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Between Piety and Cruelty

Womanhood in Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder*

Dissertação de Mestrado em Estudos de Cultura, Literatura e Línguas Modernas, Ramo de Estudos Ingleses e Americanos, orientada pela Professora Doutora Adriana da Conceição Silva Pereira Bebiano do Nascimento apresentada ao Departamento Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra.

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RESUMO

Entre a Piedade e a Crueldade - a Feminilidade em *The Wonder*, de Emma Donoghue

Esta tese é um estudo crítico sobre a obra *The Wonder* (2016), de Emma Donoghue, centrado na identidade feminina irlandesa no século XIX. O seu objetivo é mostrar como Donoghue desconstrói as representações convencionais das figuras da mãe, da freira e da jovem rapariga na cultura irlandesa, todas elas derivadas do discurso patriarcal da Igreja Católica. A tese é composta por três capítulos, divididos em secções teóricas e analíticas. O primeiro capítulo explora a perceção que a cultura irlandesa tem das mulheres adultas, com especial incidência nos seus papéis sociais de mães e esposas. O segundo capítulo foca-se na posição das freiras em relação às mulheres leigas e na forma como são entendidas a sua identidade feminina e os seus papéis sociais como professoras e enfermeiras. O terceiro capítulo trata da imagem da rapariga como uma fase sem características próprias, suspenso entre a infância e a idade adulta. A análise de três personagens centrais, nomeadamente, Rosaleen O'Donnell, Sister Michael e Anna O'Donnell, é uma tentativa de estabelecer a agência e a subjetividade restauradas às heroínas e de mostrar a importante contribuição de Donoghue para a Herstory, ou a história das mulheres.

Palavras-chave: Catholicismo irlandês, *The Wonder*, Maternidade, Século XIX, Jejum de Meninas

ABSTRACT**Between Piety and Cruelty – Womanhood in Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder***

This thesis is a critical study of Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder* (2016) focusing on Irish female identity in the nineteenth century. Its aim is to show how Donoghue deconstructs conventional representations of the figures of a mother, a nun, and a young girl in Irish culture, all of which derive from the patriarchal discourse of the Catholic Church. The thesis consists of three chapters, divided into theoretical and analytical sections. Chapter One explores Irish culture's perception of adult women, with a particular focus on their social roles as mothers and wives. Chapter Two focuses on the position of nuns in relation to lay women and how their female identity and social roles as teachers and nurses are understood. Chapter Three deals with the image of girlhood as a period without its own characteristics, suspended between childhood and adulthood. The analysis of three central characters, namely, Rosaleen O'Donnell, Sister Michael, and Anna O'Donnell, is an attempt to establish the restored agency and subjectivity to the heroines and to showcase Donoghue's important contribution to Herstory, or the history of women.

Keywords: Irish Catholicism, *The Wonder*, Motherhood, Nineteenth Century, Fasting Girls

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Introduction

This paper is an analysis of Irish womanhood in the 19th century, as portrayed in Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder* (2016), with a particular emphasis on female identity during the Victorian period. It will be argued that Donoghue deconstructs the perception of the womanhood imposed by the patriarchal discourse, embodied by the Catholic Church, and brings an important contribution in the field of Herstory¹. At the time the dominant moral code in Ireland presented a mix of Victorian values brought by the English with the Catholic ethos, strengthened by the revival of Catholicism among the Irish during 19th century. The two terms and sets of moral codes sometimes overlap, but it should be stressed that they do not function as synonyms.

In her ninth novel, Donoghue undoes the fixed categories of the mother, the nun, and the young girl, images which seem to be firmly grounded in the conservative culture of 19th century Ireland. The complexity of her female protagonists is juxtaposed with the oversimplistic duality shaped by the Catholic Church; it allows her to expose and refute this dichotomy, offering a new, ambiguous approach to Irish womanhood. Asked if she was worried about the reception of *The Wonder* in Ireland, Donoghue answered:

[...] my countrymen and countrywomen have themselves for the last 20 years been going through a major analysis of their own culture, their own history, their own traditions. The fiercest condemnation of the flaws in the Catholic Church has come from Ireland, and I feel like I'm part of that movement. (Donoghue *apud* Smith, 2016)

Born in Dublin in 1969, Emma Donoghue is a prolific writer, literary historian, novelist, playwright, and screenwriter. Raised in an academic environment – her father, Dennis Donoghue, is a renowned literary critic, her mother an English teacher and a passionate reader – she started to create her first pieces of writing at the age of six (Thompson, 2003: 170). At University College Dublin, where she earned a BA in English and French, she began to write fiction, the genre for which she is most acclaimed. Amongst her best-known fictional works are the collection of short stories *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002), the award winning *The Room* (2010) – considered one of two “bestselling works of fiction in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland” (O'Neill, 2021: 77) – and the historical fiction novel *The Wonder* (2016). Her

¹ Herstory is a term coined in the 1970s during the second wave of feminism, allegedly by Robin Morgan who was the first to use it in print, in her anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970). Feminists considered history to be a field of study dominated and dictated by male perspective; Herstory was their response to provide a more balanced and inclusive perception of the past. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, Herstory is a “history written from the point of view of women, and giving importance to their experiences and activities”. (*Cambridge Dictionary*)

artistic debut in the 1990s coincided with a special period in the national literature when, according to Mária Kurdi,

an unprecedented fermentation began within Irish society, calling traditional attitudes into question and revealing secret skeletons in secret closets. Instances of sexual hypocrisy, child abuse and domestic violence were made public and provoked debates which highlighted the need to reconsider perceptions as well as legal formulation of the links between the individual, the community and its institutions. (Kurdi, 2011: 59)

These particular circumstances allowed Donoghue not to shy out from speaking out about “the secret skeletons” which, in her case, in the context of Irish culture, was lesbianism. With her novel debut, *Stir-Fry* (1994), a coming-of-age story of a young Irish girl exploring her sexuality, she responded to the ongoing changes in Irish society at the time, representing a part of

a younger generation of Irish lesbian feminists who benefited from the women's liberation and gay liberation movements of the 1960s to 1980s and feel not only able to ‘come out’ but to speak about sexual desire and sexual practices more openly, if anything, than their straight contemporaries (Kilfeather, 2002: 1067).

With works such as *The Hood* (1995), *Kissing the Witch* (1997) and the aforementioned *Stir-Fry*, all of which feature elements of lesbian identity, she offers a fresh perspective in contemporary Irish literature, taking advantage of the “bubbling cultural context of 1990s Ireland [...] [which] provided an opportunity to depart from the legacy of a colonial past and finally enter a time ‘new’” (Fantaccini and Grassi, 2011: 398). With both her fiction works, as well as literary history writings, such as *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801* (1993) that launched her career as a scholar, Donoghue contributed greatly to the recognition of the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland, still a conservative country in the first decade of the Celtic Tiger. In *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2006), George O'Brien acknowledges Donoghue's accomplishments in the field of lesbian literature, recognizing her individual style and her place in the pantheon of contemporary Irish writers. According to O'Brien:

These portrayals of lesbianism show it to be an achieved realisation of a world of one's own, reflecting thereby the overall sense of breakthrough – in subject matter, sense of audience, self-consciousness and the interplay between autonomy and authenticity – characteristic of the postwar Irish novel. (O'Brien, 2006: 450)

Her interest in the topic results from personal experiences – as a lesbian growing up in conservative Ireland of the 1970s, she often felt like an outsider (Thompson, 2003: 171). In an interview with Fiorenzo Fantaccini and Samuele Grassi (2011), when talking about her childhood and adolescence in Dublin, Donoghue recalls:

Pretty much everyone I knew was white, had two Irish parents, and was a practising Catholic. I had no objection to all this until, at about fourteen, I realiz`ed I was a lesbian, and therefore, in my society's terms, a freak. This theme – not just homosexuality but the clash between individual and community, norm and 'other' – has marked many of my published works. (Donoghue *apud* Fantaccini and Grassi, 2011: 400)

The writer admits that her sexuality helped her develop empathy and understanding for those treated like outcasts – outcasts that later turned out to be so often the protagonists of her novels. Having, for most of her teenage years, struggled with accepting “being socially abnormal” (Fantaccini and Grassi, 2011: 401), in an interview with Wendy Smith she confesses how these early hardships translated into her works: “For example, I write a lot about freaks, I write a lot about slaves, and I'm interested in relations between the powerless and the powerful; I think all that comes in a ripple effect from my being a lesbian [...].” (Donoghue *apud* Smith, 2016: 65).

Her literary achievements, however, are not limited to queer issues. In the early 2000s, Donoghue debuted with *Slammerkin* as a historical fiction author, a genre which gained her much acclaim over the years. Explaining her predilection for historical fiction, she calls herself “an academic gone wrong” who enjoys a combination of meticulous “detective work” (Donoghue *apud* Smith, 2016: 65) required when conducting research with a range of creativity and freedom of factual selection in the process of inventing the story. In an interview with Michael Lackey for *Conversations with Biographical Novelists: Truthful Fictions Across the Globe* (2018), addressing Mary Saunders, *Slammerkin*'s protagonist, she speaks of having an

original impulse [...] to represent the ones who'd been left out, like the nobodies, women, slaves, people in freak shows, servants, the ones who are not powerful. I felt an obligation: if I was going to write about them at all, I wanted to give them their little moment in the sun. To name them, even if they were incredibly obscure figures. [...] if I am writing about this girl who got executed in the 1760s, and if I know that her name was Mary Saunders, then that's the name I should stick to. So it was a feeling of loyalty or wanting to represent them, and not just to represent categories or classes, but the actual individuals. (Donoghue *apud* Lackey, 2018: 81)

The recurring themes in her novels are non-conforming female characters who stand out, and history that focuses on usually forgotten events and people. Donoghue's inclinations are typical for postmodern, feminist writers who often use historical fiction as a mean to acknowledge the marginalized groups or individuals who were silenced in the past and could not be represented. She is one of the authors who rewrites the past by creating Herstories and thus restores women's subjectivity in history. Fantaccini and Grassi recognize that

Like many women artists of her generation, Donoghue sees the power in getting neglected works by women back from the hidden corners of official *History*. Like most contemporary

Irish artists, she works in liminal spaces which lull between the past and the present, yet with the future always in mind [...] (Fantaccini and Grassi, 2011: 397)

This sway is also very much present in *The Wonder* (2016), a historical fiction which combines elements of a gothic thriller and psychological drama. Furthermore, as argued by Maite Escudero-Alías, in “Estrangement and the Ethics of Attention in Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder*” (2023),

[...] despite the fact that *The Wonder* was published during the so-called Post Celtic Tiger era in Ireland, which refers to the period that follows Ireland's openness to the global world and market economy, best known as the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger (1990-2008), it hinges on a traumatic past that challenges contemporary Ireland's prevailing literary trends. (Escudero-Alías, 2023: 57)

In Donoghue's ninth novel she tells a story of an alleged fasting girl, Anna O'Donnell. The plot, set in an isolated countryside of Irish Midlands in the late 1850s – the post-Famine years – is written from the point of view of Lib Wright, an English nurse, summoned from London to help establishing whether the fasting child is a fraud or a living miracle who had survived without food for the past four months. After arriving in Ireland, Lib – being an advocate of science and rationality, sent from the capital of a prosperous empire – is confronted with a very different reality, one dominated by the mix of Catholic religion and folk beliefs. At least that is how she perceives it.

The village commission, consisting of local men – powerful, such as baronet Otway Blackett, doctor McBrearty, parish priest Father Thaddeus, wealthy landowner John Flynn, as well as less affluent men like the pub owner, Ryan or the local teacher, O'Flaherty – supervises the case of the fasting girl. In consultation with the O'Donnell family, they appoint Lib, as well as Sister Michael, an Irish nun from the House of Mercy in Tullamore, to watch over Anna for two weeks to either deny or confirm the rumours about her state.

Donoghue's protagonists are all females. There are a few supporting male figures, usually representing the conservative and misogynistic attitudes, such as doctor McBrearty. Yet there are exceptions: for example, Anna's father, Malachy O'Donnell, passive and withdrawn is, by far, an unconventional representation of both a father figure and a man in 19th century. William Byrne, on the other hand, an educated journalist from Dublin and a sceptic, is the only ideologically impartial male figure in the novel, offering a bridge between radical Catholicism, represented by the Irish family, and a complete rejection of faith personified by the Englishwoman.

Gerry Smyth describes the writer as able to “interrogate and expose the received narratives of the dominant culture” (Smyth *apud* Thompson, 2003: 169), a capacity she demonstrates in *The Wonder*. The novel, set in the second half of 19th century, places at the centre the theme of Victorian² womanhood in its many forms – mother, nun, girl, outsider. It focuses on exposing the abuse of the hegemonic discourse that aimed at stifling and subjugating women by imposing on them unattainable standards and filling their lives with prohibitions and obligations allegedly arising from their “nature”. In 19th century Ireland this narrative derived mainly from the Catholic Church, the most powerful institution in post-Famine Ireland.

The Catholic Church was the epitome of male dominance. Its power increased significantly in the second half of 19th century and the clergy used their influence in various ways, one of which was imposing the social norms concerning femininity. Piety was preached with such fervour from church pulpits that, in the case of women, it often appeared to balance between piety and cruelty – as Donoghue skilfully portrayed through the examples of Anna O'Donnell and her mother, Rosaleen.

The author gives voice to women who, perhaps, do not speak out directly about their sufferings but through their behaviour, decisions, and actions, do express the hardships of being a female according to Irish and Victorian standards. Placing the novel's plot in a remote time and space, yet close enough for the readers to still find its traces in contemporary Ireland, and trying to restore women's agency in the era that prevented them to exercise one, Donoghue tells *Herstories* that readers can still identify with today. Mária Kurdi's approach, although referring to Donoghue as a playwright, is also applicable to her accomplishments in *The Wonder*:

In addressing the female experience, several Irish woman playwrights chose to portray this broad thematic as intimately bound up with the socially constructed relations between men and women, and between women and institutions against the backdrop of history and dominant ideologies. Undoubtedly, a lot of measures have been implemented [...] to alter the traditionally subordinate position of women in the patriarchal society of Ireland to ensure their gender equality [...]. (Kurdi, 2011: 60)

Donoghue defines herself as “a lesbian and feminist writer [...] writing stories, not utopian manifestoes” (Donoghue *apud* Thompson, 2011: 177), a writer who is a genre-bender, passionate about real-life characters with whom her readers can relate. Her story structures are described as “an alternative narrative to the marriage plot” (Thompson, 2003: 169), given

² Although Irish culture is separate from (British) Victorian and cannot be treated as synonymic, they did share numerous common features, Ireland at the time being under the British rule. Therefore, in this thesis “Victorian values” should be read as ones also applied in Ireland.

Donoghue's interest in queer and feminist literature which break with conventional representation of male-female relationships and conformist and heteronormative gender concepts. Through her historical fiction novels, the Irish writer tries to restore the subjectivity of these figures who were often dismissed or omitted in the course of history as she explores and rewrites the female heritage. When speaking of this particular genre, she points out that, "there was a moment when a lot of Irish writers turned to historical fiction. I did it relatively early. I don't think it was a particularly Irish thing, especially as I've been out of the country since 1990" (Donoghue *apud* Lackey, 2018: 82).

Historical fiction as a genre has a long tradition in European literature (Stocker, 2017: 67). It can be applied to various types of narrative, such as theatre, cinema, or television. Nonetheless, in Western culture, it is most often associated with fiction, thanks to the novels of 19th century writers such as Walter Scott, Honoré de Balzac, or Henryk Sienkiewicz.

Considered to be a reaction of Romanticism to the Enlightenment's rationality and scepticism, in English literature historical fiction flourished through the works of Walter Scott, a Scottish writer, who had a profound influence on the literature (in English) of his time. His *Waverly* (1814) is regarded as the first historical novel in European tradition.

According to the Historical Novel Society³ for a work to qualify as historical fiction, it should be written at least fifty years after the events described have taken place or should be written by a person who was not yet born while they were occurring – hence, somebody who refers only to the research during his or her creative process (Historical Novel Society *apud* Rodwell, 2013: 47). However, many scholars find historical fiction to be a relative concept (Stocker, 2017: 77) due to its self-contradictory nature resulting from a simultaneous conjunction of facts and fiction, which Rodwell describes as "a lie with obscure obligations to the truth" (Rodwell, 2013: 49). Richard Lee addressed the allegedly contradictory character of historical fiction during his lecture at the Romantic Novelists' Association conference in 2000. He tried to explain to his listeners how this discrepancy is a fundament of, not only literature, but all art, using the example of *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1996). According to Lee:

No one thinks these two books are true: 'Yet no-one would bother to read them if they didn't believe that they were in some way drawn from life.' [...] [historical fiction] seeks, at the same

³ Historical Novel Society is a non-profit literary organisation, consisting of writers as well as readers, founded by Richard Lee in United Kingdom in 1997 to promote the genre of historical fiction.

time, both accuracy and illusion. It is ludicrous to say this is only a defining characteristic of historical fiction — it's a defining characteristic of all fiction'. (Lee *apud* Rodwell, 2013: 49)

Lee addresses the idea of verisimilitude, the believability of a work of fiction, as an indispensable element of the genre. Its aim is to blur the boundary between what is real and what is imagined so that the recipient of art is left with an impression that, for example in case of a literary work, the events described are not only possible but probable.

Nevertheless, in the case of historical fiction, such believability is much more complex and difficult to achieve than in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which is a contemporary novel. The reason behind it is that historical fiction, by its definition, draws on historical accounts and research already existing. Writers in the genre base their works on the documents and historical sources already written and thus the ones which accuracy, addressed by Lee, can all be questioned. Taking this into account, Jerome De Groot in *The Historical Novel* (2010) further problematises the issue of genre definition by suggesting that the line between historical writing and historical fiction is not so clear. According to De Groot:

The central paradox of historical fiction, the consciously false realist representation of something which can never be known, seems to prefigure the postmodern crisis in historical writing. Indeed [...] that the historian's job is to explain the otherness of the past, whilst the novelist explores the differences of the past, seem to no longer be so distinct. Both novelist and historian are using trope, metaphor, prose, narrative style to interpret and render a version of something which is innately other and unknown. (De Groot, 2010: 113)

That both the historian and the novelist employ similar literary procedures may be surprising, yet this does not make the genres synonymous. Scott Dalton, while acknowledging the speculative and fictional nature of history and historical fiction, defends that what distinguishes them is the purpose they serve. According to Dalton:

the difference lies in the level at which they seek the truth, the focus of their seeking. The historian focuses on the events. The fiction writer focuses on the persons — the characters, if you will — involved in those events. (...) We finish a history and think « So that's what happened! » We finish a work of historical fiction, catch our breath, and think « So that's what it was like! » (Dalton *apud* Rodwell, 2013: 53)

In other words, the purpose of both kinds of writing is different. History focuses on the enquiry of the past and on establishing the facts, as much as possible, while historical fiction combines a selection of the said facts with author's imagination, aiming at providing a work that is a fusion of facts and fiction, inspired by or based on real events and characters, but entirely fictional.

Scott H. Dalton offers another definition of the genre which speaks of historical fiction as consisting of historical characters either in the context of authentic experiences they have

had or invented situations. The other possibility is incorporation of fictional figures in documented historical situations or fictional events, although in case of the latter, it needs to be put in the context of a real historical period (Dalton *apud* Rodwell, 2013: 49).

Moreover, Avrom Fleishman specifies that the historical novel needs to comprise a particular connection with history, that is to have "(...) not merely a real building or a real event but a real person amongst the fictitious ones. When life is seen in the context of history, we have a novel; when the novel's characters live in the same world with historical persons, we have a historical novel" (Fleishman *apud* Stocker 2017: 66).

There are several of the above mentioned features that make *The Wonder* a historical fiction. To begin with, Donoghue describes accurately historical events – to name but one, the Great Famine that took place in Ireland in the years 1845-1852 – in combination with both invented and real characters – one of the main protagonists is Lib Wright, a nurse trained by Florence Nightingale⁴.

The main plot is based on an actual phenomenon that occurred in both Catholic and Protestant countries across centuries, with particular frequency in the High Middle Ages and then again in 19th and 20th centuries – fasting girls. In the Victorian period numerous cases of young girls and women claiming to survive for long periods of time without food gained public interest and press attention. As indicated by Joan Jacobs Brumberg in her essay "Fasting Girls': Reflections on Writing the History of Anorexia Nervosa" (1985), "Typically, the young woman claimed to be eating nothing at all or existing simply on the 'juice of a roasted raisin' or on water brushed on her lips with a feather" (Brumberg, 1985: 96).

In deeply religious circles prolonged fasting was believed to be an indicator of piety and holiness. However, the development of medicine at the time led quite a lot of people to view them as frauds or hysterics – especially the latter, considered a disease, was commonly attributed to girls in the Victorian period at any sight of an emotional or physical disorder. In the 1870s, along with the increased recognition of scientific discourse and medical knowledge, the phenomenon started to be associated with the newly coined term of *anorexia nervosa* that

⁴ Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) was a British nurse, social reformer, and statistician. Also called "The Lady with the Lamp," she served as a nurse during the Crimean War, an experience which prompted her to fight for improved working conditions for nurses. In 1860 she founded St. Thomas' Hospital and the Nightingale Training School for Nurses. Her efforts to improve social healthcare greatly influenced the quality of the health system in the 19th and 20th centuries. She also contributed to the change in perception of the profession of nursing which started to be seen as an honourable vocation, putting an end to the stereotype popularised by Charles Dickens in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844) of an untrained, incompetent, and constantly drunk nurse personified by Mrs. Gamp.

labelled prolonged fasting as a serious illness – hence it became an object of medical interest and study.

By placing the plot in 1859, only a few years after the Famine, and still several years before the name anorexia appeared in the medical context, Donoghue underlines the transitional character of the period, one that seems on the frontier between religion and science. This dichotomy is present on various levels in the novel. The author herself confessed that she “(...) set Anna's (fictional) case just before that in 1859, so that some of her contemporaries might still see it as a hoax, others as a religious miracle, others as a medical miracle, others as a mental illness” (Donoghue *apud* Haughton-Shaw, 2020). According to Escudero-Alías,

Donoghue's contextualization of *The Wonder* in the 1850s proves that the past is still a contested space which may create “alternate and more complex narratives, taking account of memories that were for too long ‘forgotten’, or sidelined, by Irish history and culture” (Pine 2011: 3). These narratives expand a narrow definition of Irish identity and reconfigure this identity through different techniques and frameworks. (Escudero-Alías, 2023: 58)

The representation of the post-Famine social reality of the Irish countryside is another realist element in the novel. The omnipresent poverty that is experienced by almost all inhabitants of the village, except perhaps Sir Otway Blackett, shows a great social division between the poor and the (very few) rich. Overall, the smallness of the community illustrates the de-population of the country in the late 1850s. The vast majority of households was abandoned and soon fell into ruin due to, among others, massive emigration to the United States during the Great Famine (*The Great Famine*, 1996, 0'33''). As commented by Friedrich Engels during his visit to Ireland in 1856:

The whole of the West, especially in the neighborhood of Galway is covered with ruined peasant houses, most of which have only been deserted since 1846. I never thought the famine could have such tangible reality. Whole villages are devastated, and there among them lie splendid parks of the lesser landlords who are almost the only people still living there, mostly lawyers. Famine, emigration and clearances have accomplished this. (Engels *apud* Jackson, 1984: 1006)

Another important and factual aspect in the novel is the depiction of profound religiousness of a very peculiar character (an interesting mix of Christian devotion and pagan beliefs) that prevails in the daily activities of the villagers in *The Wonder*, especially the O'Donnell family. Various scholars argue that one of the consequences of the Great Famine was a reinforcement of religiosity among the Irish. In the 1996 documentary *The Great Famine*, which I have been referring, it is said that the disaster provoked a significant increase in the number of priests and nuns in the country:

[...] the great triumphalist age of Church building had in a sense begun before the famine but, like those other changes I mentioned, accelerates to enormous qualitatively different state of things after the famine. By and large though, the Catholic Church does establish a kind of social control, I think in the mid to the late 19th century that it didn't necessarily have in the early to mid-19th century, and it may also have, if you like, profited from the sense of trauma and desolation which certainly affected Irish life in the generation after the famine, where the consolations of religion were probably what people turn to. (*The Great Famine*, 1996, 1'15'' – 1'17'')

At the same time folk beliefs remained very strong in Ireland, especially in the rural areas, as reported by Jeremiah Curtin in *Irish Tales of the Fairies and Ghost World* (2000), first published in 1895. Curtin, a 19th century ethnographer and folklorist claims that

the people in Ireland have clung to their ancient beliefs with a vividness of faith which in our time is really phenomenal [...] fairies are made to take such frequent part in Irish country life, and come to one's mind almost involuntarily when speaking of the supernatural in Ireland [...] These tales will show how vivid the belief of the people is yet, and will prove that fairies are not for all men personages of the past, but are as real for some persons as any other fact in life in this last decade of the nineteenth century (Curtin, 2000: 2).

As a result of the interpenetration of the Roman Catholic faith with ancient Celtic beliefs, a particular brand of Catholicism emerged, which recognised both systems and allowed them to co-exist. Donoghue describes numerous manifestations of this fusion on the pages of her novel, as, for example Anna, a pious Catholic, believing in the magical properties of the rag tree at the holy well, which supposedly serves to heal ailments (Donoghue, 2016: 209).

Another feature which also makes *The Wonder* a historical fiction (and which is, according to Fleishman, the crucial element) is the incorporation of real figures and events alongside the fictitious ones. For example, Florence Nightingale, an English nurse, who became famous thanks to her contribution to the development of nursing as a profession open to women and her recognised work during the Crimean War (1853-1856). Her character does not take part in a plot *per se*, but she is described as an authority figure in the field, regularly alluded to by Lib, described as her former student.

Another historical character mentioned in the novel is Sir William Russell, referred to by William Byrne as his acquaintance (Donoghue, 2016: 198). Russell was an Irish reporter for *The Times*, considered one of the first modern war correspondents, who spent almost two years reporting on the Crimean War. When speaking of the conflict, during which Lib served as a nurse, Byrne notices how impactful Russell's reports were: "Those dispatches of his from the front changed everything. Made it impossible to turn a blind eye" (Donoghue, 2016: 198).

In terms of historical events included in *The Wonder*, most importantly there is the Great Famine and its repercussions on the Irish and Ireland which consist of the background of

the novel. Although the action takes place several years after the crisis, its effects recur from time to time in the story. It also provides a major point of contrast to Anna's condition: a hunger that sanctifies and glorifies versus a hunger that debases and destroys. In an interview for National Public Radio, Donoghue admits that she "wanted to set the idea of voluntary starving against the appalling context of involuntary starving" (Donoghue *apud* Ferguson, 2018: 95).

There is also an important fragment from *The Irish Times* mentioned by Donoghue which helps to place the story in an exact year. When Lib reads through the paper, she notes: "union of Moldavia and Wallachia; Veracruz besieged; ongoing volcanic eruption in Hawaii" (Donoghue, 2016: 185). All of these events did indeed happen in the first quarter of 1859 – and *The Irish Times* itself was launched on 29 March of the same year. The fact that Lib browses through the paper published in August 1859 (Donoghue, 2016: 170) and reads about the international events from January, February, and March, alongside an article displaying Anna's photograph taken a few days prior, suggests the modern reader the speed with which information spread at the time.

Setting the novel in her own country allowed Donoghue, due to the knowledge of socio-cultural, historical, and religious conditions, to create a reliable image of femininity in 19th century. At the same time the incorporation of a foreign female character underlined the cultural differences and emphasised, respectively, the Irishness and the Englishness of the protagonists. Also, Donoghue constructed her characters in such a way to challenge and criticise the traditional representation of womanhood, drawing a more realistic picture of femininity, one that is complex and ambiguous. Her female protagonists do not fall into the categories they are supposed to embody – on the contrary, they question these categories and offer new perspective on the culturally grounded figures of a mother, a nun, and a girl.

The main character, an eleven-year-old Anna O'Donnell, represents a girl-child and a fasting girl. Pious and obedient, she personifies the childish innocence as well as, due to her condition, a spiritual superiority. Yet, her four months long starvation turns out to be a fraud, and her virginity is called into question when the incest relationship with her late brother is revealed.

The mother, Rosaleen O'Donnell, does not conform with the conventional image of a self-sacrificing Irish mother as a nurturer and caregiver. She is depicted as a devotee who benefits from her child's suffering when Anna's case attracts international attention and visitors who leave donations. Her passivity and emotional detachment regarding her child, an

indifferent acceptance of her daughter's life-threatening condition, are more typical of the image of a devouring mother, the opposite of an idealized self-sacrificing mother. Nonetheless, it is Rosaleen who secretly feeds Anna throughout her fasting, which contradicts the image of a devouring mother. On the one hand, it seems she tries to prevent Anna from dying, on the other hand she does not do anything more to help her, spreading the rumours of the miraculous fasting girl instead.

Sister Michael, a walking nun⁵, who, along with Lib, is appointed to watch over Anna O'Donnell, personifies the image of woman as a saint figure. Desexualised, obedient and taciturn, she seems to be blindly following the Church's orders. However, in the most crucial moment in the novel she decides to disobey her superiors. She regains agency and breaks with the patriarchal representation of the nun figure. Sister Michael restores her own voice, revealing an ambiguous approach to the clergy, one that is far from mindless adoration and thus far from conventional perception of nuns.

All these female representations ultimately serve to expose the paradox of patriarchal discourse. Through their actions, which defy conventional notions of the mother, the young girl and the nun, they highlight the contradictions and abuses of the simplistic perception of womanhood that dominated the Victorian era – and which is sometimes still present today. They also show how Catholic culture, by spreading its sexist vision of femininity, trapped women between piety and cruelty, forcing them to perform social roles according to misogynistic norms. Donoghue undoes the fixed categories of womanhood, revealing the illusion of the double standards girls and women faced at the time, which is all the more pronounced by the introduction of a foreign female figure – Lib Wright.

Lib constitutes a main lens through which the reader experiences the Irishness pictured in the novel. Being English, she arrives to Ireland as an outsider who, on one hand is rejected by the local community and, on the other, has a whole lot of (British) prejudices herself, believing the Irish to be “a rabble [...] shiftless, thriftless, hopeless, hapless, always brooding over past wrongs” (Donoghue, 2016: 174). The narrative strategy is based on contrast and comparison, constructed by juxtaposing two opposing poles – be it Englishness and Irishness, science and religion, faith and superstition, or past and present – and offers an interesting approach to Irish womanhood in 19th century.

⁵ Walking nuns are those who can leave the cloister and participate in public life, for example by visiting the sick in hospitals.

In the following chapter I will focus on the representation of motherhood in the novel. First, I will attempt to demystify the culturally consolidated pristine image of the self-sacrificing Irish mother. I then will argue the complexity of this role, which the hegemonic discourse of the nineteenth century required women to fulfil with the utmost devotion. I will confront it with its cultural opposite – the figure of the devouring mother. Finally, I will attempt to demonstrate how Donoghue offers a bridge between the two images and undoes the fixed categories of motherhood grounded in the Irish culture.

Chapter One: The Irish Mother

1.1. Introduction

This chapter will analyse the image of womanhood in 19th century Ireland with a particular emphasis on motherhood. I will briefly scrutinize the changing position of Irish women during the Victorian period⁶ and focus in more detail on their social roles as mothers and wives, from a point of view of two the most prevalent images of motherhood popularised by the hegemonic discourse at the time – the self-sacrificing mother and the devouring mother. I will attempt to demonstrate the abuse towards women coming from the simplified, dichotomic view, embodied by the Catholic Church's discourse, and show why fulfilling the role of a mother, as understood by Victorian and Catholic standards, was doomed to failure. The image of a mother portrayed by Rosaleen O'Donnell in *The Wonder* will serve as the main example of how Donoghue deconstructs the category of motherhood in the Irish culture.

1.2. Irish Women in 19th Century Ireland

According to Gerardine Meaney, Mary O'Dowd and Bernadette Whelan, authors of *Reading the Irish Woman. Studies in Cultural Encounters and Exchange, 1714–1960* (2013), from late 17th to early 19th century, women gradually gained more access to education. It helped improve their social perspectives, providing them with basic skills and knowledge, and enhanced their participation in public life – not on a grand scale yet but they did start to be recognized as members of society with a right to speak up and engage in public matters. Meaney, O'Dowd, and Whelan remark:

The generation of Irish women born in the last quarter of the eighteenth century were, therefore, better educated, on the whole, than their antecedents. Nor was this phenomenon limited by class or by religion. [...] Relying mainly on the statistical information provided in the printed reports of the 1841 census, Ó Cíosain's analysis suggests that the growth in the number of schools had made a significant impact on female literacy by that time. (Meaney; O'Dowd; Whelan, 2013: 58)

By the 1840s the level of literacy – among both men and women – was relatively high and with a tendency to increase, as argued by historian Robert Foster in *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (Foster, 1989: 341). Perhaps surprisingly, in the first half of 19th century, Ireland enjoyed

⁶ Although Irish culture is separate from (British) Victorian and cannot be treated as synonymic, they did share numerous common features, Ireland at the time being under the British rule. Therefore, in this thesis "Victorian values" should be read as ones also applied in Ireland.

less conservative gender patterns than other Western countries and offered greater freedom and inclusivity for women – as the Industrial Revolution was not present on a large scale in Ireland yet, neither were the social norms and the separation of spheres that it included (Radosh, 2008: 306). As a result, prior to the Great Famine of 1845-1852, Irish women had far more authority and power than they did for the rest of the century. Polly F. Radosh in her article “Sara Ruddick’s Theory of Maternal Thinking⁷ Applied to Traditional Irish Mothering” (2008) argues that

Patriarchy, therefore, was different in Ireland than it was in America or Europe. Women produced lace, dairy products, woolen goods, and other items for sale, and they had considerable family authority. Money was turned over to the mother in the family for “safekeeping,” and mothers made important decisions about who would emigrate, marry, or enter a religious order. Irish society practice primogeniture, and men had patriarchal family authority, but women had much more influence in important decisions and contributed more to family economic stability than would have been typical of other Western countries at the same time. (Radosh, 2008: 306)

However, it is important to emphasise that despite the relative freedom and certain range of authority women enjoyed, Ireland was still a patriarchy. Even though women were respected in the family circles as mothers, their authority was limited to the household. In the public space they were seen solely as women and therefore, by 19th century standards, as subordinate to men. What was commonly stressed in the hegemonic discourse was that, despite acknowledging female intellectual abilities, their social role was seen as different from that of men and, therefore, required a distinct educational system (Meaney; O’Dowd; Whelan, 2013: 13). In her article “Women and Higher Education in Ireland (1879-1914)” (1980), Eileen Breathnach argues that “The education offered to middle class girls in schools and by governesses alike, reflected society’s expectations as to their future. [...] The object was to equip girls with accomplishments considered suitable for young ladies” (Breathnach, 1980: 47). Nonetheless, these new social opportunities – and expectations – were limited to middle class only. Working class or peasant women, such as Rosaleen O’Donnell, never destined to become ladies, were supposed to perform one social role in their lives: that of a housewife, that is mother and wife.

Girlhood in general, be it among working or middle classes, was seen as a preparatory stage to womanhood. It will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapter Three, suffice to

⁷ Sara Ruddick (1935-2011) was an American philosopher, best-known for her contribution to the feminist studies on motherhood. She is considered one of “the most important philosophical thinker to address the issue of mothering and motherhood since second-wave feminism” (Baraitser, 2011: 61). Her theory on mothering concerns primarily three aspects that orient mothering: “preserving the life of the child, fostering the child’s growth, and shaping an acceptable child” (Radosh, 2008: 305).

say that one of the most important elements in girls' education at the time were the teachings of the Catholic Church, to a much greater extent than in the case of boys. The goal was to maintain and spread the vision of an idealized Catholic femininity in order to prepare girls for being mothers (Delay, 2019: 15). Girlhood and womanhood were, therefore, intrinsically linked with motherhood. Female education had a whole different purpose than male's and, despite claims of their intellectual equality (Meaney; O'Dowd; Whelan, 2013: 13), it kept women subjugated to men. At the same time, one cannot deny that women were indeed provided with opportunities unattainable before. According to *Reading the Irish Women*, "[...] in the fifty years before the Great Famine, the figures for female literacy grew rapidly, more women received a structured education and it became respectable for women to hold strong political views and express those views in public venues" (Meaney; O'Dowd; Whelan, 2013: 82).

An interesting duality in the perception of womanhood seems to prevail among most of the society at the time. On the one hand, women were starting to be given access to education (albeit in the form that revealed a strong gender division and prejudice towards women), yet on the other, male approach towards them did not alter much – they were still perceived first and foremost as wives and mothers.

This contradictory approach was at the root of the male discourse on femininity in 19th century. Daniel O'Connell, a renowned politician and leader of Ireland's Roman Catholic majority, embodies this paradox. In 1840 he spoke to the nationalist newspaper *Freeman's Journal* of his granddaughters, daughters, mother and wife, whom he described as having

a purity which stripped them of vice, and made celestial all the tender affections which so peculiarly belong to them. Oh, they watched over our childhood – soothed the cares of youth and the sorrows of manhood – cheered and supported old age, and even smoothed the dreary path which leads to the grave" (O'Connell *apud* Meaney; O'Dowd; Whelan, 2013: 79).

O'Connell stressed women's domestic rather than public role, believing that their main concern was to serve a man. In his worldview, women were reduced to their social function as mothers and carers, revered and idealised, but, simultaneously, imprisoned in roles that restricted them and did not necessarily offer them a sense of fulfilment. However, his attitude towards women was not so one-sidedly sexist, for, at the same time, he acknowledged their need to participate in the public life. During the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention, which took place in London, the British organisers opposed women's attendance in the event, but O'Connell defended their right to be present and contribute. He allegedly stated that "mind has

no sex” and women should be allowed an “equal share and right of discussion” (Van Voris *apud* Meaney; O’Dowd; Whelan, 2013: 80).

After a period of advancements in expanding women’s rights, the Great Famine of 1845-1852 jeopardized these gains. Considered by Robert Foster “a watershed in Irish history” (Foster, 1989: 318), it caused some unprecedented transformations in the country, “creating new conditions of demographic decline, large-scale emigration, altered farming structures and new economic policies, not to mention an institutionalized Anglophobia among the Irish at home and abroad” (Foster, 1989: 318). Amidst the various changes that took place, it also affected the situation of women. Compared to the state before the Famine, their position worsened, and their role reduced to that of housewives only. According to various scholars, such as J.J. Lee, the reason for that decline was the Great Famine. As argued by Delay:

Historians since the 1970s have linked what they describe as women’s declining status to the cataclysmic years of the famine of the 1840s and subsequent changes. Séamus Enright contends that Catholic women were ‘significant agents of change’ before 1850 but became ‘progressively disempowered and marginalised’ thereafter, while in Joseph Lee’s view, the famine ‘drastically weakened the position of women in Irish society’. Most scholars identify famine-era changes in the rural economy and the family as the catalysts for women’s declining status. (Delay, 2019: 16)

Historian Joanna Bourke also comments on the matter. In her article “The Best of All Home Rulers’: the Economic Power of Women in Ireland, 1880-1914” (1991), she agrees that women’s social position weakened drastically after the Famine. Bourke evokes positions of men from different backgrounds and time periods – from James Connolly, the founder of the Irish Socialist Republican Party in 1896, to contemporary Irish historian David Fitzpatrick. Gathering numerous approaches, all of which are unanimous, the historian emphasises the range and importance of the changes that took place in Ireland in the 1850s. Quoting from Bourke:

The nineteenth century was ‘a dismal period for Irishwomen’ according to David Fitzpatrick. Robert E. Kennedy writes that emigrating Irishwomen were desperately fleeing ‘an unusually severe degree of male dominance’. Thomas G. Conway speaks of the ‘repression’ of Irishwomen, and compares a handful of politically active women with what he calls the ‘countless hosts of their passive female contemporaries’. J. J. Lee documents what he sees as the ‘drastically weakened . . . position of women’ in post-Famine Ireland, and James Connolly calls Irishwomen ‘the slave of that slave . . . [who has] exhibited in her martyrdom an almost damnable patience’. (Bourke, 1991: 34)

Although Bourke’s article aims at challenging the claim of alleged passivity and degradation of women in society in the years after the Famine, she also argues that in terms of paid labour, female position did deteriorate. There were fewer working opportunities for single

women (except perhaps agricultural labour during the peak season), while, at the same time, married women were growing increasingly dependent on their husbands financially (Bourke, 1991: 36). Foster calls the post-Famine changes in Ireland a “complex process of social readjustment” (Foster, 1989: 341). In terms of household organisation, various modifications took place.

To start with, the average marriage age rose significantly. According to Radosh, the Irish marriage patterns were quite exceptional, compared to other Western countries, due to the strictness regarding pre-marital sex and the rigidity of Catholic moral guidance “about the demon of sin lurking in any contact with members of the opposite sex” (Radosh, 2008: 309). For women it had various repercussions. Since most of them would marry relatively late, that is, after childbearing age, they would suffer from social stigma as their value was determined by their performance as mothers. If they did not have children, it meant they did not fulfil their role properly. There was also an increase in the number of women who remained single (Foster, 1989: 340) and who were also condemned for this. Their social position was similar to that of childless wives, as female social status was largely dependent on having a husband and children. But the greatest pariahs of all were unmarried women who had a baby. In a conservative, Catholic Ireland this was seen as the biggest of offences. The only socially approved model was that of a young married woman with child (or better, children). However, in the country decimated by famine, where the population had almost halved, this model remained out of reach for most of them.

Another difficulty women faced concerned financial independence that was almost impossible to achieve. The majority of mothers and wives struggled with significant economic difficulties both in family and community life (Delay, 2019: 18). On the one hand, job opportunities were few, on the other hand, women were perceived only in domestic terms, neither expected nor encouraged to do work outside the home.

As in the post-Famine reality their social position and life quality depended mainly on having a husband, the task of finding a partner became their main concern, a task that was all the more difficult as the country was significantly depopulated. Furthermore, because of the sexist agenda of the Catholic Church, women and men were subjected to double standards – needless to say, in favour of the latter. Women had to take great care of their reputation, particularly in terms of chastity. The new order, shaped to a large extent by the Catholic

Church, aimed to limit female agency by tying them to the home and applying strict sexual norms to them. According to Delay:

Rooted in the economic changes of the Great Famine, the Church's dictates in the century from 1850 to 1950 expressed a new stridency to push women into the domestic sphere and advocate sexuality only within marriage for reproduction. [...] For rural families, securing the lineage and land remained important; therefore, protecting the virtue of young women became a central focus. Ensuring that young single Irish women remained chaste until marriage was a primary concern for parents as well as for all levels of the Church hierarchy. (Delay, 2019: 29)

Female sexuality was subject to constant surveillance. Women were objectified and their value was defined based on their sexuality. In *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change* (2011), Gerardine Meaney argues that this sexual repression, which applied to both sexes although in practice was much stricter for women, was deemed necessary to prevent another hunger crisis in the country. According to Meaney:

The landholding practices that became widespread in the nineteenth century to guard against recurrence of that famine – which ensured a persistent pattern of low rates of marriage, late marriages and emigration until late into the twentieth century – obviously required a high level of sexual repression to be sustainable. (Meaney, 2011: 10)

The new norms incorporated in the country after the Famine drew on “the small-farmer ethos” (Foster, 1989: 341) which fostered postponed fertility, ensured a financial input for marriage and discouraged land subdivisions. Along with these precautions came sexual puritanism, given that

traditional Irish preoccupations with obligations to family and kin militated against irregular sexual connections, and social disapproval of illegitimacy was marked in remote rural areas [...] the mercenary rural marriage, carefully negotiated, is usually taken as the leitmotif of post-Famine life (Foster, 1989: 341)

This focus, or even obsession, regarding female chastity illustrates how their position had weakened, compared to the pre-Famine period. Before the crisis, Irish women, although expected to marry and have children, were considered useful both for the family and society, even if remained single. In the countryside, within the context of the family, they were used as a free labour force, while in the city they would work in factories, spinning wool, linen, and cotton. According to J.J. Lee: “As late as 1841 women accounted for more than half the total non-agricultural labour force” (Lee *apud* MacKenzie, 2015: 15).

In an attempt to solve the problem of the low rate in marriages in connection with the new economic landscape, the dowry system and arranged marriages were promoted among all social classes. As stated by Jackson:

The pre-famine marriage system revolving around myriads of sub-divided, sublet plots became impracticable. [...] As a consequence of land scarcity, arranged marriages spread more and more replacing the earlier more spontaneous customs. The practice of arranged marriages or making matches had existed certainly in pre-famine Ireland, but was confined to more prosperous farmers and the upper classes and colonial aristocracy. [...] In post-famine Ireland, the practice of arranged marriages spread to other social strata. With the spread of arranged marriages, the practice of dowries spread too. (Jackson, 1984: 1009)

Many of such contracted marriages had a distinct age difference, the woman being usually far younger than the man. She also was required to meet certain criteria: “the prospective wife had to be not only equal in social status to her husband but also sufficiently subordinated to fit in with living with her husband’s family and relatives [...]” (Jackson, 1984: 1010). The inheritance practice that was introduced did not make things easier for women either – as only sons were entitled to inherit the family’s land, daughters (who needed to be dowered) began to be seen as a financial burden (Delay, 2019: 17).

All the phenomena described above formed the new reality that became the lot of most Irish women from the 1850s onwards. There were, however, women who either tried to seek a different way of life to improve their situation or were forced to do so.

The usual alternative was emigration. It appeared a promising prospect and offered an escape from motherhood and marriage. Perhaps surprisingly, the female emigration rate exceeded the male emigration which proves an unusual phenomenon compared with other migrant nationalities (Foster, 1989: 351). As Radosh reports, this was due to the widespread employment discrimination experienced by Irish male immigrants (Radosh, 2008: 307) which discouraged them from leaving Ireland. It is also likely that this disproportion was affected by the inheritance law. While it excluded women from inheriting land, it also gave them freedom of movement and freedom of choice whether or not to emigrate, which some men (the first-born sons who inherited the land) were deprived of. As farm owners could not leave, having the land to look after and “the need to preserve the family farm” (Foster, 1989: 351) was believed an “intrinsic part of the Irish rural mentality” (Foster, 1989: 351) their relatives were encouraged to do so, in order to “clear the way for an undivided inheritance” (Foster, 1989: 351). As far as the women themselves are concerned, certain scholars believe that many of them decided to leave Ireland not due to a worsening economic situation but because of increasing expectations towards life. According to Jackson (to be quoted at length):

For women it was more than a mere flight from poverty. It was an escape from an increasingly patriarchal society, whose asymmetrical development as a colony generated insufficient social space for women, even as wife and mother [...]. The subordinated, invisible status of women in post-famine, blocked from easy access to a marriage partner, to waged employment, to

expressions of her sexuality determined the high and higher emigration rates among women. The economic transformations of Irish agriculture accelerated the spread of patriarchal forms of land transfer and marriage which depressed the social position of rural women to a level below that of a head of cattle. In this sense the post-famine emigration of women was refusal to accept the servile role allotted to them in their society and a rejection of the patriarchal values underpinning it. (Jackson, 1984: 1018)

Ruth-Ann M. Harris contributes to the discussion in an article “‘Come You all Courageously’: Irish Women in America” (2001). She suggests that “[...] the lack of the incentive or ability to remain within their families, coupled with rising levels of education and social expectation, led large numbers of Irish women to seek opportunity by emigrating” (Harris, 2001: 170). In addition, Foster points out how the rise in female emigration was correlated with the rise of literacy among women – those able to read and write, and thus those who received basic education, tended to see a departure as an opportunity to break free from Irish conservatism rather than an exile. According to Foster: “From about 1870 Irish immigrants were more literate and more modernized [...]” (Foster, 1989: 358).

The statements of scholars such as Jackson, Harris and Foster recall an image of a girl that is resolute and resourceful rather than submissive and deprived of her own agency. It can be argued that, in the years following the Great Famine, there were two most widespread models of female behaviour, each of which could be further subdivided into different types. Namely, that of an emigrant and that of the Irish equivalent of the Victorian “Angel in the House”, concept which I will elaborate on further later in this chapter. The next section will discuss in more detail the norms of womanhood for those women who did not leave Ireland and had to face the harsh realities of poverty, exacerbating godliness and the unjust double standards of Victorian social norms and Catholic discourse.

1.3. The Self-Sacrificing Mother

The “Angel in the House” is a name used to define the Victorian ideal of the middle-class woman, taken from the title of Coventry Patmore's poem (published in parts between 1854 and 1862). In the poem, the lyrical subject idealizes the image of his wife, setting her as a role model for all women. Such a perfect wife or a perfect woman is expected to be dedicated and obedient to her husband, “[...] passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all--pure” (Academic Brooklyn, 2011).

Although this ideal was attributed to middle-class women, it was not lavishness and sophistication that underpinned the image of the “Angel in the House”. Moreover, in the

context of post-Famine Irish reality, it was unlikely to refer this term to affluent bourgeoisie, but rather to impoverished, rural working-class women, the dominant social group at the time. The defining characteristics of ideal femininity by nineteenth-century standards were therefore those that could be cultivated and expressed by any woman – regardless of her class background – namely servility and self-sacrifice, both of which are the fundament of the traditional perception of motherhood.

It is important to note that the image of a self-sacrificing mother is not a Victorian invention. It is a construct much older than Patmore's poem, rooted in the Christianity and the figure of Holy Mary, whose cult, present in Irish Catholicism for centuries, has re-emerged in the years directly after the Famine. According to Delay: "Through Marian belief, devotion, and apparitions, Irish Catholics constructed, worked through, and complicated prescriptions of motherhood and women's roles" (Delay, 2019: 100). She further elaborates:

The Irish Church hierarchy viewed the Blessed Virgin as a figure who could bolster, not challenge, existing gender norms. Bishops and priests utilised the ideal of the Virgin to encourage women to embody proper roles as wives and particularly as sacrificial mothers. Reinforcing dedication to the Virgin from the pulpit in carefully constructed sermons, priests asserted that women who looked to Mary as a model were the only Irish women who could achieve true grace and purity. (Delay, 2019: 103)

The clergy used the image of Mary as a feminine ideal for various reasons. To name but one example, she personifies chastity and devotion, analogically to the "Angel in the House", qualities that men willingly attribute to women in order to control and restrict them. Furthermore, Kathleen Carey Ford in "Portrait of Our Lady: Mary, Piero, and the Great Mother Archetype" (2004) claims that

[...] the official presentation of Mary as an object for veneration emphasizes certain qualities that constitute an over-spiritualized, submissive model which is a critique of the normal desires and aspirations of flesh-and-blood women and thus contributes to, rather than relieving, Christian misogyny. (Ford, 2004: 94)

The reinforced cult of Virgin Mary was also an expression of an increased Catholicism among Irish people after the Famine. Historian Emmet Larkin describes this phenomenon, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, as the "devotional revolution", dating it to 1850-1875. In the context of womanhood, the Great Famine had a profound and long-lasting impact on the perception of the Irish mother in 19th century. The rise of piety among the Irish men and women combined with the sexist, male-centred discourse of the Catholic Church, contributed to the creation of a self-sacrificial ideal of an Irish mother. According to Radosh:

Religious justifications tied to the Irish Catholic emphasis on suffering in the present as a means of attaining sainthood in the afterlife reinforced values that supported sacrifice of personal

needs for the greater good of the family and the country. Long-suffering, physical deprivation as an indication of sainthood was thematic in Irish Catholicism long before the famine, but witness and memory of suffering wove into national consciousness after the famine. (Radosh, 2008: 312)

The image of a starving Irish mother struggling to feed her hungry children and sacrificing herself to keep them alive is, indeed, one of the most remembered images of the Great Famine to date – perhaps the most famous being “Bridget O’Donnell and Her Children in Clare” from *The Illustrated London News* (1849). The circumstances faced by most Irish families during the Great Famine forced them to adapt to the new reality. Many areas of life had to be evaluated and reconstructed; this included changes in methods of motherhood. As described by Radosh, “The powerful maternal imperative to protect, nurture, and train was evident in the values, emotions, and social actions of Irish mothers in the wake of one of the greatest tragedies of humankind” (Radosh, 2008: 305). At the same time, this “maternal imperative”, reinforced by the challenges of the new reality, highlighted one of the most overused features in the discussion of motherhood by the hegemonic discourse – mother’s self-sacrifice for the child.

Margaret Kelleher addresses this issue in *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (1997). In her classic study she analyses female representations in the Famine literature of 19th and 20th centuries. She argues that several recurring depictions of female figures can be distinguished over the years and texts, namely: “the famine mother, the ministering angel, the sacrificial victim” (Kelleher, 1997: 111). All these images accentuate qualities that revolve around mother’s suffering and sacrifice, which, in turn, make the perception of her sacred and idealised. Kelleher underlines how “torn between the demands of God and the exigencies of hunger, mothers seek to protect their children” (Kelleher, 1997: 140), a task which often coerced them to use heroic yet sometimes also disturbing survival strategies (Kelleher, 1997: 111). Her study illustrates how the figure of a mother, and a woman, is used in the patriarchal discourse to personify the horrors of the famine.

One of the novels she scrutinizes is *Famine* (1937) by Liam O’Flaherty which reads: “‘Who can tell it better than a poor mother? [...] Where could a poor mother go? [...] Let people say what they like, but it’s the nature of a mother to feed her children, even if she has to walk the fiery roads of Hell for it...’” (O’Flaherty *apud* Kelleher, 1997: 139). What O’Flaherty includes in this passage is the cornerstone of the Irish perception of the mother figure as a woman whose main responsibility in life is nurturing her child and who, if situation demands so, is expected to give up herself for the baby. Yet, as Kelleher notes, he is far from

presenting a one-sided approach, “exploring the mother’s motivation and the conflict which she suffers between religious belief and love for her children” (Kelleher, 1997: 140), a conflict that is particularly relevant in the case of Rosaleen O’Donnell and which is discussed further in this chapter.

The Catholic Church, one of the dominant forces in Ireland from the time of the Famine onwards, played a great part in shaping and propagating the norms of femininity. Especially Irish women became devoted to it, often developing a strong relation with priests who preached female virtue, glorifying piety and chastity and reducing women to the roles of wives and mothers. As Radosh notes, “for the devoutly Catholic Irish, the parish priest and the Church symbolized security, opportunity, and upward mobility. [...] And Irish mothers’ close alliance with the parish priest also gave them moral authority in the home” (Radosh, 2008: 307). Therefore, it suggests that the close connection of mothers with the clergy could result as much from their piety as from their pragmatism. In a more and more conservative Ireland, women’s position and freedom was being limited by the Catholic discourse, and so they looked for resources to strengthen their position – if not in the public space, then at least in their own household.

Donoghue incorporates this element in her representation of the mother. The analysis of the daguerreotype in O’Donnells’ house by Lib Wright provides the reader with an idea of the power dynamics in the family. The nurse first notices Rosaleen, “like some imposing totem” (Donoghue, 2016: 34), while the father is not even mentioned by name, just like the son, Pat, who is merely referred to as “skinny adolescent boy rather incongruously leaning back” (Donoghue, 2016: 34). The father’s presence is acknowledged, but without much relevance to the interpretation of the photograph. The nurse’s interpretation may mirror how she perceives the organisation and the distribution of power in the family. Her analysis suggests that it is the strong mother, rather than the father, who is the mainstay in the house. And while it does reflect the reality of the time, in which the woman was assigned to the domestic sphere and the man to the public one⁸, it also disrupts the conventional portrayal of both sexes, in

⁸ “Victorian gender ideology was premised on the ‘doctrine of separate spheres.’ This stated that men and women were different and meant for different things. Men were physically strong, while women were weak. For men sex was central, and for women reproduction was central. Men were independent, while women were dependent. Men belonged in the public sphere, while women belonged in the private sphere. Men were meant to participate in politics and in paid work, while women were meant to run households and raise families. Women were also thought to be naturally more religious and morally finer than men (who were distracted by sexual passions by which women supposedly were untroubled). While most working-class families could not live out the doctrine of separate spheres, because they could not survive on a single male wage, the ideology was influential across all classes.” (Steinbach, 2023)

which the man is strong and the woman – weak. In the case of the O'Donnell family, it is Rosaleen's impressive physique that is being mentioned, not Malachy's. In Lib's eyes she emanates strength, determination, and authority, whereas Mr O'Donnell is portrayed as servile, indecisive, and insecure. Also, the usual distribution of power between the conventional passive side (the woman) and the active side (the man) is reversed in the representation of the relationship in the novel. Rosaleen is the one who takes action – she receives visitors and looks after her child by secretly feeding her so that she does not die. Malachy O'Donnell, in turn, is described as “a man of few words” (Donoghue, 2016: 23), who seems to care only about his own affairs, that is praying and working the land. Although Mr O'Donnell, unlike his wife, sincerely despairs over Anna's condition, he seems paralysed, unable to act and try to change the situation. It seems that he has either entrusted his daughter entirely to God, overcome by devotion, or left all care to the mother, overcome by apathy. Nevertheless, even if women were sometimes able to achieve a little more recognition and respect in their homes, on a public level they fell victim to full-scale misogynistic domination. According to the sociologist Tom Inglis:

women are worked into an exaggerated femininity, magnifying their relative weakness into complete helplessness, their emotionality into hysteria, and their sensitivity into a delicacy which must be protected from all contact with the world. In Ireland, it was the knowledge and control that priests and nuns had over sex which helped maintain their power and control over women. (Inglis *apud* Radosh, 2008: 308)

This approach focused at infantilising women, exaggerating the qualities that were considered “typical” of them and thus creating caricatures of femininity – an ideal which assumed that an adult woman, capable of having children and running a home independently, would, at the same time, be fragile and in need of male supervision. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries Ireland abounded with extensive moralistic literature, the so-called conduct books⁹, which instructed women how to lead a proper life in accordance with Catholic principles. This is how Bernard O'Reilly instructed women in his 1883 *The Mirror of True Womanhood*:

There is nothing on earth which the Creator and Lord of all things holds more dear than [the] home, in which ... a mother's unfailing and all-embracing tenderness will be, like the light and warmth of the sun in the heavens, the source of life, and joy, and strength, and all goodness to her dear ones, as well as to all who come within the reach of her influence. (O'Reilly *apud* Delay, 2019: 15)

⁹ “The term ‘conduct book’ [...] refers to a specific historical subgenre of advice literature. Its most important characteristic is that it gives advice on both character formation and the conduct of life [...] It is sometimes [...] interpreted as specific to the long eighteenth century in that it replaced the older courtesy book (targeting the aristocracy) as a particularly popular type of advice literature and was in turn replaced by the etiquette book (focussing on etiquette rules) in the nineteenth century. During the eighteenth century, a growing number of conduct books targeted young women [...]” (Dahmer, 2016).

As is evident from this excerpt, in the post-Famine reality it was believed that the roles of mothers and wives are “natural” for Irish women and thus, allegedly, easy, enjoyable, and fulfilling. A peaceful home, run according to the teachings of the Catholic Church, was considered women’s only concern and aim in life. The house was a female stronghold, a place “where they would influence their husbands, educate their children, and secure the future of the Irish Catholic nation” (Delay, 2019: 15). Teachings included in conduct books aimed at preserving the *status quo* – male domination. Through reading these books, women were to learn how to act appropriately in order to meet the demanding criteria of an ideal wife and mother. In Cornelia Dahmer’s article, “‘Still, however, it is certain that young ladies should be more apt to hear than to speak’: Silence in Eighteenth Century Conduct Books for Young Women” (2016), the author points out:

They all prescribe a model biography [...]: coming out, choice of marriage partner, being a wife, a mother and the mistress of a great house with servants. Conduct books of course do not give us a faithful picture of real life but of the ideal to which young ladies were supposed to aspire. (Dahmer, 2016)

As Dahmer admits, conduct books offered patterns of behaviour that were unattainable by default. They presented an image that could hardly be adapted in everyday life of an average woman – difficult enough for middle class women, the implicit recipient of conduct books, it was even more complicated for the lower classes. And although working-class women were neither expected nor invited to read this sort of literature, the ideal of femininity was one and therefore applied to all regardless. Also, there was at least one aspect which affected every woman equally – motherhood.

Margaret Pearse personifies the ideal of an Irish mother. Born in the second half of the 19th century, she combines two most potent images of Irish motherhood that came into being by the end of the century – Mother of God and Mother Ireland. The first one assumed – similarly to the Victorian ideal – women to obediently maintain the *status quo* and help preserve the patriarchal order. The latter related to the nationalist propaganda and stressed the idea of a self-sacrificing and all-enduring woman as an indispensable mean to gain independence from British rule. Irish women were used as tools in political propaganda and glorified, rendered into symbols. Over the course of the nineteenth century different images were projected on them, from the Victorian “Angel in the House” through the sacrificial starving mother during the Famine to Mother Ireland who would save the nation. Varied as these images may be, invented at different time periods, they all express a certain conviction of women as martyrs – conviction which resonates in the worshipping narration about

motherhood. Yet, this apparent idealization serves as a means to limit women, control them, and manipulate. Perhaps surprisingly, this view seems to have preserved in some form until today. Laura Sydora in her article “‘Everyone wants a bit of me’: Historicizing Motherhood in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*” (2015), speaks of motherhood in the context of Anne Enright's 2007 novel, *The Gathering*. Interestingly, several traits pointed out by Sydora are equally applicable in terms of 19th century figure of Irish mother:

The oblivious idealization of the female as an asexual, devoted, and pious mother greatly limits the political and social identity of women, as the conflation of “woman” with “mother” aligns femaleness with the maternal, thereby denying women an individual subjectivity apart from the conventions of maternal femininity. [...] Forced to accept the sole identity available, motherhood becomes a political tool [...] “everyone wants a bit of me. And it has nothing to do with what I might want, or what my body might want, whatever that might be,” could very well be the motto for Irish women throughout history (Sydora, 2015: 244).

Needless to say, this idealised vision of an Irish woman which embodies all the images: that of an anguished, suffering Irish mother struggling for her children's survival, a pious Catholic, an exemplary wife and devoted housekeeper, is only but an expression of male fantasies of femininity and has little to do with the reality of the time. At the same time, the idea of motherhood presented in this section can be read in a different manner. It can be seen as the opposite of the sacrificial mother, which is the devouring mother. The next section is an analysis of the complexity of this negative image in the context of post-Famine Ireland.

1.4. The Devouring Mother

As mentioned in the previous section, the Great Famine led to the development of new patterns of motherhood. The image of an Irish mother that emerged tends to focus on her sacrifice and suffering. Yet, there seems to be a different, less glorifying, understanding of the figure.

Similarly to the self-sacrificing mother, the devouring mother is a creation deeply rooted in the Western culture. Erich Neumann, a German psychologist who scrutinizes the mother archetype across many ancient cultures, claims that the personification of a devouring mother usually takes the shape of a demon-like creature. In *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (2015) Neumann argues, when speaking of the forms the archetype acquires, that “In the myths and tales of all peoples, ages, and countries - and even in the nightmares of our own nights - witches and vampires, ghouls and specters, assail us, all terrifyingly alike” (Neumann, 2015: 148).

Carl Gustav Jung in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1968) also states that “on the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark, the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate” (Jung, 1968: 82). The pejorative image of motherhood revolves around her sexual liberation and death, as opposed to the 19th century ideal of a chaste and fertile “Angel in the House”. Amanda Kane Rooks in “Reconceiving the Terrible Mother: Female Sexuality and Maternal Archetypes in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*” (2016) asserts that it was precisely in the Victorian era that the clash between the two representations was the most visible. According to Rooks (to be quoted at length):

the Mother has been divided from herself and split into two separate deities: one that represents “all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, furthers growth and fertility”; and the other that “devours, seduces, and poisons” [...] Perhaps nowhere was the “split” as exemplified in Jung's Good and Terrible Mother more pronounced than throughout the nineteenth century, when the Mother came to be defined by her purity, superior morality, and selfless devotion to family. At the heart of the insistent veneration of the Virgin Mother at this time was at least in part a deeply embedded fear over the threatening potential of women's sexuality. The assertion of the Mother's heavenly ordained virtue, it seems, would ensure the suppression of her dangerous sexuality in favor of the necessities of reproduction and the nuclear family. (Rooks, 2016: 122)

Another representation of the devouring mother concentrates on her selfishness and possessiveness. She is depicted as a mother figure who wants to keep her children close to her so much that she is prepared to restrict their freedom. Although driven by the intention of protecting the children from danger, she consumes their energy, creativity, and individuality. Her overprotection and control deprive them of life experience, leaving them feeling drained and unable to form their own subjectivity. Motivated by seemingly benevolent intentions, she dominates her children, preventing them from leading independent lives and breaking free from her influence.

The devouring mother embodies the duality of life and death, with the potential to both give life and take it away. Also, she is a symbol of both love and fear, someone who has the ability to protect and harm simultaneously. Her love is seen as selfish and overpowering, in contrast to the altruism of the self-sacrificing mother. The actions of such a mother are driven by her own self-interest and gain, thus contradicting the basic definition of the Victorian ideal of motherhood.

Sometimes, the devouring mother is depicted in terms of her emotional detachment from the child, provoked by some tragic experience which caused her to withdraw deeply into herself. Ann Wan-lih Chang speaks about it in “The Uncanny Mother in Edna O'Brien's

'Cords', 'A Rose in the Heart' and 'Sister Imelda'" (2017), referring to "the dead mother complex", a term coined by the French psychoanalyst André Green. Green used this term to describe "an infantile depression in which the mother is self-absorbed as a result of a loss, in other words, is emotionally dead" (Chang, 2017: 291) and thus neglects her child emotionally.

How did the narration of the devouring mother translate into the pattern of motherhood implemented in the post-Famine Ireland? The atrocities of the years 1845-1852 and their aftermath made Irish mothers reevaluate their parenting methods. In the attempts to protect their children, they often employed strict, moralistic, and highly repressive strategies. In the context of Catholic values, the increased religiosity in post-Famine Ireland "exacerbated adherence to these values and involved mothers in the reinforcement and transmission of the moral code" (Radosh, 2008: 308). As a result

Irish children were physically punished from infancy to young adulthood; children were shamed and ridiculed for deviance from strictly proscribed norms, and deprivations of food or affection were commonly applied. Irish Catholic values that emphasized humility, physical deprivations, denial of physical and sexual needs, and emphasis on earthly pain as a source of saintly transcendence prevailed in Irish families. Children complied with mothers' expectations because deviance was viewed very negatively. Irish custom denigrates "bold" (willful or outspoken) children and "soft" (nurturant or warm) mothers and encourages mothers to train children by breaking their will to deviate. (Radosh, 2008: 311)

Irish women are portrayed as devouring mothers who, on the one hand, tried to bring up their children in accordance with the prevailing norms and, on the other hand, cultivated parenting methods which harmed them on a physical, emotional, and mental level. The pressure exerted by the mothers created numerous internal conflicts and traumas for the children. For example, the clash between what was being preached about sinful sexuality and what was being experienced by pubescent teens caused a strong sense of guilt and shame. Since they were constantly controlled and monitored, children were unable to properly develop their sense of agency and subjectivity. There seems to be a connection between the post-Famine parenting patterns with the "exceptionally high presentation of mental illness" that was noted among the Irish for more than a century (Radosh, 2008: 309) and so "the Irish mothers are often blamed for raising generations of inhibited, guilt-ridden, and frustrated individuals who were not able to break from their families of origin until the death of their parents" (Radosh, 2008: 310).

However, one must not forget that the source of these new methods came not from mothers themselves but from the patriarchal discourse of the Catholic Church. Mothers were executors of the instructions imposed on them. If they were disobedient, they risked their children being condemned or shunned. If, on the other hand, they performed their role as

prescribed by the Church, their families could expect patronage and, sometimes, even social advancement. Women again appear as victims of the patriarchal order that seeks to control those below them on the social scale. Therefore, it is important to stress that Irish mothers brought up their children in the way that was required of them, to ensure the best possible conditions. According to Radosh:

Critical evaluation of the severity of maternal discipline, emphasis on guilt and shame as controls of sexuality, and emotional manipulation of children often blames Irish mothers for many of the personal insecurities, high rates of mental illness, and perennial fear of intimacy that characterized Irish culture in the not too distant past. Mothers, however, responded to the very unique features of Irish society that drove their thinking. [...] Irish mothers sought to preserve the life of their children and help them to mature into a life that would accept them. (Radosh, 2008: 314)

Ironically, it seems as if the figure of the post-Famine Irish mother was attacked for obeying the orders imposed on her. Yet, the idea of a devouring mother who loves and castigates, is still sometimes present in the 20th century representations. Ivana Bacik addresses the multiple images of the Irish mother in her essay “From Virgins and Mothers to Popstars and Presidents: Changing Roles of Women in Ireland” (2007). Based mostly on the virgin/mother stereotypes, they create a confusing image of a woman who is, at the same time, “de-sexualized, monstrous, colonized and maternalized” (Bacik, 2007: 103). According to Bacik (to be quoted at length):

The construction of Irish woman as mother has been even more problematic. First, there is the notion of 'Mother Ireland', symbol of the nation, the figure of Mother Eire so dominant in nationalist iconography. Both the motherland and the stereotypical self-sacrificing 'Irish mother' exercise power over their children, and are ultimately demanding of them. Yet these images of mother are fundamentally disempowering of women. First, the demanding mother has a sinister aspect, that of the 'monstrous maternal', like the figure of the 'monstrous feminine' which has endured, from the Medusa of ancient mythology to the deranged villain of Hollywood films such as *Fatal Attraction*. Similarly, the 'monstrous maternal' means that woman as mother/land is seen paradoxically as both nurturer and destroyer, demanding the ultimate blood sacrifice from her sons. (Bacik, 2017: 101)

Between ancient Medusa and Hollywoodian villains there is Rosaleen O'Donnell. Although initially the reader may be under the impression that the character of Rosaleen resonates much more with Bacik's monstrous mother than the selfless caregiver described by O'Connell for the *Freeman's Journal* in 1840, she soon turns out to escape such simple categorisations. The close analysis of the character demonstrates how Donoghue deconstructs the conventional image of motherhood and creates a complex mother figure that embodies both a victim and a villain.

1.5. Rosaleen O'Donnell – Irish (Im)perfect Mother

“Mrs O'Donnell had broad, bony shoulders, stone-grey eyes and a smile holed with dark” (Donoghue, 2016: 27) is the first description of Rosaleen O'Donnell. It immediately informs the reader that her character diverges from the traditional image of a mother, lacking the components usually attributed to her, such as warmth, softness, and love. Rosaleen seems cold, distant, dominant, even sinister.

However, despite the off-putting appearance, Mrs O'Donnell gives an impression of a hospitable person, dedicated housewife and devout Christian. During Lib's first visit to the house, Rosaleen wants to receive her, Sister Michael and Father Thaddeus in the most presentable room, yet it happens to be temporarily occupied by her daughter and guests “from far corners of the Earth” who came to see “the wonder”. Soon after it turns out that the visitors she referred to are, to a large extent, her own compatriots. Furthermore, they pay for the opportunity to visit the child. Thus, what initially appears to stem from the Christian ethos and piety of the family – as they receive strangers and allow them to meet their daughter – ends up by looking like a regrettable plot to enrich themselves. Rosaleen defends herself: “If the sight moves them to almsgiving, what's wrong with that?” (Donoghue, 2016: 91). The O'Donnells hold that all the money they gather is given to the Church and is of no interest to them. Even so, this arrangement has other benefits that Anna's mother seems to be very focused on. Treating her daughter like a source of income, Rosaleen's behaviour indicates she profits from the fame and recognition the child attracts. Instead of improving her condition, Mrs O'Donnell takes advantage of the situation, under the guise of helping others – “Every penny gone to aid and comfort the needy. [...] Think of that, Anna. You're storing up riches in heaven” (Donoghue, 2016: 149). This image resonates strongly with the narrative of the devouring mother, who instils discipline and piety in her child, arguing for religious duties, while nurturing her own relationship with the priest in the hope of benefits.

During the first visit, Rosaleen asks Lib to sit at the most comfortable place by the fire and offers her tea. Though poor and modest, the house is clean and well-kept. Among the few objects in the room are two candlesticks and a crucifix on the ledge above the fireplace. The austere interior emphasises the asceticism and piety of its inhabitants, as well as their difficult economic situation. In the presence of the priest and the nun, Mrs O'Donnell does not forget to cross herself and in her conversation with the clergyman she often invokes God. This exalted

display of fervent piety and acknowledgement of the superiority of Church representatives is indicative of Rosaleen's genuine religiosity, or, on the contrary, possible false devotion.

She might seem to be fulfilling her role according to the rules of the time – a religious woman, dedicated to her home. However, this seemingly ideal portrait soon begins to show imperfections. When first questioned by Lib, Rosaleen insists on replying with “ambiguous answers” (Donoghue, 2016: 29). Superficially cordial, she maintains a tangible distance and preserves a “fixed smile” throughout the conversation, revealing her displeasure only twice. Mrs O'Donnell, usually aloof, first shows discontentment when Lib fails to mention the exact date Anna started her fast, estimating that it begun after the girl's eleventh birthday. To that Rosaleen presses together her “flaking lips” (Donoghue, 2016: 30) and corrects the interlocutor: “The seventh of April, four months ago yesterday. Overnight, Anna wouldn't take bite nor sup, nothing but God's own water” (Donoghue, 2016: 30). Lib's next blunder occurs when the nurse suggests Anna's aversion to food might result from her having eaten something rancid. This remark is interpreted by Rosaleen as an insinuation of her poor household care, which she finds audacious and insolent. Overall, Mrs O'Donnell seems to take greater concern in maintaining a good impression of herself as a housewife than in her daughter's wellbeing. Rosaleen is depicted as a mother who relishes Anna's condition, reporting of her daughter's state with great excitement (Donoghue, 2016: 30), which shocks Lib. Mrs O'Donnell seems to perceive the family's situation in terms of personal gain – fame and wealth. Her apparent lack of interest and preoccupation with her daughter's actual state of health seem most “unmotherly” to the English nurse who, at the same time, reveals her own perception of motherhood, i.e. that of a self-sacrificing mother. Rosaleen, who seems more willing to sacrifice Anna than herself if it would benefit her, can be classified as the opposite of Lib, displaying the characteristics of a devouring mother.

At the end of the first visit, Rosaleen O'Donnell presents herself to Lib as a deeply religious person but at the same time a very self-aware woman, strongly anxious about maintaining her reputation as a pious Christian and one who puts lots of effort in keeping appearances. The local priest, Father Thaddeus, speaks of her as “a leading light of the parish, very active in the Sodality of Our Lady” (Donoghue, 2016: 24). She seems to find the greatest pride and contentment in Anna, for she may bring recognition to the family as “Ireland's first saint canonized since the thirteenth century” (Donoghue, 2016: 284). As a result, she puts more focus in fostering the image of Anna the fasting girl rather than Anna the child.

Certainly, little of her behaviour indicates conventional maternal devotion – when discussing her daughter, she does not seem worried about her health condition. On the contrary, she appears satisfied, seeing her as a wonder. Her alleged lack of concern about the girl may result from Rosaleen knowing the child is a hoax, whom she secretly feeds, but it may also stem from the mentality of the period: both readings are possible. For, as argued by Brumberg, before the medical term of *anorexia nervosa* was coined in the late 19th century

[...] marathon fasting and food deprivation were clearly not regarded as disease. Rather, fasting was an instrument of spirituality and a demonstration of the providence of God. Ultimately, this view of the faster as an agency for God's omnipotence was reflected in the "therapeutics" of that day: female ascetics and "miraculous maids" were treated with awe rather than called sick. (Brumberg, 1985: 97)

On the contrary, in the religious circles, prolonged fasting was an indicator of exceptional abilities that predestined such a person for sainthood. According to Brumberg, the fasting girls "were apparently motivated by zealous belief of one kind or another, and both received the accolades (and the financial support) of their respective religious communities" (Brumberg, 1985: 101). It is important to remember that such girls were believed to experience God's intervention which allowed them to live without eating, and thus, for a deeply religious people, to have a fasting girl in their family circle was a privilege rather than a misfortune, which is why Rosaleen could seem proud of her daughter rather than worried. However, the mother is aware that Anna's fasting has nothing to do with spiritual superiority. Rosaleen's reaction, both to Anna's confession and to her subsequent decision to fasting, indicates behaviour typical of a devouring mother who loves selfishly and overpoweringly. Her selfish love is that she feeds her daughter, not wanting her to die, but at the same time her help is inadequate, serving only to prolong Anna's suffering – yet sufficient to possessively keep her at her mother's side. She chooses to leave her daughter in distress, not offering any emotional support, but rather silencing her and then tacitly accepting Anna's refusal to eat. Moreover, Rosaleen decides to use her daughter's condition to spread a false story of a fasting girl for her own benefit.

After the first encounter with Mrs O'Donnell, the reader is left with a portrait of a cold woman who takes advantage of her own child's suffering by gaining social advancement at her expense. She seems not particularly trustworthy, acting too theatrical and too trained in maintaining the theory about the wondrous daughter. When the nurse begins her watch over Anna, she witnesses yet another group of guests, from America, whom Rosaleen announces as

decent people who came “all this way to see the amazing little girl who *doesn't* eat” (Donoghue, 2016:87). Lib is “sickened” by her “sprightliness” for

she was like some chaperone at a debutante's first ball. “I should have thought it obvious that such visits much be suspended, Mrs. O'Donnell.” “Why so?” The mother jerked her head over her shoulder towards the good room. [...] “Sure there's food in this house already without anyone shipping it all the way across the Atlantic.” Rosaleen O'Donnell let out a laugh. “Besides, Anna doesn't want it. Haven't you seen proof of that by now?” (Donoghue, 2016:87)

Lib is repelled by Rosaleen's “grandiloquence” (Donoghue, 2016:32) and later describes her as the woman who is “parading her concern” (Donoghue, 2016: 109). She seems as far from the role of a devoted, empathetic Irish mother as it is possible to be. Rather, she treats her daughter with distance, not as a human being but as an empty category titled “fasting girl”.

Surrendered to male domination, Rosaleen does nothing to cast off the shackles of the patriarchal order in her own household. On the contrary, she contributes to the further transmission of harmful gender paradigms. For example, during Pat's illness, Anna was used as a “warming pan” (Donoghue, 2016: 52), put in bed beside her brother to warm him up, without any concern for the girl, which highlights the servile role sisters were taught to perform for their brothers (discussed in more detail in Chapter Three). What is more, Rosaleen seems to express certain qualities of the “dead mother complex”. Mrs O'Donnell clearly favours the late son over the daughter. She glorifies, almost worships, Pat, speaking of him fondly and protecting the memory of him. At the same time, she is clearly distant in her approach to Anna. The mother either idealizes the sanctified image of the daughter as the fasting girl – turning her into a kind of a superior being – or infantilizes her, underlying the innocence and the child within her. In this way, she seems emotionally detached from the girl, viewing her through the prism of her own imaginings. Also, it may allow her to invest all her maternal feelings in the memory of her son.

After Anna confesses to Rosaleen the sexual relationship she maintained with her brother – whether it was incest or rape – the mother denies the faintest possibility of Pat having committed any sort of sin. She cares more about the memory of her dead son than the welfare of her living daughter. Even when Anna is close to death, she prefers to let her die than to allow the daughter to carry on “slandering her poor brother” (Donoghue, 2016: 308). Contradictory to the traditional representation of a caring mother, Rosaleen's approach is in line with the post-Famine practises of motherhood which stresses discipline, piety, and chastity. Catholic values seem to matter more to her than her own child – anything that goes against the Church's

teachings should be suppressed, so she decides to shush her daughter and disguise the reason for her fasting with a story of a fasting girl. According to Radosh:

[...] Irish Catholicism also included a very strong moral code that revered sexual purity and taught moral discipline. Although Catholicism in any context strictly prohibits sexual contact outside of marriage as sinful, Irish Catholicism was unusually disciplined in this practice. Irish Catholic prohibitions about sin and sex instilled intergenerational inhibitions and fear of intimacy. Irish mothers reinforced the Church's teachings about sin and sexuality by teaching children to avoid temptation, to be ashamed of their own bodies, to be morally guided by the Church, and to shun contact with the opposite sex outside of the family. (Radosh, 2008: 308)

Perhaps Mrs O'Donnell, determined to reject the idea of her children having committed the sin of incest, fixates on the idea of glorifying both Pat and Anna in order to cope with the brutal reality. Easy as it might be to worship a son that was already dead (and therefore exists only as the memory of those who remembered him), it is supposedly more difficult with the daughter. Therefore, when the child stops eating, the mother can use the story of the fasting girl to sanctify Anna.

Rosaleen does not seem to be fulfilling the role of a mother in its most basic definition, i.e. that of a nurturer. The nurse portrays Mrs O'Donnell as a cruel figure of motherhood – while her eleven-year-old daughter (apparently) has not eaten for months, she does not seem to feel obliged to save her. Given that the story is set just a few years after the 7-year famine that decimated the country, her behaviour seems even more appalling.

Yet, the demonisation of Rosaleen fails from one crucial reason – she combines elements of both the self-sacrificing and the devouring mother. Her behaviour contains some traits typical of an idealised as well as demoralised vision of motherhood. For example, when Lib banishes Mrs O'Donnell from Anna's room, forbidding her any unauthorised contact with her daughter, Rosaleen replies: "Does not every mother willingly accompany her own sweet child in prayer?" (Donoghue, 2019: 89). Mrs O'Donnell prays together with Anna, stands by her and inquires about her needs – all of which are forms of care and concern, typical of a self-sacrificing mother. Nevertheless, what Mrs O'Donnell sees as an expression of maternal commitment, Lib sees as insufficient action, revealing Rosaleen's emotional coldness and indifference – characteristic of a devouring mother. However, it is important to remember that, according to post-Famine patterns, the mother should first and foremost instil Catholic values, discipline and rigour in the child (which is precisely what Mrs O'Donnell does), rather than encourage tenderness and warm affection.

The mother seems to firmly believe in a miracle without understanding the danger it poses to the health and life of the child. Reconciled to the reality, all she seems to offer the child is prayer. In this way, Rosaleen is indeed fulfilling her feminine role, being passive and obedient to the orders of the Catholic Church, in line with the 19th century discourse on ideal motherhood.

Yet, the problem of dichotomy arises again. On the one hand, she voluntarily watches her only child starve; on the other hand, she secretly feeds Anna the minimal portions that keep her alive. As a devouring mother, she appears to profit from her own child's suffering to gain her family's reputation. As a self-sacrificing mother, she becomes a traumatized victim of "seven years of famine and misery", which "may have caused peculiar changes in her psyche" (Donoghue, 2019: 192). Having lost a child herself before becoming a nurse, Lib emphasises and identifies with the Irishwoman's pain, but does not understand her ways of coping with it. On a personal level, both women share the same loss – "Lib could understand that, a sensation of having no more left to give [...]" (Donoghue, 2019: 192) – although their backgrounds made their experiences drastically different – "Was that why the woman made an uncanny cult of Anna now, apparently preferring her daughter to be more saint than human?" (Donoghue, 2019: 192).

Rosaleen's intervention in the girl's decisions and actions is scarce – the minimal food portions she is feeding her is enough only to survive. The mother lets the child believe that what she is being given every day is "manna from Heaven". Thus, on the one hand, she seems to acknowledge Anna's decision to starve, on the other hand, she does not accept it, for she deliberately prolongs her life. This contradiction underpins the whole character of Rosaleen. In light of the traditional understanding of the mother figure, which is to protect the child and ensure its survival, Rosaleen seems to contradict her most fundamental task by deliberately depriving her daughter of life. At the same time, however, she finds a way to feed Anna – with the child's unwitting consent – as if trying to save her. As the fast continues, she begins to idealise the daughter and treat her not as a helpless child, dependent on her mother (which she certainly is), but as an unreal figure. There is a noticeable distance in the relationship between Rosaleen and Anna, whose bond is based on and sustained by faith. During Lib's stay at the O'Donnells' house the daily interactions between mother and daughter are limited only to praying together and to the secret feeding ritual, which, according to the nurse, is "like something out of grand opera, the way she barged in to make a show of her maternal feelings twice a day" (Donoghue, 2016: 169). Rosaleen's display of "maternal feelings" is,

nevertheless, restrained when compared with the conventional understanding of motherly affection. It is, perhaps, another aspect of the character revealing the “dead mother complex” which speaks of emotional detachment. Rosaleen feeds her daughter twice a day, passing the food to her by kissing her – but apart from this act she does not show any warm feelings towards the child. Even this kiss itself is not intended to show tenderness but only to feed Anna so that she lives a little longer. Mrs O'Donnell's ritual reflects, in a way, her attitude towards her child – cold and limited but nevertheless possessive, as the mother does not allow her daughter to act according to her own will, instead putting Anna in a state on the brink of death. The half-living, half-dead daughter seems good enough for Rosaleen – she exists, but is under her mother's total control and authority.

Accused of lying and faking her daughter's fasting, Rosaleen confesses she is “willing and more than willing” to allow the investigation and receive the nurses to take a watch over her child “so we'll have our characters vindicated that are as good as any from Cork to Belfast” (Donoghue, 2016: 32). In this way, she seeks to respond to the expectations of the community, which demands from the mother a high moral conduct and care for the child. At the same time, if proved right, the O'Donnell family would gain recognition and reputation, thus she may also be driven by personal motifs.

Lib sees the mother as a devotee who is indifferent to her daughter's situation, but still she finds it hard to comprehend that Rosaleen might actually believe Anna can live without food and that they are experiencing God's intervention. The nurse claims that “there were only two possible explanations for the Irishwoman's serenity [...]: either Rosaleen was so convinced of divine intervention that she had no anxiety for her daughter, or, more likely, she had reason to believe the girl was getting plenty to eat on the sly” (Donoghue, 2016: 62). Lib's scepticism, caused by her lack of faith in the Catholic religion, and her belief in science, engender animosity between the women. What fuels the conflict even more is her nationality – as an Englishwoman, she is full of prejudices against the Irish. Her judgements are often flawed and stem from a profound misunderstanding, underpinned by contempt, for Ireland, its culture and religion. She sees the village as a “primitive backwater” (Donoghue, 2016: 16) and the whole of the country as “an improvident mother, seemed to ship half her skinny brood abroad” (Donoghue, 2016: 23), as if to perpetuate the popular, among the English, belief that the Irish themselves were to blame for the Famine. Her view is riddled with stereotypes, such as the one concerning the Irish having large families: “Two children only for the O'Donnells, then; that seemed a paltry total to Lib” (Donoghue, 2016: 23).

She sees herself superior to the Irish, an opinion she expresses through her remarks about the country and the people, whom she perceives as simpletons and liars – including little Anna and Sister Michael. Lib's bias take precedence over her medical training when she misinterprets Anna's excessive hairiness – a sign of extreme malnutrition – linking it to the caricatures seen in *Punch*, presenting Irish “as apish pygmies” (Donoghue, 2016: 43). In turn, when she meets the nun, she presumes from the outset that her assessment of Anna is biased for Sister Michael is surely “blinkered by superstition” (Donoghue, 2016: 31). She scoffs at Irish godliness, failing to recognise her own blind admiration for Florence Nightingale, whom she regards as the ultimate role model. Lib often invokes her mentor in her mind, as if she was her constant companion and critic.

The nurse's behaviour, determined by prejudices, often leads to various misconceptions. For example, what Rosaleen sees as support of her daughter's decision to fast – through frequent prayers together and voiced concern for her wellbeing – Lib sees as indifference and emotional detachment. She asks herself: “Wasn't feeding what defined a mother from the first day on? A woman's worst pain was to have nothing to give her baby. Or to see the tiny mouth turn away from what she offered” (Donoghue, 2016: 61).

Interestingly, Rosaleen's opinion of herself as a mother appears at odds with her seemingly cool and aloof demeanour – “A mother understands what a child does not say, as the saying goes” (Donoghue, 2016: 245). During an argument with Lib, when the nurse accuses Rosaleen of unmaternal feelings, lack of compassion, and passivity regarding Anna's health, Mrs O'Donnell defends herself. Pushed to the limit, she openly gives vent to strong feelings, for the first and the last time in the whole novel, usually carefully hiding her emotions behind a mask of cool serenity. “Didn't I try my best? – the woman wailed, water scudding down the lines of her face. – Sure isn't she flesh of my flesh, my last hope? Didn't I bring her into the world and rear her tenderly, and didn't I feed her as long as she'd let me?” (Donoghue, 2016: 253).

The fragment quoted above is the key to understanding the foundation of Rosaleen O'Donnell's motherhood: faith. She believes she is a good mother for she follows the Catholic guidelines. Lib Wright's ideas on maternity, on the other hand, are drastically contradictory. It is important to note that both women symbolize motherhood, albeit of different kinds. Rosaleen seems to be monstrous and wicked, to have “a talent for taking pleasure from terrible things” (Donoghue, 2016: 151) because that is how the Englishwoman sees her – and the way she sees

her results from Lib's failure to comprehend Irish people and the Irish culture. They represent opposite points of view and are unable, all throughout their relation, to find agreement. Both seem to care about Anna, but their concerns take a very different form:

- If you love your daughter, Mrs O'Donnell, why don't you do everything in your power to get her to eat?
- Still not a word. Then, very low:
- She's chosen.
 - She's been chosen? – Lib repeated, disgusted. – You mean by God? Called to martyrdom at the age of eleven?
- Rosaleen corrected her: She's made her choice.
The absurdity of it choked Lib.
- Don't you understand how desperate Anna is, how racked with guilt? She's not *choosing* any more than she might choose to fall down a big hole.
- Not a word.
(Donoghue, 2016: 308)

Both women lost children in the past, yet these events seem to have marked them in two very distinct ways. Lib seems to have used her pain and suffering to turn them into a lifelong profession of serving others with empathy and dedication. As a nurse, she could connect elements of maternal care and professional medical expertise. Rosaleen, in turn, appears to have put her trust in God. These two mothers appear to be each other's opposites, one representing science, the other religion. One seems active, the other passive and yet it is Lib who failed to provide her baby with food, while Mrs O'Donnell manages to feed her child when Anna decides to fast. As much as the personal tragedy made Lib efficient and autonomous, the inert Rosaleen gave all of herself and her close ones to God – an invisible higher power personified by a male, the epitome of patriarchal order. Yet, one cannot describe Mrs O'Donnell as completely passive. Limited by the restrictions of Catholic faith, she is trapped between what she may want to do and how much she is allowed to. Imprisoned in this struggle, she personifies the conservative and servile aspects of an Irish mother, dominated by patriarchy. Rosaleen nevertheless finds a way to manifest her subjectivity as a woman and a mother. Her decision to secretly feed the child was a desperate expression of her maternal feelings, but also of her agency – she proved to be able to think and act independently, even if it goes against the rules imposed on her. At the same time, concealing the truth from Church representatives about the child's alleged four-month strict fast and propagating a false story of a fasting girl can be read as a form of defiance by Rosaleen against male authority. On the one hand, as a mother who is trying to protect her child from death, on the other hand, as an individual woman who sees personal gain from maintaining the farce.

The complexity of Mrs O'Donnell's character is indicative of why the 19th century ideas of femininity and motherhood were destined to fail. The hegemonic discourse imposed unattainable demands on women which they were unable to meet and forced Irish mothers to behave in contradictory ways, exemplified by Rosaleen's secret feeding ritual in *The Wonder*. In the context of the harm this discourse carried, it is symptomatic that her struggle to meet the demands of the Church and fulfil her role as a mother who protects and nurtures would ultimately have led to the death of her daughter had it not been for Lib.

Donoghue demonstrates how Irish women disappeared behind labels of mother, wife, devout Catholic. Their identity was shaped by answering to the strict social norms which deprived them of any freedom to pursue their own needs and desires. At the same time, the author deconstructs the 19th century notion of motherhood, rejecting the oversimplistic narration of the hegemonic discourse which tried to shut women in fixed categories. In line with the belief that "the Catholic Church's teachings left little room for women who were not nuns or married mothers" (Delay, 2019: 29), the next chapter will attempt to reassess the figure of the 19th century Irish nun, based on Donoghue's Sister Michael.

Chapter Two: The Irish Nun

2.1. Introduction

In her essay “Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland” (1996), Maria Luddy claims that “[w]omen religious were central to the evolution of social and cultural life in nineteenth-century Ireland; to ignore their influence is to misunderstand a major historical force in Irish society” (Luddy, 1996: 44).

Given the role of the nun in *The Wonder*, and taking Luddy's argument into consideration, Chapter Two of this thesis will discuss the position of nuns in 19th century Ireland. It will trace the spread of religiosity in Ireland over the course of the century, with a particular emphasis on the rise of Catholic women religious and their role as nurses. I will try to demonstrate the ambiguous status of the Irish nuns as a group between lay women and men. I will also analyse the image of Irish nuns in terms of the standards of womanhood at the time, using the character of Sister Michael in *The Wonder* as the main example. The aim of this chapter is to scrutinize how Donoghue deconstructs the traditional representation of Irish nun.

2.2. Nuns as Institution

In *The Transforming Power of the Nuns: Women, Religion & Cultural Change in Ireland, 1750–1900* (1998), Mary Peckham Magray examines the development of Catholicism in Ireland from the 18th to the 20th century, with a particular focus on the role of nuns and their contribution to the propagation of Catholicism in the country. She analyses the circumstances and reasons behind women entering convents in such large numbers, especially in the years after the Great Famine. In the following section of this chapter, I will scrutinize some elements of the 19th century Irish social dynamics to understand the motivations which encouraged so many women to take the habit.

Contrary to the allegedly widespread belief that the Irish have always been a deeply pious people, until Victorian times it was folk beliefs¹⁰ that dominated in Ireland – particularly in the

¹⁰ I follow O'Connor's position: “‘Folklore’ is variously defined, but essentially it is oral (not written, and could be behaviour or action), dynamic (not static), anonymous (not traceable to any individual), collective, continuous and variational, in that it is shared over time and space and by a collective community, communicated over generations, groups and/or geographies. Bearing in mind that folklore is not history, the testimony from Irish folklore is presented to provide another way of seeing, and treating, these topics.” (O'Connor, 2012: 223)

Western part of the country. According to Peckham Magray, before 19th century, the organisation of the Catholic Church was unregulated and had few followers. She argues that

Church leaders, troubled by problems of clerical discipline, found themselves faced with a multitude of transgressions, such as drunkenness, factionalism, ignorance, laxity in performing pastoral duties, and the occasional sexual scandal. [...] lack of religious zeal that characterized organized religion in general during the eighteenth century hampered the church's work. Not only priests but also their bishops lacked religious enthusiasm at this time. In this atmosphere, it was very difficult for the church to combat the thriving popular culture of folk belief and practice so prevalent among the Irish masses. (Peckham Magray, 1998: 4)

Another aspect that prevented Irish Catholics from becoming part of an institutionalized Church was the various sets of Penal Laws, the first of which was introduced in 1695. Not only did they forbid Irish Catholics from practising their religion but also deprived them of land, while, on the other hand, encouraging conversion to Protestantism. The aim of these regulations, which excluded them from many activities and subjected to an extensive control system, was to avert potential Catholic rebellions against the British rule. For instance, the 1703 Queen Anne's Law provided that if the eldest son of a deceased Catholic converted to Protestantism, he would be entitled to all the land and all his brothers disinherited – which was contrary to the Irish custom of dividing land equally between sons. Furthermore, Irish Catholics were prohibited from buying or inheriting land from the Protestants. These laws were designed to reduce the amount of land held by Catholics in favour of Protestants and, as a result, increase the influence of the latter in Ireland.

Under the Penal Laws, Irish Catholics were not allowed to teach or run schools. They could not practice law, neither hold office in government, nor serve in the army or navy. The few Catholic priests who were permitted to remain in Ireland had to be registered with the authorities. These restrictions resulted in increased poverty across the country, which eventually forced some Irish people to emigrate – among those who stayed, however, it helped to build a sense of unity and solidarity (Howell, 2016: 21). Although the English Penal Laws did not exterminate Catholicism, they weakened Catholic religious practices for many years. As described by Maria Luddy:

Penal legislation enacted in Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries limited Catholic access to education, the professions and property, and placed restrictions on the practice of their faith (Wall, 1961). Intermittent harassment made the Catholic church disorganised and weak until the nineteenth century [...] (Luddy, 1996: 351)

In the beginning of 19th century, the situation began to change. According to Susan O'Brien, the changes in Ireland were part of a general phenomenon in Western Europe which saw an unprecedented rise in the number of female convents, religious institutes, congregations, and

women joining the orders (O'Brien, 1997: 142). Both Maria Luddy and Caitriona Clear underline female's leading role in the transformations that took place in the 19th century, speaking of their "distinct role evidenced by the expansion of native religious foundations and the rise of women's philanthropic endeavours" (Luddy, 1996: 351), while Clear states that

The re-organization and centralization of the Catholic church which took place in the nineteenth-century Ireland [...] would not have been so successful, nor would it have entrenched itself so deeply there had it not been for the strong undertow of native co-operation and initiative. Women religious, or nuns as they were popularly called, spearheaded this initiative, and almost all of the socially active female congregations were founded before the Catholic emancipation was won in the 1829. (Clear, 2002: 517)

One of the main reasons for this sudden growth of religious devotion was an attempt to counteract Protestant proselytism. To prevent the spread of Protestantism, Catholic people religious started a "conscious process of evangelization [that] gradually spread this revitalized Catholicism to the Catholic population (both urban and rural) throughout the island" (Peckham Magray, 1998: 4) – and the Irish nuns played a major role in the process. Peckham Magray underlines that

[...] these women played an instrumental role in the development of both the identity of the nineteenth-century Catholic middle class and, more generally, an Irish identity that became inextricably linked with Catholicism. The result was a revolution in the religious and cultural landscape of nineteenth-century Ireland. (Peckham Magray, 1998: 34)

Deirdre Raftery points to another reason of this religious transformation, namely the abolition of the Penal Laws, the process which started in the second half of the 18th century. After the final Catholic Relief Act was passed in 1829, Irish Catholics were allowed to practice their religion, get an education and work in liberal professions. Another of the consequences of the Catholic emancipation was a remarkable rise in the number of religious orders (Raftery, 2012: 305).

Historian Emmet Larkin calls this turbulent period of religious changes a "devotional revolution" which he dates to the first two decades immediately following the Great Famine. In his article "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75" (1972), he argues that it was due to the aftermath of the hunger crisis that the revolution broke out. Although his theory is generally accepted among historians, many scholars, such as Sean Connolly or Kevin Whelan, are inclined to see the changes in Ireland as a slow, gradual process that had already started by the end of the 18th century, rather than an abrupt upheaval. Despite different opinions regarding its starting point, all historians agree that it happened during the 19th century and led to

first of all, an outwardly more devout population that practiced its religion in impressive new churches and educated its children in an entrenched Catholic school system and, second, the

proliferation of a network of Catholic social-welfare institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, refuges, and reformatories. (Peckham Magray, 1998: 4)

According to different scholars, these changes are linked with the embourgeoisement of Ireland which was part of a more complex process of demographic, economic and social changes that helped forming the Irish middle-class. Whether this was a steady process or a swift transition, it did provoke great changes on the religious map of Ireland. One of them was the aforementioned increase in the number of women religious.

But why is it that we consider women religious, and not men, to have contributed so much to the religious changes, since it was men who exercised all the power? Susan O'Brien suggests that it might have been due to the fact that women religious were, to a much greater extent, the ones who chose to become active sisters rather than contemplative nuns, whereas men were more inclined to join closed cloisters (O'Brien, 1988: 112). And although nuns' roles in areas such as healthcare and education can hardly be questioned, it is only recently that their role has been restored in the modern Irish history (O'Brien, 1988: 117).

In her book, Peckham Magray tries to re-establish the position of Irish nuns whose role, according to the author, was largely marginalised in the historical narrative. She argues that women religious played a vital role in the process of, firstly, evangelising the country, secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, in the education and healthcare sectors. According to her, by the middle of the 19th century nuns' orders were the major institution within the Catholic Church (Peckham Magray, 1998: 129). Cara Delay agrees with Peckham Magray, saying that the "devotional revolution" was, in fact, a "feminised transformation characterised by the active participation of different groups of women, and particularly nuns" (Delay, 2019: 22). In *Irish women and the creation of modern Catholicism, 1850–1950*, she argues:

Women religious, who emerged as a potent and visible force in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish society, proved capable leaders of the 'revolution' on the local level. In 1800, there were only 12 convents and 120 nuns in Ireland. By 1850, Ireland boasted 1,500 women religious, and in 1900, there were 368 convents and an astounding 8,000 nuns in the country. By 1901, nuns constituted 70 per cent of the entire population of post-famine religious, female and male. The spread of convents in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland reflects not only the remarkable institutional trajectory of the 'devotional revolution' but also the gendered nature of the movement. (Delay, 2019: 22)

Peckham Magray argues that one of the reasons for the evangelisation of the Irish people being so efficient, was the recognition and acknowledgement for local beliefs, then prevalent in Ireland much more strongly than the Catholic faith (Peckham Magray, 1998: 92). In an attempt to attract people to the church, nuns would often compromise and try to integrate folk

beliefs with the Catholic ideology – for example, through the use of relics such as sacred stones or water from holy wells, considered to possess healing powers and very popular in the 19th century. The result of their practices was a fusion between folk and Catholic beliefs that led to the creation of a very specific Irish Catholicism. Pamela Berger in *The Goddess Obscured: Transformation of the Grain Protectress from Goddess to Saint* (1985) illustrates this process with the example of the acquisition of some Celtic gods and reinventing them into Christian saints. To name but one, there seems to be a great deal of analogies between the Celtic goddess, Bríd, and one of Ireland's patrons, Saint Brigid. St Brigid's Day is celebrated on the 1st of February, the same day as once a pagan festival Imbolc, dedicated to Bríd. Still today, the festivities on this day involve weaving Brigid's crosses and many other folk customs (Berger, 1985: 71). Berger demonstrates how

Illuminating the roots of Saint Brigid's Day and the customs tied to it demonstrates how we can uncover those Celtic beliefs and practices that, though modified over time, were not completely destroyed. The monks took the ancient figure of the mother goddess and grafted her name and functions onto her Christian counterpart, Saint Brigid. They made her a virgin, identified her as a second mother of Christ, and honored her as a kind of symbolic matriarch of all Ireland. (Berger, 1985: 73)

The peculiarity of Irish Catholicism lies in a balanced blending of old, Gaelic traditions with modern Catholic culture, a feature that can be found in *The Wonder*. Emma Donoghue skilfully portrays the nature of this fusion, for example when Kitty is singing to Saint Peter “to charm the butter” so that it comes out tasty (Donoghue, 2016: 119), or when she is making preparations for the Blessed Virgin Mary's feast – called by the Irish, Lá Fhéile Muire Mór (Donoghue, 2016: 170), which stands for “The Feast Day of Our Lady in the Harvest Time” (Duffy, 2023) and has roots in pagan beliefs.

In the years after the Famine, nuns established their strong position and became an indispensable element of the Catholic life (Clear, 1987: 157), mainly through their work as teachers and nurses. However, it should be stressed that becoming a nun was not a prospect available to every woman. Convent life was a strongly hierarchical institution, access to which, with all the privileges it provided, was restricted to middle-class women only. As reported by Peckham Magray, “convent life as a new and highly respectable option was only for women of the right class or the right attitude [...] women's religious life mirrored and reinforced the rigid, class-based social structure of the wider society” (Peckham Magray, 1998: 44). Maria Luddy also points out:

Within these walls women created their own systems of labour and could rise to positions of power and authority unmatched by lay Catholic women. The need for social compatibility led to a class-

based system of authority, most obvious in the distinctions between choir and lay sisters. Choir nuns came from privileged backgrounds and engaged in the public work of the community. Lay nuns were less well educated, from poorer backgrounds, did the domestic tasks of the community, and had little say in the managerial structures of the congregation (Luddy, 1996: 353)

Luddy demonstrates that for many women a life in convent could be a conscious choice that often did not stem from religious devotion but from sheer pragmatism. Becoming a nun seemed a safe and comfortable alternative for various reasons. It gave women a sense of power and agency over their own lives (and the lives of their pupils) that they would hardly be able to achieve otherwise. Women saw religious life not as a last resort but as a promising opportunity to escape the fate of fulfilling domestic duties. Life in convent often guaranteed challenging work and, what is important, did not involve a downgrading of social status. On the contrary, it would elevate women on the social scale. What is more, as explained further by Delaney and Raftery, for these women who wanted to avoid marriage (or emigration, especially in the years after the Great Famine),

[...] the convent held out the only possibility of a 'respectable' alternative to family life or the spectre of 'spinsterhood'. There were other 'push' factors that may have impelled women to enter convents, including poverty and even starvation. Convents entrants were increasing in number even as the country was witnessing famine and mass emigration. (Delaney and Raftery, 2022: 251)

It is important to note, however, that this alternative was limited to a few. The obligation to pay a dowry on entering a religious order, meant that the majority of Irish nuns came, essentially, from a middle-class background (Peckham Magray, 1998: 128) and that the highest ranks in the convent were largely inaccessible to the poor. Less affluent women, however, were allowed to enter the convent as lay sisters although their position was not as esteemed, and their independence limited. Since convent life reflected the power dynamics and social order of the Victorian society,

Choir nuns were trusted in positions of responsibility and respected in positions of authority, and lay sisters existed in auxiliaries, making the former's concentration on apostolic work possible by dint of unremitting life-maintenance work. [...] lay sisters' position in the convents of the period was roughly analogous to that of women as a group in the larger society. (Clear, 1987: 99)

Treated as "servants who took religious vows", lay nuns were relegated to all sorts of domestic jobs such as cooks, gardeners, or cleaners (Clear, 2005: 518). The predominant attitude towards them was somewhat dismissive, if not disdainful:

Atkinson¹¹, writing in 1879, recalls a lay sister in the mother-house of the Irish Sisters of Charity in the 1830s. [...] The women in question are portrayed as shrewd, parochial, loyal, and maternal [...]. Affectionate, uneducated [...] and above all, *outside* the door, excluded from the making of

¹¹ Sarah Atkinson (1823-1893) was an Irish writer.

executive decisions which ultimately concern their future, Atkinson's lay sisters are the archetypal servants found in all literature which upholds a hierarchical world-view. (Clear, 1987: 95)

It needs to be remembered though that in spite of all the authority nuns exercised over the subordinate nuns, they themselves were subjected to the male hierarchs of the Catholic Church, and thus their own independence was also restricted. They enjoyed higher position than lay women, but "because of their subordinate position and subjugation by the church hierarchy nuns could not develop a clear sense of their power and place in Irish society" (Luddy, 2005: 44). Despite their privileges, they were far from having equal rights to men, religious or lay. They had no prospect of further advancement within the Catholic structures. Even within the convent itself, the idea of social mobility was non-existent. Throughout the 19th century nuns tried to defend their freedom and loosen their dependency on the male authorities, with mixed results. Peckham Magray points out that

Women religious, though they were always careful to acknowledge episcopal authority, were also quick to defend their own. Because of this, relationships between convent leaders and their male superiors were often strained, and many orders were involved in significant power struggles with the hierarchy. These struggles [...] appear to have been most intense and widespread between 1830 and 1860. The same decades that witnessed the transformation of the Irish church also witnessed the peak of the conflict between nuns and bishops. (Peckham Magray, 1998: 129)

Regardless of their efforts, nuns remained subjected to the patriarchal order and so they were required to fulfil certain aspects of the role assigned to their sex, which was rather paradoxical in view of the fact that they were denied the most essential task assigned to their gender, namely marriage and children. The nature of their social position was a complex one, as it would sometimes demand from them to be powerful and dominant – according to the traditional perception of men – other times obedient and docile – according to the traditional representation of women.

Susan O'Brien also contributes to the discussion regarding nuns' ambiguous social status. In "Terra Incognita: The Nun in Nineteenth Century England" (1988) she writes about Anglican nuns, but nevertheless, given the similar nature of religious convents, I will quote a fragment as an interesting example which demonstrates the transnational and transdenominational character of the issue in question: "As a group of women living and working together under the direction of women they were autonomous in many respects, but they were also part of a larger body in which institutional power and authority was vested in an all-male hierarchy" (O'Brien, 1998: 116). It demonstrates how their position is suspended between female and male realities. Although autonomous and independent in their all-female communities, they were subjugated to men on the same terms as lay women.

Nuns are often described as wives of God (Jackson, 1984: 1015), which portrays them as passive, desexualised creatures, surrendered to an invisible force – God – which is represented by a male figure. This vision of womanhood reflects that nuns, in fact, were not entirely independent and, although the convent life did offer them an escape from marriage, it did not ensure them escape from patriarchy. Jackson argues that “[...] this chaste and obedient life was increasingly attractive in post-famine Ireland compared to a chaste and obedient life with their families. For families with several undowered children, convents offered an outlet for offloading a surplus of a daughter or two [...]” (Jackson, 1984: 1015). Again, women are denied agency, to be managed without regard to their will or reason. In this case, the decision to join a convent appears not as a matter of religious vocation or even pragmatism, but of necessity.

The image of nuns is complex and confusing yet for another reason. There seems to be a distinct clash between what the women religious personified and their actions. Peckham Magray calls them “victims of their own success” (Peckham Magray, 1998: 130) and, indeed, there is a certain paradox in them. On the social scale nuns distinguished themselves as powerful, independent, and empowered women, and still they are the same women who helped reinforce the unjust gender division and prevail the female subalternity.

Nuns' roles as educators, subordinate to the Catholic Church, required them to propagate the desired values of Irish Catholic ethos. Interestingly, Peckham Magray argues that generations of women brought up by nuns – these nuns who were themselves founders of the first Irish convents schools – were far from embodying the same virtues as their teachers. She comments that “the irony is that as the creators and enforcers of a new, modern Irish Catholic ideology that idealized meek and docile women, Irish nuns themselves helped to create the very conditions that ultimately robbed them of their autonomy” (Peckham Magray, 1998: 130).

A vital part of their educating mission was to help forming the new – that is, post-Famine – Catholic society, still very much class-based, but with an emergent middle-class, particularly on the follow-up of Catholic Emancipation. They completed the task successfully and, at the same time, contributed to the reinforcement of the social gap in Ireland, however that fact seemed to be of a secondary importance in the light of their accomplishments.

2.3. Nuns as Nurses

Apart from education – understood as basic knowledge, practical skills, and Catholic upbringing in accordance with the 19th century social order – nuns' main public occupation was nursing, in which they “achieved a great deal” (Peckham Magray, 1998: 128). According to Peckham Magray, one of the reasons that allowed Irish women religious to engage in nursing so successfully was the general trend that prevailed in the Roman Catholic Church after the French Revolution, when the Church “[...] put on a caring face. In all the Catholic countries of Europe, the church developed large-scale institutions for the care of the sick, the poor, and the destitute, as well as an extensive system of popular education” (Peckham Magray, 1998: 128). Nursing itself, however, had been a nuns' occupation long before the 18th century. In a study published more than one century ago, in *The History of Nursing in the British Empire* (1906), biographer and journalist Sarah Tooley states that already in the Medieval times

[...] nuns studied the art of nursing. Before hospitals sprang up, the early religious foundations charged themselves with the care of the poor and the sick. [...] Women were permitted to practice surgery, and Abelard¹² [...] urged them to learn surgery for the benefit of the poor. The sisters also were skilled in the compounding of medicines, and had their gardens of herbs. [...] The nursing sisters under religious rule gained good practical experience in the infirmary attached to their religious house, and also in the public room for the reception of the sick, which formed part of all large monastic institutions. (Tooley, 1906: 6)

The fragment above shows that in the Middle Ages women religious were highly regarded for their nursing skills¹³. Not only were they taking the basic care of the sick but were also allowed to perform more complicated tasks such as surgery. There seems to be a great deal of confidence in women's knowledge and abilities as well as a sense of trust between nuns and their superiors who did not see nursing as an obstacle to nuns' religious duties.

The etymology of the word “nurse” provides an interesting insight into the nature of women nurses from a historical perspective. According to the “Online Etymology Dictionary”, the term “nurse” comes from “nourish”, which derived from Latin “nutrix” and means: “wet-nurse, woman who nourishes or suckles an infant; foster-mother to a young child” (Harper, 2022). The verb “to nurse” was therefore considered synonymous with “to breastfeed” and it was only in the 17th century when it gained its contemporary meaning, that of “a person who cares for the ill” (Lam, 1'32''). Hence, to call a woman a nurse before the 17th century might referred either to a nourisher (which is traditionally associated with motherhood), or, as it is today, to a

¹² Peter Abelard (1079-1142) was a French theologian and philosopher, founder of the Abbey of the Paraclete.

¹³ However, it is only after Florence Nightingale's merits during the Crimean War (1853-1856) that nursing started to be recognized as a separate profession which eventually led to the adoption of the Nurses Registration Acts for Ireland and England, Scotland, and Wales, in 1919.

caretaker of the sick (which was at the time the occupation of nuns). By perceiving nursing as a women's occupation, tied to feeding and mothering, nuns were deprived of the chance to gain the same status as doctors had. Their work has always been seen as secondary and less prestigious compared to male doctors' – although it does not mean it was disregarded or belittled. Clear adds that it is largely due to the high moral conduct of the Catholic nuns that they succeeded in the nursing profession during the Victorian era. She writes:

[...] it is hardly likely that nuns as nurses would have been so widely approved had the nuns themselves deviated at any point from the Victorian ideal of the nurse. Co-operative, skilful, obedient helpmate was seen as women's role in all branches of medical practice by one doctor writing in 1856. Women were ideally suited to this helpmate role said a contributor to *St Paul's Monthly Magazine* in 1871. (Clear, 1987: 131)

However, there were also more emancipated nurses who tried to establish their position as professionals equal to men. Florence Nightingale was an English nurse and social reformer who revolutionised modern nursing¹⁴. Treating wounded soldiers at Scutari Hospital during the Crimean War (1853-1856) revealed the appalling state of the conditions of health care in English institutions. As more soldiers were dying from infections contracted in hospital than from wounds received in battles, Nightingale raised awareness of the importance of proper sanitation in the healing process. After the war, she fought for better working conditions for nurses back home – in 1860 she founded the St. Thomas' Hospital and the Nightingale Training School for Nurses. Furthermore, her efforts led to the improvement in the public image of nurses, from incompetent drunkards – as portrayed in Charles Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), for instance – to respectable professionals.

However, despite Nightingale's merits, nurses' efforts to have their profession recognized in legal terms, proved to be futile at the time. Their fight for nursing to be included in the official register of professions was opposed, for one, by Sydney Holland, of London Hospital: “We want to stop nurses thinking themselves any more than they are, namely, the faithful carriers-out of the doctor's orders” (Holland *apud* Clear, 1987: 130). Nuns who practiced nursing were also “warned not to ‘render themselves ridiculous by affecting a medical

¹⁴ Although it is Nightingale who is widely regarded as Britain's first nurse, there are some who oppose this view in favour of Mary Seacole (1805-1881), a Jamaican-Scottish nurse and doctress. Seacole possessed a wide knowledge of folk medicine, the use of hygiene and herbs, as well as general practitioner's skills in treating injuries. However, despite her competences, her application for the nursing contingent in the Crimean War, was repeatedly rejected. Nevertheless, Seacole travelled to Crimea and treated wounded soldiers independently of Nightingale's corps, in a self-funded establishment called British Hotel. Although they were not considered competitors, according to Jan Marsh “the Lady with the Lamp loathed Mary. ‘I had the greatest difficulty in repelling Mrs Seacole's advances, and in preventing association between her and my nurses (absolutely out of the question!),’ she wrote” (Marsh, 2005).

phraseology or skill which belongs not to their sex or duties...’ This arcane science was strictly confined to men; the traditional healers, women, occupied an auxiliary, subordinate role” (Clear, 1987: 131). Elizabeth Steiner-Scott also discusses the struggle of nuns to break free from male supremacy, which suggests that the widely held notion of their submissiveness and obedience may be misleading. According to Steiner-Scott:

The struggle between women religious and a male hierarchy was often bitter, and, in the pre-Famine years, the nuns were often successful. The proliferation of women's orders and the establishment of Catholic schools, hospitals, refuges, orphanages, and reformatories in the nineteenth century reflected the success of the nuns, but their very success also anticipated their loss of autonomy. (Steiner-Scott, 2000: 517)

Donoghue tries to combine these mixed approaches by creating two opposite images of nurses – Lib Wright, Nightingale's former pupil at Scutari, who corresponds more with the idea of an emancipated medical professional; and Sister Michael, who appears to embody the 19th century ideal of an obedient nun as nurse, both to Father Thaddeus and to doctor McBrearty. Their different approaches to nursing – the Irish nun is a devout Catholic and follows the tenets of her faith, while the English nurse is a sceptic and a firm believer in the then emerging scientific discourse – is a source of discord between the women. Lib openly scorns Sister Michael, while the latter endures her verbal attacks in silence. Even though the nursing profession binds the two females together across the barriers of nationality and class, they could not represent more contrary positions. What Sister Michael perceives as a conscientious performance of the task entrusted to her, Lib sees as idleness or even shameful action against the nature of the nursing vocation. When the Irish nun refuses to acknowledge Anna's fatal condition (as it would mean undermining her superiors), Lib openly accuses her of misunderstanding the idea of nursing:

“We did accept this charge,” said the nun faintly, as if each syllable were coming up from a deep hole in the earth. “But did you ever think we'd reach this point?” [...] Sister Michael writhed. “I'm under a vow of obedience. Our orders were very clear.” [...] The nun's face was livid. [...] “Then why won't you speak to the doctor with me?” “Because I'm only a nurse,” said Sister Michael. „I was taught the full meaning of that word,” Lib raged. “Weren't you?” (Donoghue, 2016: 228)

Their conversation reveals divergent approaches to nursing and mirrors the social changes taking place at the time. Before the grand scale modernization and secularisation of nursing in the 19th century, it had primarily been choir nuns who took care of the sick in Ireland. In the Victorian era, there was a reform in the field that created a division between nuns and nurses, as two separate “professional” groups. Nursing began to be seen as an independent occupation that required special training and preparation. In *The British Medical Journal* of September 1895, it reads:

There are no fewer than sixty-seven workhouses in Ireland where the nursing is controlled or carried out by the nuns. These ladies, excellent in their devotion to charitable work, have not as a rule received what is understood as hospital training. We are extremely sorry that any difficulty has arisen in regard to them; but we hope that wise counsels will prevail, and that their advisers will see how necessary it is that modern requirements in regard to nursing must be met. (“Nuns As Nurses in Ireland”, 1895a: 791)

In the October edition of the same journal, one person asks with indignation:

Are the sick in the workhouses to be nursed by trained or untrained nurses? The addition of the word “trained” is not of the small importance that some of the critics in the local press would lead their readers to imagine; a trained nurse is a woman who has been taught her business in a school authorised to teach, and by a body qualified to teach. [...] In the Mater Misericordiae, Vincent’s, and Jervis Street general hospitals in Dublin, which are under the direction of nuns, and where nuns have for years nursed, it has, we understand, been found advisable to change the system. Lay nurses are now trained there, and the nursing is done by the lay nurses, the nuns working in the domestic departments of those institutions. (“Nuns As Nurses in Ireland”, 1895b: 921)

Changes in the approach to nursing soon followed, forced by the post-Famine reality. As argued by Margaret Preston in “The Good Nurse: Women Philanthropists and the Evolution of Nursing in Nineteenth Century Dublin” (1998), after the crisis, job opportunities for women in the liberal professions were scarce and nursing became one of the few professions in which Irish women managed to find employment. According to Preston:

The medical community in Ireland, and in Dublin in particular, was working to improve the nursing profession even before Florence Nightingale left for the Crimea. By the nineteenth century, Ireland had a well-developed medical system and this, combined with the dramatic increase in numbers of women entering the convent for nuns lead the charge in nineteenth-century nursing reform helped to lay the basis for improvement of medical care. [...] Nuns played a leading role in the evolution of nursing and the establishment of hospitals in Ireland. (Preston, 1998: 93-96)

As is evident in the passage quoted above, the profession of nurses has its origin in the religious orders where it was gradually evolving and eventually separated from them over the course of the 19th century. Albeit secularised, nurses kept on sharing the core values and following similar principles as nuns. They were expected to be “of irreproachable moral character, but [...] ought to have a deep sense of religion... and tender sympathy for the sufferings of others” (Churchill *apud* Preston, 1998: 100). Above all, according to nursing reformers of the era, a good nurse should obey the male doctor. Fleetwood Churchill, the author of *A Manual for Midwives and Monthly Nurses* (1872), reminds all aspiring nurses that “your position as to the medical attendant is quite secondary; you are to receive and implicitly obey his orders” (Churchill, 1872: 53). It was often underlined that the nurse should under no circumstances forget her inferior position – “not unlike wife to husband or nun to priest, the nurse was not to question the doctor, only to provide his prescribed care” (Preston, 1998: 100). When nursing began to gain public recognition and respect, the view that it was a “naturally

woman's" profession due to its "typically female" characteristics began to be promoted. Clear argues that:

As well as being self-effacing, nuns were associated with self-sacrifice – this, indeed, was an essential element of their state of life. It corresponded to the potent Nightingale stereotype of the nurse as self-forgetful servant of the sick. [...] Nursing in the nineteenth century was gradually elevated into a vocation, a sacred mission. The Victorian woman was, according to idealists, a self-sacrificing, devoted helpmate of man; nurses were seen to carry these qualities into the field of gainful employment, and high standards of magnanimity were therefore expected of them. (Clear, 1987: 131)

Whether as wives, nurses, or nuns, women's most important duty was to obey their male superiors. Similarly, to women religious, nurses were also described as a professional group "in between". Historian Susan Reverby perceives their social position as "intermediate": "...neither for the drawing room nor the kitchen" (Reverby *apud* Preston, 1998: 100). In the Victorian era, both nurses and nuns, regardless of having employment, position, or social recognition, would suffer from discrimination because of their gender, and treated as second-class professionals.

2.4. Nuns as Women

One of the most desired qualities of a woman in 19th century Ireland was obedience, promoted by patriarchal discourse so that men could use and control women in a variety of ways. The Roman Catholic Church contributed largely to the reinforcement of sexist traditions in the perception of the ideal of womanhood, demanding of women "of all classes resignation, 'service', self-sacrifice and above all, obedience: obedience to the will of God, the will of men, to social superiors, and to the potent feminine mystique of the times" (Clear, 1987: 136).

In this part of the chapter, I would like to analyse the perception of nuns as women. Desexualised and silenced by their sacred vows, glorified by men and rendered into idealized symbols of perfect females, socially superior to lay women and privileged among them but unprivileged among men – how much of womanhood was there left to be expressed?

Women religious were often associated with the image of Holy Mary. The analogy was drawn between the role of the Virgin Mary in the redemption of humanity and the role of nuns in redeeming Irish people (Clear, 1987: 132). Their profession elevated them among other non-religious women, yet, at the same time, deprived them of some experiences socially approved only of lay women – the fact which placed nuns, in a way, outside of the conventional representation of womanhood.

Due to their vocation, they could not fulfil the traditional role assigned to them as women, that is to marry and have children. However, they were not socially stigmatised for it, given that they were seen as wives of God and followers of a higher calling. What is more, the vows which obliged them to remain virgins, contributed to their idealization and reinforced the idea of nuns personifying the ideal of womanhood, one that was desexualized. In 1869 an anonymous man wrote to *The Edinburgh Review* that “such women were intellectually superior to the ‘ordinary mass of women’” (Clear, 1987: 152). Indeed, on the one hand, they embodied the qualities praised in the Victorian era, such as modesty, obedience, chastity; yet, on the other hand, they were unable to meet the same social expectations as lay women – again, the question of ambiguity arises. According to Susan Casteras in “Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists’ Portrayal of Nuns and Novices” (1981):

[...] the nun might qualify as a perfect embodiment of the Victorian idealization of womanhood, particularly with her qualities of virginity, docility, dedication, spirituality, and modesty. Marriage was certainly the definitive career for women, with spinsterhood, one alternative to the wedded state, ungraciously denigrated as a half-life in which the “redundant” or “superfluous” female was dependent for her subsistence upon the generosity of a father, brother, or other male relative. The unattached woman in 1850 was essentially a social embarrassment [...] (Casteras, 1981: 157-158)

This “perfect embodiment” was largely linked with the desexualisation of women. Overall, there was a strict dichotomy in the representation of femininity in the Victorian era, which mainly focused on two main types: the “Angel in the House” and the “Fallen Woman” – “the good and chaste, and the sinful but sensual” (Kühl, n.d.: 172). This division, however, did not apply to women religious as they were not included in the conventional representation of femininity. Since the main determinant of women’s value in the 19th century was their sexual restraint and the image of nuns focused on their lack of sexuality, this sole fact put them somewhat at odds with the conventional discourse. As argued by Clear:

Chastity for women religious was, and is, essentially a renunciation of the satisfaction of sexual appetites. The chastity of nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland was inextricably bound up with the social mores which governed the behaviour of ‘respectable’ women. Conventions and customs touching everything from dress to subjects of conversation were creatures of the dominant contemporary view of women’s sexuality. (Clear, 1987: 153)

The paradox is that the image of nuns as asexual creatures was used by the hegemonic discourse both to render them less feminine and to glorify them as perfect women, because free from “carnal temptations”. They constituted a separate group of women, between a human and a saint, or rather between sinful Eve and the Holy Virgin (Kühl, n.d.: 171).

Indeed, in Victorian society, nuns must have seemed the ideal of womanhood – possessing all the desired qualities of lay women and never risking the danger of becoming “redundant”

as they were forever confined to the convent. Caitriona Clear recalls the memories of Thomas Burke, a nineteenth-century Irish civil servant, who shared the popular perception of nuns as idealised and superior beings. She quotes his reaction to an event, which Burke described as “the arrival of the fallen woman at the gate of the ‘Magdalen asylum’”:

[...] she turns to the portals of the Church and there... she finds the very ideal of purity – the highest, the grandest, the noblest of the Church's children. The woman who has never known the pollution of a single wicked thought – the woman whose virgin bosom has never been crossed by the shadow of a thought of sin! – the woman breathing purity, innocence and grace, receives the woman whose breath is the pestilence of hell! (Burke *apud* Clear, 1987: 153)

In the eyes of society, nuns embodied a spiritual sphere, that was at once unique and unattainable for the rest of the women, and which elevated them among their sex. They appeared as role models of womanhood and purity, holding “the most privileged position that a Catholic woman could hold” (Peckham Magray, 1998: 74). Through their vocation, they were connected more closely to God than any other group of women, and “their work in institutions and their own enterprises of benevolence gave them a moral and spiritual authority unsurpassed by any other group of women in society” (Luddy, 1996: 354). In terms of femininity, as in the case of their profession, they represented a group of an unclear rank. Clear affirms that female convents held “the ambiguous gender status” (Clear, 1987: 151). In her detailed study, she scrutinizes the position of nuns as women (the fragment needs to be quoted at length):

Where did women religious fit into the dominant nineteenth century interpretation of femininity? [...] The nun had renounced rights over her property and her will, and had voluntarily excluded herself from social life, yet she enjoyed – especially in Ireland – a social standing which was higher than that of the unmarried woman, and a socially-approved area of activity which was wider than that allowed the married woman. A combination of misogyny and genuine respect characterised male ecclesiastical attitudes to nuns in this period. [...]. Women were perceived through the distorting lens of male sexuality. [...] Therefore although respect was given to individual women who transcended the ‘limitations’ of their sex – Mary the Mother of God [...], and a host of abbesses and prominent female religious – women who bore children were seen to be too close to carnal realities to be realistic candidates for holiness and sainthood. (Clear, 1987: 151)

Again, nuns seem to represent a group in between, this time, above non-religious women but below the female ideal personified by Holy Mary. This vision of nuns, focusing on their (supposedly non-existent) sexuality and presenting them as Mary's closest confidants, shows them in an idealized way, transforming into half-divine beings. The hegemonic discourse distinguished nuns among lay women, but also isolated them within their own gender group. Nuns personified the transition between earthly and heavenly spheres – as the representatives of the Catholic Church they were the direct link between human life and divine power.

2.5. Sister Michael – Nun as Woman of Reason

In *The Wonder*, Emma Donoghue creates the character of Sister Michael – a “walking nun” from the Convent of Mercy Tullamore who is designated to watch over Anna, the fasting girl, along with Lib, the nurse from England. They are to establish whether the child is indeed living on “manna from heaven” or whether she is a hoax. The way the nun is introduced in the novel indicates Lib’s aversion to women religious as well as her scepticism towards Catholicism in general. Right upon the nurse’s arrival to Ryan’s pub (where she is to stay during her time in the Irish Midlands), Sister Michael is one of the first persons Lib meets, although still not knowing they will work together. Her first impression reveals judgment and prejudice:

One [table] was occupied by a nun whose face was almost invisible behind the starched layers of her headdress. If Lib flinched a little, it was because she hadn’t seen the like for years; in England religious sisters didn’t go about in such garb for fear of provoking anti-Romish sentiment. “Good evening,” she said civilly. The nun answered with a deep bow. Perhaps members of her order were discouraged from speaking to those not of their creed, or vowed to silence, even? [...] When at last the girl brought in the tray, the nun bent her head and whispered; saying grace before the meal. She was in her forties or fifties, Lib guessed, with slightly prominent eyes, and the meaty hands of a peasant. (Donoghue, 2016: 7)

The image of the nun presents her as mysterious, perhaps even unapproachable. Lib’s meticulous analysis of the other woman – from the clothes she is wearing, through her body and age, to her behaviour – reveals the nurse’s cautious and insecure approach in the new and strange surroundings. The bias and marked distance that characterises Lib’s attitude towards the Irish woman is related to the concept of Otherness. Although the idea itself is much older than Victorian England (already Homer wrote passionately about distant, imagined lands), the interest in the Other “[...] became commonplace in the 19th century with colonization and spread to the tropical world” (Staszak, 2008: 6). Geographer Jean-François Staszak in “Other/otherness” (2008) argues that

Otherness is a result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (“Us”, the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups (“Them”, Other) by stigmatizing a difference – real or imagined – presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination. [...] The Other only exists relative to the Self, and vice versa. The asymmetry in power relationship is central to the construction of otherness. Only the dominant group is in a position to impose the value of its particularity (its identity) and to devalue the particularity of others (their otherness) while imposing corresponding discriminatory measures. (Staszak, 2008: 2)

In *The Wonder*, Lib represents the dominant group while the Irish people are the Other. Even though she sees herself as superior to them, it is Lib who enters their world – hence, it is on her to adjust to the new environment, since her “superior” position does not apply in an unfamiliar area. Paradoxically, after arriving to Ireland, it is the Englishwoman that constitutes

the minority and, although coming from a position of power, it is she who feels threatened, not the locals. Bias and contempt are the main filters through which Lib approaches Ireland and the Irish, serving her as a protection from the unknown, understood as dangerous and hostile. Their Otherness constitutes of many aspects – religion, beliefs, economic situation, customs, nationality, language etc. and serves, primarily, to define oneself, to help create the sense of identity. As stated by Staszak, “Otherness is due less to the difference of the Other than to the point of view and the discourse of the person who perceives the Other as such” (Staszak, 2008: 1) and it “[...] serves to comfort the Self in its feeling of superiority” (Staszak, 2008: 1). Donoghue exposes the artificiality of the position by showing the evolution in Lib's perception of the Others. The writer demonstrates its absurdity, making analogies between two national groups, for example in the context of faith and religion. Lib regards the Irish as superstitious, criticising them for their preoccupation with their religious rituals, while herself, she often “talks” to Florence Nightingale in her mind, just as believers do when they pray to a God, treating her as an authority figure and role model. It seems as if she believes in the power of science and rationalism as fervently as the Irish profess to believe in the Catholic God. Interestingly, as she becomes more familiar with the Irish and their customs – mainly through her relationship with Anna – the differences between the groups are no longer so pronounced. This evolution is also visible in her attitude towards Sister Michael.

When they are formally introduced to each other, the Englishwoman is the first to greet the nun, which makes her feel seemingly superior, “more civilised” than the Irishwoman. At the same time, the nun's reaction, her “deep bow” instead of a verbal answer does not strike Lib as rude or impolite – she takes it, potentially, as part of Sister Michael's religious vows. Therefore, even in her eyes, nuns are allowed to follow a different set of norms, they have a monopoly to behave outside of the standard social code. The condescending comment regarding the nun's “meaty hands of a peasant” is an unclear hint which may reveal ambiguousness in terms of her social background, but might also be only a remark on the part of a prejudiced Englishwoman.

During Lib's first conversation with Doctor McBrearty, after learning about the identity of her fellow nurse, she states dryly: “One of the *walking nuns*. [...] They were reliable workers, at least [...]” (Donoghue, 2016: 17). Her short remark shows she perceives the other woman only in professional terms, as a nurse. She seems rather prejudiced towards the nun even for the sole fact of her belonging to the convent. On the other hand, Lib tries hard to find any

positive information about Sister Michael, which she expresses by “at least” at the end of the comment.

Her antagonism is reinforced by McBrearty's confession that the O'Donnells wished for at least one of the nurses to be one “of their own” denomination and nationality (Donoghue, 2016: 17). It makes Lib feel all the more like an unwelcome stranger and intensifies her vigilance against any sign of hostility towards her person – which proves to be a double-edged sword in her hands, as it also contributes to her own understanding of the Irish in the worst possible terms and leads her to often misread their behaviour.

The personality of Sister Michael is constructed using sparing means. She is reticent and retreated, maintaining her position as an observer. She willingly withdraws from company, as if in keeping with her vocation, which places her outside society. Her character is outlined in a slow, gradual manner. She remains mysterious right to the very end of the story, and Lib's impression of her alters significantly throughout the novel. Interestingly, the Englishwoman's remarks about the nun say more about the nurse herself (which confirms Staszak's theory). She tries to decipher her colleague but usually fails, thus only exposing her own ignorance, while Sister Michael slips away.

Lib acknowledges the nun's distinct social position even though she does not identify herself as Christian and is not familiar with religious customs – this shows the esteem in which nuns were held in Victorian society. During Lib's first dinner in Ireland, when a group of men enter the room greeting: “God save all here”, she finds herself “not knowing the appropriate response” (Donoghue, 2016:8). Her confusion emphasises the distance between herself and the Irish people, reinforcing the sense of loneliness and isolation. Simultaneously, Sister Michael welcomes them with a shy “And ye too”, while “[...] making the sign of the cross by touching her forehead, chest, left and right shoulders. Then she left the room – whether because she'd had all she wanted of her meagre portion or to surrender the second table to the newcomers, Lib couldn't tell” (Donoghue, 2016:8). The first encounter with the nun presents an image of a woman who is pious, modest, thoughtful, and dedicated, obediently fulfilling her role in the society. In other words, “a perfect embodiment of the Victorian idealization of womanhood” (Casteras, 1981: 157).

Donoghue, however, makes sure that her character avoids such simplifications. One of the most striking elements of Sister Michael as a character is how little of her is actually mentioned in the novel, given the acknowledged social position nuns held at the time, and the importance

of the task she is been assigned for. The nurse assumes indulgently that the nun must be “crippled by shyness” (Donoghue, 2016: 21), although, at the same time, the utter silence that usually surrounds the sister makes a rather eerie impression on Lib.

This silence is, indeed, an interesting aspect of Sister Michael. She rarely “talks”, her utterances are almost always described as “whispers” – only a few times throughout a novel it is said explicitly that the nun was speaking with her voice at a regular volume, and it was mostly when talking to the child; “when telling Anna a story: [...] Sister Michael was saying” (Donoghue, 2016: 222). Especially in conversations with Lib, she tends to lose her confidence, speaking “even more quietly” (Donoghue, 2016: 186) or not speaking at all: “Sister Michael began, as if to justify herself. [...] The nun hesitated, then went out without another word” (Donoghue, 2016: 243). The other situations in which Sister Michael does not seem to shy away from Lib are when she is forced to defend her position as the representative of the Catholic Church. When provoked by the Englishwoman, she remains calm and firm: “‘What do we do?’ ‘What we were hired to do, Mrs. Wright. No more, no less.’ And with that, the nun sat down and opened her holy book like a barricade” (Donoghue, 2016: 188). She does not hesitate, neither stutter nor run away. Similarly, after telling Anna one of the religious tales, which Lib misinterprets and describes as “lurid” (Donoghue, 2016: 223), Sister Michael replies, making her face “[...] closed up inside its frame of linen. ‘I don’t think you understand our stories, ma’am.’ That was fighting talk for Sister Michael. And the nun glided from the room [...]” (Donoghue, 2016: 223).

She moves noiselessly, “gliding away” (Donoghue, 2016: 88), her “black robes brushing the grass” (Donoghue, 2016: 36) and all she does is done quietly – “she slid the book shut” (Donoghue, 2016: 114). If given a choice, she does not speak at all but rather nods “guardedly” (Donoghue, 2016: 104), listening in silence to Lib’s suggestions (Donoghue, 2016: 115) and following Dr. McBrearty’s orders (Donoghue, 2016: 187) – both of which stand in opposition to each other which implies the nun’s ambiguous attitude – usually preserving an unreadable expression (Donoghue, 2016: 207).

She brings to mind an image of a person between two worlds. Firstly, due to her physical appearance, wearing black robes which render her silhouette shapeless and enhance the impression of her gliding rather than walking (Donoghue, 2016: 36). Secondly, because of her name – according to the custom, nuns are to acquire a new name of a chosen saint, either male or female, when joining the convent. The fact that sister Michael picks a male’s name makes

her, in Lib's view, stripped of womanhood (Donoghue, 2016: 17) and it also reinforces her position in between sexes. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, her seeming emotional detachment from Anna's case and the sheer diligence with which she carries out instructions given by her male superiors make her unable – or unwilling – to question anything and, thus, keep as if in paralysis between the worlds.

She does not take sides but instead of that listens and observes yet does not make any comments. For example, when she merely informs Lib that she has been seen “tramping all over the county” (Donoghue, 2016: 213), the Englishwoman interprets it as an accusation. Sister Michael, however, in all her actions, seems to maintain caution and appears incapable of open criticism, “keeping her own counsel and uttering anodyne generalities” (Donoghue, 2016: 226). On the one hand, she prays with the O'Donnells (Donoghue, 2016: 313), on the other hand, she shares her doubts with Lib in a veiled way, as if passively trying to help her investigation (to be quoted at length):

[...] the nun whispered, eyes turning towards the bed. Lib blinked. Could these hints mean that the nun thought Anna had a terrible secret to confess – that the girl was no miracle after all? She tried to recall their brief conversations of the past week. Had the nun ever actually said that she believed Anna to be living without food? No; blinkered by prejudice, Lib had just assumed she thought that. Sister Michael kept her own counsel or uttered anodyne generalities. Lib stepped up very close to her now and murmured, “You've known all along.” Sister Michael's hands flew up. “I was only –” “You're as familiar with the facts of nutrition as I. We've both known from the start that this must be a hoax.” “Not *known*,” whispered Sister Michael. “We know nothing for sure.” [...] Sister Michael turned on her heel and fled from the room. (Donoghue, 2016: 226)

Lib seems to become aware that the nun is more favoured by the child's parents and committee members than her, noticing that “[...] Dr. McBrearty might perhaps hear the truth better from Sister Michael if the nun could possibly be persuaded to tackle him” (Donoghue, 2016: 222) and so she tries to take advantage of it for her own benefit. Compared to Lib's uncompromising and strongly opinionated attitude, Sister Michael remains aloof and reserved. These qualities render the latter appear more mature, with the ability to control her emotions and dedicate entirely to the task in hand. Even though this “abstention”, that Lib attributes to all the Irish people (Donoghue, 2016: 184), makes the nurse's stomach turn, in the case of Sister Michael it is likely to be a part of her vocation. As Raftery, Delaney, and Nowlan-Roebuck argue in *Nano Nagle: The Life and Legacy* (2018), an “ideal” nun should be

[...] patient, even in the most trying and difficult of circumstances; her zeal was to be disinterested, seeking only the salvation of souls and the Glory of God. Finally, she was to be preserving and enlightened, and never feel sad or dejected, when there was little success from her labours. In correcting the pupils, the Sister was cautioned to suppress whatever emotions of passion that arose, taking care not to give way to anger. (Raftery; Delaney; Nowlan-Roebuck, 2018: 84)

Therefore, Sister Michael's composure may not be due to her indifference or emotional detachment but, on the contrary, attests to her commitment to performing her duties according to the training she has received. However, Lib perceives her as a useless peasant, blinded with prejudice, albeit "a good soul":

This farm woman who'd ended up in the House of Mercy was no doubt a good soul, Lib thought in exasperation. And probably intelligent in her own way, if only she could let her mind roam beyond the boundaries prescribed by her superiors and their master in Rome. *We vow to be of use*, Sister Michael had boasted, but what real use was she here? (Donoghue, 2016: 188)

Lib belittles Sister Michael, speaking of her with condescension and thinking of her as the "undertaker's hired mute" (Donoghue, 2016: 93) who is "riddled with superstition, seeing angels dancing across every bog" (Donoghue, 2016: 163). She questions her intentions and motivations, since they come from – what the nurse understands as – a bunch of prejudices and balderdash (Donoghue, 2016: 115). This hostility stems from Lib's prejudices towards the Irish, their beliefs and religion. Her ignorance of Irish customs blind Lib's sense of judgement, leading to misunderstandings. She questions all of Sister Michael's actions: "But how hard had she tried, given her trust in God's *mysterious ways*? Was the nun going to be any help to Lib at all, or only a hindrance?" (Donoghue, 2016: 79).

The different views on the nurse's duties make Lib patronise the nun and openly distrust her (Donoghue, 2016: 98), describing condescendingly as "familiar and inoffensive" (Donoghue, 2016: 104). She claims the nun has less experience and, therefore, can be managed by the Englishwoman (Donoghue, 2016: 81) although she is later proved wrong by Dr. McBrearty who calls Sister Michael "an old hand" for she "nursed at the Charitable Infirmary in Dublin for twelve years" (Donoghue, 2016: 98). Even though Lib comforts herself thinking Sister Michael should turn out to be a diligent worker, she quickly loses her hope and starts to treat the nun as her subordinate, who is more devoted to religion, approaching the task from a spiritual (understood by Lib as worse) point of view. The Englishwoman remarks she "[...] might not have faith in the nun's judgement, but surely the woman would know her Bible?" (Donoghue, 2016: 94). Sister Michael fends off all attacks with calm and dignity, by alleging that the nurse is exceeding her powers (which she considers a grave breach):

"We weren't asked to look into her mind." [...] "You're drawing an inference, Mrs. Wright." The nun held up one rigid finger. "We're not to engage in this kind of discussion." [...] The nun shook her head violently. "Is she eating or not? That's the only question." "It's not *my* only question. And if you call yourself a nurse, it can't be yours either." The nun's cheeks tightened. "My superiors sent me here to serve under Dr. McBrearty. Good night to you." (Donoghue, 2016: 163)

Not only does Sister Michael not allow herself to be provoked by Lib but refuses to do anything not ordered by Dr. McBrearty. At times she seems afraid and unwilling to even speak to the nurse, as if out of fear at the thought of questioning her superiors' decisions, whom she should obey blindly, regardless of her personal convictions. In this sense, she is indeed an ideal nun, acting as their male superiors would wish her to – she is self-vigilant to the extreme.

Sister Michael is trapped between her own beliefs and the professional requirements she needs to meet. On the day of the votive mass for Anna, she does not dare to refuse the O'Donnells, when asked to participate in the ceremony, although she is suspicious of Lib's intentions and would rather stay with the child. However, only her facial expression attests to the conflict going on inside her: "The nun hesitated, frowning. [...] 'Gladly,' said the nun. Her eyes were still puzzled" (Donoghue, 2016: 318).

The nun seems torn, and her confusion is often expressed by physical reactions – she tends to flee from Lib as if scared of her own thoughts and what they may lead to in presence of the nurse. She repeatedly states that her mission is to "be of use", according to her vows:

"We walk out into the world, you see, Mrs. Wright. We take the usual vows of any order – poverty, chastity, obedience – but also a fourth, service." [...] "What kind of service?" Anna broke in: "To the sick, the poor, and the ignorant." "Well remembered, child," said the nun. "We vow to be of use." (Donoghue, 2016: 105)

Although the nun speaks loudly and firmly about her duties and vocation, at the end she breaks with her obligations and takes initiative; not only does she go against the common perception of her as passive, but she also disobeys her orders. By bringing Anna to the commission's reunion, she expresses her disagreement with her superiors' decisions – yet, again, she does not question anything out loud. Her opinion remains unknown, but her actions speak for her: "A creak; the door of the room flapped open, then almost shut again, as if admitting a ghost. Then a black shape appeared in the gap, and Sister Michael backed in, pulling the wheeled chair with her. Lib was speechless. She'd urged the nun to come. But with Anna?" (Donoghue, 2016: 285).

The image of Sister Michael undergoes a significant change over the course of the novel. However, the evolution in the way she is portrayed may only be a mirror of Lib's own transformation. As her mind opens, she begins to see Ireland differently and realises, for example, that "Sister Michael didn't say That couldn't be or Anna needs no food" (Donoghue, 2016: 187). It undermines her former assumption of the nun blindly believing in the miracle story (Donoghue, 2016: 137). Suddenly, Sister Michael becomes a potential ally, and her

portrait grows softer, more sympathetic. The Englishwoman sees how tender the nun is towards the girl, comforting her in distress with fingers sliding over Anna's (Donoghue, 2016: 176): "The child let out one harsh sob. Sister Michael cupped the child's left hand in both of hers. "Come", she murmured. "Didn't Our Lord say, *Be not afraid?*" (Donoghue, 2016: 177). She is the only one who cares for Lib after the fire in O'Donnells' house, showing her kindness and support – "'I'm sorry, Sister,' said Lib, her voice uneven, 'so very sorry.' 'Shush,' said the nun again, softly, as if to a child" (Donoghue, 2016: 335). In the end Sister Michael turns out to be Lib's saviour, by not confessing what she has witnessed but rather describing it vaguely as "a vision" (Donoghue, 2016: 335): "Dumbstruck. *She knows*. Loud in Lib's head. *She has out fate in her hands*. Sister Michael was vowed to obedience; how could she not confess what she'd seen to the committee? [...] The nun had her hands joined and her head bowed. *She's setting us free*" (Donoghue, 2016: 336). The Irishwoman remains reserved and secretive until the very end, letting events unfold on their own and not intervening. Once again, she hides her opinions behind a mask of composure, this time for the sake of Lib. She tries to help the Englishwoman by advising her to remain meek – which sounds as Sister Michael's personal way of surviving in unjust, patriarchal Ireland:

[...] the nun put a hand on Lib's arm, above the bandage. "Best not do or say anything till you're called on. Humility, Mrs. Wright, and penitence." Lib blinked. "Penitence?" Her voice too loud. "Isn't it they who should be penitent?" Sister Michael shushed her. "Blessed are the meek." [...] "Be meek, Mrs. Wright, and just maybe they'll let you go." It was sound advice; Lib shut her mouth. (Donoghue, 2016: 335)

According to 19th century norms, Sister Michael appears to represent the embodiment of an ideal Victorian nun – obedient, dedicated, pious, quiet. Up to a point. She fulfils her duties impeccably but there remains something strange about her behaviour, a certain shield she holds up as "her holy book like a barricade" (Donoghue, 2016: 188). Throughout the novel much less is seen of Sister Michael as a woman and what dominates her image is the religious vocation. She focuses all the efforts to her obligations as nun and nurse – the feminine aspects of her personality as if disappear. The moment this façade falls is the moment she starts to behave more like a woman and less like a professional. Donoghue skilfully portrays this transition through the internal struggle that the Irishwoman is going through:

The nun averted her face, big eyes blinking. [...] Haltingly: "My place is here." [...] The smoothly wimpled head kept swinging like a bell. "Those aren't our orders. 'Tis all dreadfully sad, but –" [...] Sister Michael's face crumpled in on itself. "Good nurses follow rules," Lib growled, "but the best know when to break them." The nun fled from the room. (Donoghue, 2016: 271)

Although intimidated by Lib, she brings Anna to the reunion to demonstrate her critical condition. Sister Michael proves she cares more for the girl's wellbeing than for approval of

her superiors – she decides to do something she is not asked for and therefore “forgets her place” that, as explicitly underlined in *A Manual for Midwives and Monthly Nurses* from 1872 is “quite secondary” (Churchill, 1872: 53).

It has already been mentioned that nuns held a rather ambiguous position in post-Famine Ireland, their independence and freedom being somewhat limited while still having opportunities unavailable to other women. While this duality may cause confusion and frustration, and even lead one to question their real contribution to female empowerment – after all, they were transmitting models of femininity that discriminated against them, enjoying a more privileged position themselves – it must be remembered that religious women were just as subject to the patriarchal order as all other women. The difference was in their position *vis-à-vis* lay women, but not men. By the nature of their vocation, rooted in Catholic ideology, they needed to obey the sexist discourse. Their role was not to question it but pass it on further to their pupils. According to Clear, it was a sign of rationality on the part of nuns, and perhaps certain loyalty towards fellow women, as “themselves caught up in a male-dominated, hierarchical organisation, teaching nuns pragmatically passed on to the female under their care important strategies for survival in a male-dominated, hierarchical society” (Clear, 1987: 124). What Clear suggests is that, since women religious were in charge of educating generations of young Irish girls, they chose to use their position to prepare their pupils to deal with the sexist, hostile reality they would face as adult women, rather than train them to fight a misogynistic system.

Emma Donoghue brilliantly manages to create a complex character of one of the most symbolic and important figures in Irish Catholic culture. She skilfully captures the ambiguity of the Irish nun, using silence, understatement, reserve, and apparent emotional coolness as her dominant features. It also helps to picture the vagueness of a character who *ex officio* represents ambivalence. Donoghue deconstructs the conventional representation of nuns as half-saints, ideal women, meek and docile wives of God. In a seemingly traditional image of a nun, she includes qualities that make her less idealised and show the struggles of a woman trying to adapt to a hostile reality. Sister Michael restores her own agency by opposing patriarchal orders and masculine, idealised visions of an obedient, speechless nun. By challenging her previous servile behaviour, she reveals herself as a rational woman, aware of her disadvantaged position, one which forces her to adapt rather than rebel.

Chapter Three: The Irish Girl

3.1. Introduction

Chapter Three will discuss the perception of girls in 19th century Ireland. This chapter will briefly present the two main discourses on children in the period – the Romantic and the Evangelical. It will also analyse the Victorian standards of girlhood and the widespread phenomenon of fasting girls at the time. I will try to show how girlhood, treated as a preparatory stage to womanhood, was deprived of its own subjectivity, placed between childhood and adulthood, and how the patriarchal discourse – in the form of the Catholic Church – fuelled this polarisation. I will also attempt to demonstrate how Donoghue breaks with the conventional representation of girlhood and reinstates girls' agency. The character of Anna O'Donnell from *The Wonder* will serve as the main example.

3.2. The Perception of Children in 19th Century British Culture

According to Sally Shuttleworth, in the Victorian period the two most popular images of children were those of an Evangelical, evil child and of a Romantic, innocent child. In "Victorian Childhood" (2004) she writes: "In childhood studies the equivalent of the virgin/whore divide is the clash between Romantic ideas of childhood innocence, and Evangelical-fuelled notions of the child as an expression of original sin" (Shuttleworth, 2004: 110). In this section I will analyse these two views which will later serve as a basis for the perception of girlhood in 19th century Ireland.

Hugh Cunningham in *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (2021) claims that the eighteenth century is the moment of the "discovery" of the child. Linda Austin, on the other hand, in "Children of Childhood: Nostalgia and the Romantic Legacy" (2003), argues that "the concept of childhood was more likely 'elaborated' through the centuries than suddenly 'born'" (Austin, 2003: 79). Whether as a sudden discovery or a gradual process, the theories have one element in common – they both meet in 19th century, which was the period of the most heated debate on childhood.

The perception of a child as naturally evil is part of the Evangelical discourse that focuses on the notion of the original sin. Robert O'Connell states that "[o]ur souls are sin-laden from before conception in our mother's wombs, guilty with a guilt we could never have contracted in our 'proper' lives, guilty because we were one in and with Adam, were Adam in his primal act of sinning" (O'Connell *apud* Banerjee, 2007). Jacqueline Banerjee explores this

idea further in her article “Ideas of Childhood in Victorian Children’s Fiction: The Child as Sinful” (2007). According to her:

The Romantic child might be quashed by life (those “shades of the prison-house”) but the child of Adam had to be saved by it – or at least by firm parenting. Mrs Sherwood, whose works for children were imbued “with a religious fervour and an emphasis on sinfulness which had not been seen in juvenile books since the writings of the 17th-cent. Puritans” [...] was the great influence here. (Banerjee, 2007)

Mary Martha Sherwood, mentioned by Banerjee, was a 19th century English writer for children. She was a strong advocate for the idea of children as sinful creatures – claiming that “all children are by nature evil” (Sherwood *apud* Fadiman, 2023) – and for recognition of people’s innate depravity. She describes one of her works, *The Infant’s Progress*, as “a story about some little children who, like yourselves, were born in a state of sin” (Sherwood, 1851: 11) in which she personifies the original sin in a character named In-bred Sin. According to Sherwood, In-bred Sin is “as ill-favoured and ill conditioned an urchin as one could see” (Sherwood, 1851: 11), who “whispers evil in the ears of nine-year-old Humble Mind and his sisters, Playful and Peace, and never ceases to torment them” (Banerjee, 2007).

Sherwood’s literature was partly influenced by John Locke’s philosophy, the author who is considered one of the first to write about children. Locke established the importance of childhood as a pre-stage to adulthood that shapes and determines what people become in the future – and for this reason he stressed the value of education, upbringing, and experience. Although his perception of a child was no longer that of a seed of all evil, unlike Sherwood’s, it was still a far cry from the Romantic idea of it. His “rational child” was something in between (MacLeod, 1992: 141) and constituted a transition phase between the Evangelical evil child and the Romantic innocent child. Locke,

[...] seldom considered the nature of the child as a child. Treated as a small adult, the child was to be trained out of his childish ways into the moral and rational perfection of regulated manhood. The child was *tabula rasa* upon which, through education, sensation could work its beneficent influence. [...] The cult of the child which informed the romantic literature of childhood lay with the opposing school, with the ‘cult of sensibility’ associated with Rousseau [...]. (Coveney, 1967: 40)

The main preacher of the “opposing school” was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, often identified as the author of the Romantic idea of the child. According to Coveney, “if original sin had informed the Christian centuries in their attitude to childhood, it is Rousseau’s *Emile* that dominates the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until Freud” (Coveney, 1967: 46). Rousseau claimed that children were innocent by nature and denied the idea of the “original sin” (Coveney, 1967: 44). In *Émile, or On Education* (1762) he famously said: “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil” (Rousseau *apud* James; Jerks;

Prout, 1998: 13). In his best-known work, he introduces the concept of human beings as good and pure creatures at birth who live in a morally corrupt society. Therefore, when they grow up and interact with various public institutions (school being one of the first), their demoralisation is inevitable. According to Coveney,

Rousseau's great contribution was to give authoritative expression to the new sensibility, and to direct its interest towards childhood as the period of life when man most closely approximated to the 'state of Nature'. His primary demand was, and it is perhaps difficult for us to see it as quite the revolutionary idea it was, that the child is important in himself, and not as a diminutive adult. (Coveney, 1967: 42)

Rousseau preaches that it is unnatural, and, indeed, foolish, to rush children in their process of growing up – they should be allowed to experience these formative years at their own pace because “childhood has ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling peculiar to itself” (Rousseau *apud* Coveney, 1967: 44). According to Rousseau, to ignore this fact, one should accept to receive “premature fruits which are neither ripe nor well-flavoured, and which soon decay...” (Rousseau *apud* Coveney, 1967: 44). The way the Romantics understood childhood was revolutionary also because, in their eyes, it ceased to be “a preparatory phase in the making of an adult” (Cunningham, 2021: 55) but rather an acknowledged and valued phase on its own. Ann Wierda Rowland develops these ideas in *Romanticism and Childhood: The Infantilization of British Literary Culture* (2012), where she describes the Romantic child as “essentially an idealized, nostalgic, sentimental figure of childhood, one characterized by innocence, imagination, nature and primitivism” (Rowland, 2012: 9). Cunningham further elaborates that this new view,

[...] not only seemed to put paid to original sin, but to replace it with the idea of an infancy positively endowed with blessings from God. Children came to be thought to have keener perceptions of beauty and of truth than adults. [...] [Wordsworth's *Ode*] came to encapsulate what was thought of as a Romantic attitude to childhood: that is, that childhood was the best part of life. (Cunningham, 2021: 55)

This Romantic attitude was a novelty also for, as Gerald Early puts it in his essay “On Literature & Childhood” (2004), before 19th century, childhood was: “[...] a rather negligible phase of life, and for most people surely not an especially pleasant period” (Early, 2004: 96). According to Cunningham, an important factor that made the introduction of these changes possible was (to be quoted at length):

[...] the long-term secularisation of attitudes to childhood and children. It was not that people suddenly ceased to be Christian, but that for many their Christianity narrowed in its range, became less all-embracing as an explanation for natural phenomena and as a guide to action. There were numerous and important exceptions to this generalisation; Christianity did not give up its claims without a fight, and was on the resurgence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But there was a long-term, if interrupted, decline in belief in original sin,

[...], and with that decline children were transformed from being corrupt and innately evil to being angels, messengers from God to a tired adult world. (Cunningham, 2021: 45)

Heywood disagrees with Cunningham that the Church endorsed the idea of a happy childhood filled with blessings from God. In *Childhood in Modern Europe* (2018) he defends the opposite position:

Christianity has always conveyed diverse and even contradictory messages on the nature of the child, evident from the outset in the scriptures. On the one hand, there was a tradition dating back to the early Middle Ages of emphasising the purity, humility and innocence of children. On the other, there was the equally long-standing tradition that highlighted the stain of Original Sin on the newborn infant, inherited from Adam and Eve after the Fall. This pointed to the capacity of the child to do evil. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Christian churches have generally veered towards the pessimistic view. (Heywood, 2018: 29)

Indeed, Heywood's position seems to encapsulate well the contradictory and ambiguous attitude of the Christian ideology towards children. Moreover, Sally Shuttleworth appears to share this opinion, portraying a Victorian view of childhood that was heavily influenced by the discourse of the Church at the time: "To read through the nineteenth-century *Times*, indeed, is to gain an overwhelming impression of children as victims: they seem to figure primarily as beings who are abused, abandoned or abducted" (Shuttleworth, 2004: 108). Her position stands in a curious contrast to the theory of idealised, pure and joyful innocence so promoted by the Romantics, of which childhood was supposed to be the epitome. Ironically, Shuttleworth's observations coincide with what Declan Kiberd writes in *Inventing Ireland* (1996):

[...] the Irish and the child were victims of a similar duplicity of official thought. Present-day readers are often amazed at the fact that those same Victorian adults who wept copiously for the innocent outraged children of Dickens belonged to a generation which still sent children up into chimneys and down into coal-mines. [...] The manipulation of childhood by sentimental Victorians was just another example of such functional hypocrisy [...] (Kiberd, 1996: 104)

The dichotomy identified by Kiberd is characteristic of the Victorian morality, which encouraged double standards in many areas of life. The romantic idyll may have been shared by Victorian middle-class children, but working-class children no longer experienced similar privileges. Even lower down the hierarchy were Irish children, the lowest of whom were girls. At the same time, it was the girls who faced the most demanding – because contradictory – demands. In the Irish case, it was not just about Victorian values, but above all - Catholic ideology.

3.3. The Perception of Girls in 19th Century Ireland

Irish girlhood is a complex matter to research and discuss, due to the fact that, as many scholars attest, it is largely absent from historiography. Both Cara Delay and Jane Elizabeth Dougherty point out that – compared to the Irish boyhood which has been “canonized, prize-winning, best-selling, and even parodied” (Dougherty, 2007: 50) – Irish girlhood “remains comparatively unexplored” (Delay, 2019: 60). This absence, however, is meaningful. It indicates the attitude the society of the period had towards girls – it was, to say the least, dismissive. As put by Dougherty in “Nuala O’Faolain and the Unwritten Irish Girlhood” (2007): “it sometimes seems that only two subjectivities exist in the Irish imaginary: male child or female mother” (Dougherty, 2007: 60). It appears as if Irish girlhood was non-existent or, at least, not important. This period, considered a mere pre-stage to womanhood, required from girls to obtain the training and education necessary for them to be able to fulfil their future social roles as women, i.e. mothers and wives. The Victorian narrative of girls mirrors the realities of their mothers and grandmothers, showing the persistence of the hegemonic, masculine discourse and the pervasiveness of Christian culture (Delay, 2019: 61). Delay also underlines that:

Most importantly, perhaps, Irish girlhood narratives, whether rural or urban, and across one hundred years, provide evidence for the prominence of Irish Catholic devotions in the realities and imaginations of girls as well as for the changes and continuities that characterised their religious lives. (Delay, 2019: 62)

The Catholic Church took a significant part in the upbringing of Irish children. The nineteenth century saw a rise in education by establishing in the 1830s Ireland’s national school system which Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh described as a “quiet revolution in female education” (Ó hÓgartaigh *apud* Delay, 2019: 64). Despite this statement being empirically supported – for girls obtained opportunities unattainable before, getting access to basic education, learning how to read and write – it is hard not to notice how school, through its structure and curriculum, reinforced the patriarchal order (Magray, 1998: 130).

Above all, the curriculum in the Catholic schools aimed at preparing girls (and boys as well) for their adult life in accordance with social norms. In the instance of girls, it constrained them to the future roles of mother and wife, tied to the domestic sphere. As described by Delay, “Education, that attempted to teach morality and character to Irish girls, [...] meant focusing on ‘gentleness, honesty, duties of brothers and sisters, and government of the tongue and thought’” (Delay, 2019: 66). She later elaborates that

Convent schools, like national schools, affirmed Irish Catholicism's focus on moulding girls into wives and mothers. Irish girls' 'character formation and development' depended not only on a curriculum that featured their future domestic roles, but also on a carefully planned and ordered convent, one that managed girls' minds, souls, and bodies. Nuns and female education thus became integral to the goals of the 'devotional revolution', including 'the secular project of social organization, integrating mass populations into orderly, well-disciplined societies'. (Delay, 2019: 67)

In 1839 the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland published *Reading Book for the Use of Female Schools* which read:

It is very important, not only that the mind should be well informed, but that there should be a taste for knowledge ... At the same time [the Irish girl] should ever bear in mind, that knowledge is not to elevate her above her station, or to excuse her for the discharge of its most trifling duties It is to teach her to know her place and her functions; to make her content with the one, and willing to fulfil the other. (*Reading Book for the Use of Female Schools* apud Delay, 2019: 66)

School, either convent or national, was supposed to shape girls accordingly with the social (Catholic) expectations. Deborah Gorham in *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (2012) describes the 19th century ideal of a girl in Great Britain – which, of course, also includes Ireland. Although constructed by the middle-class, and therefore inaccessible for those from less affluent social backgrounds, it prevailed among all classes.

The paradox of this ideal image is that it presented a girl, simultaneously, as a woman and as a child. On the one hand, she was expected to fulfil duties of mother and wife (albeit in a reduced version), believed to be able to perform domestic tasks and serve as a comforter for her relatives, above all, males. On the other hand, she was officially deprived of her sexuality, the one element that could connect her with an adult woman. A girl, in Victorian eyes, was pure and innocent, just like a child. And although the Victorian ideal of womanhood was also asexual by default, it was woman's most important task to bear children and thus it was tacitly accepted for her to perform sexual activities. The ideal daughter – and thus, girl – was to be "gentle, loving, self-sacrificing and innocent"; her opposite, in turn, was "vulgar, self-seeking, lazy and sexually impure" (Gorham, 2012: 37). Still according to Gorham:

In polite Victorian discourse, the idea that a young girl could have any sexual thoughts at all was simply bypassed. It was part of the Victorian belief system that girls were not only innocent of sensuality, they were ignorant of it: indeed, their ignorance was the main safeguard of their innocence. If a girl lost her ignorance, if she became aware of sexuality, she was in imminent danger of becoming unchaste. (Gorham, 2012: 54)

Apart from the sexual component, a "good" girl was perceived in the same categories as a woman, that is, she was bound by the same rules and expectations. It meant that, ironically,

a girl – rather than a woman – was more prone to successfully fulfil the role of “The Angel in the House”. Gorham suggests that:

Unlike an adult woman, a girl could be perceived as a wholly unambiguous model of feminine dependence, childlike simplicity and sexual purity. While it might be believed that an adult woman should retain a childlike simplicity, clearly a real child could be conceived of as more childlike than could an adult woman. (Gorham, 2012: 7)

In Victorian society, a perfect girl was not only supposed to behave like an adult woman, but she was also expected to be a perfect daughter. Obedient and cooperative, her main duties included relieving her mother of household chores. She was also responsible for providing emotional support to her male relatives, especially her brother, for it was through her relationships with others – and mostly with males – that the image of the ideal daughter was constructed. This suggests the passivity that was ascribed to the figure of a girl. She was not seen as an independent individual but merely as a companion, or rather even a servant, to other people, viewed and judged through her deeds to others. Owing to the fact that a daughter was thought of as a smaller version of her mother, it could be suggested that the sister-brother relationship mirrored the wife-husband one, albeit without the sexual factor – and, just like between adults, their bond was far from equal:

The woman's mission of self-sacrifice was meant to be a girl's guiding principle in this relationship, just as it would in future be the guiding principle of her relationship with her husband. That self-sacrifice was the highest duty a girl could perform for her brother was often illustrated by tales about real-life self-sacrificing sisters. (Gorham, 2012: 47)

While the sister's “highest duty” was giving up on herself and her needs towards her brother, his responsibility, in turn, was – according to popular motif in children's stories – to act as a guide in practical and intellectual matters (Gorham, 2012: 45). The gender division, implemented by adults, permeated the environment of children and adolescents. Boys belonged to the domain of the intellectual and physical. They engaged in actions and enjoyed adventures – in other words, they were part of the public sphere. Girls, on the contrary, tied to the domestic life, could only passively wait for their brothers to come home, to meekly and attentively listen to their stories.

This description recalls an image of a loving wife looking after her husband rather than a little sister waiting for brother to return from school. Significantly, in these stories sisters are usually younger than brothers, which is meant to emphasise their dependence, inferiority and admiration for their older siblings (usually brothers). In other words, what daughters were taught in 19th century was to act as a child's version of the Angel in the House, the Victorian ideal of womanhood.

The duality in perception of adult, middle-class women – either as “Angel in the House” or “Fallen Woman” – translated into the narrative about girls. The opposite of the girl version of the “Angel in the House”, however, could not be the “Fallen Woman”, as, due to her age, she was officially devoid of sexuality. Instead, the anti-ideal was described as a lazy, disobedient girl. It could be suggested that the positive personification of girlhood was taken from an adult discourse, while the negative image took source in the childish narration of an Evangelical evil child. Consequently, the Victorian perception of girls put them in a limbo between childhood and adulthood and therefore denies their own subjectivity.

The ideas on the “evil” girl revolved around her idleness and insubordination, traits that were publicly criticised both in the middle-class circles as well as among lower classes. A conduct book from the 1860s, quoted in Gorham's book which I have been following, reads:

Pride and indolence are the crying evils of the present generation of young ladies of the middle classes. They hate work, and don't scruple to say so. They do it in a grudging, ill-tempered way. Every thing they touch is half-done. If they lay the table for dinner, a third of the things are forgotten. If they wash a little brother or sister they do it so harshly that the little one cries all the time... (Gorham, 2012: 51)

The subject of the criticism – the girl's actions or lack thereof – is essential insofar as it shows how, in some cases, it matters more what she does, not what she looks like – while, in case of women, they had to excel in both areas. The official discourse claimed girls to be asexual, giving less attention to their looks than it did regarding women. When talking of girl's usefulness to others, her physical appearance came as secondary. It demonstrates the ambiguous status of a young girl in the Victorian period. Seen as a child preparing to become an adult, she finds herself at a stage that has almost no qualities of its own. Adolescence, suspended between childhood and adulthood, tries to keep the illusion of an idyllic world yet expects a conduct beyond abilities of an early teen. One of many contradictions of this narrative, is adults' obsession of the sexual purity of children, while, at the same time, they were filling their environment with erotic images. It is particularly evident in the Irish Catholic culture. According to Delay:

[...] in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Irish Catholic children were encouraged to be innocent and pure, abstaining from interacting with their own bodies, but that they were ‘then surrounded by holy pictures which depicted the beauty and fragility of human flesh and incarnated the divine, and by poetic prayers which underlined an ecstasy sometimes lightly touched with the sado-masochistic’. Linking food, sex, and bodies [...] Irish girls' lives were deeply sensual, revolving around sight, smell, taste, and touch, and revealed how girls could negotiate Catholic culture, finding some space within it to claim agency. (Delay, 2019: 76)

The range of this space, however, was very limited. Patriarchal society – in Ireland, best represented by the Catholic Church – imposed unattainable standards on young girls. More often than not, when trying to meet them, they would fail to do so, which sometimes could have severe repercussions.

The next section will focus on one of such consequences, namely the phenomenon of fasting girls, widespread in the Western world in 19th century; it will also explain how the Catholic culture encouraged these inclinations among young girls.

3.4. Religion and Girls: The Phenomenon of Fasting Girls

In *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as A Modern Disease* (1988), Joan Jacobs Brumberg offers a detailed insight into the history of anorexia nervosa. Brumberg goes back in history, studying examples of women voluntarily starving themselves as far back as the Middle Ages. The disease itself, although its clinical term came to use only in the 1870s, is not an invention of the modern age – rather the contrary. According to Caroline Walker Bynum, between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries, voluntary starvation was a common practice among religious women. She argues that “almost all saints who were completely unable to eat or who survived for years on the Eucharist alone were women” (Bynum *apud* Brumberg, 1985: 96). This disproportion resulted most likely from the fact that Christianity supported the worldview in which men were associated with the mind and women with the body. Consequently, fasting in religious circles was a strategy used rather by women than men. Hoskin, Holmberg, Jenson, and Blair (2020) state that:

Eve's original sin frames the pursuit of feminine urges (for food, knowledge, sexual appetite), and women's inability to control these urges, as the downfall of all humankind (Bordo, 1993). Such an ideology creates a dichotomy between women who give into their desires (for food or sex), versus those who are able to transcend their bodily urges and abstain. (Hoskin *et al.*, 2020: 2)

In the Middle Ages religious women would go on starving themselves to emphasize their holiness and purity, to prove their close connection with God and, after death, elevate their status to sainthood. Also, in Roman Catholicism gluttony was considered one of seven cardinal sins and so abstinence from food was a mean to express spiritual enlightenment. Fasting symbolized rising above earthly needs. One of the most renowned medieval women who denied herself food was Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). She was believed to eat nothing

but herbs and used to purge herself by shoving sticks down her throat (Ferguson, 2018: 97). In *Fasting Girls: the Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease*, Brumberg claims:

In the medieval period fasting was fundamental to the model of female holiness. The medieval woman's capacity for survival without eating meant that she found other forms of food: prayer provided sustenance, as did the Christian eucharist—the body and blood of Christ—ingested as wafer and wine. Women who were reputed to live without eating – that is, without eating anything except the eucharist – were particularly numerous in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, a time when food practices were central to Christian identity. (Brumberg, 1988: 41)

The phenomenon of fasting, however, is much older than the Middle Ages. David Lambert in “Fasting as a Penitential Rite: A Biblical Phenomenon?” (2003) analyses the nature of voluntary starvation in Christian culture, basing his research on the Hebrew Bible, the main inspiration of the Old Testament. According to Lambert, there are several potential reasons for fasting that can be put into four categories: “1) fasting as an act of mourning the dead, 2) fasting as an act of penitence, 3) fasting as an auxiliary to prayer, and 4) fasting as a preparation for encountering the divine” (Lambert, 2003: 478). What may come as a surprise, given that Christianity is a religion that glorifies martyrdom, Lambert claims that in Christian culture, fasting was rarely motivated by a desire to repent – it was more often used as a mean to express affliction and anguish. In other words, it was a method of calling attention to a cause. Lambert states that “The refusal to eat, like the lamenter's refusal to fall silent, is in many ways the last recourse of protest for one otherwise powerless to change the course of events” (Lambert, 2003: 482), creating a bridge between fasting and hunger strike. Interestingly, although both these forms consist of voluntary starvation, they are perceived differently with fasting being seen as a passive manifestation, while hunger strike is considered more of an active protest.

To differentiate between these seemingly identical phenomena is especially meaningful in the case of Ireland, a country with a long Catholic tradition as well as a history of political resistance, hunger strikes being one of its strategies. In *The Wonder* Donoghue deftly connects the idea of hunger and Catholicism with early Irish history, grounding a vision of fasting – voluntary or not – as if rooted in Irish identity:

Of course, abstention has long been a distinctly Irish art. As the old Hibernian maxim goes, *Leave the bed sleepy, leave the table hungry*. [...] Our forefathers had a custom of (in the Hibernian idiom) *fasting against* an offender or debtor, that is, starving conspicuously outside the door. Saint Patrick himself is said to have fasted against his Maker on his namesake mountain in Mayo, with noted success: he shames the Almighty into granting him the right to judge the Irish in the Last Days. [...] (Donoghue, 2016: 184)

Molly Ferguson places the problem in a broader perspective, pointing to important factors – in the context of *The Wonder* – of gender and religion:

For Maud Ellmann, an Irish woman's hunger acts "as a form of speech . . . entangled in the rival ideologies of nation, gender, and religion." Indeed, hunger in an Irish context goes beyond a state of lack; hunger, in an Irish context, also recalls traumatic periods of oppression in Irish history. These include instances of both powerless and intentional starvation [...] (Ferguson, 2018: 94)

It is important to note a split in naming that reveals hidden attitudes and prejudices, used to belittle women. While men would usually go on hunger strike, actively protesting against an oppressor, women are left home fasting, passively expressing whatever feelings lay behind their fast, and suffer in silence. It seems that in a masculinised, patriarchal world of the Victorian era, in which women were deprived of any agency (including over their own bodies) and had limited resources, refusal to eat could be used as a mean to manifest resistance and give the illusion of power. Angela Bourke argues that for women fasting may be a potential "alternative to language: a way of saying something which a young woman finds herself unable to express in any other way" (Bourke *apud* Ferguson, 2018: 95).

Women would use fasting for different reasons and purposes. According to Brumberg, after the sixteenth century the phenomenon went dormant, and it was not until the nineteenth century that it resurfaced on a large scale. During the Victorian era the stories of young women, the so called "fasting girls", who supposedly survived without eating, became prominent once more, spreading from Great Britain through France to the United States and Canada. The problem of naming arises again, as the use of fasting "girls" instead of "women" aimed at belittling females and downplaying the phenomenon. The alleged susceptibility to nervous disorders, mainly hysteria¹⁵ – which was said to underlie the fast – was considered "typical" of girlhood and therefore unworthy of professional, medical attention. What in some cases was a serious, life-threatening disease, was simply categorised as female affliction. The name emphasised female inferiority and indicated the dominance of the patriarchal order – even though some of the said fasting "girls" were often long past their puberty period, as in the example from *The British Medical Journal* (1873) which describes a case in which "the culprit is a maiden sixty years of age" ("Fasting Girls", 1873). According to Brumberg:

¹⁵ "In a treatise published in 1770–1773 [...] François Boissier de Sauvages de Lacroix, describes hysteria as something akin to emotional instability, "subject to sudden changes with great sensibility of the soul." Some of the hysteria symptoms that he named included: "a swollen abdomen, suffocating angina [chest pain] or dyspnea [shortness of breath], dysphagia [difficulty swallowing], [...] cold extremities, tears and laughter, oscitation [yawning], pandiculation [stretching and yawning], delirium, a close and driving pulse, and abundant and clear urine." De Sauvages agreed with his predecessors that this condition primarily affected women, and that "men are only rarely hysterical." According to him, sexual deprivation was often the cause of female hysteria. To illustrate this, he presented the case study of a nun affected by hysteria, who became cured only when a well-wishing barber took it upon himself to pleasure her." (Cohut, 2020)

Typically, these women were young and humble, characteristics that made their rejection of food still more astonishing. All of them claimed to avoid normal earthly fare, and if they ate, they ate only delicate things. One fasting girl allegedly “din’d on a rose and supt on a tulip”; another took only aqua vita as a mouthwash; and still another was said to live by her olfactory sense, inhaling only the “smell of a rose.” The symbolic diet of the maiden underscored her purity. (Brumberg, 1988: 47)

The change in nomenclature, from fasting saints to fasting girls, is symptomatic yet for another reason. It points to an important shift that began in the seventeenth century and came to prominence in the Victorian period, with the growth of the medical knowledge, when “[...] scientifically minded physicians began to pay close attention to food abstinence, so common among women of the High Middle Ages. They called it both *inedia prodigiosa* (a great starvation) and *anorexia mirabilis* (miraculously inspired loss of appetite)” (Brumberg, 1988: 41). Therefore, in the scientific community, fasting ceased to be perceived as a sign of holiness or extra-terrestrial powers but rather as a disease and on top of that, a disease largely ascribed to women – hysteria. Needless to say, these communities were composed of men, who were in favour of a discriminative, sexist discourse that controlled women and the assumption of female vulnerability to hysteria was another form of repression. It constituted part of the narrative used by men in power to portray women as emotionally unstable and unreliable. The change in perception of fasting from spirituality to illness reflects the process of secularization and medicalization of the Victorian society. The said women went from being glorified and admired to being the subject of suspicion, often accused of fraud to gain publicity.

A short notice titled “Yet Another Fasting Girl”, published in *The British Medical Journal* from May 1872, informs in a sneering and contemptuous voice: “The Americans have, as usual, beaten us in our wonder-producing powers. They have produced a ‘fasting girl’ who has taken no solid food for two years, and nothing but water for the last seven months!” (“Yet Another Fasting Girl”, 1872: 481). Already the term “beaten” suggests the author’s scepticism regarding the theory of fasting girls as wonders. He rather sees them as fraudsters who spread on industrial scale and try to outdo each other in non-eating periods in order to gain fame and money.

The most famous case of a fasting girl, or at least one of the best documented, was probably Sarah Jacob from Wales, whose story might have been one of inspirations for Donoghue’s novel. She was believed to have survived without food for seventeen months before gaining international notoriety thanks to the involvement of Dr. Lewis of Carmarthen, in an article published in the *British Medical Journal* on April, 24th, 1869 entitled “The Case

of a Young Girl Who Is Said to Have Fasted For the Last Seventeen Months". He claimed that: "The alleged facts respecting this girl are, that she has not swallowed any food whatever since October 10th, 1867; and that she has not swallowed any water or any other fluid since the end of December 1867" (Lewis, 1869: 373). The girl was eleven years old when the first symptoms occurred, including vomiting with blood and inability to swallow, which eventually led to a long-term fast. At the same time her parents reported their daughter to have become more and more religious. Sarah Jacobs was diagnosed with hysteria. According to her parents:

Before her illness, she was very much devoted to religious reading; after her illness commenced, this devotion considerably increased. She was a member of the Church of England, and had been confirmed. From special inquiries respecting the child's moral qualities, we unhesitatingly chronicle that she invariably bore the character of a very good girl, never particularly seeking the society or play of the rougher sex. (Lewis, 1869: 685)

Several watches were carried out to establish the veracity of the Jacobs' statements – none of them succeeded to prove any fraud having been committed and so Sarah was announced "a marvel of the nineteenth century" (Lewis, 1869: 685). Soon she became "not only an object of curiosity and sympathy, but of material profit to the tenant of Llethernoyadd-ucha" (Lewis, 1869: 685) that attracted numerous visitors willing to pay to see the fasting girl.

The last watch conducted over Sarah took place from 9th to 17th December 1869 during which the child died. The chairman of the "Watching Committee" commented that this event left them "sadder, but not much wiser men" (Lewis, 1869: 685), although it did prove that before the final watch had begun – that is, for about two years – the girl must have been secretly fed. The manner in which she received food, however, remains unknown.

Sarah Jacob's story is one of many that came to light in the Victorian era. However, it has to be emphasized that not all of the girls (or, indeed, women) were impostors. In "Fasting Girls": Reflections on Writing the History of Anorexia Nervosa" (1985) Brumberg suggests some of them were actual cases of anorexia, linking the spread of the disease to the rise of the bourgeoisie in the Victorian era, which created conditions that encouraged eating disorders. She defends that (to be quoted at length):

The modern concept of anorexia nervosa was tied also [...] to the place that daughters assumed in that particular family constellation. In this setting [...] family meals meant that either overeating or noneating by any member of the family was subject to the scrutiny of others, calling for attention and discussion. Simultaneously, the growing cultural authority of doctors, as opposed to ministers, meant that any extraordinary eating behavior was "medicalized." Nineteenth-century developments – secularization, middle-class formation, and the professionalization of medicine – were all preconditions for the emergence of anorexia nervosa as a disease entity with a distinct and workable nosology. In this respect, anorexia nervosa is a

historically specific diagnosis at the same time that it suggests enormous continuity in human behavior. (Brumberg, 1988: 102)

As mentioned before, the disease was at the time diagnosed as a form of hysteria and not anorexia. John Campbell's short article for *The British Medical Journal* (1878), "Feeding Versus Fasting" is an expression of the growing role of medicine and science in the perception of fasting girls to the detriment of religious and mystical interpretations. Campbell, then the superintendent of the Garlands Lunatic Asylum, in Carlisle (1873-98), conducted treatment of several such cases. In his article he clearly perceives voluntary starvation as an illness and not a sign of holiness. Campbell states that the reason for the deterioration of girls' health was "with no difficulty of diagnosis" (Campbell, 1878: 254), hysteria. This popular medical approach, established by male doctors and reproduced by Campbell, spread harmful and incorrect judgements that stigmatised women and influence their perception by the rest of society.

The voluntary starvation by young girls was ceasing to symbolize piety and spiritual superiority – at least in the medical circles. Yet the new narrative of women going on fasting due to their "natural susceptibility" and fragile disposition was socially detrimental as well. It may seem that the new approach – identifying prolonged fasting with illness – would discourage young girls from fasting. Nonetheless the hegemonic discourse continued spreading its agenda, using more subtle and passive means, such as the cult of slim bodies which had only just begun to emerge. Anna Krugovoy Silver in *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (2002) argues that the harmful patterns permeated already children literature, contributing to the spread of anorexia among little girls, encouraging them to eat less as a sign of virtue. According to Silver, much of the Victorian literature for children

praises girls for denying their appetites and limiting their consumption of food, often connecting that denial to femininity. Thus, children's books of the period often underpin a culture of anorexia, in which control over the body and its desires are enacted through the control of food intake. (Silver, 2002: 52)

In 19th century Ireland these Victorian standards of femininity came hand in hand with the discourse of the Catholic Church, which still praised the idea of women having to demonstrate their piety through their bodies. In *Irish Women and the Creation of Modern Catholicism, 1850-1950* (2019), a book I have already quoted at length, Cara Delay analyses Irish girlhood in more detail, with particular reference to the influence of Catholicism. Its impact became especially notable in the years after the Famine with the spread of the so-called "devotional revolution". The omnipresence of Catholic material culture and the efficient

propaganda of the clergy meant that faith occupied a coronary place in the everyday lives of Irish girls, shaping their worldview and their own identity, creating a “realness and presence of the sacred in the bodies and imaginations” (Orsi *apud* Delay, 2019: 71).

Interestingly, it would sometimes happen that, “that realness could morph into something less tangible: a sense of enchantment and even magic. Indeed, a significant number of Irish girls characterised their encounters with local Catholic culture in the early twentieth century as wondrous” (Delay, 2019: 71). The tendency to seek for the magical and enchanted points out to the particular nature of Irish Catholicism, discussed briefly in Chapter Two, which blends folk beliefs with the teachings of Church. Also, it could be an expression of girls’ attempts to find their own voice and agency in the society that refused them one.

Delay demonstrates how the Catholic Church stimulated gender division, placing boys above girls in the hierarchy, reinforcing the prevailing sexism and even misogyny. The clergy made sure that children, already from very young age, would grow up mindful of the roles they were expected to perform later in life. Through its teachings, it would also fuel attitudes that made girls more prone to diseases like anorexia than boys. Firstly, due to the emphasis the Church put on girls’ bodies and their outer appearance. Secondly, because of the exposure to traumatic experiences, for, as demonstrated by Delay, Irish girlhood was often filled with stressful and extreme events. She recalls the example of Katharine Tynan, an Irish poet from 19th century, whose

childhood encounters with death as both routine and terrifying; her exposure to death as a young girl had a life-long impact on her. Here, again, is another example of Catholic indoctrination having an unintended effect. According to Tynan, ‘girl-children’ may have been uniquely susceptible to fear and anxiety after wakes. (Tynan *apud* Delay, 2019: 75)

These tendencies persisted into the 20th century. Hazel Lyder, who researched Irish girlhood in Dublin in 1930s and 1940s, confirms the ubiquity of fear and anxiety in girls’ childhood, claiming that their faith, albeit honest, was fuelled more by their fear of priests than their love for God. One of the consequences of such hostile environment, Lyder argues, was their dread of Confession. Girls were so afraid of priests’ reaction, they would prefer to hide their sins and thus not receive redemption rather than face the clergy’s anger – the sexual thoughts or transgressions were their particular concern (Delay, 2019: 85).

Discipline, self-control, perseverance, emotional unavailability, are but some of the qualities inculcated by the Church in Irish girls. One of the means used to achieve their goal was the ubiquity of religious artefacts. They would appear at school, at home, at church, or on

the road in a form of a wayside cross, for example. Its presence and, usually, drastic form in which they were made constantly reminded the onlooker of Christ's sufferings and was intended to nurture devotion and servility. Especially children, whose imagination was, in particular, susceptible to such poignant images, were impacted by it. They would associate faith with suffering and believe that, for it to be authentic, God requires their sacrifice and pain. According to Delay, "The tortured body of Christ also encouraged girls to empathise with Jesus and thus share intimacy with him" (Delay, 2019: 71).

The approach towards children in 19th century Ireland centred on infantilizing and idealizing them, denying their sexual nature, yet exposing them to contents full of eroticism and cruelty, presented in a prudish manner and feigned piety. This dichotomy is included in Emma Donoghue's representation of girlhood in *The Wonder* (2016), where she tries to deconstruct the, often self-contradictory, 19th century discourse on girls in the example of Anna O'Donnell.

3.5. Anna O'Donnell – a colleen, a Virgin saint, or an evil fairy?

Anna O'Donnell, who in Donoghue's story represents a child-girl and a fasting girl, is a complex character. So much so, that she escapes any general categories. Just like in case of the mother and the nun – Rosaleen O'Donnell and Sister Michael – Anna is ambiguous and certainly does not follow the conventional way of portraying 11-year-olds in literature. Trapped in the world of adult expectations, she acquires multiple – often mutually exclusive – labels, as if performing different roles. In this section I will try to demonstrate how Donoghue plays with the idea of the child's representation in Victorian, post-Famine Ireland. I will also attempt to show how the patriarchal discourse, embodied by the Catholic Church, confined girls in an idealized, unreal world, forcing them to play out male fantasies.

During the first meeting in the O'Donnells' house, when introducing the family to Lib and Sister Michael, Father Thaddeus asks Rosaleen to tell them Anna's history, to which the woman replies, startled: "Sure what history has a child?" (Donoghue, 2016: 29). Mrs O'Donnell describes Anna as "a delicate flower, but not a sniveller or tetchy. If ever she had a scrape or a sty, she'd make it a little offering to heaven" (Donoghue, 2016: 29). She perceives her daughter in an idealised way, in line with the Romantic discourse in which innocence and purity are the most favourable qualities of a child. Asked about Anna's appetite, Rosaleen answers that "she's never been greedy or clamoured for treats. Good as gold." (Donoghue,

2016: 29), emphasising that a good child is the one that is silent, unseen and does not bother adults. Her criticism of gluttony may also result from it being one of the seven deadly sins in Catholicism. The fact that Anna is free from it, elevates her among other children, who, according to the Evangelical perception of childhood, are greedy and evil by nature.

Rosaleen calls her daughter “our little colleen” (Donoghue, 2016: 29), which in Irish stands for “girl”. Throughout the novel, the mother clearly alternates between infantilising and glorifying Anna. When the nurse inquires into the reason of Anna's fasting, Mrs O'Donnell enigmatically confesses, leaning towards Lib, “as if imparting a secret” that her daughter does not need food for “she's a living marvel” (Donoghue, 2016: 31).

Anna, however, seems uninterested in the clamour provoked around her person – which is already atypical of a common image of a fasting girl. She receives guests, accepts their presents and almsgiving but appears to do so out of genuine religiosity rather than a desire for fame or wealth. She seems to perform the role of a fasting girl, and behaves accordingly to adults' expectations, especially her mother and the local priest, Mr O'Donnell being somewhat absent and withdrawn. Herself, however, does not do much to convince guests of her alleged abilities – instead, she remains silent and focused on her prayers. Blindly devoted to her parents, she follows their guidance unquestionably. Pious and firm in her beliefs, she gains the reputation of being exceptionally mature for her age. Lib notices “an air of self-command unusual in one so young” (Donoghue, 2016: 110). The nurse's remark seems correct; however, Anna's docility and commitment could equally result from her looking up to her parents as role models, for, as Lib points out, “The young placed such trust in the grown-ups into whose hands they were consigned” (Donoghue, 2016: 263). These two insights clash, provoking a discrepancy in the perception of a character, as someone between an adult and a child. This contradiction becomes a defining feature of Anna, placing her between a realistic representation and an idealized narrative.

The nurse observes that the girl “was a *strange child*, certainly. She'd *halted* from the ordinary *path* of girlhood [...]” (Donoghue, 2016: 109). This conclusion is all the more significant because it is Lib that introduces a fresh, more realistic perception of Anna. She approaches the girl from a scientific point of view, one that treats a child like a patient and hence requires an analytical, unsentimental mind.

Nevertheless, one cannot overlook that Lib, being English, and presumably not a Catholic, is biased in her own way, prejudiced against the Irish and their faith. She starts her

new job with a determination to “expose the hoax” certain to “be on the ship back to England in a matter of days” after demystifying a “young faker” (Donoghue, 2016: 19). Nonetheless, Lib represents a more realistic impression of Anna than the girl's fellow countrymen. For most of the novel, she speaks of Anna as of an ordinary child, rather than treating her like a superhuman. When trying to understand the motivation of the fasting girl, Lib relies mainly on her own practical knowledge and rationalisation, looking for a scientific explanation. In her reflections, the nurse refers to the ongoing discussion in the 19th century of children's mental capacity and position in society:

Besides, could children ever be considered quite of sound mind? Seven was counted the age of reason, but Lib's sense of seven-year-olds was that they still brimmed over with imagination. Children lived to play. Of course they could be put to work, but in spare moments they took their games as seriously as lunatics did their delusions. Like small gods, children formed their miniature worlds out of clay, or even just words. To them, the truth was never simple. But Anna was eleven, which was a far cry from seven, Lib argued with herself. Other eleven-year-olds knew when they'd eaten and when they hadn't; they were old enough to tell make-believe from fact. (Donoghue, 2016: 138)

The nurse acknowledges Anna to be somehow different from other children – despite her young age, her behaviour seems exceptionally mature and austere. Her little room is “nothing like the cluttered sickrooms of the upper classes” and if it was not for a single, woven mat on the floor, “the room would be very cheerless” (Donoghue, 2016: 54). She has no toys, as if indifferent to material joys, placing all her concentration and affection in religion and pray. She believes it is “better not to get too fond of things” a firm statement that shocks Lib who thought it was “in the nature of children to be graspers, greedy for all of life's pleasures” (Donoghue, 2016: 121). The nurse thereby expresses yet another assumption about children, typical of the Evangelical discourse, which judged them as evil, vain creatures.

Brought up in a rural, Catholic environment, Anna is trapped in a world which holds very defined, and biased, views on girls. And just as girlhood appears as a non-existent state, so Anna O'Donnell disappears behind numerous labels. She is seen either as a child – reflecting a Romantic or Evangelical discourse – or a woman, portrayed as a little “Angel in the House”.

There seems to be a great dissonance between what Anna personifies and how she is perceived by different groups – from Lib through Rosaleen to the villagers. For those who do not know her personally, she acquires superhuman features. To the villagers she seems either a powerful saint, “the wee wonder” (Donoghue, 2016: 147), capable of overcoming basic human needs, or a wicked fairy, “some kind of monstrous changeling disguised as a girl” (Donoghue, 2016: 155). It is significant to note that in Irish folk beliefs, fairies can be depicted

as both kind and evil creatures. According to the folk legends, wicked fairies tend to “abduct happy, healthy humans, whether children or able-bodied adults, and replace them with withered, sickly, evil-tempered or taciturn changelings, which either live for a while or appear already dead. The changeling is usually an elderly member of the fairies’ own community [...]” (Bourke, 1999: 33). Again, there is a divergent perception of the girl, this time between Catholic and folk discourse. The villagers, when speaking positively about her, call her a wonder – in line with the religious narrative – or a wicked changeling when expressing criticism of her, a term that comes from folk beliefs. Drawing on both belief systems seems to reveal their valuation as positive (Catholicism) and negative (folk beliefs).

The locals treat the girl as a symbol – a cure or a curse – to whom they can entrust their fears and hopes or in whom they can locate their frustrations. Either way, in their eyes, Anna is not an 11-year-old child of flesh and blood but a spirit, either good or bad. When John Flynn, a local farmer and a member of the committee on Anna’s case, visits the fasting girl, his eyes turn “glassy, as if he were seeing a vision” (Donoghue, 2016: 181). He says: “Aren’t you marvellous? [...] You give us all hope. The very thing we need in these depressed times [...] A beacon shining across these fields. Across the whole benighted island!” (Donoghue, 2016: 182). Flynn looks at Anna as an object of worship, not a human being of flesh and blood. He objectifies the child by calling her a “thing”. As argued by Molly Ferguson in her article on the novel,

Anna absorbs the anxieties of a nation uncomfortable with women’s bodies, but she is also a vessel for colonial unrest and trauma experienced by Irish survivors of the famine. Anna, as a child who appears to her admirers to be liberated from dependence upon food, becomes a kind of mascot for her community and nation. If the body of the nation is a starving female child then she becomes a martyr, sacrificed under a history of hunger strikers while silencing her personal trauma. (Ferguson, 2018: 100)

Nonetheless, Anna’s role as a mascot for the local community and her family turns out to be more complex than only bringing hope and comfort to Irish people “appalled by death, sickness, hunger and poverty” from the years of the Famine (Escudero-Alfías, 2023: 56). Anna claims her non-eating is motivated by a will to rescue her late brother from purgatory, after learning that fasting, according to Father Thaddeus, is considered “a useful penance” (Donoghue, 2016: 25). Before starting the fast, the girl confesses to the priest and her mother the sexual relationship she had maintained with Pat. Having learned, already after her brother’s death, that incest is considered one of the gravest sins in the Catholic religion, she seeks support and comfort from those who should protect her. Not only did she not receive it, she was further shushed by her superiors – her mother accuses her of lying, and the priest silences her, claiming

that “such calamities should be kept in the family” (Donoghue 2016: 316), thus depriving the child of any agency and possibility to look for help. Left alone, Anna makes a desperate attempt to save her brother's soul on her own, through fasting, disregarding her own wrongs. What appears to be a self-sacrifice coming from child's deep piousness is used by the adults, Rosaleen and the priest, to form a wonderful tale of Anna possessing unnatural abilities to live without earthly food. Maite Escudero-Alías in “Estrangement and the Ethics of Attention in Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder*” (2023) argues that

Their attempt to convert a sexual trauma into a religious miracle attests to the unethical and manipulative potential of the family and the Church. Rather than offering Anna protection and spiritual consolation, the patriarchal Catholic nuclear family is presented as the opposite to a loving family. (Escudero-Alías, 2023: 61)

The wounded and childlike trust in adult authority of the eleven-year-old girl is exploited for private ends. First silenced to avoid scandal, when she stops eating, she is elevated to the status of a supernatural figure, almost a saint, destined to redeem the Irish people. Yet, despite these hostile circumstances, Anna manages to reclaim her own voice – her fast is a manifestation of it. Lin Elinor Pettersson in “Neo-Victorian Incest Trauma and the Fasting Body in Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder*” (2017) confirms that “[...] food-refusing behaviour serves as a rhetorically indirect way of communicating incest trauma, and the body becomes a locus of power where family, Church and state attempt to control the individual mainly through silence” (Pettersson, 2017: 4). Escudero-Alías adds that “*The Wonder* comprises a more complex truth about sexual violence in Ireland, placing at its heart an incest victim, and elevating Pat, Anna's brother, to an untouchable status” (Escudero-Alías, 2023: 60).

Perhaps the most surprising to the reader is the attitude of Mrs O'Donnell, who seems far from the conventional loving and caring figure. Rosaleen – well aware of her daughter's story – focuses on benefits the situation can bring to her and her family – be it either fame, wealth or redemption of her son – rather than helping Anna. According to the nurse, the mother makes “an uncanny cult of Anna now, apparently preferring her daughter to be more saint than human” (Donoghue, 2016: 192), having “set Anna up on a pedestal to shine like a beacon to the world” (Donoghue, 2016: 263). Officially, Rosaleen maintains the theory of her child being a wonder, glorifying her and spreading stories of Anna's unnatural abilities. She acts as “in the old tale who'd vaunted her daughter to the world as a spinner of gold. Had Rosaleen O'Donnell noticed her younger child's talent for abstinence and dreamt up a way to turn it into pounds and pence, fame and glory?” (Donoghue, 2016: 162). Yet this religious narrative may serve as the mother's way of coping with the unbearable truth of her son possibly having raped her

daughter; or both of their children having shared an incest relation. The story of Anna's alleged call to sainthood separates the mother from reality, projecting an imaginary vision of her daughter and slowly dehumanising her – both figuratively, as she becomes more of a fasting girl than Anna, and literally, as she slowly weakens, on the brink of life and death. When Lib confronts Rosaleen with her daughter's confession, the mother rejects it yet again, revealing an ambiguous attitude towards the child: "It's the same filthy falsehood that Anna came out with after Pat's funeral [...] and I told her not to slander her poor brother" (Donoghue, 2016: 308). This shows that Rosaleen sees her daughter as deceitful and evil, rather than angelic. By favouring Pat over Anna, the mother contributes to the spread of harmful patterns, preserving the notion of girls being less important and honest than boys. Mrs O'Donnell's parenting methods also confirm how girls have less authority when compared to their brothers (which resembles the dynamic between men and women in the adult world), their needs and rights being of secondary importance. After the death of her son, Rosaleen seems torn between the welfare of her only surviving child and the memory of her beloved Pat. On the one hand, she pretends to accept her daughter's choice of fasting, on the other keeps on feeding her tiny portions of food. It could seem that she tries to save her in a certain manner, the one allowed by her beliefs. However, after learning of Anna's fatal state she "didn't have a word to say to that; she received it like news of a storm or a distant war" (Donoghue, 2016: 300) as if accepting her daughter's death. Interestingly, Gorham in *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* points out that the image of the severely ill daughter often appears when discussing the ideal of girlhood in relation to their supposed willingness to make sacrifices. According to Gorham:

In this variation of the girl-as-redeemer, the quality that is often stressed is that of her profound religious devotion, a devotion that makes her patient in the face of suffering, and more intensely aware of spiritual matters than a healthy child. A girl suffering from a fatal illness is frequently depicted as achieving an adult moral sense. She can indeed affect a conversion experience on those who attend her and change the character of the whole household [...] (Gorham, 2012: 49)

Anna, however, is not ill. She represents a child that tries to live up to the expectations put on her by others. This split is illustrated in the fact that her character seems mentally mature beyond her age, while physically she looks "more like eight or nine than eleven" (Donoghue, 2016: 42). She reminds of a small child that – through self-sacrifice, obedience, a strong sense of duty and the urge to please others – pretends to be a grown woman. Fasting serves as a way to achieve this goal. Lib notes that "Anna must have been petted every time she said she'd had plenty. Earned a smile for every morsel she passed on to her brother or the maid" (Donoghue, 2016: 162) which confirms Molly Ferguson's observation that "Refusal of food also has a

gendered valence; women are often rewarded for taking up less space and demanding fewer resources" (Ferguson, 2018: 95). What is more, Ferguson observes that

the Catholic narrative in Donoghue's novel understands fasting as a mortification of the flesh that demonstrates religious piety, rewarding young women who deny their bodies nutrition on presumably religious grounds. In *The Wonder*, Anna's fast appears to be deeply motivated by religious belief. (Ferguson, 2018: 97)

Anna epitomises the drama of the victim, confronting the injustice of a patriarchal reality that silences the underprivileged under elaborate pretences – in case of Anna, her story about Pat was dismissed and when she stopped eating to redeem her brother's guilt, the theory of the miracle fasting girl emerged. She was refused to be heard by the mere fact of being a girl – all she was given was another label. Abandoned and traumatized, with no support from the family, she withdraws into herself and seeks solace in her faith, trying to wipe away stains of "the sins she's committed with each part of her body" (Donoghue, 2016: 315), while it is against her that the sins were committed. This eagerness of redeeming the family's beloved son and brother, the readiness to sacrifice herself epitomises in the most dramatic way the Catholic upbringing and Victorian values instilled in girls. Lib's accurate conclusion: "wasn't it so often the girl – no matter how young – who got blamed for having incited her molester with a look?" (Donoghue, 2016: 311) bitterly summarizes the position of girls in nineteenth century in the context of sexual violence.

The nurse's perception of Anna, although initially hostile and biased, evolves. At a certain point she starts to follow the idealized discourse of the fasting girl, speaking of the child as of an angelic creature:

[...] Anna was Anna and like no one else. Fragile, plump-faced, bony, vital, chilly, smiling, tiny. The girl continued to read, sort her cards, sew, knit, pray, sing. An exception to all rules. A miracle? Lib shied from the word, but she was beginning to see why some might call it that. (Donoghue, 2016: 213)

Lib questions her own convictions – the more she grows fond of Anna, the more her vocabulary turns exalted, even religious. There is a meaningful transition in Lib's perception of Anna, captured in the descriptions of the child asleep, at an early stage of the watch and almost at its end. At the beginning she would notice: "Angelic, as all children looked in that rapt state. The creamy lines of her face proved nothing, Lib reminded herself; sleep could make even adults look innocent. *Whited sepulchres.*" (Donoghue, 2016: 111). As their relationship evolves, the nurse takes on a more spiritual tone:

The tiny face transfigured by light. Sleeping beauty; innocence preserved; a child who looked perfect, perhaps because she wasn't moving, wasn't asking for anything, wasn't causing any

trouble. An illustration out of a cheap paper: *The Final Vigil. Or The Little Angel's Last Rest.*" (Donoghue, 2016: 292)

Although Lib would think of herself as a rational and unbiased observer, she, too, represents an approach which ignores girlhood, looking at Anna either as a child, be it angelic or wicked, or almost a woman. In the beginning, full of prejudice against Ireland and Catholicism, Lib calls Anna "a brat" (Donoghue, 2016: 36), "a false little baggage" (Donoghue, 2016: 39), "swindler" (Donoghue, 2016: 40) or "a shammer of the deepest dye" (Donoghue, 2016: 49).

The nurse remains deaf to what the girl tries to tell her, for any mention of religious discourse makes Lib scorn. When Anna says: "*I have slept and have taken my rest [...]* So what do you family call you? Lib is disconcerted by this rapid switching between Scripture and ordinary conversation" (Donoghue, 2016: 140) but draws no conclusion. This scene shows the discrepancy in the depiction of the child. The first statement echoes the Catholic upbringing, the patriarchal perception of young girls being pious and obedient. Anna performs her role as she is expected to, programmed by her family and society. The questions she later asks reveals, however, the still childish nature of the 11-year-old. Lib hears this discord but does not listen to it.

On one hand she believes that Anna "was nothing so much as a little girl who didn't need to eat" (Donoghue, 2016: 165), denying the wonder theory. She notices the child's honesty and simplicity, how "conviction shone out of Anna O'Donnell. A *case of hysteria* she might possibly be, but utterly sincere" (Donoghue, 2016: 133). The nurse rejects the popular, emotionally charged names attributed to Anna, either by her supporters or critics, such as: "*Hysteric, lunatic, maniac*" (Donoghue, 2016: 165), "tender dote" (Donoghue, 2016: 177), "the little angel" (Donoghue, 2016: 300), "cherub" (Donoghue, 2016: 297). In doing so, Lib disenchants the image of Anna as an unreal creature, either glorified or demonised, and restores her identity as a girl.

Yet, on the other hand, she does not try to actually understand the girl and her motivations, instantly categorising her as a religion-blinded hoax. Lib is looking only for the confirmation of her own assumptions, initially antagonising her relationship with the girl. Focused on "making sure sense prevailed over nonsense" (Donoghue, 2016: 35), she is inattentive to what Anna is trying to say, admittedly in an indirect and veiled way, but nevertheless the only way a girl, raised in a world that wants to silence her, knows. It is only after learning of Mrs O'Donnell's practice of feeding her daughter under the guise of kissing,

that Lib realises her own biases and repents, wishing to have been “a little less contemptuous of pious legends” (Donoghue, 2016: 262) so that “she might have paid more attention to what the child was trying to tell her” (Donoghue, 2016: 262). This is the turning point in the novel, for Lib by listening to Anna restores her agency, gives her a voice, and makes her fully human – neither a “nonsense” nor “a little martyr” (Donoghue, 2016: 339). The nurse begins to look at Anna beyond the categories established by culture and sees an 11-year-old, traumatized girl who tries to take action. After fasting for four months on “manna from heaven”, she decides to stop receiving any food at all and sacrifice her life to ensure her brother's salvation. According to Ferguson:

Hunger strikes are a physically devastating, yet symbolically potent, statement against patriarchal and colonial authority. [...] Anna's behavior appears to be a willed decision to fast and not a case of anorexia nervosa, which is a medical diagnosis. Withholding can be a subversive strategy suited to women, who often possess few resources for resistance. (Ferguson, 2018: 94)

Another situation in which Anna manifests her regained agency is when she decides to abandon her old identity in favour of a new one of her own choosing, one that she can create herself from scratch rather than simply playing a role imposed on her by society. She shrugs off the burden of responsibility for her brother's actions and thus breaks with the patriarchal pattern that forces women to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others, even perpetrators of violence of which they were victims. By doing so, Donoghue undoes the categories of a passive girl, obedient daughter and self-sacrificing sister.

Although Lib Wright's perception of Anna undergoes a transformation, all other characters remain unchanged, symbolising the conservatism of the patriarchal order. After the girl's feigned death, the committee's only worry is the absence of the body, the final evidence that could solve the mystery of the fasting girl (Donoghue, 2016: 339). The protagonist is yet again reduced to an impersonal phenomenon, deprived even of her own name, whose most important feature is a physical body treated as “a blank page that recorded everything that happened to it” (Donoghue, 2016: 137).

In an interview for the National Public Radio, Donoghue admits that she “wanted to set the idea of voluntary starving against the appalling context of involuntary starving.” (Donoghue *apud* Ferguson, 2018: 95). This drastic and glaring contrast is a primary mean through which the author plays with convention, questions, and debunks fixed categories. Donoghue's representation of girlhood is unique of how, in the maze of established images and

labels, she manages to bring out the voice and identity of Anna O'Donnell despite the strenuous efforts to suppress that voice.

Conclusion

When asked about the main motivation for writing, Emma Donoghue answered: “telling the stories of people left out of history or misinterpreted. I’ve always had this burning feeling of hurry to tell these stories, especially stories of dead people from a long time ago – I have a real sense of mission” (Lacey, 2020).

In light of this remark, this thesis may be read as a contribution to Donoghue’s mission of giving voice to those who cannot speak for themselves. Through an analysis of the figures of the mother, the nun, and the young girl in *The Wonder*, this study tries to demonstrate how Emma Donoghue represents the damaging influence of Victorian standards and 19th century hegemonic discourse of the Catholic Church on Irish women. The representation of womanhood in the novel is an important input to the discussion of Herstory and female agency.

The Irish writer constructs complex portraits of women who, forced to adjust to the hostile reality which wished to control and manipulate them, find ways to manifest their subjectivity. Telling a story from a female point of view and putting importance on women’s experiences and perspective, Donoghue reinstitutes their place in the course of Irish history. For example, the incorporation of real historical figures, such as Florence Nightingale, reminds the reader of the crucial role ordinary women played in the development of nursing. The main protagonist, Lib Wright, represents all the anonymous nurses that worked alongside Nightingale – and although most of them are unknown today, their participation was an important contribution to the field of nursing and the process of women’s emancipation.

Donoghue manages to deconstruct the simplistic image of nineteenth-century womanhood that often makes its way into the public discourse, as she creates her female characters in ways that challenge attitudes advocated by the Catholic Church and reject Victorian values. By creating a world from the feminine perspective, in which their stories are the main axis of the novel, Donoghue renders women the subjects of the story rather than its objects. In this way, the writer succeeds in making *The Wonder* an important position in the Herstory current.

The comparative analysis of Rosaleen O’Donnell, Sister Michael, and Anna O’Donnell against the backdrop of the Catholic discourse of the period, sheds light on the oversimplistic duality preached by both clergymen and the state who deprived women of agency, projecting either an idealised or a demonised male fantasy onto them. Donoghue’s female protagonists question the logic of the patriarchal discourse and highlight the abuse committed through its

misogynistic views. Her characters do not fully correspond to any of the nineteenth-century labels assigned to women, instead combining elements of each category, and exposing the artificiality and bias of the patriarchal views on womanhood. They try to express their own subjectivity in a world that denies them one, and wants to imprison them in a limbo between piety and cruelty, in which any attempt to manifest their independence is dismissed.

In Chapter One I traced the evolution of the perception of the Irish mother in the course of 19th century – from an authority figure in the pre-Famine period, through the self-sacrificing mother or the devouring mother in the middle of the century, to Mother Ireland at the end of the Victorian era. I presented the conventional image of womanhood, focusing on the roles of mothers and wives, with a particular emphasis on the two most common representations of motherhood in the 1850s, i.e., during the period of the novel takes place – the self-sacrificing mother and the devouring mother. I also analysed the evolution of perception of the Irish women in the years before and after the Great Famine, showing how the rise of Catholicism contributed to the degradation of their position. Later I argued how Rosaleen O'Donnell tries to combine the demands of the patriarchal discourse, which preached the image of a nurturing mother, with the imperatives of the Catholic faith in whose name her daughter apparently chose to fast. The feeding ritual that she keeps secret is an attempt to meet the contradictory demands placed on women and, simultaneously, a means to restore her individuality as a woman and a mother. Firstly, by having a secret that was hers alone, which, in a world that invigilated and dominated every sphere of a woman's life, provided a semblance of independence; secondly, by defying the precepts of her own faith and deceiving the clergy about her daughter's supposed fasting, whom she herself fed, while keeping the rumours about the fasting girl. Incorporating features of both devouring and self-sacrificing mother, Rosaleen, stands for a multi-dimensional and complex portrait of motherhood.

In Chapter Two I analysed the spread of Catholicism in Ireland in 19th century, especially in the years after the Famine, and the rise – both in number and importance – of women religious. I highlighted their significant contribution to the development to the profession of nursing and their role as educators. Also, I illustrated their ambiguous position as a social group between lay women and men. In this novel Donoghue juxtaposes men's ideas on femininity with the female figures who were supposed to embody these visions. I have shown how, with Sister Michael's figure, Donoghue emphasised the contrast between the idealised vision of a nun as a woman saint and a more pragmatic figure of a woman trying to find her way in a reality that offered only two socially acceptable paths in life – religious order

or motherhood. Unlike Rosaleen, who manifested her subjectivity through keeping a secret for a prolonged period, Sister Michael restored her agency by openly opposing her superiors and bringing Anna to the committee meeting. Her action, although the nun remained silent throughout the whole time as if absent, was all the more pronounced due to her otherwise obedient and servile conduct.

In Chapter Three, I deconstructed the conventional representation of a young girl, emphasising the peculiar character of girlhood in 19th century Ireland, which was seen as a transition phase between childhood and womanhood, an argument sustained by different scholarly studies. Usually, it was depicted as a stage with no particular features of its own, either as an extension of childhood (seen as a romanticised and blissful period, during which children – the embodiment of purity and innocence – experience only joy) or as preparation for womanhood which focused on instilling in girls the sense of utility towards men. In *The Wonder*, Donoghue creates an image of a violated child whose experiences were manipulated and turned into a sanctifying story of a virgin fasting girl. Anna's story is an example of the detrimental impact of patriarchal discourse, which denied women their sexuality, especially among young girls who were yet seen as children. It also illustrates the objectifying approach the Catholic culture had towards girls and how it was able to exploit their suffering for its propaganda purposes. In the case of Anna, her own will is expressed, firstly, through the initial decision to fast – either as a means to redeem her late brother or as a reaction to trauma. Secondly, by rejecting her mother as an authority figure – refusing the feeding ritual allowed her to regain control over her own body. The construction of the character emphasised the clash between the physicality of an 11-year-old child, and the mind of someone much more mature, experienced, and serious than an early teenager. This contrast, embodied by Anna, is yet another of Donoghue's ways of highlighting the discrepancy between the conventional narrative about girlhood, presenting them as innocent and desexualised figures, and a Herstory which places the young girl as the protagonist and reveals her struggle to cope with a hostile reality that attempts, and initially succeeds, to objectify and silence her. Eventually Anna's strong bond with Lib, which bears the hallmarks of a mother-daughter dynamic, allows her to be heard. Anna's relationship with the English nurse can thus be read as an allegory for the strength of female bonds, whether in the form of motherhood, sisterhood, friendship, etc.

In the novel, Donoghue expresses her passion for the genre of historical fiction as well as her commitment to feminism. By setting the plot in a past not too remote so that the reader can still find its traces in today's Ireland, she demonstrates the undeniable progress women

made in their fight for equality – whether as mothers (Rosaleen), professionals (Lib Wright), or young girls (Anna). However, although discrimination and misogyny today are not so blatant as they were back in the 1850s, and a great deal has been achieved to change the traditionally subordinate position of women in Irish society, Pat O'Connor argues that

Women in Ireland, regardless of their age, life stage, ascribed class position and participation in paid employment, are surrounded by structural and cultural cues which define their lives. These cues refer not only to their position in the economic, political, religious and domestic arenas, but also presuppose their positive experience of responsibility for child care, and the 'naturalness' of subsuming their identities in families and/or in other caring relationships. They assume their relative disinterest in the 'normal' male trappings of individuality, viz. economic independence, individual autonomy, money and power. (O'Connor *apud* Kurdi, 2011: 60)

Despite O'Connor's remarks, there is no doubt that Irish women enjoy more freedom and social recognition than in the years after the Famine. *The Wonder* is thus an important contribution in the writings of Herstory – on the one hand, perhaps surprisingly, given the plot, it brings hope, highlighting the differences in the treatment of women in the past and today; on the other hand, it raises awareness of how much women had to go through to make it and how recent their achievements are. Furthermore, Escudero-Alías comments that

Delving into the contradictions and emotional dictations of a not-too-distant and institutionalized past, Donoghue's work displays an ethics of care and affection which is manifest in the engagement of two strangers that transgresses the socio-cultural and historical resonances of complicit participation in such politics of concealment. The interrogation of past legacies in Irish fiction identifies the Catholic family as a harrowing site that reveals children's vulnerability and deprivation, demonstrating new potentialities of survival that are being crafted by contemporary literature and literary criticism. [...] in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, one that is contributing to negotiating a shifting landscape of change and hope for those female bodies rendered disposable. (Escudero-Alías, 2023: 64)

As I have been arguing throughout this study, Donoghue uses her characters to question and deconstruct conventional representations of female figures. She restores subjectivity to women, who quite often function as empty labels (of a mother, a girl, a wife), created and exploited by masculinist discourse. By telling the story from the perspective of an outsider, an English nurse, the violence of the patriarchal order is all the more emphasized.

Sebastián Lelio's 2022 screen adaptation of *The Wonder* focuses more on the relationship between Anna and Lib than on the individual struggles of other female protagonists. Yet, his intimate portrayal of the nurse brings an additional dimension to Donoghue's story, raising issues not mentioned in the novel – at least not directly – namely, female sexuality and trauma coping mechanisms. Although both these points could be applied to, for example, Rosaleen or Anna, Donoghue has chosen not to call it by its name, using instead a vague, religious discourse when discussing the girl's relation with her brother or the

mother's approach to her daughter. Lelio's movie, in turn, creates an image of a woman who, in some aspects, resembles a contemporary figure – she is direct, independent and conscious of her sexuality, unlike the traditional picture of a 19th century woman. In the movie, the sex scene between Lib and William Byrne, as well as Lib's sessions of intoxication, presumably with opium, which she stores in one bundle along with the shoes of her deceased infant, do not appear in the novel. The director's interpretation of the nurse seems to be his contribution to Donoghue's *Herstory*. By enriching Lib's portrayal with elements that show her as an even more liberated character than in the novel, he enriches the writer's vision of women challenging male dominance with a contemporary touch.

Donoghue's story touches upon many issues that are very specific to Ireland – for example, the role of the Catholic Church in shaping the post-Famine cultural landscape of the country or the problem of hunger in its different variations (starvation, fasting) within a nation who is “intimate with hunger” (Donoghue, 2022). However, *The Wonder* also speaks of subjects that transcend national boundaries, such as womanhood and its struggles in a patriarchal society. Although the image of 19th century Irish womanhood has its own specificities, which I have shown in the work – drastic decline in women's authority during the post-Famine period, increased surveillance of the Catholic Church, especially in the area of female sexuality, the special role of nuns in the propagation of Catholicism and simultaneously a contribution to the process of female empowerment via education, the conflict between the new, emerging Catholic reality and the old folk beliefs – the novel deals with issues and problems that still exist today throughout many cultures and societies of the contemporary world. While it is perhaps easy, when reading a historical novel, to assume the comfortable position of the modern, contemporary reader who treats the book as a story about problems that are no longer relevant, Donoghue demonstrates – once again – the inaccuracy of such simplifications.

While the situation is far from ideal, it would appear that in 2023 most Irish women do not have to worry about issues of Church control, gender inequality, or blatant, pervasive sexism and misogyny as much as in 19th century. Nevertheless, although *The Wonder* is a fictional story, it represents an important position in contemporary Irish literature as a warning or reminder of the dangers that come from the conservative, patriarchal order, and religious radicalism.

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