in their glances ‘signs of rejection, signs of racial superiority’ (181). Indeed, this story may be seen as a critique of Eurocentrism and racism. These themes are later taken up in the story ‘Little Africa’ in the collection *Storm over Belfast*.

While in hospital, Madeline also analyses the couple’s evolution from revolutionary socialists in the seventies to a bourgeois couple in the nineties, from happy mates in the past to partners who are clearly dissatisfied with their present relationship. Madeline observes with crystal clarity that she and Andy don’t share family duties on equal terms. While Andy claims the right to enjoy a pleasurable life in Germany, where he works briefly as a teacher and becomes embroiled in a passionate love affair, she remains in Ireland, working both in the domestic sphere as a mother and as a housewife, and in the public sphere as a writer. She imagines that he perceives her as ‘The wife, a stiff-backed matriarch who granted favours and knew nothing about fun’ (183) and, in doing so, he betrays their ideals: respect, justice and equality. As in ‘Honey Island’, after a cathartic row, the couple goes back to a past state of harmony by making love. Sex is presented as having a reconciliatory effect in several of O’Donnell’s stories.

A different type of sexual relationship is depicted in ‘A Beast of a Man’, in which Mary O’Donnell explores the theme of child sexual abuse.[78] The story is narrated in three voices: that of the perpetrator, that of the victim and the collective voice of a cross-section of people condemning paedophilia. After seeing a film in which an adult man sexually abuses an ‘unknowing nymphet’, James, a film critic, cannot prevent himself from remembering his own pedophilic experiences, including an incestuous relationship with a niece.[79]

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[78] O’Donnell refers to a problem that affects a substantial number of Irish girls and women. Monica Prendiville has stated in a press release that ‘at least one third of the Irish women have been subjected to sexual abuse and if this is so, many thousands of Irish girls and women are victims of incest’ (1993: 81).

[79] Given the stories of abuse and incest that emerged in the Irish media during the 1990s, it is remarkable that this story, of all O’Donnell’s narratives, has provoked no commentary at all.

James can only find ‘the truth […] in the arms of girl-women’ (195) because, according to him, when the members of the female sex lose their ‘sweet innocence’, they become dangerous enemies: ‘all the time men and women are killing one another with disappointment and hate, and forget how to love one another honestly’ (201).

Incapable of relating to the grown-up women he admits to fearing, James prefers relating to girls he can easily manipulate, like his own niece, who sees sexual abuse as an act of obedience towards her uncle. James assumes a fatherly role when the girl’s own father dies.

When the whole affair becomes known, a woman addresses James’s wife and thus reveals to readers what a section of Irish society, Catholic and patriarchal, thinks about this phenomenon: the pederast is ‘a beast of a man’ (201), but has, according to this interpretation, simply fallen into a trap laid by the girl-woman – in other words, James is but another poor man seduced by a wily seductress too precocious for her years:

> How could he do such a thing, I ask you darling, here have some more coffee, what a beast of a man, oh of course some of these gels ask for it, out strutting and performing from the age of ten and they know what they’re doing, it’s in the blood m’dear, in the blood. Women. Daughters of Eve the lot of them. That brat must have led him astray somehow, it’s at home doing her homework she should have been, or tucked up in her bed, or helping her Mammy with the dishes like any normal daughter would. (201)

Like the ‘unknowing nymphet’ who is sexually abused in the film James watches in ‘A Beast of a Man’, the protagonist of ‘Minerva’s Apprentice’ is also called Bridget. Once again employing a second-person narrator, the writer describes Bridget’s experience at a boarding school run by nuns in rural Ireland in the 1960s. She is happy there till she meets Marika, the leader of a group of girlfriends, whose opinion is widely accepted. Though intelligent, Marika mocks the idea of Bridget aspiring to become a poet: ‘Who ever heard of a woman poet!’ (215).

Bridget forgets about such chauvinistic prejudice when her English teacher, Sister Brigitta, opens up a whole world of knowledge and arts in which women are the protagonists. As a teacher, Sister Brigitta believes in the need to include powerful female myths and influential real women in the syllabus in order to encourage her pupils' – all girls – self-esteem. Interestingly, in this female genealogy, there is no place for the subservient, powerless Virgin Mary and instead she introduces the story of the pagan goddess Brigid, a powerful female figure, whom she describes as, 'the equivalent of the Gaulish Minerva' (213). The goddess, according to Sister Brigitta, looked 'after writers and artists throughout Europe' (213). The protagonist remembers her grandmother's story about the Christian St Brigid who, she said, 'spent her life guarding a sacred fire and there were no men allowed near it' (213). This fire, conceived as the fire of knowledge, was restricted to women (214). The schoolgirl Bridget, perhaps a poet in the making, finds this knowledge of myths and legends both empowering and liberating. She ends up becoming a silent rebel, a poetic soul forced into an inner exile because she holds opinions different to those of others. The only person she can comfortably relate to and confide in is Sister Brigitta, a mothering figure who is also an open-minded woman, free from male dominance. As Jeanette R. Shumaker and Amanda Hurych affirm, Sister 'Brigitta is not only [her] love object, but [her] model for deviating from traditional female roles' (2016: 122). In light of this, we can view Sister Brigitta as a representative of modern feminist theology. Indeed, echoes of Edna O'Brien's story 'Sister Imelda' can be found in this account of passionate love and admiration for a compelling nun figure.

'Strong Pagans' is the following story in the collection. It is a love story in which the protagonist, an open-minded bohemian actress who resists traditional roles such as 'sew[ing], knit[ing], cook[ing], and breed[ing]' (O'Donnell 1991: 230), eventually marries 'the man of her dreams', Anton. He is described as a romantic man who 'conformed to the Italian mode of courtship' (1991: 228), 'a pagan god' who is 'elegant, erect, fully manly' (234).

However, this man has a double aspect: in public, he is the perfect incarnation of masculinity and in private, he inhabits stereotypical femininity by cross-dressing and wearing make-up. Through his transvestism, he claims to experience his wife's sense of freedom. It can be argued that this situation demonstrates how gender is a construct and that one can choose which gender to inhabit. When the protagonist accidentally discovers that her husband delights in wearing 'women's things' (238), she is thrown into a deep state of shock, but she tries to understand and support him, to the extent that she ends up offering him 'an opinion on which skirt or dress is more suitable, which shoes are definitely out, which stockings enhance his legs' (238). They are 'strong pagans' (239), real transgressors who must subvert the established social order to achieve self-realization and happiness.

This type of marriage is in marked contrast to that of Anton's sister, Beth. She and her husband enjoy a 'relaxed, orderly life' (227) and stand for the traditional patriarchal marriage: 'They are a happy couple. He likes to assume control and treats her as if she was his daughter, but Beth has always liked being looked after, so she's lucky to have found someone who likes to do it' (229). They have five children.

The last story in the collection is 'After the Match'. This was originally published in *The Sunday Tribune*'s 'New Irish Writing' page in July 1990 under the title 'Machismo' after it won the Jameson Listowel Short Story Award that year. The main protagonist, Helen, is pejoratively labelled a 'feminist' when she vents her opinions regarding social conventions and imposed roles at a celebratory event after the rugby final won by her son's team. In this 'happyland' (251), where actions follow a protocol, where people are 'yobs' and 'aleckadoos' – in her opinion – who behave as expected according to their age and sex and where discipline and 'doing things without asking why' (245) are valued as the key to success, Helen, who 'has her own ideas on everything' (254), feels like an outcast. Despite that, she makes a real effort to be sociable, but cannot really connect with anyone at the party and instead opts for drinking and thinking. She reflects on her husband, who is always 'remote', on her son, who is embarrassed due to her anomalous attitude, and on what seem to be the two different types of women coexisting in Ireland: Doreen, the wife of her husband's colleague, represents traditional domestic womanhood – very much socially condoned – whereas Helen represents feminism, which, in this milieu, is associated with resentment, unhappiness, even lesbianism (255).

However, after an exchange between the two women, readers discover that both regard patriarchal men as 'Bastards' (257). A final gesture of their disregard comes in the form of both women heading off to a nightclub while their men continue the homoerotic revels that have defined the day.

Storm over Belfast

Mary O'Donnell's second collection of short stories, *Storm over Belfast*, was published in 2008, seventeen years after the publication of *Strong Pagans.* It includes twenty short stories, one of which, 'Strong Pagans', had already been published in the previous collection, but appears, in the newer collection, in a changed and slightly updated form. The first story, 'A Genuine Woman',[80] is set in 1940 and located in rural Ireland, near Campile, Co. Wexford. It is the story of Kate, an Irish woman who is 'true to everything and everyone', married to a slightly commanding, independent and somewhat vain Mike, whose 'face is like a mask' (O'Donnell 2008: 3). Mike dictates all matters concerning family life, as he does those related to the creamery he manages. His sense of autonomy and relative liberality (for the times) is underlined by his deliberately ordering contraceptive devices for him and his wife, when such things were prohibited in Ireland, thus limiting their family to two sons.[81] While they are regarded as a 'happy couple' (2008: 4), Kate feels 'lonely' (4), disappointed, and sometimes even angry as her husband is somewhat self-absorbed and incommunicative, even if well-intentioned. Employing Ann Wan-lih Chang's expression, she is a 'marriage rebel', a woman who devotes her youthful years to a secure marriage as a dutiful wife or mother and, then, rebels against the sense of alienation she feels within her marriage enclosure (2016: 38).

Thus, she is drawn to a humble workman who offers her a sense of affinity, true love and great fun. The man, Sean Flynn, makes her utterly happy by spending time with her, talking to her and even lending her a helping hand around the house and yard. He treats her as an equal, but lets her know that she is a beautiful woman in mind and body.

Their platonic love affair – and the reader might ask whether it really is platonic – comes to an end when Sean is killed by the mistakenly offloaded bomb which struck the creamery at Campile,[82] where he also works. But by then, he had already taught Kate a vital lesson: that beyond appearances, there exists a life which is more real, more polymorphic, less likely to be controlled, 'that surface sincerity is not everything, that sincerity has an underbelly that is not always possible to be true to. […] It is the difference between a lake and the ocean. Both are water, but I would choose the ocean any day, for its greatness, its solid will. Nothing contains the ocean, only gravity' (O'Donnell 2008: 17). Her husband may be seen to represent the lake and Sean the ocean. The chaste nature of the relationship between Kate and Sean is underscored by the final sentence: 'We never did more than kiss' (2008: 17).

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[80] O'Donnell also adapted it as a radio play for RTÉ national radio.

[81] Mike, who believes in family planning, has introduced Kate to the works of Marie Stopes. The narrative comments on how he manages to import one of Stope's books and contraceptives for himself and his wife's use.

[82] In 1940, a German bomber plane offloaded a bomb on Campile creamery and Ballymitty on the Wexford coast. Historically, this has always been understood as an error by the Germans, as Ireland was neutral during the Second World War.

'Storm over Belfast' is the second story in the collection. O'Donnell has spoken in private correspondence about how this story came to form the basic framework for her well-received novel *Where They Lie* (2014). Roon drives from Dublin to Belfast to visit his ex-partner, Lettie. Once in Northern Ireland, which he refers to as the 'foreign country, the imagined loyal province of Saxon and Briton' (19), memories of his failed relationship with her come to his mind. During the course of the afternoon visit, he seems to establish a connection between the political and the personal, the roots of which lie both in their break-up and with their conflicting national identities. While he may be seen to represent the Gaelic dream, she – a descendent of 'East Belfast folk' (23) – is a Northern Protestant who describes the Republic of Ireland as 'a whole nation of lower-middle-class philistines suddenly rising high, without an aristocracy of anything – whether blood, intellect or muscular labourers – to save them […]' (23).

Roon also resorts to the past when he traces Lettie's psychological decline from a 'woman of the frontiers of intellect' and a 'programme-maker par excellence!' to a bipolar, depressive and psychotic woman who has 'turned into an over-energetic sex maniac, a shopping-mall addict, binge drinker and incessant, repetitious spinner of tall, illogical tales' (27).[83]

As soon as Roon arrives at Lettie's house, he is shocked by its chaotic state and its odours of 'filth, rot and decay' (25) which, somehow, represent her 'infected and deadly nature' (33). Immediately, the reader realizes that a convivial conversation between the couple is not about to unfold. Tension builds as Roon rebukes Lettie for not taking her medicine and she blames him for having to take them in the first place in order to cope with him – in her view, 'a total bastard in every way' (33). Shortly afterwards, he flees, having witnessed Lettie's mood dissolve and the manner in which it is suggested she may be abusing her dog. Already in his car, an electrical storm over Belfast brings 'him back to her, to hospital, to electrodes' (34).

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[83] Madness, as can be observed, often recurs in O'Donnell's work. The author indicates that this is the case because of the 'wisdom and honest vision it can offer' (in González Arias 2011: 256).

Kevin, the writer protagonist of 'An Invitation', the third story in *Storm over Belfast*, experiences an entirely different type of married life. However, married life is not at the core of this narrative, which revolves around a ninetieth-birthday homage to another writer, Dorian, who is regarded as 'the last of the Big House writers' (35). Kevin, also a writer, is invited to Charleville House, where the event is held. There he meets Gwen, a critic, whose review of his last book 'portrayed him practically as a pornographer' (36-7), thus destroying his chances of selling it (36), and Jago Kinnane, another writer who shares more than friendship with Dorian and Gwen: 'The three shared a cache of divorces, affairs, troubled adult children, bisexual dalliances, the full braggadocio of drink and disarray trailing between them like a mark of honour' (37-8). Kevin, however, prefers the stability of home and a solid life shared with his wife, Tess., He is sometimes rejected for being different or even mocked by 'The last bohemians!', as they like to call themselves, who inadvertently or indifferently snub him by declining his invitation to have dinner at his house after the homage to the elderly writer is over.

Tensions in the literary circles of Ireland, rooted in prejudice, competition, biased criticism and a lack of solidarity, are also put forward in this story: 'literary tensions that crossed the country like lines, unseen by the majority, electrifying to the few' (41).

The next story in the collection is called 'The Story of Maria's Son' and was written in response to Mary Lavin's 'The Story of the Widow's Son'. She deliberately replicates the form and tone of Lavin's masterpiece, although the context is contemporary. Her purpose is 'to explore the possibilities of a morality tale with two very different outcomes in an urban setting' (63). Maria is a young Irish woman who books – together with some more friends from the biscuit factory where she works – two weeks in Benidorm, Spain. There, she meets Jorge, with whom she falls in love. Back in Ireland, she discovers she is pregnant and informs Jorge. His correspondence suddenly ceases and she realizes that she has been 'dropped like a hot potato' (48). She christens his son George and tries to raise him to be 'a good man, a reliable man' (48), a man with 'a bit of character in him, mainly by not spoiling him and by teaching him the value of a euro' (50). Leading by example, she holds down two jobs to save money to put towards her son's education. George grows up and turns out to be a brilliant student with real possibilities of being accepted either at Oxford or Cambridge.

When Maria is buying things to celebrate the fact that her son is going to receive a scholarship place at one of these prestigious universities, thieves break into her house and steal the money intended for George's education. O'Donnell's offers two endings to the break-in. In the first, described as a 'tragedy', George is killed while trying to defend his mother's store of banknotes. Maria repeats over and over, 'Why did he try to hang onto a tinful of money?' (55), indicating that her son's life was far more valuable than any amount of money. In the second, described as a 'drama', George does not die, but instead, with a blade at his throat, witnesses the thieves stealing the TV and the money and is unable to resist them. Infuriated, Maria blames him for the incident, insults him and strikes his back and head until he bleeds. Consequently, he abruptly leaves home to work and replace the money that had been stolen, but also, it is inferred, as a way of punishing his mother.

With these two endings, the writer, on the one hand, stresses the power of storytelling as a creative activity that represents reality as a construct. In this sense, storytelling can be linked to gossip: 'Without invention, the real history of our presence on this planet, which is storytelling and gossip, would wither and die' (56). On the other hand, O'Donnell indicates (in the style of the original Mary Lavin story) that 'Perhaps every action has a double life, the potential for alternatives' (63).

'Fadó, Fadó'[84] is also a parent–child story. In this case, the protagonist, John, is a father concerned with his adolescent daughter, Katy, an innocent and vulnerable girl who opens herself up to a world of liberality and consumerism unknown to previous generations. Her father observes a world in which 'reward [is] automatic for the stupid, the passive and the evil, and every-body dress[es] like characters from a southern California soap series' (67), where girls and women love wearing pearls as a symbol of economic wealth and high social status.

In contrast to this colourful Celtic Tiger Ireland founded on materialistic values, he remembers the Ireland of his childhood, an impoverished country in which children were rarely gratified, but frequently rebuked harshly. He recalls a traumatic week-long stay at Uncle Seanie's in Clonfadó to powerful effect. Uncle Seanie's is described as a dismal farmhouse in the west of Ireland, where his stingy uncle would make the tea with water used to boil eggs in order to save on electricity (67) and where there was no inside toilet.

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[84] 'Fadó, Fadó' is the expression used at the beginning of a traditional Irish story, it can be translated as 'once upon a time' or 'long, long ago'.

John feels lost as he cannot fit into either of these Irelands and longs for a 'safe haven that lay somewhere between the impoverishment and spirit-wreckage of his uncle in Clonfadó and this new, bewildering zone which people embrace so frenziedly' (67). Accidentally discovering that his thirteen-year-old daughter has bought a thong for herself in a Dublin shopping mall, he overreacts, blaming his wife for being too lenient, and finds himself considering all of the men who prey on young girls and how his daughter needs to learn how to protect herself. In this regard, he is adopting a traditional position in relation to female–male relationships, inadvertently making her responsible for her own safety in relation to men based on her appearance and how she chooses to dress.

In 'Pimiento', Ella, an educated, single, middle-aged woman who experiences a 'scarified inner life' in the small community of Bunmore, decides to attend her one-time lover's funeral. As she believes 'the funeral demanded colour' (72), she is ready to wear her 'pimiento rig-out' (79), which consists of a red silk skirt and top, since it triggers good memories of love episodes shared with Aidan in Jeréz, Spain. Red stands for her passionate inner life, which contrasts markedly with her day-to-day experience in her agricultural store.

Ella is grieving the death of the man with whom she had an eight-year long affair. Their romance was conducted in secluded places for two reasons: firstly, because he was married and, secondly, because, as a doctor, he felt ashamed – in Ella's view – that he was conducting a relationship with an agricultural store manager. When the idyll ends, Ella falls into a state of melancholy, which can only be kept at bay with the help of anti-depressants. She turns to another man, Tom, as a source of 'distraction and companionship' (80). Tom, well-intentioned and willing to take up where Aidan left off, offers her holistic treatments and psychological chats designed to help her, but she ultimately splits up with him, just prior to Aidan's funeral. The scene is played out with tension, leading to Ella smacking him forcefully across the face as he tries to take her red outfit from her, knowing that Aidan had bought it. ‘Tom, understanding counsellor and all-round alternative good guy’ (83), reveals his real self and, resentfully, bullies and insults her. She nevertheless experiences a sense of relief as she is free again.

At the funeral, the widow, Joyce, approaches Ella. Instead of words of reproach, she utters words of sympathy. This scene of female solidarity, despite Ella’s betrayal, is witnessed by the ‘other mourners [who] drift […] and hover […], seeing all, seeing nothing’ (85).

In the next story, ‘The Lost Citadel’, the author explores ‘the silence of men, that inner silence which seems not to have any echoing response’ (O’Donnell in Carty 2008: 22). The protagonist, an anonymous, fragile, postmodern character, presents himself, in the first person, as a tormented father-subject. Unable to meet his authoritarian wife’s expectations without a sense of alienation and unable to deal with his little son as a father without a sense of guilt, he finds himself trapped in a situation he does not know how to handle. Like many other characters in Mary O’Donnell’s stories, he experiences an incapacity to verbally communicate with others and resorts to inner exile, where his thoughts move from fantasy to reality and vice versa.

He finds in the sea the means to achieve the isolation he needs to reflect upon himself and this soothes both his mind and his body. While swimming, the protagonist remembers a traumatic episode that occurred a year previously, but which has become a memory that resurfaces whenever he feels unnerved after conflict. It is a memory of he and his wife, Thea, discussing their child’s education. Thea is in favour of physically disciplining their six-year-old child, whereas he thinks he is not ready to employ ‘strategies of adult tyranny’ (O’Donnell 2008: 87); however, he does employ them once, following Thea’s instruction, when he brutally loses his temper and beats the child out of rage:

> He’d been calling for hours, whinging and sobbing. Finally, it was my turn, and I bore her rage like a ball of steel, grabbing him from beneath the bedclothes. He roared as I shook him. Then I struck and could not stop. I flailed at his legs and arms with my man’s strength, as if to finally quieten him or show him that this was the way and once and for all, he would behave for her. (2008: 91)

From that moment on, he becomes a troubled man who blames himself over and over for having inflicted pain on his beloved son and for not having the courage to defy a wife, who incited him to such a cruel and inhuman act of violence: ‘Not even the sea [with its cathartic effects] could save [him]’ (90). The genteel protagonist does not fit the traditional pattern of a patriarchal figure, normally linked to notions of strength, power, repression, etc., and instead finds himself, already a mature man, undergoing a crisis of masculinity.

In the ‘The Sacrament of Feet’, Nancy, who describes herself as ‘a middle-aged woman gone to seed’ (93), works as a nurse at a hospital. She is fascinated by the feet of the elderly and by the feet of passersby, which she observes when looking up at street level from her basement apartment. Her fascination is so great that she learns how to ‘read people’ by analysing the language of their feet.

Nancy’s ‘gentleman friend’ Stefan is a Holocaust survivor twenty years her senior. A wise man who teaches her relevant things: ‘Ve must live well, let others live vell too. Even if ve don’t like the vay they live’ (96). She, on the other hand, helps him by providing him with some drugs to prevent him from suffering pain (97). Though they belong to different countries, different generations and different backgrounds, both enjoy a symbiotic relationship based on mutual respect, affection and support and they try to share special moments during which they can relax, in mind and body: listening to music, dancing, talking or caressing, particularly the feet, which, despite the erotic note, reminds us of the love, humility and service which the sacramental ritual of foot-washing represents in the Christian world.

‘Smiling Moon’ is also a story of a friendship between a woman and a man who come from different countries, cultures and backgrounds. An Irish female writer, Mary, shares a residency with a Chinese writer, Wong Tian, in a remote part of Australia for five weeks.[85] They can barely communicate with each other because Wong’s English is very basic. Far from home, she ponders her everyday life, and some of the difficulties she finds in reconciling both family and professional life:[86]

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[85] This story is partly autobiographical: ‘In 2001, Mary O’Donnell was awarded the James Joyce Suspended Sentence residency to Australia and participated in the Sydney International Writer’s Festival’ (Comerford 2006: 280).

> The episodic quality of her time at home – driving the children to school, writing until lunchtime, avoiding phone calls, avoiding encounters with people she detests, remembering not to become the perpetually smiling middle-aged mom, coping and capable, doing it all. A little bit of this, that and the other. A typical writer's life. Check. A typical married female writer's life. (O'Donnell 2008: 100)

Regarding her professional life, she expresses her aversion to those critics who produce reviews of her works founded on superficial readings: 'Movers and shakers [she calls them], who spout quick words like hot tea and never read anything properly unless it suits an agenda' (100).

Within the framework of writing, Wong Tian asks her to define the word 'Style', meaning literary style. Wong needs an explanation of the concept and Mary defines it as 'a way of doing something, a way of writing, a distinctive pattern or description' (102). They share an interest in intellectual topics and a taste for natural landscapes which evoke emotional sensations, as when the two of them go down to the beach at night to see the reflection of the 'smiling moon' splitting into a kaleidoscope of broken moons upon the heaving water (105). Such emotions highlight the protagonist's need to express herself through art and literature:

> She imagines how the scene would look on a porcelain plate. Two people, probably lovers, staring out to the Pacific, the moon above broken into shimmering minor moons on the water, making poetry in their souls, stirring loneliness, awakening thoughts of absence and longing. On the plate, though, the man and woman would stand closer together. (106)

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[86] As Elisabeth Bowen would codify it in *Pictures and Conversations*, O'Donnell reflects on 'The relationship […] between living and writing' (Bowen 1975: 61) in this short story and some others in *Storm over Belfast* – for instance, 'Come to Me, Maitresse' and 'Aphrodite Pauses, Mid-life'.

Paradoxically, in the place where she expected to find time and space for herself, she feels suffocated by her Chinese companion's dependence on her. She eventually decides to leave the residence, but on the way to the new one she understands that she cannot leave because her departure would negatively affect Wong, who would be isolated without her. In both this and the previous story, we have intelligent, generous and sacrificial characters who engage in symbiotic relationships to exchange knowledge, affection and care. At the end of the story, she and Wong become 'the couple [who] share the same view of the moon on the water' (110).

The protagonist of 'Twentynine Palms' is also an Irishwoman far from mother Ireland. Connie works as a babysitter in San Diego, California, where she 'tests her prejudices about other ethnic groups and different ways of life, but she also comes face to face with the clichés other people have about the Irish' (Palacios 2012: 219). In America, being Irish, she feels she is regarded as belonging to a slightly inferior race and her employers convey the impression that Irish people are poorly educated and speak English in an unintelligible way. Connie, however, has worked at her own accent as she knows that one's use of language is like an identity card. She is reluctant to be seen as just any migrant and resists stereotypes of the symbolic order as constructed by the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Maria, the Mexican woman with whom she shares an apartment, tells Connie, 'You not perfect. You Irish' (O'Donnell 2008: 113), 'People say the Irish only good for drinking, laughing and making babies' (2008: 127) and even the Native American Blue Hawk, her lover, mocks her Irish accent when he tells her that she could devote herself to giving '*Irish* lessons' and indicates that Ireland was 'a kind of reservation' under British rule. However, he comes to understand her background when she explains to him how she was named after the Irish revolutionary figure Constance Markiewicz.

As 'the other', Connie experiences a feeling of exclusion, a feeling which is shared by other characters in the story, who are also judged according to negative class, ethnic and gender stereotypes – that is, according to labels which have been imposed upon them by those who proclaim themselves culturally superior beings and therefore define the symbolic order which 'gives meaning' to people's lives. Connie is against this order of things, which she considers a farce: 'It was a bit of a farce, the obsession with naming, one people imposing themselves on another people, another land, […] The native country, the native child, heroes, heroines and politics, crumbling to nothing in the end' (123).

Mary O'Donnell's refreshing 'Come to Me, Maitresse' – which also featured in the anthology *Moments: Irish Women Writers in Aid of the Tsunami Victims* – narrates the story of the Irish writer Gwen and her husband Al, both in their late sixties, who have reached the arthritis-and-afternoon-naps years, with all their love, respect and sexuality still intact. They live as 'quaint expatriates' (137) in Carla Bayle, France, where they enjoy a peaceful and pleasant existence, in which they are, respectively, the 'Maitresse' and the 'Captain' of the love story they feed one another day after day. As in 'An Invitation', the writer describes a harmonious and symmetrical relationship between writer and partner, in which both enrich each other's life.

Their quiet routine is broken by the visit of Calista Stoney and her niece Joanna, 'a rising young poet' (130) in her thirties, whose 'first collections of poems has been nominated for a McLachlan Award' (134). This recognition empowers her to talk to Gwen with a certain disdain when discussing the state of 'arts and letters' in Ireland as she views it. They hold different opinions about the quality of literary criticism in Ireland and its effect upon writers' careers – Gwen considers reviewers to be 'barracudas' and Joanna happens to be one of them, a young jobbing reviewer – and about the relevance of literary genres – Gwen, who comfortably writes in them all, does not rank them, whereas Joanna insists that poetry, her own genre, is 'the highest art form there can possibly be' (135). The conversational tension builds during an outdoor meal in the sun, during which writers are discussed not only from a synchronical, but also from a diachronical, point of view: the older generation of writers, represented by Gwen versus the new generation of writers, represented by Joanna, who maintains that 'significant poets, [are] the ones who counteract […] that free verse patter which the washed-up hippies and feminists wrote during the eighties' (136), Gwen being one of these, in Joanna's mind.

Gwen feels hurt by Joanna's despotic attitude, which Al associates with ignorance and youth, and after the guests depart, he attempts to comfort her by stroking her feet, as if to please her. Later, they try to have sex in the bedroom, but it is no consolation for Gwen's sense of dereliction.

This story is followed by a more modern version of the previously discussed 'Strong Pagans'. The collection continues with 'Canticles', whose protagonist, Anna, is a specialist in twelfth-century composition and an acclaimed composer and successful player of different musical instruments – harp, fiddle and organistrum. She is invited to unveil a plaque in the new Irish Conservatory of Music, the lines of which are taken from a manuscript that her mother discovered by chance. The text is but a fragment of sacred music praising the Virgin Mary, written under the influence of Hildegard von Bingen by a woman in the forests of Laois. It is ecstatic, religious music and the story examines two things: the existence during the Middle Ages of female religious figures who challenged and wrote sacred works – contrary to ecclesiastical rules – and the identification of such figures as part of something we nowadays term 'female genealogy', which is oriented towards promoting feminine values in order to counterbalance the misogynist principles that governed the medieval Christian mentality.

This female continuum is in contrast to the chasm between Anna and her college tutor, Ottiline, who tries to gain possession of the manuscript as soon as she sets her eyes on it. She sees in it a means to fulfil her professional ambitions and so she lies to Anna about its relevance and potential. Her envy, her cunning, and her falsehood – hidden behind an 'unlovely mask' – are detected by the then student, who wisely retains the manuscript for herself. The writer presents the academic arena as a place where scholars oppose one another, motivated by egotism, envy and rancour, instead of assisting one another on a common journey: the building of solid knowledge.

The next short story is entitled 'Passover' and has an 'explicit focus on the physical and gory side of childbirth' (Fasching 2009: 128). Rosanna, the main character, becomes a mother as a consequence of a passing sexual affair with an almost unknown man. When the story begins, she is a single mother with an eight-week-old baby and is in a severe state of anxiety. Mothering consumes all of her energy and occupies most of her thoughts. It has resulted in a transformation of her body and mind from the very moment of delivery, which she associates with slaughter. To reinforce this idea, she recalls the ward orderly at the hospital who cleaned the ward after she gave birth and who told her that he used to work as a pork butcher. To soothe her wounded body and calm her agitated mind, she resorts, like many other O'Donnell characters in similar states of anxiety, to water: 'The only place she could get a bit of peace and quiet at the maternity hospital was in the baths, especially the demi-tubs' (O'Donnell 2008: 164). The relaxing effect of water helps to temporarily obliterate all concerns. Other episodes in which the violence of childbirth is considered show her recalling her friendship with the American woman Marilyn and their visit to the war site at Appomattox, as well as to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, during which she observed violent, male-centred sculptures that responded to the Vietnam war. She is preoccupied with the idea of violence and the narrative arc of the story leads her to reach some sort of reconciliation with herself; indeed, it is a journey towards a retrieval of the Eden she so hankers for.

The icon of Eve, who was expelled from Eden and punished with painful delivery, comes to her mind. She is a sensual, but never immoral, Eve, who, unlike the biblical figure, wants to re-enter Eden – she tells herself '*Enter Eden. Remember Eve*' (2008: 172) – and to enjoy life, happiness and social acceptance again. She will eventually do so, hand in hand with her Adam, Henry – who is, curiously enough, a pathologist and so an expert on dead bodies – a kind of saviour who cares for her and for her baby, a man she can feel for.

'Charlie, St Joseph, Big Hands and God' takes place at a maternity hospital, where Rosaleen and Charlie take their daughter Eva because she is convulsing and bleeding. Rosaleen fears that Eva, her only child, might die and is remorseful for having neglected her so frequently in order to devote herself to the study of shells and minerals, to which she confers a special status in nature. Shells, for instance, are 'a mixture of the divine and fleshly' (181) and as such she resorts to them when she needs to get away from a situation that overwhelms her: '*Tectus nilaticus*, she repeated sternly. Think *Tectus nilaticus. Tectus nilaticus, nilaticus, nilaticues*' (181).

At the hospital canteen, she meets Davnet O'Reilly, a school friend who, unlike her, has chosen family over a professional career. She has had five children in five years. Mary O'Donnell sheds light upon the difficulties women encounter in reconciling working life and family life and the reasonable need to find a balance between the two, as in Charlie's reproach, 'Woman, there's more life than shells and stones' (180).

Rosaleen ponders certain aspects of her professional life and relevant aspects of her family life. Regarding university life, her natural habitat, she makes clear her aversion to colleagues whom she considers to be wearing masks as a means of concealing their uncertainties: 'She saw her colleagues' over-certainties as if for the first time, observed the smooth insincerity which was indispensable to many knowledgeable people' (183). Regarding family life, she discovers that the object of her love and erotic desire is not her husband but her obstetrician – not the person himself, but what he represents – a father figure who might have been the father of her child, such is the strength of her feeling. She consequently conceives of Charlie as a kind of St Joseph: 'The child, she thought, could have been osmotically conceived thanks to obstetric spores wafting secretly in the air, seeking her, finding her. Charlie was surplus to requirements. Charlie's paternity was a mere font to pacify an unforgiving world. A bit like the way God pulled a fast one on St Joseph when he wanted to impregnate Our Lady' (183). She refers to her obstetrician, 'Big-Hands', as a kind of god: 'Big-Hands, the divinity who'd seen her through the pillaging of her posterior canals, which strongly resembled the pillaging of Tectus nilaticus's canals by sea parasites' (184).

The protagonist is thus portrayed as mentally unstable and as 'an erotomaniac'[87] (185); conscious of the problem, she is aware of her own death drive, arguably preferring death to 'being committed to an asylum' (187). The author suggests that her mental state is due to 'too much grief and longing' (187) only offset by narcissistic professional success, which she enjoys once more at the end of the story, when a colleague at Sheffield University invites her to join a field trip to Madagascar.

'Border Crossing' is a narrative of geographical, political, cultural, psychological and sexual liminality, as the eighteen-year-old unnamed protagonist crosses the border between the Republic of Ireland – County Cavan, where she lives – and Northern Ireland, where her boyfriend, Peter, lives, in order have sexual intercourse for the first time. This story is set during the years of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, a time when the border was of added significance for most people living there. 'Border', in this context, also has a symbolic meaning, at least according to her boyfriend Peter: the transition from girlhood to womanhood. As a man seven years her senior, who lives across the border in a British jurisdiction and so is at home there, he adopts the leading role of the master and teasingly refers to her as his 'wee slave-gurl' (194). He seduces this 'girl' with sweet words and when he has slept with her and she has been conquered by the patriarchal phallus, she becomes colonized territory, no longer to be cared for, but rather to be exploited or discarded as he wishes. Peter removes his mask and shows his real, tyrannical self. This is illustrated when he celebrates his conquest of the girl by greedily eating a tin of plums without sharing with her.

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[87] Erotomania is defined as 'A type of passional psychosis. […] A category of delusional states in which a paranoid delusion is accompanied with passionate feeling. […] Clérambault identified very specific characteristics of this delusional syndrome: A conviction of being in amorous communication with a person of much higher rank. […] Erotomania generally does not appear alone and is usually an aspect of a serious psychotic disorder, such as SCHIZOPHRENIA or BIPOLAR DISORDER' (Noll 2009: 154).

In an epiphanic moment, the girl realizes that she has been used as a sexual commodity. Instinctively rebelling against his treatment of her, she fights back by letting Peter's authoritative mother, whom he fears and loves in equal measure, know that they have made love in *her* bed by leaving one of her pearl earrings in the bed and spraying the bedclothes with her own perfume.

Another young person in a liminal situation is depicted in 'Jethro', which focuses on the generation gap between hippy, anarchic, feminist, progressive, human-rights-oriented, anti-capitalist parents who place individual happiness above material conformity and a son who does not want the same style of life. Instead, he dreams of stability, pragmatism, traditional marriage, a regular job and respect for the established social order, which protects money and private property more that it protects the individual. Jethro is simply presented as a product of his time. Tension between the generations is stoked when Jethro, about to become a man, announces that he will not study arts, as his parents expected, but banking.

Though comically disappointed by, angry at and resentful of their son's decision not to represent the values that they spent decades fighting for, they finally accept the fact that every person must have the right to choose his/her destiny. Jethro is also ready to make a concession before beginning his career: 'he might write a few poems, a lyric or two' (203) to please his parents. Mutual love and respect bridges the gap between the two generations.

Carol, the main character in 'Aphrodite Pauses, Mid-life', also thinks about the past and present of Ireland: a Gaelic past is on display in 'gaudy shop fronts' showing 'gilt-titled books and Celtic CDs, […] purple pottery, Hessian lampshades and other emblems of authentic Irish family living' (204) and she is critical of a Celtic Tiger present linked to prosperity, consumerism and welfare, but also migration, alienation and a national identity crisis.

She herself is undergoing a personal crisis. The onset of menopause makes her think about herself as an ageing person who has already reached her peak and is forced by biology to consider the fact that this is the next stage on the journey towards death: 'she considers her tide-less, about-to-be-permanently-silent body' (209). Menstruation stands for fertility, youth, beauty and health, qualities necessary to be appealing to men in a somewhat patriarchal society which perceives the woman as a reproductive machine. Menopause represents the opposite. Women like Carol become, she imagines, invisible bodies whom no one cares to look at because the tyranny of beauty – represented in the story by a French model, Carol's counterpoint – dominates. She becomes aware of this phenomenon when 'A man looks her quickly up and down and in that moment, she knows herself transfigured' (2010). She is, however, transfigured to a stage of indifference to his regard and realizes that she has passed through a barrier and has begun to feel released, as if from the female imprisonment associated with youth.

Possibilities cut off at a biological level are open at a professional one, since she views herself as academically nurturing and mentoring a substantial number of young students from America who are in Ireland on a creative writing course. She assumes the responsibility 'to assist in the implantation of literary embryos if not at the actual long-term delivery of fully fledged entities, grotesque beauties of rampant imagination' (205). She will also instil in them love and respect for the previous generations of writers, literary fathers and mothers, not to emulate them but to learn from them: '*We are all*, Carol consoles them, *apprentices to writers who have gone before us. We absorb their traditions, then freely break them to the point of reformation. Reform, reform without fear*, she urges' (208).

'Yugoslavia of My Dreams' portrays the experience of two young female students and is set during the 1970s. Katherine and Laura, Irish college students, head for Munich, Germany, to work as chambermaids at a hotel during the summer. Frau Schlang, the housekeeper, informs them about the other cleaners and betrays racial prejudice in her description of them – they stand for the ethnic subaltern – as coming from 'big, dirty families in hot, dirty countries where the politics are most *unzuverlässig*, unreliable' (114), which is not the reality as the girls quickly discover when working with them.

However, national stereotyping in Germany plays in their favour. To be an Irish student in Germany in the mid-1970s means 'to be unsullied by the smut and filth of the world in general' (223) and that is why there are referred to as the *irische Damen*, even if, ironically, the girls do not fit that description at all: they love going out, meeting men, visiting sex shops, etc. – indeed, all the outer sexual machinations that are absent in their home country.

They want romance, excitement and fun in a country which is new and progressive to them. Katherine seems to have a chance to enjoy all these things with Mikael, a young Yugoslavian emigrant who is polite and respectful while courting her, but becomes hurt, then resentful and distant when he is eventually rejected by her. He considers her refusal as an insult and the time spent with her a waste. Unlike Peter in 'Border Crossing', Mikael has not achieved his goal – he has not conquered any territory – and conceals his frustration behind a 'mask'.

In common with 'Yugoslavia of My Dreams' and 'Twentynine Palms', 'Little Africa', the story that closes *Storm over Belfast*, deals with immigration and explores the experience of being in exile far from one's native land: alienation, exploitation, insecurity, economic hardship, problems with communication, loneliness, the lack of a sense of belonging and homesickness. The protagonists are migrants from Africa. Mosi and his mother Angela have miraculously survived a massacre in their village, during which all their other family members were violently executed. Once in the capital of Ireland, they try to put this traumatic episode behind them and actively adapt to an entirely new way of life with the intention of achieving happiness, as Mosi is convinced that 'Everybody in Dublin believed in happiness'. Mosi is curious about this concept because it was never discussed in his previous life (228). He changes his name – originally Hyacinth, which is not 'appropriate' for a boy/man in Ireland as it is the name of a flower – attends a city-centre Jesuit school and tries to do 'what everybody expected of an African boy' (229). Angela finds a new partner, an Irishman called Colm – of whom Mosi disapproves initially – and becomes pregnant. Her baby girl is proof that Ireland is nowadays a globalized and hybrid nation. However, it is still an intolerant nation: Mosi lives in an area in the city known as 'Little Africa'. Although he does not experience racial prejudice himself, he is aware that people like him might still be regarded as 'the other' – that is, not central, not normative, not controlled and still stigmatized as marginal and potentially dangerous.

The story is set at Christmas time and so O'Donnell employs the image of the nativity, which can be interpreted as symbolizing or exploring ideas of tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation among people, regardless of their place of birth, the colour of their skin, their class or their gender. The Virgin Mary and St Joseph of the twenty-first century – like Mosi and Angela – are portrayed in the school Christmas nativity play as fleeing from a war zone. They move from one place to another in an attempt to save their lives, but they are not accepted in any. Finally, these 'refugees settled themselves rebelliously into a raised area of straw, Joseph propping his rifle carefully to one side' (241). They are visited by the Three Wise Men, who offer them 'scrolls on which were written the words: *Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!*' (241). This stands as a final statement in a collection of short stories which denounces oppression, discrimination and egotism in contemporary Ireland and leaves room for hope. The conclusion of 'Little Africa' sees Mosi, Angela and Colm celebrating baby Daisy's birth by sharing a ripe pineapple, which might represent fertility and hope, and provides readers with an image of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. According to Anne Fogarty:

> a renovated family unit emerges at the end of this story in which primacy is given to the difference of the African mother and her son. Pointedly, the immigrant child is given the licence to adopt his Irish father and not the other way round. O'Donnell's hopeful ending subtly implies that a renegotiation of value systems is needed in order for a workable multicultural community to emerge, as the superiority of white culture is challenged from within by Mosi, who retains his searing memories of his life in Africa while acquiring a new identity in Ireland. (2016: 126)

This story, together with many others in *Storm over Belfast* set, for example, in America, Australia, France or Germany, 'proves [O'Donnell] a multicultural writer; […] each [setting] realistically representing a vignette that has a global voice' (Schuck 2015: 1067).

Since the publication of *Storm over Belfast* in 2008, O'Donnell has written and published new, uncollected short stories, among them: 'The Space between Louis and

Me' (*The Fish Anthology*, *2010*),[88] 'The Capital of Outer Mongolia' (*The Fiddlehead Review,* 2015), 'The Postcard' (*Stand*, 2016), 'A Bonnie and Clyde Thing' (*Crannóg Magazine,* 2016), 'The Path to Heaven' (*The Glass Shore: Short Stories by Women from the North of Ireland*, 2016), 'An Armenian in Dublin' (*Incubator Journal*, 2016) and 'Wheelchair Plaza' (*Prole Magazine*, 2017). Some of the themes which characterize her work are also present in these stories. For example, she continues to explore extreme situations, both domestic and more public. There is also a preoccupation with national identities, not alone Irish identity, as the familiar trope of immigration emerges again. Sexual identity is focused on too, as well as memory and loss, and the prospect of 'virtual' solutions to human isolation.

In 'The Space between Louis and Me' (included in this book), we encounter a protagonist who has ordered a virtual pair of spectacles online. These spectacles allow her to 'see' what is really a virtual male companion. The woman works in an addiction clinic and is single and relatively content, but has found real-life men to be inadequate or, at least, disappointing. She is not anxious or obsessive, but nonetheless decides to try this unusual system of faux companionship. Louis, as the virtual man is called, is the protagonist's perfect man and he is presented as her customized dream man: brown-haired, blue-eyed, sallow-skinned – if anything, slightly Semitic in appearance – and she is satisfied with the result. She remarks in the story's opening sentence:

> I think of Louis as a decorative essential. He doesn't do much around the place beyond being there as much as I want. He doesn't cook or clean up and can't make a bed to save his life. I watch in frustration as he goes through the motions of holding a book, knowing reading is beyond him. Yet guided by me, conversation is lucid. He is by no means stupid. (O'Donnell 2018: 168)

Even at this point in the narrative, it is clear that O'Donnell is inverting the pattern of male dominance of females by making slightly condescending remarks about her companion.

At one point in the story, she remembers her childhood. The reader discovers that she grew up in rural Ireland, one of many children in a not very religious household in which the Rosary was never said. Her parents, despite being farmers, were not typical of their time and the children, we are made to understand, grew up in relative freedom. Even so, she recalls that the work of family and farm life conveyed a message to her: that, like a bird, she must fly away. The 'bird' she refers to is described as diving into her chest

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[88] Winner of the 2010 Fish International Short Story Competition.

‘like a kingfisher into a pool’. However, she recalls the path she did not take with nostalgia. Her life now, although she is not unhappy, is a highly contemporary one in which the problem of isolation presents challenges for most people. Even her work makes particular demands on her, as she remarks laconically:

> Working with addicts fucks up the most balanced disposition, although that’s not my excuse. The Serenity Prayer isn’t all it’s cracked up to be either. You ferret out what makes life bearable. Some convince themselves work is the key. They become top sales people or even middling sales people, or they build credits doing self-improvement courses. (2018: 169)

Deep down, we sense that she would like more alternatives in her life and Louis is one option that is open to her. This story is all about choice for a woman. She has avoided the kind of life she witnessed her parents living when she was a child, with the demands of rural labour, and has instead replaced it with her own more comfortable, but no less challenging, life as a counsellor to drug addicts and alcoholics. She is not impressed with conventional marriage as she has seen it: ‘One thing I’ve learned in the long, heated therapy sessions, is that women living with men find it all a bit conditional. There’s a great deal of sheet, jeans and towel folding at weekends, toilet-cleaning, swanky “couples” meals to be prepared.’

O’Donnell nevertheless presents her protagonist as a sensuous and sexual woman: ‘He cannot know that when I lie back, fascinated and wild at the sight of a Pre-select-for-Size erection, imagining his touch as he sits on a canary-yellow linen chair opposite my bed, that I need to believe his lustful and loving endearments, the quiet sibilance of what he enjoys most.’ The story is not devoid of comic moments, as, for example, when she reads the advertisement which inspires her to order her virtual man, but the tone is slightly melancholic, and it is clear that she is making the best of her lot in life. At times, she sounds almost old-fashioned in some of her deliberations:

> It satisfies me to wear a moonstone ring and imagine it was *given* to me, that *Louis* gave it to me when in fact this would be impossible, because he has no money, no currency. It excites me to warm a chained oblong of tiger’s eye in my hand before draping it on my breast-bone, the chill gone. I imagine his honey-coloured hand warming it, not mine. Sometimes too, I dance before him, in the bedroom,

> enveloped in a Rose Madder length of silk from the province of Uttar Pradesh. (170)

She is sensuous and vibrant enough to actually dance before her virtual man, even though in reality he does not exist. This image of her dancing alone reminds us of her solitude.

In stark contrast to this, 'An Armenian in Dublin' presents the reader with two unconventional characters, one of them an Armenian immigrant called Galo, who has been raped in boyhood in his own land and remains traumatized by this. He dresses colourfully and wears a fur jacket, making him stand out in the Irish community in which he lives. His companion is transgender and has not yet completed the transition from male to female. The narrator Maree regards herself as fortunate to be with Galo and to find acceptance at this point in her transition: '*Let's just say, all things considered, it's not every girl he takes to. And I'm so lucky it's me*'.

The couple attend library evenings in the town in which they live, finding acceptance and tolerance among what Maree refers to as 'the town's finer spirits' and not the mockery the pair are accustomed to. The story focuses on their somewhat drunken journey home from a local bar and their attempt to find a mislaid key to their house. In the end, Galo breaks a small window with his elbow and the pair gain entry to the house through the window. During the course of the story, we discover that their landlady is suspicious of both of them, without having any reason to be, other than their slightly unusual appearance and her belated realization that Maree was formerly male but is now female. On the night on which the story is set, Maree is secretly pleased when the pizza delivery boy glances at her in the way he would glance at any other female customer. The night ends with the couple making love, after a fashion. What O'Donnell is suggesting is that desire prevails, regardless of the situation or gender or indeed regardless of transitional roles. It is a story in which O'Donnell insists, yet again, that life is various and that people are diverse, but that some instincts prevail, regardless of what roles we adopt. The fact of Galo's early trauma is not the point of this narrative, but the fact that he has survived and found comfort with another marginalized person is important. This story was published in the online journal *Incubator* in winter 2016.

In this story, as in much of her short narrative fiction, O'Donnell not only finds inspiration in the margins and depicts characters and situations that the social order regards as queer, liminal, irrational or even abject; she also highlights denied or hidden aspects of life which need to be known in order to fully understand the human condition at present. As a humanistic, feminist and multicultural writer who ‘lifts facades’ in search of truth and social justice in a nonsensical and postmodern world, Mary O’Donnell deserves a place of honour among the most avant-garde contemporary writers.

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