USC UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA
FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

“Victor Forde, I can never resist your smile”: A Study of Trauma in Roddy Doyle’s *Smile*

Traballo de fin de grao

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Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

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CUBRIR ESTE FORMULARIO ELECTRONICAMENTE

Formulario de delimitación do título e resumo

Traballo de Fin de Grao curso 2021/2022

APELIDOS E NOME:	CERNADAS LEMA, CARMEN GLORIA
GRAO EN:	LINGUA E LITERATURA INGLESAS
(NO CASO DE MODERNAS) MENCIÓN EN:	
TITOR/A:	LAURA MARÍA LOJO RODRÍGUEZ
LIÑA TEMÁTICA ASIGNADA:	LITERATURA E CULTURA EN LINGUA INGLESA

SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

Título: "Victor Forde, I can never resist your smile": A Study of Trauma in Roddy Doyle's *Smile*.

Resumo

"Victor Forde, I can never resist your smile" is quoted from Roddy Doyle's novel *Smile* (2017), and is pronounced by a Catholic school teacher who feels an inappropriate interest in Victor, his student. Significantly, this quote signals the inception of the first-person narrator's trauma as a victim of child sexual abuse and its life-long consequences. Both the novel's content and its particular narrative structure and literary devices are affected by trauma, which the first-person narrator – a writer himself – aims at verbalizing and come to terms with. The aim of this dissertation is to explore the connection between traumatic experience and the healing quality of literature and story-telling in Doyle's novel. As one of the major constituents of traumatic experience, pain is a central element in *Smile*: the progressive discovery of details about the shock that caused the trauma and its consequences in the life of the protagonist, Victor, is also a process of revealing a painful truth. Violence of all kinds – physical, sexual and psychological – is also omnipresent in the novel, whose social and historical background also enhances the inherent violence that Ireland suffered, especially in the twenty and early twenty-first centuries.

In this sense, one of the most evident effects that trauma has had on the protagonist is the protagonist's fictionalization of his own life in the novel, in which memory and imagination also play an important role, since Victor creates a character to stop his delusion. In this sense, the notion of storytelling and lying are at the heart of the novel and pose forward postmodern narrative issues which relate to metafictional assumptions by addressing the character as the novel's unreliable creator. Thus, the novel functions in terms of a double manipulation: Victor's own conviction of the existence of the world he has created and the reader's belief in the plot that the author presents.

To pursue this aim, this dissertation will be informed by, among others, trauma studies, such as Cathy Caruth's seminal works *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* (2014).

SRA. PRESIDENTA DA COMISIÓN DO TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

Santiago de Compostela, 11 de novembro de 2021.

Sinatura do/a interesado/a	Visto e prace (sinatura do/a titor/a)	Aprobado pola Comisión do Traballo de Fin de Grao coa data
	LOJO RODRIGUEZ LAURA MARIA - 33284584L Firmado digitalmente por LOJO RODRIGUEZ LAURA MARIA - 33284584L Nombre de reconocimiento (DN): c=ES, serialNumber=IDCES-33284584L, givenName=LAURA MARIA, sn=LOJO RODRIGUEZ, cn=LOJO RODRIGUEZ LAURA MARIA - 33284584L Fecha: 2021.11.11 23:37:46 +01'00'	15 NOV. 2021 Selo da Facultade de Filoloxía

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INTRODUCTION

Last year I spent a semester as an Erasmus exchange student in Lyon, France. At my host university we had a course in English Literature and, without a doubt, the book that caught my attention the most was Roddy Doyle's *Smile* (2017). I had never read Roddy Doyle before, but I was captivated by his style characterised by brilliant dialogue and colloquial language. I was already interested in Irish culture and the great amount of detail and references in the book made me feel as if I were in the country. I was also shocked by the way in which the main theme, childhood trauma, is dealt with through metafictional devices that reminded me of the world of cinema, which I love. I found it to be a novel that, precisely because it is little known, still needs to be analysed in order to unearth all its intricacies which can generate a lot of debate both in terms of content and form.

Doyle's *Smile* is articulated as the first-person narration of a middle-aged writer who is a survivor of child sexual abuse, born and raised in Dublin during the second part of the twentieth century, a conflictive period for Irish history. As a result of this abuse, the protagonist is unable to have a normal adulthood and fictionalises his own life in order to avoid feeling like a failure. The novel revolves around the concept of trauma on different levels and plays with questions of metafiction, in connection with the protagonist's job. This dissertation aims to analyse the healing quality of literature in the process of trauma recovery in Roddy Doyle's book.

The misleading title, together with the book's cover showing a smiling child, might suggest that to the novel will be a happy story, but nothing could be farther from the truth. *Smile* originates from an episode which actually happened to Roddy Doyle himself. One of the Christian Brothers who taught at Victor's school told him: "Victor Forde, I can never resist your smile". This sentence marks the beginning of Victor's traumatic experience.

The specific objectives of this dissertation include: to analyse the different types of violence that generate a pain that is difficult for both the protagonist and Irish society at large to process; to recognise trauma-derived behaviours, not only in the events narrated, but also in the form of narration; to reflect upon the effect that writing has on the process of healing from trauma for the protagonist and how it is truncated at times because of his writer's block, which is itself a consequence of being traumatised; and to explore the relationship between lying and storytelling, as Victor fictionalises his own life, playing with the concepts of memory and imagination and with particular emphasis on two invented characters: Rachel and Fitzpatrick.

To be exact, the character of Rachel is not completely invented, but based on a real woman with whom Victor could have had a date. Due to the protagonist's deep fear of sex-affective relationships as a consequence of his traumatic experience, he never showed up for the date. Victor then imagines what might have happened had he attended and invents a whole life with Rachel as husband and wife. She becomes a way of making Victor feel he is not a failure and connecting him to the adult world. Fitzpatrick also has a mission in Victor's life but the character is constructed as Rachel's opposite: he must bring Victor out of his delusion. While Rachel keeps Victor out of reality in an attempt to survive away from the trauma, Fitzpatrick is actually Victor (or a version of him) forcing himself to face the truth on a path to healing.

This moment occurs at the end of the novel, in a final revelation in which Victor ends up crying. This brings us back to the meaning of the title, *Smile*. It is an opposition between smiling and crying, with the former having a traumatic and violent meaning and the latter representing the expression of feelings and their acceptance. Moreover, it also functions as a warning that not everything is what it seems, as happens in the novel.

In order to demonstrate the starting hypothesis, I have based the methodology of this dissertation mainly on Trauma Studies, focusing on two works by one renowned expert in the field, Cathy Caruth: *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* (2014). These works have helped me to acquire a basic knowledge of trauma and its treatment in literature. Thanks to the many authors related to the study of trauma that I discovered in these books, I have also focused especially on Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014), which offered a varied description of real clinical cases and valuable information on how the development of activities related to arts and the humanities, such as literature, could help victims of trauma.

Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) has been a key source of information to deal with questions more in relation to the form and peculiar structure of the novel, due to its overt connection with metaliterature and postmodernism.

This dissertation is structured in five chapters. The first one provides information about the author of the novel, Roddy Doyle, both in a personal and literary tone; a summary of *Smile*; allusions to the economic, social and political context of each of the three periods in which the novel is narrated; and an introduction to Trauma Studies and the healing quality of literature. The other four chapters focus on one type of violence each that is displayed in *Smile*: physical, sexual, psychological and institutional. The chapter on physical violence focuses on teacher-to-pupil violence, a situation that was seen as normal in the Christian Brothers' schools in the second half of the twentieth century. In addition to this, the chapter reflects on how physical violence among classmates created a feeling of bonding between them, as they had to help each other in

order to survive, as opposed to psychological violence which meant exclusion. Physical violence is also used by Fitzpatrick in the final chapter to make Victor react, as he often appears numb and alienated.

The chapter on sexual violence is the longest one in this dissertation, as it mainly concerns the trauma of Victor's rape by the Headmaster of his school as an adolescent that has the worst life-long consequences and is fuelled by other types of trauma.

Psychological violence in *Smile* can be perceived in three interdependent levels: the harassment of Victor's classmates, the cynicism with which some people receive the protagonist's confession of being a victim of sexual abuse, and the manipulation to which Victor is subjected by the Headmaster.

Finally, the chapter on institutional violence addresses how Victor and Ireland are equated, as both are deluded and traumatised. This chapter deals with different issues related to the Irish political, social and economic context from the second half of the twentieth century to the early twenty-first century, such as the divisions due to the civil war, the prevailing conservatism, the Church's cover-up scandals, the debate on abortion and contraceptive methods, a reflection on a society silenced and manipulated by the media, sexism, emigration and economic inequalities and the appearance and destruction of the "Celtic Tiger" by the property bubble.

CHAPTER 1: RODDY DOYLE AND TRAUMA STUDIES

Roddy Doyle (Dublin, 1958) is one of the most popular contemporary Irish writers and, as he himself declares, a proud Dubliner (Gülüm Tekin 2017, 129). He grew up in Kilbarrack "in a middle-class family quite different from the gritty, working-class characters of his books, plays, and films" (Sbrockey 1999, 537). He had a Bachelor of Arts degree from University College Dublin, opened as the Catholic University of Ireland (University College Dublin, n.d.). Before becoming a full-time writer in 1993, Doyle was an English and Geography teacher. Along with Seán Love, he founded "Fighting Words", a creative writing centre in 2009 in Dublin.

Doyle has always shown his commitment to local causes, such as the petition supporting Suzanne Breen, a journalist who faced jail for refusing to reveal her sources in court. He is one of those Irish authors that "insistently explored the lives of those trapped within Ireland's architecture of containment" (Smith 2001, 116).

A prolific writer, Doyle's novels "realistically reflect the language and culture of Doyle's students in this part of Dublin (Barrytown as a fictitious model of Kilbarrack), unseen by most tourists" (Sbrockey 1999). As Doyle himself states in an interview with Burcu Gülüm Tekin, 2017, "if I hadn't grown up in Dublin, and in my part of Dublin, I wouldn't write in the same way; the characters wouldn't speak in the same way and the narration wouldn't be the same". Doyle's *Barrytown Trilogy* is composed of *The Commitments* (1987), *The Snapper* (1990) and *The Van* (1991), all of them made into films. Doyle is the winner of 1993 Man Booker Prize for *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*.

However, darker themes are addressed in *The Woman Who Walk into Doors* (1996), a novel which tackles domestic violence and gender issues, whose protagonist also appears in Doyle's *Paula Spencer* (2006). Doyle's most recent trilogy is *The Last Roundup*, formed by the adult novels *A Star Called Henry* (1999), about an IRA volunteer

and 1916 Easter Rebellion fighter; *Oh, Play That Thing!* (2004); and *The Dead Republic* (2010). The composition of his novella *Two Pints* was triggered by different short comic dialogues that Doyle published on his Facebook page, where two old men in a pub comment on current events in Ireland. Doyle has also written many novels for children, such as the "Rover Adventures" series. He is also a dramatist, with four plays and two screenplays, such as the television screenplay for *Family* (1994) and has published many short stories in *The New Yorker*.

Victor, the protagonist of Doyle's novel, narrates in the first person different stages of his life, going back and forth in time. The narrative starts in the present, 2014, a date he writes down on a page in his notebook. From his present perspective, Victor recollects his early adulthood by reaching back to the 1980s, whereas his childhood and adolescence correspond to the 1970s. By means of this narrative strategy, the narrator also tackles three very different moments in terms of the social and political context of Ireland.

Victor, a 54-year-old Irish man living in Dublin, is a victim of child sexual abuse by the headmaster of a Christian Brothers school, an event which has deeply affected Victor and which conditions his narrative. The novel's present, 2014, introduces Victor as a divorced man with a grown-up son that has recently moved out to an apartment near the place where he grew up. Although he never finished his degree in History and English, Victor is a journalist, who began writing gig critiques for a music magazine in his twenties. In one of his radio programmes Victor interviews a politician, a Backbench TD (Teachta Dála, a member of Dáil Éireann, the lower house of the Irish Parliament) of Fine Gael who confesses to have had an abortion and announces her resignation. It is in the wake of this controversy that Victor keeps getting called back to the radio to talk about polemical issues such as contraception. As a result of this, Victor is forced to leave his

mother's house to preserve his own integrity, as the word "killer" is painted on a wall. In addition to this, Victor also narrates how he met his ex-wife Rachel outside a studio in RTE, when he was going to announce his book, *Ireland. A Horror Story*, about "everything that's wrong about this country" (81). Rachel, in turn, is at the studio to introduce her catering business. Victor recounts that he had never had sexual intercourse when he met Rachel and the complications of their firsts sexual relations.

Rachel is a very important figure in Victor's life, even after their divorce. They were a popular couple in Ireland for a while. Victor reveals to Rachel that at the age of 14 he was molested by the principal of the Christian Brothers. This revelation ignites in Victor a process of gradual unearthing of the truth, yet he notices different reactions to this, not all of them sympathetic ones. Victor believes that the Head Brother, the principal, was taking advantage of his situation at home to abuse him. One day, Victor talks about his story of abuse on the radio.

Victor thinks to himself about certain episodes from his time at St Martin's CBS. For example, when he was thirteen, Brother Murphy, his French teacher, told him in front of his entire class "Victor Forde, I can never resist your smile" (18). From this moment on, he becomes "the Queer" and his classmates bully and torment him to smile at Murphy to get out of his homework. Three years later, Victor does this deliberately and Murphy leaves the school, possibly because he notices that Victor is no longer afraid of saying that he had made inappropriate advances towards him.

Victor has a date at home with Brenda, a woman that frequented the pub. When she leaves, Victor discovers Fitzpatrick – a man he has gone to school with and who is aware of the priest's sexual advances – is there. He punches Victor in the face and enigmaticality says: "I am you". As the reader learns, Fitzpatrick is a product of Victor's imagination.

Fitzpatrick reveals that Victor was not only molested once by the Headmaster as he had confessed on the radio, but he was raped seventeen times. Victor's life has been fictionalised by himself: Rachel is not his wife, he does not have a son and he has never been able to have a healthy sex life or a normal life due to his trauma.

Fitzpatrick reminds Victor that the Headmaster told him "You're old enough to stop me" (214), for which Victor has felt guilty all his life. Victor cries, in an act that can be interpreted as forgiving himself and accepting that what happened to him was not his fault.

Both Victor's childhood and a large part of his adult life are marked by the context of violence inherent to Ireland in different aspects. The beginning of the conflict known as The Troubles (1968-1998) mainly affected Northern Ireland, but the Republic of Ireland suffered from its consequences as well. These hostilities originated in the disagreement between the Protestant unionists (loyalists), who stood for Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom and the Roman Catholic nationalists (republicans), who defended that Northern Ireland should become part of the Republic of Ireland (Wallenfeldt 2020). In the South, the paramilitaries robbed banks, kidnapped people and attacked the Irish as well as the British security forces. Some attacks were carried out by loyalists, such as the Dublin and Monaghan bombings of 1974. When Victor was a young adult, the British government recognised in the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985) the right of the Irish government to play a role in a future peace settlement in the North. What is best reflected in the novel about this time in Irish history is the social liberalisation that took place. In the 1980s, a review of bans on homosexuality, contraception and divorce was called for, which provoked strong tensions between conservatives and liberals through a series of referendums. In 1983 the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign won a referendum, including a ban on abortion into the constitution. The amendment was

adopted during the Fine Gael–Labour Party. On the other hand, in 1985 prophylactics and spermicides were available without a prescription. Concomitantly, Ireland was to progressively experience the gradual decay of the Catholic Church's influence in society. In the 2010s, some events such as the visit of Pope Francis to Ireland in 2018 showed Irish rising scepticism towards this institution. After 40 years of terrible cases of clerical abuse, the Pope's speech in Dublin Castle was criticised, since he did not make a direct apology to victims, fixing his faux pas the following day (Rónán 2019).

Doyle's novel offers a thorough reflection on the aftermath of traumatic events, both in the protagonist and in Irish society at large. The novel's thematic concerns have, therefore, conditioned the particular methodological approach which this dissertation uses as a lens to explore Doyle's novel. As such, the methodology of this dissertation will be informed by Trauma Theory, mainly drawing from two works by Cathy Caruth: *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* (2014). Not only do they provide reflections upon the causes and effects of several types of trauma, but also look for interdisciplinary connections with different disciplines, such as sociology and literature. As above suggested, Caruth's work seemed appropriate as a method of critical exploration, since the plot of the novel revolves around the consequences derived from the protagonist's trauma, which also has a crucial impact in the writing technique.

Trauma Studies are concerned with questions such as "psychological trauma, its representation in language, and the role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities", all central issues at stake in Doyle's novel. As such, trauma theory explores "the impact of trauma in literature and society by analysing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance" (Mambrol 2018). Thus, although the main traumatic event that the novel deals with is produced by the sexual abuse suffered by Victor, other traumatic

experiences are also present in the narrative: in fact, the protagonist is also shown as a victim of the trauma of living and growing up in an eminently violent society as a "child of the crossfire, surrounded by conflict", as the protagonist of TV series *Derry Girls* puts it (*Derry Girls* 2018).

When Trauma Studies first began to develop in the 1990s, most of their theories drew from Sigmund Freud, thus regarding trauma as a most painful experience which made its representation impossible. Later on, the incapacity to talk about trauma was considered one of many possible responses to an extreme event, rather than its sole defining feature. In the 1990s, the concept of trauma was revised and its role in literature and society was analysed by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman, among others. Trauma was conceived as "an event that fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation". According to this, trauma damages the psyche, shatters identity and remains outside normal memory and narrative representation. Some of its consequences are fragmentation or dissociation, triggered by an external source which changes the mind and affects identity, fracturing both language and consciousness, demanding unique narrative expressions (Mambrol 2018). This is directly connected to what Victor experiences in *Smile* and to the ways in which literature can be regarded as an experimental tool to explore the inquisitions of the mind.

One of the issues intended to be examined in depth is the healing quality of literature and the act of narration. What Victor is doing by relating his story in the first person can be interpreted as a testimony: "It has been suggested that testimony is the literary—or discursive—mode par excellence of our times, and that our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony" (Felman 1995, 17). The act of giving testimony has a bidirectional sense: that of the person who narrates their experience and that of the person who receives it and integrates it into their own life. On the one hand, "the capacity to

witness and the act of bearing witness in themselves embody some remedial quality and belong already, in obscure ways, to the healing process" (Felman 1995, 16). On the other hand, "'life-testimony' is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life" (Felman 1995, 13), to the point that "literature is the alignment between witnesses" (Felman 1995, 14).

Therefore, the healing quality of literature is present both in those who narrate and those who read. The narrators are giving meaning and importance to an experience that marked them and, in doing so, they initiate an introspective journey trying to understand it. At the same time, those reading can identify themselves with the narrator, realising that there are people with similar experiences to their own. This would be the case of the readers who have been victims, like Victor, and who can feel some kind of comfort in seeing that they are not alone in their healing process.

Pain is a central element in Doyle's *Smile*, caused by different types of violence, which in the novel can be classified in the following categories: physical, sexual, psychological and institutional violence. The chapters to follow will focus on analysing the manifestations of each kind of violence and how the pain they generate has traumatic repercussions on the novel's protagonist, Victor.

CHAPTER 2: PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

Several instances of physical violence can be detected in *Smile*, since Victor is surrounded by this kind of violence from a very early age. It comes both from teachers towards pupils and from pupils towards other pupils, often younger or smaller: "There were boys in the class who still looked a bit like girls. Or there was Willo Gaffney, who said he had to shave twice a week […] We had to go through a sixth-year class but no one kicked us this time" (19, 50).

In the following excerpt, Victor describes a situation in which Brother Murphy, who is also the teacher who told him that he could not resist his smile, physically hurts a student:

> He wasn't as savage as most of the other Brothers and lay teachers. Just now and again, he lost the head. Something would snap and there'd be no warning. He'd headbutted Cyril Toner when there'd been almost total silence in the room. (...) I heard a kind of thump, and a groan. I looked up. Murphy was staggering back, holding his forehead, and Toner just stood there. His hands were hiding his nose. He was squealing and there was blood coming through his fingers. Dripping. It was frightening and cool; it was history. *Christian Brother Loafs Student*. And – this was the vital part – he hadn't loafed me. Relief, shame, joy. (16)

Teacher-to-student violence can be classified not only as physical violence, but also as institutional one. As the passage shows, this was not an isolated case but rather a common attitude among teachers. This will be later addressed in the chapter dedicated to institutional violence.

As has already been mentioned, not only teachers exercised physical violence on a daily basis, but also pupils: "There was Kenny Peters who had a scar on his forehead and was absent from school every time the Circuit Court came to the GAA club" (19). To fully understand the relevance of, it is necessary to know that "the Circuit Court is the second tier of the Irish courts system. It is a court of local and limited jurisdiction - this means it is restricted as to which cases it can decide in both civil and criminal matters" (CitizensInformation, n.d.).

Therefore, Kenny would be involved in serious cases of violence, so that he would have to go into hiding when the Circuit Court came to the GAA club. This kind of clubs belonged to the Gaelic Athletic Association, which is "Ireland's largest sporting organisation", that promotes Gaelic games, playing an important role in Irish society (GAA, n.d.). The Christian Brothers participated in such associations as they were supporters of Irish culture: "The Brothers [...] have traditionally been regarded as fuelling Irish separatist nationalism by their teaching" (Corish 1989). They are probably trying to cover Kenny up for their own interests, which would be related to institutional violence. This type of violence in education is particularly serious, not only because of the indelible mark it leaves on students, but also because it is part of a system of values that is reproduced and assumed by students, thus becoming a systemic type of violence.

Every day Victor lives situations that threaten his physical integrity, often perpetuated by authority figures. This leads him to a "high-alert survival mode". In *The Deepest Well,*

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, a practising paediatrician and the California Surgeon General, explains how the human body responds to a threat using an analogy:

> She asks readers to consider walking in the woods and encountering a bear. The brain immediately registers the bear's presence as a threat and releases hormones to activate fight, flight, freezing, and/or numbing responses in order to survive a potential attack. Ideally, after the threat passes, the body metabolises the stress hormones and returns to a state of homeostasis, but Burke Harris asks readers to consider the following: "What happens when you can't experience safety in your cave because the bear is living in the cave with you? (...) When an individual is deprived of the opportunity to return to homeostasis, stress hormones demand that the nervous system, brain, and body remain in high-alert survival mode. The bear in Burke Harris's analogy represents persistent, more frequently encountered threats in the form of daily life stressors. (Tayles 2021, 299)

However, what terrifies Victor the most is exclusion:

> I hadn't been in there half an hour before I'd been hit, lifted by an ear and dropped, been called an eejit by the prick in the science lab because I thought he was pointing at someone else; I'd got lost and ended up in the senior yard and got kicked by a gang of lads who wouldn't have touched me, or even noticed me, outside school. But I wasn't alone. We were all thrown, all the first-years, all around the place. We suffered together and it was great. (20)

While a beating is still a traumatic experience, Victor "wasn't alone". Loneliness is a feeling experienced by the majority of victims of bullying (Juvonen and Graham 2014, 170). Bullying and exclusion are directly related. *Smile* shows a peculiar situation that happens at Victor's school: physical violence is inflicted on the vast majority of

pupils, creating a sense of camaraderie and belonging to a group; they must help each other in order to survive:

> I knew the lads would destroy me after the bell went and we were outside. And they did. They didn't even have to wait until we were outside the school grounds. The Brothers never minded violence. There was no point in trying to avoid it. I was surrounded, pushed.
>
> A schoolbag – a Leeds United kitbag – was swung high and into my back. It hurt but I laughed. The slaps became thumps. They were all over me now. But it wouldn't last; I knew that too. I was kicked, punched, spat on. For a minute. Only a few of the kicks really hurt, and the thumps were just to my arms and chest. No one thumped or kicked me in my face. The spitting – we did that all the time.
>
> It was over. There was space around me. They'd drifted away. Only my real friends stayed behind. They laughed. And I laughed. I could breathe. It was over. Moonshine handed me my schoolbag. Doc picked my jumper up off the ground and walloped the muck off it. (21-22).

In this way, physical violence, although traumatic and unjustifiable, is a way for Victor to socialise with his peers in the face of a greater threat: the risk of being excluded.

Furthermore, the fact that he is in "high-alert survival mode" is not only due to avoiding being beaten, but also a strategy to prevent exclusion. In this sense, Victor uses survival techniques to be accepted by his peers: "I'd stopped wearing vests. I was becoming good at spotting what was cool and what would get you killed" (60). Although this is already done for the very important purpose of preserving his physical integrity, it is also crucial to have the feeling that he belongs to a group, even more being an adolescent.

However, in *Smile* psychological violence does not function in the same way as physical violence -as a mechanism of bonding between peers- but, on the contrary, it leads to exclusion. For instance, Victor claims that Brother Murphy "singled him out" (21) in the "smile" episode. This will be fully developed in the chapter dedicated to psychological violence.

Victor's social behaviour, which could almost be described as a calculated one, but which has a purely survival function, is repeated in the present moment of the novel, when he is a middle-aged man: "I was thinking the way I'd done when I was a teenager […] "I was a kid again, reading the signs" (142). Victor is keen to make friends, not to protect his physical integrity now, but to regain that feeling of belonging to a group. In fact, it seems striking and even infantile for a person of his age how much importance he gives to be accepted by others. In the final chapter, Fitzpatrick questions him on this matter: "What is it about you and friends, Victor? What is it you're fuckin' clinging to?" (202). It could be understood as a consequence of the traumatic environment of pervasive violence that he faced as a young boy and in which friends were lifesavers.

However, the novel suggests that Victor has, in fact, adopted this survival mode from a young age, and that his attitude continues to inform the present as a middle-aged man: "I'd grown up with lads who hit you. I knew the body language, and the eyes […] other boys, men now too, who'd been a bit careful, a bit frightened, a bit clever like me" (41, 129).

One activity related to physical violence that has crucial importance in the novel is wrestling. Victor's school principal's excuse for perpetuating the sexual abuse was to give him wrestling lessons: "He was going to teach me how to protect myself. He knew my father was sick and back in hospital" (97). The justification for doing this with Victor was that, because of his father's illness, there was no one to teach him how to defend

himself against others: “He knew that, without my father at home, I was the man of the house and he was going to teach me how to defend myself. The rudiments, he said” (163).

At the beginning of the novel the character of Fitzpatrick is introduced, a man who claims to have been Victor’s classmate at the Christian Brother’s school but that the protagonist cannot remember. In the words of Victor, “everything about him was abrupt, a bit violent” (30).

Edward Fitzpatrick is described by Victor as a grotesque, hypermasculine, sexist and carefree character. He is often characterised as almost uncivilised and primitive, being violence inherent to him: “He was wearing shorts, the ones with the pockets on the sides for shotgun shells and dead rabbits” (8), “He was vast, away from the shadows of the pub. His feet were apart because they had to be. There was a grass stain on one leg of his shorts” (186).

Victor dislikes his personality so much that he fantasises about physically hurting him: “I wanted to hit him. I wanted to kill him. I could feel the glass ashtray that wasn’t there any more, that hadn’t been on the table since the introduction of the smoking ban a decade before – I could feel its weight in my hand and arm as I lifted it, and myself, and brought it flat down on his head” (9). His reaction of anger might be understood as an expression of his repressed feelings and of the violence contained all those years. It is mixed with a sense of powerlessness, reflected in the abundance of negative statements showing Victor’s lack of control: “I didn’t know what to do […] “I couldn’t answer” (8, 9).

However, in the last chapter Fitzpatrick is revealed as an imaginary character created by Victor’s mind, thus being, in fact, Victor himself. In this sense, Victor’s

construction of this imaginary character and his hatred towards Fitzpatrick suggests a reflection of his self-hatred.

Fitzpatrick's characterisation as a savage, hypermasculine and aggressive man might be related to the fact that he belonged to Victor's past at the Christian Brother's school, reminding him of that kind of environment, as he recalls: "The room was savage, even when it was empty" (26).

In tune with this, Victor's violent reaction to Fitzpatrick is due to the fact that this character is created for a purpose: to reveal the truth about the origin of Victor's trauma and to destroy Victor's imaginary world. This poses a threat to Victor, as it means he must confront a painful past that his mind has been denying and, in doing so, renounce the safe place that he has invented for himself.

The last chapter shows a scene of intense physical violence between Fitzpatrick and Victor. After Victor has a date with a woman in his apartment, he finds out that Fitzpatrick has broken in without knowing how:

> He was right in front of me and his fist - a fist, a huge fist - went straight into me, into my face. It didn't stop, it went right in, impaled me to the air [...] I was sitting - I'd fallen back. I was trying to push myself over the back of the couch. To get away, to wake up. I tasted blood. Fitzpatrick was standing over me and he'd never looked bigger (198).

It is significant the way in which Fitzpatrick is portrayed as being bigger than usual: "I thought he was growing in front of me. His feet, his knees, were moving closer. His knees were like plates, fists" (199). In addition to this, Victor might unconsciously be referring to dealing with his trauma, so it had "never looked bigger" to him as it has up to this point because it is such a big psychological challenge: "I was afraid to breathe

too deep, afraid of the damage that would announce itself - loose teeth, exposed nerves, broken nose" (198). Victor might also be scared of what this revelation may cause to him, not being able to handle the painful truth, after trying to be a survivor all his life.

In the face of this attack, Victor only believes to find the strength to respond with -also- physical violence when Fitzpatrick lies saying that he is there because the woman Victor is seeing was also seeing him: "Now it made sense and now I could get angry. I didn't mind being beaten; I had it coming. But I'd hit back. I'd hurt him" (200). Here we have irrefutable proof that Victor is not frightened by the physical violence that Fitzpatrick might inflict on him, but by the threat posed by the revelation of his secret, of his traumatic experience. He himself says that he does not mind being beaten because it is a logical situation, belonging to his fantasy world that he has created to protect himself, his safe world. But Fitzpatrick wants to destroy that world.

Physical violence has a great importance in this chapter, as it is used as a tool by Fitzpatrick to bring Victor to his senses: "Do you want to be slapped again, do you?" (205). It may have been the most plausible way to do it according to Fitzpatrick's characterisation, especially relevant because Victor is a writer and, therefore, his characters must seem believable. Also, Victor is depicted as a living dead several times in the novel. Perhaps, physical violence is considered a stronger means of making him feel something in order to react.

CHAPTER 3: SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Chapter 2 of *Smile* describes Victor as any young teenager: excited yet terrified to begin a new stage of his life, trying to fit in and discovering his sexuality. It is easy for the reader to empathise with him. However, when the "smile episode" with Brother Murphy takes place, everything changes for Victor: "It was like a line from a film, in a very wrong place. I knew I was doomed" (18). This teacher's inappropriate advances towards Victor, in addition to having a direct psychological impact on the victim, also affect the protagonist's treatment by other witnesses. Victor's classmates perceive Brother Murphy's sexual interest in him and automatically not only mock the victim but also blame him, implying an alleged provocation on Victor's part. As it can be seen in our daily reality, this behaviour is very common in situations of sexual harassment: to focus on blaming the victim for what has happened to him or her rather than the abuser. This is the first time Victor feels he has to justify himself and defend his innocence in an abusive situation directed towards him: "*It's nothing to do with me!* [...] I wasn't smiling" (19).

It is this ongoing verbal harassment that eventually makes Victor reflect on why he has been chosen as a victim: "I couldn't see why he'd picked on me. I wasn't like a girl or a man. I'd no big brothers; no one had warned me about him. *Never smile back at him*. *Never get ten out of ten. Never get below five – don't give him any excuse to keep you back after the bell*" (19-20). What is more, Victor remembers that on his first day of school he smiled back at Brother Murphy and feels the need to justify himself by thinking that it had been a hard day because of the hostile environment at school, as if this fact had any bearing on his innocence: "[...] last class, first day, [...] the French teacher, Brother Murphy, smiled at me, the first adult to smile all day, and I smiled back" (19-20).

Victor adopts this attitude of self-blame not only in this case, but also when he is a victim of sexual abuse by the school headmaster. As mentioned earlier in this work,

Victor erases from his memory the fact that he was sexually assaulted and only remembers being molested. When he confesses this to Rachel, he feels the need to clarify "It wasn't my fault" (161).

Regarding survivors of childhood sexual abuse and self-blame, M.D. Bessel van der Kolk indicates in his book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma,* that "all of them are ashamed about what happened to them, and they blame themselves -on some level they firmly believe that these terrible things were done to them because they are terrible people" (137).

When Victor tells Rachel that it was not his fault, she responds as most people probably would: surprised and sorry that he could even consider such a possibility, "How can you say that?" (161). Van der Kolk recalls what a patient told him after he had had a similar reaction to Rachel's:

> [...] after two years I trust you enough to tell you that those comments make me feel terrible. Yes, it's true; I instinctively blame myself for everything bad that happens to the people around me. I know that isn't rational, and I feel really dumb for feeling this way, but I do. When you try to talk me into being more reasonable I only feel even more lonely and isolated -and it confirms the feeling that nobody in the whole world will ever understand what it feels like to be me. (134-135)

Van der Kolk explains that he has tried ever since not to tell his patients that they should not feel the way they do (135): "Trauma is not stored as a narrative with an orderly beginning, middle, and end. [...] memories initially return [...] as flashbacks that contain fragments of the experience, isolated images, sounds, and body sensations that initially have no context other than fear and panic (van der Kolk 2014, 141). This statement in relation to how trauma is relived may be revealing in terms of the narrative structure that

the author has chosen for this novel. It is not a linear narrative, but rather Victor jumps backwards and forwards in time to different moments in his life in a disorderly way. This may also serve to reflect what is going on in his mind.

Chapter 9 in the novel could be an example of what van der Kolk considers a flashback. In literary terms it is, in fact, a flashback: "Merriam Webster defines the word *flashback* as 'an interruption of the chronological sequence (as of a film or literary work) of an event of earlier occurrence.'" (Literary Devices, n.d.). In psychological terms, this chapter would also meet the definition: not only is Victor remembering, but also reliving a fragment of a past experience. Specifically, it is about a situation of sexual abuse by the headmaster of his school in which he molested Victor. At the end of the novel, however, it is revealed that he was not only molested once as he claimed in repeated occasions, but also raped seventeen times.

In this chapter, Victor describes the traumatic experience of being molested in a way that, although speaking in the past tense, his own feelings at the time can be perceived by the reader: "It was like he was holding my voice down with his hand too. I couldn't speak" (98). This is also an example of what has been said earlier about testimony and how it allows the lives of different people to be intertwined.

The episode ends with a disconcerting phrase from Victor: "Thank you, Brother" (98). This is the best evidence that in situations of child sexual abuse, it is often the case that the perpetrator is an authority figure and the victim is a subordinate and vulnerable one. One has power over the other, who has no choice but to obey for fear of the consequences: "Children are also programmed to be fundamentally loyal to their caretakers, even if they are abused by them" (van der Kolk 2014, 139).

However, although the factor of the abuser being an authority figure is relevant in this case, Victor's situation at home also has a great impact on his decision to remain silent. Fitzpatrick explains in the final chapter: "And I even hoped Mam would notice the stain and I was scared shitless she would. The fuckin' shame – the consequences. And no one asked why I was late home from school all those times. None of the lads asked why I had to stay behind. And Dad being sick. He was a clever fucker, Brother McIntyre [...] I was too frightened not to go – disobeying him. Frightened of what would happen, you know. He'd call to the house. It's stupid now, thinking that. But that's now. He knew he was safe. Cos of Dad. He knew I'd never blab. He knew I'd always turn up. I'd never go home to Mam and tell her" (211, 213). The headmaster knew that Victor would not say anything at home because of his father's illness.

The novel shows the terrible consequences of Victor's trauma that stay with him throughout his life. When I was watching episode 3 of season 2 of *Euphoria* (2019) the words "She often imagined that her parents weren't really her parents, and her sister wasn't her sister, and that her house wasn't even really her house. [...] That it was just a movie, one that she was writing", about the character of Lexi, reminded me of Victor.

Although Lexi is not a victim of sexual abuse, she suffers the trauma of abandonment by her drug-addicted father. She is constantly compared physically to her older sister and remains always in her shadow, which generates a feeling of envy towards her. This envy is reminiscent of the one Victor feels on numerous occasions in the novel, especially towards the musicians he reviews and towards Fitzpatrick. In the first case, Victor would like to be a musician but he cannot because of his excessive shyness (which could also be considered a consequence of his trauma), so he takes revenge on the artists he envies by writing bad reviews about them. In Fitzpatrick's case, he wishes he had a more carefree and simple personality like his own.

Victor, as well as Lexi, is defined as an "observer":

> I was bored [...] I was sick of being the **observer**. There was never any sex. I was too shy and too stupid. [...] I began to hate hearing myself, and I stopped talking. I was tired of being angry too, sick of it. [...] I'd gone to UCD, University College Dublin. [...] I was the first in my family, both sides, to have any kind of third-level education [...] I was years out of college before it occurred to me that that was what I'd had. And I never felt proud of that, and not because I didn't graduate. I was just angry – and vain. Angry. Always angry. [...] Later on, I blamed the Christian Brothers. But back then, I'd forgotten all about them. (42-43)

This fragment reflects the attitude Victor had in his twenties, before he had met Rachel. He thought that his only achievement was merely an academic one, and in comparison to the rest of his family, who had not had the same means. He felt he was a failure in all other aspects since he was not able to have a normal social life. He preferred not to get involved in relationships and he simply observed how others lived. As Victor himself states at the end of this excerpt, this attitude is clearly a consequence of his trauma:

> Victims of childhood sexual abuse may anesthetize their sexuality and then feel intensely ashamed if they become excited by sensations or images that recall their molestation, even when those sensations are the natural pleasures associated with particular body parts. (van der Kolk 2014, 67)

This is what Fitzpatrick confesses what happens to him in the final chapter:

> —You were too frightened, he said.—Of what would happen or wouldn't happen. Of touching her, yeah? […] And being touched, he said.—I know the feeling.

> Been there, Victor. Fuckin' done that. I've never had an erection. Can you believe that? (212)

The lack of a healthy sexual life is precisely the cause of Victor's overemphasis on sex. In one episode he tells how one of the musicians, who is the victim of one of his bad reviews, reproaches Victor in tears. Our protagonist does not understand how a rock star who has numerous sexual partners can be crying over a bad review, since for Victor sex equals success.

Victor's life changes dramatically when he meets Rachel. Her characterisation clearly indicates that she is idealised by Victor: "whenever there's been a newspaper feature on successful Irishwomen, my wife's name has been one of the first to be trotted out" (37). Victor's mother told him "that Rachel walked like a Protestant. I saw a similar walk years later, in *House of Cards*. Claire Underwood walked like Rachel" (92). Although Victor describes Rachel as the perfect woman ("this walking proof of female perfection" [109]), he also says that Rachel is human "she strode and she sometimes whistled" (92), perhaps in an attempt to make her seem more plausible, since, as it is known at the end of the novel, their relationship is part of Victor's imagination. Despite all her successes, Rachel remains humble: "She never says she works hard. She never boasts. She never spoofs. She claims nothing special, nothing God-or blood-given. She never claims an interesting history, or a struggle to get to the top" (121).

What is more, Victor considers that Rachel is too good for him, that he does not deserve her: "She looked bright for the house. Her charcoal coat was hanging at the door, beside my mother's raincoat and my sister's grey school blazer. She looked too bright and too big" (107). There are subtle comparisons between Rachel and him. Unlike Victor, Rachel is not an envious person, simply because, as Victor believes, no one can match her:

—She's lovely, said Rachel.

She said that about virtually all women her own age. She meant it, always, but she knew it wasn't true. She wanted it to be true. (48)

While Rachel is a very sociable person, Victor struggles with his shyness on a daily basis. On his first date with Rachel, Victor's thoughts give us another glimpse of him as an observer: "She was so physically there, right up against me. It was too much. I'd have been happier sitting there watching her chat to the woman and watching the man watch her. I'd have been happier feeling left out. It would have been normal" (88).

The great importance of Rachel lies in the fact that she is the one who connects Victor to the adult world ("I was eating a thing called couscous and there were no peas or spuds on the plate, or meat. I was doing this as I sat beside a naked woman. There was a mug of wine on the floor beside me. I felt French. I felt American. I felt like a writer, living the writer's life. I felt handsome. I felt cruel and good, adult and giddy. I felt sophisticated, and I didn't. I felt that this was mine. My life had started. My real life had started" [101]), to sex ("the way she took sex, took and gave – I can see now that it saved me [...] But I remember thinking – feeling – that by fucking Rachel I'd be up to anything. I'd be incisive, winning, brilliant. I believed in myself" [119, 158]) and to work ("She made me work, she made me want to work; she made me believe in what I was doing or bracing myself to do. [...] I wanted Rachel to be proud of me" [86]). Victor is constantly afraid of losing Rachel: "I don't remember going back in but I do remember the terror at not being able to find her, and I remember that because it was how I always felt, even today" (90). In chapter 10, he states:

She saved me. That was what Rachel did. She saved me and, later, she carried me. [...] I'd fallen in love with an adult. I wasn't a fraud; I was a slow starter. (119)

This quote is tremendously revealing, since it unearths that the cause of Victor's deep dependence on Rachel is due to his trauma. Bearing in mind what actually happened to him as a teenager, this fragment shows him as a man tormented by the consequences of being a victim of child sexual abuse: not feeling like an adult, not feeling like a man and with a complicated relationship with sex. Victor feels like a grown man because of being with Rachel. This fixation might come from his late start in sex, which he identifies as very important in becoming an adult. This quote in van der Kolk's book might shed light on Victor's obsession with Rachel: "The most natural way for human beings to calm themselves when they are upset is by clinging to another person" (106). The fact that the reader knows the end of the novel further aggravates all these issues, because Rachel, his salvation, does not actually exist.

In his imagination, Victor introduces Rachel to his mother. What this actually means for him is that he is showing his mother that he is an adult at last:

> My life made complete sense to her now. She'd just seen its measure going up the stairs. I never had to explain myself again. [...] I loved my mother and that was why I'd brought Rachel to the house. To show her off, and to make my mother happy. To let my mother know that I'd grown up; I was a man. To let her see that I'd gone up in the world and that she mightn't be seeing that much of me any more. (106, 109)

I found this fact shocking, because there is already an episode in the novel in which Victor demonstrates to his mother that he is a mature person at a very young age, after his father's death, and it has nothing to do with having a partner or not. Victor found his mother crying in bed every day when he came home from school, so he decided he had to grow up:

> One day, I came in and I didn't go up to her. I went into the kitchen and ate a packet of biscuits. [...] I filled the kettle. I put my homework out on the table. I heard her on the stairs. I put the gas on under the kettle. I was holding my pen when she came in. I looked. It was my mother, not the other woman. Whatever I'd done – been a man – it had worked. (157-158)

In the novel, Victor's mother is portrayed as a loving and charming character, who cares about her son and is proud of him on numerous occasions, communicating this directly to him in words. However, Victor feels the need to create this scene in his imagination in order to truly believe that his mother really was proud of him. This shows the extent to which Victor is delusional, living in an alternative reality in which everything revolves around his shortcomings.

On the other hand, although Victor's mother was a good mother, the complicated family situation meant that she was very absent for him. There are certain moments when Victor compares Rachel to his mother, such as when he describes her crying in bed. On one particular occasion, he imagines the two of them fighting: "There were minutes sometimes when there was a fight between the two women. Eventually – always – my mother won" (157).

Maybe this points to the fact that Victor might consider Rachel a sort of mother figure: idealisation, dependence and the need to make her feel proud.

Rachel also serves as an excuse for Victor to show his old childhood friends why he moved away from everyone: to go and live with the woman of his dreams:

> Being the man who was riding Rachel was another. It was why I was there. Not to gloat, although yes. But it explained me. It made sense of me and my desertion.

> It allowed them to forgive me. And me – it allowed me to forgive myself. They could bring me back in, bring me up to date. (129)

This is a way of hiding the real reason for Victor's turning away, as Fitzpatrick says, from "everyone who'd ever mattered to me" (209): his trauma.

In addition to this, a major problem for victims of child sexual abuse is panic attacks, in which they relive the traumatic experience.

> When something reminds traumatized people of the past, their right brain reacts as if the traumatic event were happening in the present. But because their left bairn is not working very well, they may not be aware that they are reexperiencing and reenacting the past—they are just furious, terrified, enraged, ashamed, or frozen. (van der Kolk 2014, 180)

This is what Victor calls "The Drop" (165).

> I remember waking, often, soon after my father died, and being unable to breathe. There was a rock, a boulder, on my chest. [...]it felt like I was falling. [...] I think I hurt her. I must have. I exploded. I've nothing to describe it. No picture or sound. I burst apart. I stopped existing. But I knew exactly what had happened. [...] I had to cry. It was the only way to drive it out of me. I could still feel the carpet. I could smell it. I could feel his hands. Pushing me down. Shoving my face. [...] He wasn't there but he had been there and I had been there. I hadn't dreamt it – I'd been there. (159)

This reminded me of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Thing Around Your Neck" in her homonymous work (2009): "At night, something would wrap itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked you before you were asleep" (119). Forced migration to another country is seen as a potentially traumatic event (Weiss 2020). In this

story, the protagonist is forced to leave her Nigerian family and go to live in the USA, where her race and culture are caricatured even by her own lover.

Victor has different moments of confession, which could be related to the concept of testimony. In each one of them, the person to whom he tells what happened to him, the facts he narrates and his attitude at the moment of telling vary.

The confession to Rachel just after his panic attack has many similarities with the confession to Fitzpatrick: Victor cries, on both occasions he says: "I couldn't stop crying" (159, 214); the person he talks to does not really exist, both Rachel and Fitzpatrick are invented characters. To be more precise, Rachel is not an invented character, she is a real woman with whom Victor was going to go on a date but he finally did not because of his terror of relationships, another consequence of his trauma. Also, Victor describes how Rachel and Fitzpatrick sound similar when they are talking to him: "There was no edge to the words, no concern. She could have been reading them out. [...] He sounded like he was reading the words in bad light, alone. There was no energy in them" (175, 200). This might point to the fact that they are not real people.

The other confessions he makes are on the radio and to face-to-face acquaintances. In both, unlike when he is with Rachel and Fitzpatrick, Victor does not cry, but instead shows himself to be composed. This is not necessarily a good thing. When Victor is with Rachel or Fitzpatrick, he is actually alone. This could mean that Victor does not feel comfortable showing his true feelings to anyone but himself. It is by crying (as opposed to smiling [*Smile*]) that Victor can begin to heal from his trauma.

Derived from the confession on the radio, Victor's mother finds out what is going on and they have a conversation in which Victor tries to downplay what has happened so as not to make his mother feel guilty for not noticing when he was a teenager. Playing it

down makes more sense in this context, since it is for his mother's sake. However, Victor tries to normalise what happened every time he confesses what is happening to him except in the final revelation with Fitzpatrick, where he comes face to face with reality:

> I told her more about the school. I told her about the Brother who'd fancied me in first year and about learning the Ó'Riada mass for the Brother who was dying. I told her about the stairs and the mad routes to the classrooms and the Virgin Mary with the hole in her back. I led her away from the Head Brother and me.[...]I knew I'd reassured her – and distracted her. I'd made a story of it. [...] it wasn't all bad. [...] The things you always do, she said.—The choir and the priest listening to his funeral. [...]—I wanted to be fair, I told her. [...] I listened to myself, making small of it. [...]Eight minutes after I'd told Myles and the rest of Ireland that a Christian Brother had placed his hand on my penis, I was laughing. (162, 164, 172)

To belittle what happened to him is nothing more than a form of denial. Victims of trauma "become so upset when they think about what they experienced that they try to push it out of their minds, trying to act as if nothing happened, and move on. It takes tremendous energy to keep functioning while carrying the memory of terror, and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability" (van der Kolk 2014, 1-2).

Victor may delude himself into thinking that if he denies what happened, it never happened, rather than facing up to it. He does not want to admit that something terrible happened to him since he can stay in his imaginary world this way.

Significantly, in all the confessions what Victor tells is that he was molested. The confession to Fitzpatrick is also the only one in which he admits that he was actually raped seventeen times.

In page 86, Victor says about Rachel:

> She loved me. I never doubted that – she didn't let me. She still says she loves me and I believe her. Then, it filled me. Later, it made me want to lie down on the ground, in public. It made me want to kill her.

To kill Rachel is, in a certain way, what Victor does in the final chapter. Or rather, that is what Fitzpatrick does. It is important to note the moment when Fitzpatrick appears to make his revelation. Victor's trauma continues to interfere with his sex life. When a woman he is dating, Brenda, leaves his flat, Fitzpatrick shows up to reproach him for not having sex with her.

At the end of the novel, it is discovered that Victor has fictionalised his entire life: he does not have a son, Rachel Carey is not his wife, and Fitzpatrick is Victor himself.

Characters in fiction are written by authors in order to seem plausible, to resemble real people:

> The tragic view of characterization is that we cannot, no matter how hard we try, make real people by language. We can only make verisimilitudinous people. (as cited in Waugh 1984, 92)

From the beginning of the novel, readers assume that Fitzpatrick and Victor are two different characters interacting and even opposing each other: "To make a statement in fiction is to make a character" (Waugh 1984, 92). However, some similarities appear also from the beginning. They share memories from school, they lost their fathers the same year in similar consequences and some wonder whether they are brothers or cousins, because they look alike.

The final "I am you" (200) reveals that Fitzpatrick and Victor are the same character, or two versions of the same character.

Fitzpatrick tells Victor early in the novel that he was a builder who, due to the bursting of the property bubble in Ireland, went bust. Fitzpatrick says himself that he is a version of what Victor would have been if he had not moved away from his environment by going to university:

> You often think about what your life would've been like if it had been a bit different. I'm right, amn't I? A dose of the oul' what-ifs. […] What if you hadn't gone to college. What if you hadn't done the record reviews. What if you hadn't met Rachel. What if I'd written that book. What if I'd stayed closer to home. (209)

Perhaps Victor would have opted for the working-class life and would have ended up as Fitzpatrick's character who, as has already been mentioned, Victor sometimes envies for his carefree attitude. However, the fact that Fitzpatrick has not turned his back on his environment does not mean that he is not anymore a victim of child sexual abuse and its corresponding consequences.

Dialogues between Victor and Fitzpatrick are in fact internal dialogues and conflicting thoughts of a troubled mind. There are hints in the last chapter that Victor and Fitzpatrick's voices are the same: "His breath was mine. I could feel the breath being pulled from me. Through the blood. With the blood. He was taking in my breath, pulling it into himself" (198).

When Fitzpatrick says:

> —The stuff you've been writing in there, he said.—Fuckin' hell. [...]But it's all about sex, isn't it? Mad stuff. Reminded me of when I was fifteen or something. When everything gave you the horn, d'you remember? 'Course you do. You're the writer. The fuckin' author. (203)

Victor is actually acknowledging his own obsession with sex, something he knows is a sequel to his trauma, a fixation that stems from his impossibility to have a healthy sexual life. A question related to metafiction could be raised in this regard. As defined by Patricia Waugh:

> *Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (1984, 2).

Metafiction is commonly associated with Postmodernism. As Linda Hutcheon reflects in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, "what is usually meant by the use of the term 'postmodernism' in this case is metafiction, often of the most extreme variety" (1988, 40).

An example of metafiction in the novel could be the following quotation, when Victor refers to the process of writing a past experience with Rachel:

> I sat at the table, and wrote. *She pulled me to the floor by the sleeve of my jumper. Then she kneeled in front of me – she wasn't smiling. She turned her back and dropped onto her elbows.* (139)

> If the reader goes back to page 102, they will find the same exact words:

> She pulled me to the floor by the sleeve of my jumper. Then she kneeled in front of me – she wasn't smiling. She turned her back and dropped onto her elbows.

In this second case, we are reading something written by Victor that happened to him. In the former case, we are reading that Victor wrote that he was writing that thing that he has already told us as readers.

This may lead to think that what Victor is writing in the novel is the very book that we are reading: a novel that contains numerous graphic descriptions of sexual encounters between Victor and Rachel, which coincides with what Fitzpatrick describes reading on Victor's laptop. Could we say that what Fitzpatrick has read is the very novel that we are reading right now? Is Victor, as he and Fitzpatrick are one, reflecting not only on his own life but also on his creative capacity and on the very work we are reading? These questions are not clearly answered in the book. As Waugh indicates, "contemporary metafiction draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins. […] Literary fiction simply demonstrates the existence of multiple realities" (29, 89).

With such complex issues, it can sometimes be difficult for the reader to differentiate between what is true and what is false. However, one thing is always made clear that is unequivocally true: the abuses that Victor suffers. Perhaps this is also a tool to contrast the value of truth over lies and to give greater importance to Victor's testimony:

> If certain events of a book's universe explicitly account for themselves as imaginary, they thereby contest the imaginary nature of the rest of the book. If a certain apparition is only the fault of an overexcited imagination, then everything around it is real. (Waugh 1984, 112)

Eventually, Fitzpatrick's final revelation could be defined as a moment of anagnorisis, which is "the turning point in a drama at which a character (usually the

protagonist) recognizes the true state of affairs, having previously been in error or ignorance" (Oxford Reference, n.d.). It is a moment of recognition. This reminded me of James Joyce's epiphanies in *Dubliners.*

This quote by Stephen Cope in *The Great Work of Your Life: A Guide for the Journey to Your True Calling* (2012) expresses very well what Victor is living in this encounter with Fitzpatrick:

> The "night sea journey" is the journey into the parts of ourselves that are split off, disavowed, unknown, unwanted, cast out, and exiled to the various subterranean worlds of consciousness… The goal of this journey is to reunite us with ourselves. Such a homecoming can be surprisingly painful, even brutal. In order to undertake it, we must first agree to *exile nothing* (as cited in van der Kolk 2014, 128).

Victor's own "night sea journey" is produced after a whole life of self-blame and shame, when he finally feels ready to do it. As van der Kolk explains, "In order to regain control over your self, you need to revisit the trauma: Sooner or later you need to confront what has happened to you, but only after you feel safe and will not be retraumatized by it. The first order of business is to find ways to cope with feeling overwhelmed by the sensations and emotions associated with the past" (2014, 210).

CHAPTER 4: PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

Psychological violence is closely linked to physical and sexual violence. The latter two, not only disrupt physical well-being and sexuality, they also have consequences for the victim's mental health.

As mentioned before, Victor suffers psychological violence from his classmates after the "smile episode": "Remember we used to call you that ["Victory", as a way of effeminating his name]? [...] I was stuck with it, what Murphy had said; I became the Queer" (14, 22). As opposed to physical violence, which helped to forge a sense of camaraderie among the protagonist's classmates, psychological violence results in the exclusion of the victim: "[...] I always felt a bit left out – left behind. It was always hard work" (205).

This causes the protagonist to behave in a way that, as previously mentioned, is calculated and driven by his need for survival: "I knew that if I became the centre of the day, I might never have to do it again. They'd still call me a queer but they wouldn't mean it. They might even stop calling me Queer" (62). The following excerpt speaks to Victor's need for control, a key point in his way of thinking:

> There were old horror films on BBC2 every Monday night [...] I loved talking about them the morning after, with the other lads who'd seen them or pretended they had. I'd remember every bit, to catch out the lads who were spoofing. I'd describe scenes that weren't in the films, and trap them. I was being a prick, but *it gave me power* and I had no other way of getting it" (59) [emphasis mine].

In connection with these horror films, Victor invents an allegory in which the Christian Brothers are zombies for the enjoyment of their peers and, consequently, for his own benefit: "I'd invented something that would live for years. My own monster, and I was giving it to my friends, the only people I cared about and the only people who really,

really frightened me, because of how things shifted, how the wrong word, the wrong shirt, the wrong band, an irresistible smile, could destroy you. You had to have something useful, your size or a temper, or a sister. The Brothers were zombies. Because I'd said they were" (61).

However, Victor's association between the Christian Brothers and zombies hides something deeper: "the zombies [...] seemed real. They *were* real. They were ordinary people. They weren't exactly ordinary but they were only slightly warped. What they reminded me of – the men among them, dragging themselves, never giving up – was the Brothers. That only became funny when I said it the following morning, but it never really stopped being worrying and possible" (59). The protagonist's comment may refer to the fact that society is often surprised that people of ordinary appearance can commit atrocities such as sexually abusing a child. This is even one of the reasons why the testimonies of the victims are often doubted. The perpetrators look like normal, sometimes even charming or respectable people, but in reality they are monsters.

The psychological violence that Victor receives in his teenage years has a great impact on his self-esteem throughout his life: "I was happy and miserable, a fraud who objected to being one, and I was quietly honest with myself. [...] I hated and loved, and envied and sneered" (40).

In the following excerpt, Fitzpatrick speaks of the sense of alienation he feels and which is therefore also inherent to Victor:

> —I see people walking, he said.—Just during the day, like. I see them and they all seem to know where they're going. And I always think they're keeping the secret from me. Where they're going – where they know they're going. I've always felt that. Left out, I suppose. Excluded – that's a big word these days, isn't it, Victor? Excluded. (204)

In an interview, Doyle himself clarifies where the inspiration for this excerpt comes from:

> Hopper's paintings, these solitary figures, you know, that's why they are so powerful, because you're either […] in the picture, you know, yourself, and I think we all have been, or you're worried that you would be or could be in the picture […] I started writing the novel and I heard a homeless man on the radio […] and he said […] 'I watch people going past me and they always seem to know where they're going, but they never tell me the secret'. And I thought that was brilliant. It really did capture the state of homelessness I thought […] It's a sensation or a feeling that we all feel on occasions if not most of the time […] so I said to myself 'the character is going to say that […] at the end of the book'. So I had my light at the end of the tunnel. (Waterstones 2017)

On the very first page of the novel, the narrator presents himself as a person overtly concerned with what others might think, constantly worrying about how he is perceived, in a way that may come across to the reader as immature behaviour: "I didn't want the barman thinking that I needed someone to talk to [...] I tried to picture myself from where he'd been looking at me. I can't have looked that bad – that lonely, or sad. Or neglected. It never occurred to me that he might be gay. I was fifty-four. I was too old to be gay back" (1). That last sentence, "I was too old to be gay back", is a bittersweet reference, as Victor uses a certain humorous tone, to the insult his classmates used to call him at school. However, when, forty years later, the narrator's mind travels back to this moment with such ease, it is clear that the abuse has left an indelible mark on his psyche.

The second evidence of psychological violence that I have found in the novel are the responses from Victor's acquaintances to his confession of having been molested by a Christian Brother as a teenager: "I'm not making this up […] You just let him do it?

There was nearly always one who wanted to blame me. […] how small were you? […] I'd have fucking killed him, said Conor. […] —I'm sorry. I just know that if he'd — He looked around at the other men.—Did anything like that ever happen to any of us? he asked. *Us*" (162, 163).

Finally, the most horrific of the psychological violence the protagonist was subjected to was perpetuated by the same person who raped him seventeen times as a teenager: the principal of the high school. On one of these occasions, the Head Brother tells Victor: "You're old enough to stop me" (214). As Fitzpatrick reveals at the very end of the book, "That was the evil part. Or the most evil—the worst. When he said that […] He condemned us there, didn't he?" (214).

In both cases, this type of violence is characterised by the victim being held responsible for the abuse that he has suffered. The focus is placed on the fact that he did not stop the abuse in order to claim that the victim is to blame:

> To champion one type of victim over another lessens the responsibility of care towards the seemingly 'knowing' child simply because he/she does not fit into an 'innocent' typology (Kitzinger, 2015; Woodiwiss, 2014). [Pearce] introduces the notions of 'coerced consent', 'survival consent', 'condoned consent' and 'normalised consent', all of which are relevant to the experiences of children and vulnerable adults experiencing exploitation (Pearce, 2013, p. 66). […] Within this climate of responsibilisation, it is unsurprising that participants unanimously blamed themselves for the abuse that they had endured […] The focus on responsibilisation reinforces damaging messages for all children who are victims of any type of abuse and allows for a narrative of culpability. (Ellis 2020, 406, 407, 414)

There is one activity the protagonist knows he is good at: writing. This is of great importance in the novel both in terms of content and form. The reader is invited in a fictional world created by Victor in order to keep his trauma at a distance, to build a more positive image of himself and to have total control over his life.

As an example, this is one of the few times we see Victor show some self-esteem and it is related to his work as a writer. This is clear evidence that literature can serve as a mechanism of salvation in the face of trauma. The healing power of literature lies in its ability to allow anyone to express or identify with human thoughts and emotions. The narration of traumatic experiences enables the survivor to accept and confront the event. If this narrative is published, survivors of similar traumatic experiences can understand that they are not alone. What is more, the author of a book does not necessarily have to have gone through the traumatic event that is narrated in reality. The simple existence of a character that did, even if they are a fictional one, can help enormously to combat the sense of alienation of the traumatised person:

> I did a good job. I have to make that claim, although few who remember the whole thing would dispute it. I need to assert it, to myself – for myself. I felt good throughout. It was like finding a football in the grass and discovering that I could *control* it, use it precisely and unpredictably. (68) [emphasis mine]

We see that this obsession with control is not something that the narrator abandoned in his adolescence, but it accompanies him throughout his life and is a characteristic of someone who has suffered trauma.

Van der Kolk talks about this fear of lack of control in traumatised people and proposes that it be treated with the help of theatre lessons:

> Traumatized people are terrified to feel deeply. They are afraid to experience their emotions, because emotions lead to loss of control. In contrast, theater is about

> embodying emotions, giving voice to them, becoming rhythmically engaged, taking on and embodying different roles. (2014, 348)

One might reflect on the "method" Victor has chosen to cope with his trauma: in a sense, he is acting. He has adopted a life that is not really his own, as actors do. However, for the healing of the victims of traumatic experiences, "theater involves a collective confrontation with the realities of the human condition. […] Theater gives trauma survivors a chance to connect with one another by deeply experiencing their common humanity" (van der Kolk 2014, 348).

The difference between what the protagonist does and what is involved in using a healing method endorsed by psychologists such as theatre is that Victor tries to escape the trauma and theatre allows the survivor to confront it. As Cathy Caruth explains in the preface of *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, "Psychic trauma involves intense personal suffering, but it also involves the recognition of realities that most of us have not begun to face" (1995, vii). Van der Kolk addresses how theatre can help to keep a sense of control in situations of conflict:

> Traumatized people are afraid of conflict. They fear losing control and ending up on the losing side once again. Conflict is central to theater—inner conflicts, interpersonal conflicts, family conflicts, social conflicts, and their consequences. Trauma is about trying to forget, hiding how scared, enraged, or helpless you are. Theater is about finding ways of telling the truth and conveying deep truths to your audience. This requires pushing through blockages to discover your own truth, exploring and examining your own internal experience so that it can emerge in your voice and body on stage. (van der Kolk 2014, 348-349)

Programmes that are doing this work include Urban Improv in Boston and the Trauma Drama programme; the Possibility Project, in New York; and Shakespeare in the

Courts, a programme for juvenile offenders run by Shakespeare & Company (van der Kolk 2014, 348). Van der Kolk also talks about "art, music, and dance therapists who do beautiful work with abused children, soldiers suffering from PTSD, incest victims, refugees, and torture survivors, and numerous accounts attest to the effectiveness of expressive therapies. However, at this point we know very little about how they work or about the specific aspects of traumatic stress the address, and it would present an enormous logistical and financial challenge to do the research necessary to establish their value scientifically" (van der Kolk 2014, 249).

Although these methods are still under development and need further research, they might be the way to a problem that Caruth pointed out:

> [T]he study and treatment of trauma continue to face a crucial problem at the heart of this unique and difficult phenomenon: the problem of how to help relieve suffering, and how to understand the nature of the suffering, without eliminating the force and truth of the reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us. To cure oneself—whether by drugs or the telling of ones story or both—seems to many survivors to imply the giving-up of an important reality. […] The difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story, is a problem that remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, and filmmakers alike. […] how we can listen to trauma beyond its pathology for the truth that it tells us. (1995, vii-viii)

Henry Kristal (1995, 97) suggests that "survivors were treatable if we could work patiently for many years—or in exceptional cases, if they were especially endowed with literary or artistic talents that permitted them to develop or reconstruct damaged functions. This is something we have to do with severely or early (infantile) traumatized individuals

before they can utilize psychoanalytic psychotherapy. These exceptional ones can recover from their post-traumatic problems, can integrate, and can heal themselves to a significant degree".

Particularly, van der Kolk devotes a section of his book to the benefit of writing, something that is of direct relevance to Victor's character:

> There are other ways to access your inner world of feelings. One of the most effective is through writing. […] When you write to yourself, you don't have to worry about other people's judgment— you just listen to your own thoughts and let their flow take over. Later, when you reread what you wrote, you often discover surprising truths. (van der Kolk 2014, 244)

One might then think: if the practice of artistic expressions such as theatre or writing is beneficial for survivors of traumatic experiences, wouldn't the protagonist be doing the right thing to heal? Actually, Victor seems to write very little. It is known that he wrote music gigs in his 20s and that he occasionally attempts to write short stories. Also, he intended to write a novel, but he never did. He has what is known as writer's block, which is also a consequence of trauma. So, although writing does give Victor a sense of control, a means of expression and an improved self-perception, his block prevents him from carrying out this activity.

As defined by Mike Rose, writer's block is "that frustrating, self-defeating inability to generate the next line, the right phrase, the sentence that will release the flow of words once again" (1980, 389). This affects to the writer's self-perception as it creates "a growing distrust of their abilities" (Rose 1980, 389).

Rose centres his article on the fact that writer's block is due to an excessive concern with writing rules or planning strategies (1980, 390). However, he also claims

that “The answer could have rested in the emotional realm-anxiety, fear of evaluation, insecurity, etc.” (1980, 389). This could be Victor’s case, who is deeply preoccupied with other people’s opinions: “They [those suffering from writer’s block] ‘operate’ and then they ‘test,’ and the testing is not only against some internalized goal, but against the requirements of external audience as well” (Rose 1980, 399).

In any case, and this is where issues of metafiction come into question, it could be argued whether the protagonist really has writer’s block. As noted in the previous chapter, the novel we are reading may not simply be Victor’s thoughts, but a novel (or diary, or memoir) that he writes himself.

What is clear is that *Smile* functions on a double delusion: the protagonist’s self-deception and the manipulation of the reader by the author. Roddy Doyle forces the reader to reflect on the fine line between illusion and reality: he describes a world that is the mental creation of Victor’s troubled mind. Doyle uses metafiction and embedded narratives, the mise en abyme, defined by Laurence Grove, Anne Magnussen and Ann Miller as “the use of an image within an image or text within a text, whereby the inner picture or story illuminates the outer work” (2020, 1). Narrative strategies play an important role to accomplish the deception: the chronology; the order of the chapters, alternating scenes that actually happened with others that are invented by the narrator; or the incredible work of characterization with Rachel and Fitzpatrick, giving them a past, a personality, a way of speaking and a bunch of memories with him.

It is important not to mistake Victor for Roddy Doyle. Doyle is the responsible for the creation of the fictional world of the novel. Victor, as a fictional character, does not exist outside the novel. However, readers accept to consider him as a flesh and blood character who is also the narrator of the story of his life. This is due to the suspension of

disbelief: “The suspension of disbelief, ascribed to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, epitomizes the magic of fictional transport beyond reality in a broad range of literary-theoretical and popular uses” (Beenstock 2020, 673). The reader interrupts his normal sense of logic to believe what the novel offers him.

A clue to the reader that Victor may not be a reliable narrator lies in the many occasions on which he demonstrates his facility and willingness for lying: “That was true but I loved thinking – even lying – that it wasn’t […] It wasn’t the first time I’d pointed out a fictitious old girlfriend. […] I’d tell them about fat men on the stairs and the sound of smashing glasses. I’d give it to them […] I’d make it up. I’d have to. […] I’d forgotten I’d thought I was renting a flat in a brothel, until now” (29, 48, 154).

This is a lie that the protagonist makes up while thinking about his shopping list, hence the word “pepper”. It is important to mention that in most of his lies, the narrator describes himself as the hero of the story.

> I decided my neighbours were prostitutes. Before I saw any of them. […] I heard laughter above me, a woman laughing. She was being paid to laugh. It made some kind of sense. I was folding my trousers but I was living dangerously. Behind enemy lines. Somewhere in the building was the whore with the heart of gold, waiting for me. She’d see what my wife couldn’t see, and fuck me. For nothing. And cook for me. Or let me cook for her. *Pepper etc.* We’d watch football in bed. I’d hide her from her pimp. I’d get my son to beat him up. (5-6)

There is a moment in the novel, in the present time, when he stares through the window at a young girl making up her story (6). It reminded me of Peter Walsh following and daydreaming about a woman in *Mrs Dalloway*. A very telling clue is Victor’s

comment about Brother Murphy, in which he identifies with the feeling of loneliness that makes the professor dream about a different life:

> I remember watching Murphy and thinking, "He wishes he was there." He wanted to be a Frenchman. He wanted a beret and a Renault, and a son called Marcel. He was happy in the book. I'm older than he was back then and I think I recognise it now: he was miserable. He was lonely. (17)

Other hints are the several references to memory, shown as fragile and selective. "The memory. It's like dropping bits of yourself as you go along" (9). This might also refer to the fragmented structure of the novel. Victor contradicts himself "I have a good memory – or I thought I did", leading the reader to question the apparent simplicity of the novel. The final revelation makes this passage seem ironic, as the protagonist deliberately erases the most traumatic event of his life from his memory. As Caruth explains, "the concern with false memories also teaches us, I believe, another and equally important lesson: the difficulty that many people have in believing memories that seem to them to be false simply because they do not appear in easily recognizable forms, and the urgency of creating new ways of listening and recognizing the truth of memories that would, under traditional criteria, be considered to be false […] traumatic recall or reenactment is defined, in part, by the very way that it pushes memory away" (1995, viii).

There are several moments in the novel where Victor questions his own memory, pointing out to the reader that they may not have to take his word for it: "I can't seem to believe, or cling to, much of what I know I'm remembering, even though I know it happened […] My memory was some sort of Brecht play. I was surrounded by surnames and nicknames scrawled on placards. […] But never Fitzpatrick. He was in among the faceless. I didn't like him but I wanted to remember him" (42, 73-74).

The protagonist does not seem to have much control over the intrusions of memories, which haunt him years after the traumatic event, into his present life: "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom o f a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth 1995, 5). Fitzpatrick's character is the embodiment of the notion of intrusion. On many occasions, with subtle comments directed to Victor that only make sense at the end of the novel: "I don't want to interrupt anything […] Finally had to grow up […] So you're spoofing. As usual" (8, 11, 13).

As can be seen in the novel, Victor tries to keep him at a distance but without success: "He stood between me and the loose group of other men. I could only get into the gang if he let me in. […] I was still stuck behind him. […] Fitzpatrick was bang against me. He had me pinned to the counter […] I'd got rid of Fitzpatrick. He was still there but I could feel him floating away. […] He had me trapped" (134, 135, 138, 199).

Fitzpatrick makes references to the protagonist's job as a writer: "You creative types – fuckin' writers. You must always be working on some fuckin' book […] The writer, he said.—Always digging" (29, 30). Fitzpatrick seems to refer to the fictional world Victor has turned his life into, just as a writer creates his own parallel universe. The relationship between storytelling and lying is treated by Waugh:

> As Berger and Luckmann point out, for most people the everyday world is the only "real" world: it is "reality par excellence" (Berger and Luckmann 1971). […] Literary realism appears to be a continuation or extension of this "commonsense" world. Authorial comments serve to reinforce its general "truths" and continually refer the reader to the content of everyday reality. The language of realism is generally metonymic: descriptions are presented as a selection from a whole

> which is the real world. […] Telling stories may not, in fact, be telling lies, but until one has established the nature of 'truth' it will be impossible to know. So all metafictional novels have, finally, to engage with this question of the 'truth' status of literary fiction, and of necessity therefore with the question of the 'truth' status of what is taken to be 'reality'. (Waugh 1984, 87, 90)

There is another detail that may make the reader doubt, once again, the narrator's reliability: grotesque thoughts that pop into the narrator's mind out of nowhere. These may confuse the reader, but they serve, nevertheless, to portray Victor's mental instability and inability to cope with problems in a healthy way. Chapter 10 is a very clear example. The protagonist is introduced to Rachel's family as her boyfriend, a very familiar scenario that is narrated in a humoristic way, even like in a comedy film. However certain thoughts of Victor seem out of place, such, a kind of rivalry with his girlfriend's father to see who would get to be Rachel's favourite (also in terms of sexual attraction), a sexual tension with Rachel's mother or an onion that Victor chokes on during the lunch that he imagines to be "the blood-covered head of one of the unborn babies I'd been writing and talking about" (114-115). This last image brings to mind Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, who saw an old woman's head in the middle of a fern. This character, as well as Victor, is traumatized. Particularly, he suffers from Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a consequence of his participation as a soldier in World War I. This kind of thoughts are evidence of a profound disorder, of terrible deficiencies that the victims of trauma try to make up for.

CHAPTER 5: INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE

Smile is, in essence, the story of a traumatic life experience. The first-person homodiegetic and autodiegetic narrator takes the reader into his thoughts and memories. However, the narrator is also highly critical with Ireland's social and political institutions. This does not create a division in terms of content between the private and the public sphere, the individuality and the commonality. It rather shows how Victor's environment is of paramount importance in his life, especially when it is affected by a trauma caused by a social scourge.

The novel suggests that violence is omnipresent in Irish society, a community with a troubled history, marked by colonisation, followed by a war of independence and a civil war. The country ended up partitioned by a border, separating Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State. The split personality of the protagonist might mirror this division.

Like Victor, Ireland is deluded ("in Ireland you can get along for a long time before the truth starts to matter" [38]). The country refuses to recognise that there is a major problem with one of its most relevant institutions: the Catholic Church.

Victor wants to confront this national sense of delusion. Ironically, at the same time, Roddy Doyle creates an atmosphere of familiarity and an identifiable environment in order to deceive the reader and make them trust the reading pact.

Smile is a realistic novel where there is a lot of references to Ireland and to Western civilization in general: popular culture (SuperValu [5], Desperate Dan [17], Paul McCartney [55], Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) [79], "We were kind of proud of Pierce [Brosnan], an Irishman holding his own in the middle of all that Americanness" [111]), politics (Special Branch [66], Leinster House [66], Fine Gael [68]), religion (The Sisters of the Holy Faith [11]) traditions (Donnelly's: "good old-fashioned name for a pub" [2], O' Riada [53], Setanta [57], "banshee" [110]), geography (Croke Park [1], Swords [5],

Hanover Quay [39], Temple Bar [119]), gastronomy (gravy [115], "coddle and griddle cake, and bacon and cabbage" [151], Bovril [185]) and so on.

Furthermore, Doyle is a master of dialogue. He uses humour and colloquial speech in order to achieve a sense of realism. On several occasions, he refers to "slagging", an Irish good-natured mocking:

> I welcomed his provocation. It felt close to slagging. I hadn't been properly slagged since I'd left school. [...] There was no malice. This was slagging – it was love. [...] They were going to love slagging me. I was going to love being slagged. (33, 129, 148)

All these techniques intended to lower the reader's guard might be considered an example of the literary device of "red herring":

> A red herring (RH) is a distraction device and refers to an informal logical fallacy that detracts from the actual issue, allowing one to be sidetracked from what is actually happening and to draw a false conclusion. […] RHs can also be used as a literary device to steer readers off course, such as in mystery novels like Perry Mason stories and, of course, Sherlock Holmes. (Rivera 2018, 208, 210)

In relation to the critique of the violence inherent in Irish society, there are several themes that are touched upon. Perhaps the most important of these is the one that directly affects Victor's life: the cover-up of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, or abuse in general:

> And nothing happened; there were no consequences. Toner went home with a broken nose after Murphy sent him to the Head Brother's office. And Toner would have felt lucky when he got out of the Head Brother's office without being assaulted again. That was the thing: it wasn't assault. Not back then. It wasn't what most of us saw at home and it wasn't what we'd experienced in the national

> school, the primary school. But I never thought I was witnessing anything illegal. Even being felt up by a Brother was just bad luck or bad timing. Toner wouldn't have told his parents. He'd have given them a story. A football in the face, or a hurley, a slammed door, an elbow; the school was full of good, believable ways to break your nose. They'd have all laughed about it in the Toner kitchen. The Head Brother hadn't brought him home or to the Mater A&E. He'd just been sent on his way. The Brothers knew they were safe. […] The word 'inappropriate' didn't appear until years later. But the grin was inappropriate. It was all inappropriate. He was being taunted and teased by a room of boys and he was loving it. […] The Brothers were always moved during the summer holidays. The ones who were too violent or the ones who put their hands on boys' necks and left them there. The ones who stood at the classroom window and said nothing for forty minutes. They'd be gone, or some of them would, and there'd be a few different old zombies and one or two younger, mad-looking fuckers walking around the walls of the yard when we went back in September. […] He hit a sixth-year when he didn't move fast enough. […] He was bigger than Tom Jones but he did nothing. It was the most frightening thing I'd seen. […] Charles Jacob had done what years of education had never done. He'd paid me a compliment; it still makes me tingle. (16, 18, 25, 51, 65)

The Christian Brothers are not a fictional element of the novel, they are an order of the Catholic Church in Ireland that actually carried out these crimes against the children who attended their schools:

> The Christian Brothers have traditionally been associated with boys' schools in Ireland, for many years playing a central role in the country's education system. […] At one stage the order ran more than 100 schools and eight orphanages. The

apology refers to harsh punishment dealt out to pupils and to sexual abuse. (*BBC News* 1998)

As this news reveals, when these long-covered-up abuses were first reported, there was not even an adequate response from the congregation. Victor gives an account of the power of the Catholic Church in Irish society and how it takes advantage of its influence when being asked what is wrong with Ireland:

> That was the problem. 'I don't really know,' should have been my answer. Or 'I don't really know yet.' The Church, politics, inequality, being stuck in the past, the political clout of the farmers. These were my targets but I hadn't been able to do much with them. I'd been felt up by a Christian Brother but I didn't blame the Church for that. I didn't know how to blame the Church; that came decades later. I knew the dominance of the Catholic Church was a bad thing but I didn't know how to expand on that, or even start. (118)

An example of how these abuses are hidden occurs when Victor goes on the radio to confess the abuses that he had suffered as a teenager. He is asked several times not to give names as well as being treated in a paternalistic and hypocritical manner by the presenter. It is curious that, even nowadays, there seems to be a greater concern for safeguarding the privacy of the abusers rather than the victims. Also, possibly tainted by the presenter's attitude and the protagonist's own need to deny his trauma, Victor downplays his testimony and later regrets it:

> There was always uproar. I was undermining the Church and the education system; I was assaulting the country itself. I was a blackguard and a self-serving fuckin' little queer. […] Then I seemed to become the man who needed to hear the mitching stories and the Brothers were mad bastards stories. *I have one for you. Listen to this, you'll laugh.* I told Myles Bradley quite clearly that I'd been

molested. But I'd kept talking. I should have stopped after I'd told him about the man's weight holding me down. I didn't exactly bury the story – my story – but I made it, somehow, an expected part of every Irishman's education. A bit of gas. Not so bad. Part of what we are. (173)

Another example of the power of the Church is the conservatism that pervades Irish life, especially on sexual matters. It is paradoxical that an institution in which terrible crimes of a sexual nature have occurred should have anything to say about how citizens should live their sexuality, promulgating that it should be repressed and oriented exclusively towards procreation.

Victor creates controversy in Ireland for discussing issues related to sex, such as the use of contraceptives and abortion: "I'd get the bus or a taxi out to RTE every second or third Sunday and I'd say one controversial thing. On one occasion I said that Leaving Cert students should be issued with condoms when they were walking out of school on Friday afternoons. One of the panellists, an ageing member of Youth Defence, slapped me during the ads" (122).

An entire chapter of the book is devoted to the case of a female politician confessing an abortion and dying a few months afterwards. A special detail of this story is that the woman belongs to the Fine Gael party, which is characterised by its conservative ideology. She says that she did not really want to be involved in politics, but inherited the seat after her father's death. This woman is ironically presented reading the *Independent* newspaper, which is centre-left: "[…] the other sitting Fine Gael TD in her constituency was very impressed with her. That, she told me, was because she kept her mouth shut, did what she was told" (70).

The abortion referendum that took place in Ireland in 1983 is mentioned and the politician confesses that she had one and never regretted it. She also shares some

disturbing details like not telling her family, probably because of the consequences of it. "I don't like this place, she said. She meant the Government Buildings around the corner. She meant Dublin. She meant Ireland" (72). Victor narrates that she died five months later. No explanation is given about this death. A possibility would be that she died because of her confession, maybe killed by a member of her family. It could be a political/social death. Also, maybe she committed suicide.

In relation to what the politician mentions about keeping one's mouth shut, there are several moments in the novel where we see that Irish society is silenced. For example, when Victor goes on the radio and is not given the floor, or when his mother objects that he talks about abortion when the word "killer" is painted on his house. Victor asks her whether she thinks that abortion is murder: "No. I don't. But I won't be jumping up and down telling people that" (79).

Victor says he was planning to write a book about Ireland. When he goes to the radio to present it, he announces the title, which itself is revealing "*Ireland*, I said.—*A Horror Story*", about "everything that's wrong about this country". The presenter also adds "And packed full of our faults, is it?" (81). This might bring to mind James Joyce's *Dubliners.* Certainly, Doyle has been compared several times by scholars to the author of *Ulysses*, but, as he claimed in an interview "Joyce is never in my head, you know?" (Doyle 2016).

Other issues related to Ireland's political, economic and social context are addressed. A very clear sexism is seen in different situations, like Rachel trying to make her way in the business world: "[…] Myles Bradley had spent most of the ten minutes flirting with her. "*Here's a lovely lady and she's not going to be talking about fashion.* […] I was told I'd sound less like a psycho or a ruthless bitch if I said 'we' instead of 'me' or 'I'. […] 'We' says I'm not just a little girl playing recipes in the kitchen. […] He

doesn't trust me. I'm only a girl and girls are for marrying. And the heels – he made the whole thing look pornographic. (82, 83, 84, 105).

The novel also gives an account of the different stages that Ireland has gone through in economic terms, a country strongly marked by emigration ("[f]our or five hadn't emigrated; three were still living at home with their parents." [127]) and economic inequalities ("[t]hey were good; they were grand. But they were there because this was their neck of the city and their parents had bought them their instruments and gear, and there was talk of a van for the UK tour" [43-44]).

Fitzpatrick claims to have been a millionaire, a builder ruined by the collapse of the housing bubble in Ireland, a true fact in the country's history:

> Much of Ireland's contemporary housing woes can be traced back to the collapse of the Irish property bubble in 2007. Ireland's economy as a whole had experienced a prolonged period of expansive economic growth between the years 1995 and 2007, earning the moniker "Celtic Tiger" (O'Leary, 2011). A term coined in homage to the four "Asian Tiger" economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. Each of which experienced comparably strong levels of economic growth from the 1960's through to the 1990's (Peters, 2021). During this time in Ireland, lax lending criteria combined with an immigration fuelled upsurge in demand created an enormous property bubble. (Duggan 2022)

Valerie Sayers comments: "As it channels the voices of outrage still sounding in Ireland and around the world, *Smile* bears witness to damage almost beyond imagination—but it does dare to imagine, with a strange form of narrative empathy, and demands its readers imagine too" (Sayers 2018). Once again, the healing power of literature, either in trauma on a personal level, such as Victor's, or on a community level, such as Ireland, cannot be overemphasised.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Roddy Doyle's *Smile* shown in the chapters of this dissertation draws several conclusions in response to the starting hypothesis presented in the introduction. Indeed, literature has a healing quality in the process of trauma recovery in Roddy Doyle's *Smile*. This is demonstrated through different examples: in the first place, Victor, as a victim of child sexual abuse, has suffered profound damage to his self-esteem, causing him to view himself with disdain in virtually every aspect of his life. The only facet in which he appears to feel anything like a "victor" (even the protagonist's name is chosen for a purpose) is writing.

In Victor's process of coping with trauma, two parts can be distinguished: in the first one, it is a matter of doing everything possible to survive, which leads Victor to fictionalise his own life in order to endure the day-to-day. The second one begins with Fitzpatrick's final revelation in the second chapter. Victor's goal shifts from mere survival to a true acceptance of his trauma in order to heal and start a new life that he finally believes he deserves, after feeling guilty all his life.

The turning point between the first part and the second is testimony. Fitzpatrick provides a testimony that Victor listens to and identifies with (since it is, in fact, his own). This encourages him to finally provide the true testimony of his trauma himself and no longer through Fitzpatrick. As this dissertation has explained, the act of giving and receiving a testimony is one of the characteristic functions of literature. In this way, an individual can express his or her thoughts and emotions, feeling that they are relevant, and the reader can identify with them and help to reduce his or her feeling of loneliness and alienation.

There are certain issues that could have been here addressed, but for reasons of space and coherence were not. In the future, one possibility that I have considered in relation to

metafiction in *Smile* could be explored further: it is not clear whether the book itself is what Victor seems to be writing at certain moments. Is *Smile* the work of Roddy Doyle alone or is it also a novel written by Victor at the same time? Victor mentions different projects that he is in the process of writing, such as a novel about Ireland, different short stories, etc. However, it is never explicitly stated that what he is telling the reader, when narrating his life, is a novel as such: it could be considered to be simply Victor's thoughts. There is only one detail that gives rise to this possibility, and that is that at one point Victor claims to be writing a paragraph that we have previously read as part of Victor's train of thought. The novel does not give a definitive answer to this question, but it could raise an interesting debate about different options as feasible answers.

I think it could also have been discussed how this novel has a great influence from cinema, due to the use of resources such as flashback, the multiple scenes of natural and colloquial dialogue, and even the type of humour displayed in some scenes, which gives the sensation of watching a comedy film. Even Fitzpatrick's character, continually bursting into Victor's life to end up discovering that they are one and the same person, reminded me of the film *Fight Club* (1999) during which there are also hints that the main character is deluding himself by creating a persona to escape reality.

This novel could also be analysed in the wake of different types of methodology, such as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey* (1990), by exploring Victor's journey towards recovery from his trauma and the different figures and challenges that are involved in the course of it.

To conclude, *Smile* is a tremendously human novel which reminds readers that literature does have a practical purpose apart from the pleasure of reading *per se*: to feel that you belong to the world, that you count, that your experiences matter and can help others. In short, and as Victor would have liked to know from the beginning, no one has

to feel alone, there will always be someone who has written your story; and if not, you can do it.

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