Facultade de Filoloxía

“Not evil or irredeemable”: Women, Bodies and Sorority in Donal Ryan’s *All We Shall Know*

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Historically, Western philosophy conceptualized the human subject as an entity conformed by mind and body, inevitably privileging the former over the latter. The mind has ever been the object of most philosophical discussion, while the body was absolutely glossed over, with only a minority of literature paying attention to it. The dichotomy of mind vs. body as mutually exclusive concepts became part of a larger apparatus of gendered and hierarchized dualisms; the mind has been mainly associated with men, reason and culture while the body related to women, emotion and nature. The assumption that these concepts are contrary has inevitably led to the subordination of one of the parts. The supremacy of the mind and, therefore, of its associations has resulted in the devaluation and exclusion of the body and, of course, of women from philosophical and intellectual activity; as Elizabeth Grosz explains, discussion about the body was restricted to "its role in either the advancement or, more usually, the hindrance of the production of knowledge" (4). Women's bodies were "judged in terms of a "natural inequality"", (Grosz 14), an argument used to maintain the dominance of men in the social space. This argument, therefore, prompted, as the most immediate reaction, some feminists' rejection of the body, and as a "limitation on women's capacity for equality" (Grosz 15). In response to these essentialist arguments, many feminists drew attention to the tension between motherhood and a role outside the private space.

However, we must avoid a negative view of women's body, and of maternity as inherently detrimental for the achievement of equality, and even if women have suffered because of the essentialist assumption, refusing to admit women's bodies means accepting the patriarchal views and notions of women's biology as a justification for their exclusion from social and intellectual activity. The body conditions and is conditioned by our interaction with the world; it cannot be ignored despite the pernicious association of women as limited to and by the body.

Although the wish to put a certain distance between women and topics such as pregnancy or motherhood, can be understood, it is not at all favourable to overlook them.

Postmodern feminism discusses matters of the body, of pregnancy and motherhood, of sexuality, and so forth, in particular, acknowledging the diversity of bodily experience. For instance, discussion regarding women and female sexuality was centred around the ways it "deviate[d] from or compare[d]" to men and male sexuality, which was taken as the reference model for human bodies and sexuality (Grosz 82). Not only is it necessary to consider gender differences, discussions about the body must be intersectional, therefore, factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, age or disability must be also taken into consideration.

On the basis that bodily experience is dependent on different aspects, not just gender, contradictions are inevitably bound to emerge. In the case of this dissertation, we will see how women's lived bodies clash or intersect in a context of cultural diversity, between the sedentary community of Ireland and the nomad Irish Travellers.

Irish Travellers are an indigenous nomadic minority group of approximately 30,000 people in Ireland; having vindicated their status as a separate ethnic community within Ireland, their efforts were rewarded in 2017, year in which the Irish Law officially recognized their status as such (O'Halloran and O'Regan). Despite this victory, Irish Travellers have been and still are marginalized and criminalized by the settled community and they still suffer from institutional discrimination and anti-Traveller propaganda.

The origin of the Irish Travellers is a site of contestation, in which the emphasis is put, not on where they come from, but on the moment of history and the reason why they decided to abandon (or were forced to abandon) the settled community and began to wander (Helleiner 30). Several theories exist concerning the descent of the Irish Travellers, which range from arguments supporting a pre-Celtic ancestry to claims of a recent emergence due to the Great

Famine (1845-1849). The discourse connecting Irish Travellers with a pre-Celtic origin is used as a means to legitimize them as an ethnicity separate from the rest of Ireland, asserting their "long-standing presence in Ireland" (Burke 29). Certain folktales have perpetuated damaging stereotypes about the Irish Travellers by depicting their current situation as a "[fall] from grace" which had forced them to leave the settled community (Ó hAodha 105), "deviant, destitute drop-outs from a homogeneous settled Irish population" (Binchy and Kenny 118) according to the 1963 Commission Report.

Folktales have negatively portrayed the Irish Travellers, in particular, as Ó hAodha (106) indicates, one of these tales accuses a 'Tinker' of agreeing to make the nails for Jesus Christ's crucifixion while the Christian devout blacksmith had refused to do so. The implications of these religious tales which stigmatise the Romanies or 'Gypsies', have been damaging for Irish Travellers who hold strong religious beliefs and became a source as well of "collective guilt" (Ó hAodha 139). Given these statements, Travellers were constructed as "dishonest, prone to violence and poverty", pertaining to the "lower class" and members of a "dysfunctional culture" (Ó hAodha 102), essentialist stereotypes emerged from folktales used in an attempt to justify the marginalisation of Irish Travellers. However, this construction of their identity continues to affect the Travellers' image in Ireland as this rhetoric was naturalized by the settled community. Not only has it affected the consideration of the Travellers by non-Travellers, it has also had a profound impact on their self-image (Ó hAodha 103-4). In addition, prejudice against nomadic lifestyles was validated by the settled community due to, among other reasons, the existence of Judaeo-Christian myths which deemed the act of 'wandering' and other nomadic practices as a punishment which were associated with "exile, banishment, flight" (Ó hAodha 106-7).

It is my intention to provide an analysis of Donal Ryan's novel *All We Shall Know* (2016) whose themes include an insight into the culture of the Irish Travellers, the complexity of

mother-daughter relationships, the burden of guilt and the possibility of redemption, among others. My aim is to analyse the intersections of gender and ethnicity in Donal Ryan's work, applying concepts related to the female body and motherhood.

In the first chapter I will provide a summary of Donal Ryan's novel, as well as a general commentary on the representation of the Irish Travellers in the novel, focusing on their status as the 'other'. In the second section of the dissertation, first, I will offer some context for the situation of Traveller women, both in their culture and in the settled community. I will reflect, as well, on the experiences of the protagonist as a pregnant woman, connecting it with other issues such as abortion, infertility and sexuality, offering different accounts from the novel's characters. In the last chapter, I set out to analyse relationships between the female characters, focusing on the topics of motherhood and sisterhood.

I. Irish Travellers in Context and their Representation in Donal Ryan's *All We Shall Know* (2016)

Donal Ryan

Donal Ryan is an Irish author from County Tipperary, a location where many of his stories are set, including his novel and the object of this dissertation, *All We Shall Know* (2016). His debut novel *The Spinning Heart* (2012) received several awards, including both the Book of the Year and the Newcomer of the Year at the Irish Book Awards (2012), as well as the Guardian First Book Award (2014) and the European Union Prize for Literature (Ireland) (2015). His following works, *The Thing About December* (2013), his collection of short stories *A Slanting of the Sun* (2015), his novel *From a Low and Quiet Sea* (2018) and his most recent publication, *Strange Flowers* (2020) have also received critical acclaim.

Ryan provides a reflection on the contemporary Irish society, the perils of the Celtic Tiger years, in particular for rural spaces, but he also offers the readers tales about outcasts, characters who are struggling to find their place in the world. In *All We Shall Know*, he introduces the Irish Travellers, an ethnic minority who have been forced to fight for their identity and against the negative connotations that have accompanied the status of the Irish Travellers for so long. The protagonist, who is to some extent an outcast as well, is a flawed complex character with internal conflicts that could initially prompt the dislike of the reader, but her growth through the narrative and her efforts to atone for her past, make her, at least, deserving of our sympathy. Ryan's novel received overall positive reviews by critics from *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Examiner*, or *The Guardian* who deemed it "a modern-day Irish tragedy".

All We Shall Know

Irish author Donal Ryan's novel *All We Shall Know* (2016) introduces the reader to the Traveller people mainly through the character of Mary Crothery, but also of Martin Toppy and the whole kinship. In *All We Shall Know*, Melody Shee, the protagonist and voice of this first-person narrative, is an ambiguous and multi-layered character whose childhood and adolescence, and her relationship with her mother and her best friend during this period, have impacted and conditioned her adulthood and current relations. When she is hired to tutor a seventeen-year-old traveller, Martin Toppy, her life is radically changed after she seduces her student and gets pregnant from the affair. She separates from a husband with whom she already maintained a difficult relationship and she befriends Mary Crothery, another Traveller, when she is searching for Martin Toppy. Her immediate connection with Mary will bring a series of revelations for Melody that will help her come to terms with her past and make peace with herself in the present time.

Ryan's novel features the Irish Traveller community and we must pay attention to the author's constructions of the characters and their culture. Furthermore, many themes from the novel are worth analysing, in which we can include: the use of violence, the role of Traveller women in their culture or their construction as the 'Other'.

Irish Travellers as the 'Other' and their Representation in Ryan's Novel

Irish Travellers were constructed as a countercultural group that refused to integrate into the settled community and whose cultural practices were "anachronistic" (Ó hAodha 80). The argument that Irish Travellers are "'outside of history' and frozen in certain folkways that have been abandoned by the 'civilised' or 'progressive' settled community" is supposed to justify prejudices and their exclusion (Ó hAodha 80).

Many critics and Traveller activists have recognized the necessity of acknowledging the Travellers' right to self-determination, as they insist that Travellers were "'Othered' in Ireland in an uncannily similar way to the way that the Irish and other indigenous peoples were 'othered' as part of the English colonial project", not on a racial basis, but rather as part of the Irish's ancestors which adopted a nomadic lifestyle (Ó hAodha 100). A set of cultural marks separates the Travellers from the rest of the Irish people; different practices, different lifestyles and a different language ('Cant' or 'Shelta') that set them apart from the settled people and allows them to be defined as an ethnic minority within white Ireland. Irish Travellers are constructed as the 'Other', but it is not a racialized 'Other', as it happens most commonly, the discourse in question is one of "naturalization of sedentary culture" (Burke 5), which is caused by "a mixture of mistrust and envy of their supposed "freedom"" (McVeigh 41, qtd. From Burke 5). Anti-Traveller sentiment is connected to Anti-Irish propaganda by the British; in its post-colonial period, Ireland attempted to distance itself as much as it could from the pejorative

and stereotyping discourse that the British employed in colonial times in order to assimilate the Irish people into their society. Nevertheless, the Irish settled community has incurred in the same behaviour by stereotyping the Irish Travellers utilising the same discourse the British did with them. As Noelle Mann illustrates (182), the Travellers' value seems to lie in its importance as an emblem of ancient Ireland, but not as a contemporary group that still refuses to conform with the norm, romanticizing old Travellers but vilifying its descendants.

The English colonialists associated nomadism with sedition due to "the important role which the travelling bards played in the fostering of Gaelic culture and in inciting the general population to resist colonisation" (Ó hAodha 77). Effectively, as participants of a mostly oral and non-literate tradition (Okely 1), there exist more accounts about nomadic groups by non-Travellers than from members of the Traveller community, which has inevitably led to the construction of Irish Travellers and other nomadic communities without any input from them. This conforms the main reason why Irish Travellers have been and still are victims of stereotyping and prejudice by the settled community. The Irish Travellers were constructed as the 'Other', a group of people outside the norm of the Irish society which follow their own system and whose activities and behaviours are outdated and a source of conflict with the settled Ireland.

In *All We Shall Know*, Martin Toppy is a young Traveller whose father hired Melody Shee to teach him how to read at 17 years old; Mary Crothery must abandon her education without learning how to read or do basic maths (56). These two instances do not necessarily reflect the reality of Irish Travellers; in fact, many wanted their children to attend school, and sacrificed mobility in favour of their children's learning (Helleiner 222). Nevertheless, overt anti-Traveller racism in school results in the exclusion, marginalization, and criminalization of Traveller children. A study conducted by Claire Alexander and William Shankley found that within the schools of England, "Irish Traveller, Gypsy/Roma and Black Caribbean groups have

the highest rates of permanent exclusions" (111), with the poorest academic performances (102). Teachers might prioritize settled children and dismiss Traveller children due to prejudice, with the assumption that their learning is not as important as the other children's as a consequence of harmful Anti-Traveller discourses. In the novel, Martin Toppy is an example of the effects that the discrimination and exclusion suffered at schools, as well as the interiorization of anti-nomadic propaganda, as he is clearly suffering from low self-esteem: "I'm thick, he whispered. I'm thick, miss" (32)

When Melody describes the Traveller camp as "a chaotic aggregation of vans and caravans and tiny bungalows" (23), Ryan is depicting an image of disorder and chaos which is not new in the anti-Traveller discourse, which would serve as an excuse to send the Travellers to the "industrialized outskirts of cities" (Burke 7), in an apparent mission to protect the settled from the Travellers' disorderly and criminal lives.

The discussion regarding the various names used to refer to Travellers is also present in the novel:

> Is it the same little tinker lad you do have all the time?
>
> Traveller, Dad.
>
> Oh, ya, Traveller. Lord, everyone is gone fierce particular about what they're called these days. (10)

In this passage, when Melody corrects his father, Ryan is drawing attention to the importance of using the correct terms to refer to the Travellers so as to avoid expressions which carry negative connotations for the community and since 'tinker' has been rejected by Travellers at large, as a minority ethnicity, it is offensive for non-Travellers to use it. Initially employed in relation with their occupations, 'tinker' acquired negative connotations as the term became associated with "secrecy, dishonesty, licentiousness, violence, etc." (Ó hAodha 140). Irish

Travellers, then, started to reject being referred to as ‘tinkers’ due to the word’s implications and the internalisation of the term as an insult within the Traveller community (Ó hAodha 143) which can be explained by the fact that “their identity and the inferiority complex that accompanied the denigration of their nomadic tradition” was a source of shame for the Travellers (Ó hAodha 145). This has without any doubt contributed to the anti-Travellers Irish propaganda and the government’s persisting efforts to assimilate the Travellers into the settled community. (Ó hAodha 145).

Moreover, Melody’s father represents as well common negative attitudes towards political correctness which is often viewed as people being exaggeratedly sensitive about certain topics. In another instance, Pat refers to Mary as a “little knacker” (111) and Melody once again corrects him; we might be inclined to think that the use of ‘knacker’ might have been a harmless, albeit ignorant, expression, but it is Pat himself who, only a couple of pages later uses the word with clear pejorative connotations, “What the fuck is it with you and knackers? YOU AND YOUR FUCKING KNACKERS!” (113) . It only serves to demonstrate that those who do not refer to minority groups with property perpetuate negative and offensive views about them.

Melody’s father is recurrently the voice of the mainstream ideas that the settled community holds about Irish Travellers. He claims that there is no “law among those people, only their own” (164); he believes that the Travellers involve themselves in cycles of non-ending senseless violence, of violence for the sake of it. His descriptions of the Travellers, of what he believes to be true, is a perfect example of the popular beliefs that have been established as the reality by the settled:

> When it comes to fighting and honour and feuds and all that bloody stuff there can be no reasoning with them. I knew many’s the tinker along the years. We’d meet them

> often on the sides of roads when I was on the council crews. Many of them were as decent as the day is long. But they'd swipe all before them, all the same and think nothing of it. They used to often circle us when we were doing big jobs, like vultures above a dying animal, watching machinery and tanks of diesel and trailers and bales of wire and all sorts of plant. And we came to know the way they see the world, just by the odd conversation we'd have here and there with them. The small things they'd drop into a conversation. You could see the steel inside in them when it came to certain things […] You could bate a Traveller all day long. You could saw off his arms. He'll stay coming at you till there's one of you dead (164).

In the novel, violence in the Traveller community is recurrent: Martin Toppy's father was a "bare-knuckle boxer who'd retired undefeated" (29). Among the settled community there were rumours of his involvement in criminal activities, which could perfectly be the product of anti-Traveller prejudice. Mary has a naturalized view of violence, she does not bat an eye at it, and there is a suggestion that she considers Pat's reaction to Melody's pregnancy shameful because he did not punish her; she feels proud knowing that Buzzy, her own husband, would have "buried" Mary if she were unfaithful, and she mentions that even her father would have "killen" Mary (130)

When the enemy family, the Follans, brutally beat Mary once and attempt to do it a second time, their behaviour is admitted as unacceptable by the rejection of their violent ways by the Toppys "Them people don't know reason" (203). There is a code of honour that the Follans broke, therefore, there is not either a generalization of the Travellers as brutes. Violence as a way to resolve conflicts is justified by the fact that the Irish law system does not work for the Travellers and they must take certain issues into their hands, as Mary expresses: There was not one thing ever dixed for us by police […] nor never will be" (206).

Melody's father provides some of the most interesting passages in his explanations of the Travellers; through him, we can detect the contradictory accounts that range from their criminalization to their idealization: "Travellers are the only true Irish […] Ye never mixed blood with the Vikings nor the English nor the Normans nor any of them. Ye were warriors and chieftains and kings. The Hill of Tara ye came from originally. The royalty of Ireland ye were" (174). Some have claimed that Travellers were descendants of "'fallen nobility' who had lost status during the various periods of dispossession associated with the conquest, confiscation, and colonisation of Ireland" (Ó hAodha 81). This belief led to the misconception of a social organization exclusive to Travellers, but as Ó hAodha explains, the presumption of a hierarchical system within the Irish Traveller community was most definitely "a 'projection' of the class structure that existed among the settled community" (83). Nonetheless, despite the veracity of the claim, a separate social structure was negatively conceived by sedentary people and it acted as another barrier between both groups.

Melody's father continues:

> Ye ruled over Ireland and were warriors, and ye fought against every invader that ever took sword against us, and lost all the power and influence ye had for a finish and were set upon the road and never stopped. The very same as the Gypsies abroad in Europe; they're called that because they used to be the rulers of Egypt before the pharaohs even, and were so powerful that they set out to take over other countries, and got repelled at every border so they stayed moving from place to place in search of conquest and for a finish they never stopped. (174-5)

According to this narration, the Travellers were forced to be on the road, as a punishment for losing their power; it was not a choice. Mary, far from disagreeing with him, sees his story as an explanation for their exclusion; Travellers posed a threat for the settled community, "That's

why the country people has no time for us. They're afraid we'll take over again" (175). Melody's father is also establishing ties between the Travellers and the Romanies in Europe, the "Gypsies" whom Mary does not trust because no one "can't trust them people, you know. They'd steal the tooth from your mouth" (25-6).

The Travellers became an alternative to Celtic Tiger Ireland as they evidenced the connection between "the loss of connection with nature, spirituality and authenticity" and the "processes of rationalisation inherent in the development of the nation state" (Gray 63). The Travellers represent an alternative to the abusive practices of globalization and industrialization to nature, because their "relationship to the earth is one of transitory attachment and cyclical frequentation; the antithesis of the farmer, the nomad gathers, reaps, and exchanges but does not exploit" (Braidotti 25).

The settled community is portrayed as thinking of the Travellers as hopeless, a lost cause, a group that cannot be civilized and must then, not be interfered with:

> there's not one thing that anyone can do, except to hope that the location is sufficiently remote from the rest of the world, and to hope the fair-play family are chosen well […] and to hope that no one is killed, and that the fight itself serves its intended purpose, to bring peace, however brittle, however temporary, to this world within a world (196)

The notion of the "world within a world" explains perfectly the situation of the Travellers within Ireland, as a separate ethnic group, with a different culture and different mindset that must rely on an independent system since they suffer exclusion and neglect from the rest of society.

The long history of anti-Traveller attitudes, more often than not, was initiated and supported by the institutions of the Irish State, despite the politicians' denial of their opposition to the Travellers (Helleiner 64). As Ó hAodha explains, there might have been some underlying

reasons for the conflict between Travellers and non-Travellers, "economic competition or economic jealousy between the sedentary and the nomad was at the root of much of the antagonism between both groups" (Ó hAodha 136). In order to justify the government's assimilation attempts in the 1960s, Irish Travellers were said to have been forced into the lifestyle as a consequence of "the evictions and famines suffered by the Irish during the centuries of British domination" (Helleiner 30). This discourse was effective on projecting the image of the Travellers as victims and of the state as their saviour from their 'unfortunate' circumstances, while the truth is that the lifestyles of the Travellers were a threat and a constraint for the urbanization and modernization of Ireland as they inhabited terrains which were aimed for construction purposes (Ó hAodha 31). There was no longer a place for Irish Travellers in Ireland with the start of the Celtic Tiger period and the increased urbanization of the Irish landscape.

II. Women's Bodies: the Maternal body, Sexuality and Oppression

The Specificities of Traveller Women's Bodies

Jane Helleiner, in her work *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* (2000), explains that in post-independence Ireland, the State stressed women's place in the domestic sphere and the value of their domestication for the country (67). Helleiner draws attention to the intersection of "female domesticity and anti-Traveller racism" (68) as Traveller men were seen as a threat for non-Traveller 'domesticated' women. This discourse may remind us of the southern rape complex, through which black men were vilified and dehumanized in post-Civil War America, which constructed white women as weak and defenceless and whose purity had to be protected against the 'savage' black men. In opposition, Traveller women, "whose lives

were much less domesticated than those of their settled counterparts" (Helleiner 68) and "were located outside of this Irish modernity in a liminal space of Traveller nomadism and non domesticity" (Gray 63), were the object of three different discourses. In the first one, they were portrayed as victims of the Traveller lifestyle, as needing to be liberated from Traveller men and their culture (Helleiner 163). Secondly, women were also sexualized and treated as objects by "non-Traveller male exoticism" (Helleiner 162). Lastly, Traveller women were masculinized, described as 'aggressive' and as eager participants of Traveller practices that were considered not only masculine, but uncivilized, such as 'brawls', 'rows' and 'tribal feuds' (CT, 16 May 1959: 3, qtd. From Helleiner 163).

Settlement policies were launched in the 1960 and aimed at assimilating the Travellers into the settled community; one of its measures was the domestication of Traveller women, recommending the dedication of their entire time to house chores and child rearing, adopting the model followed by non-Traveller Irish women. This attempt at eradicating the Traveller culture, however, reinforced as well certain aspects that non-Travellers viewed as positive, such as the prominent figure of the patriarch, Traveller women's chaste clothing and behaviour, and the extreme paternalistic attitudes of Traveller men towards Traveller women (Helleiner 166).

One of the controversial aspects of the Irish Traveller culture is the practice of arranged marriages between teenagers. Arranged marriages did not revolve around the exchange of a dowry or properties: instead, Helleiner claims that the reason for this practice and at such a young age was the danger of Travellers marrying outside of their community which could entail "desertion or marriage breakdown" (181). On the other hand, refusing a match already negotiated by the families and consented to by the groom, could lead to consequences for Traveller women, so their dubious consent to marriage was often conditioned by fear of stigmatization by the community; Traveller women's consent to marriage was suggested to be

a formality rather than an actual agreement to it (Helleiner 182). Nevertheless, this is not to mean that Traveller women were passive in the 'matchmaking' process, as a matter of fact, Helleiner explains how women were relevant and influenced unofficially certain decisions made by men regarding marital arrangements (183). Nowadays, the Traveller community tends to be more lenient regarding the age of marriage, thus marriages have been relatively delayed, which gave men more freedom, but in turn, caused women to be more controlled in order to protect their 'purity' which, ironically, they could only escape through marriage (Helleiner 226).

In *All We Shall Know*, Mary's arranged marriage somewhat coincides with Helleiner's description, but Mary mentions a sort of economic agreement between her parents and her husband's, Buzzy, parents: "I wasn't bought or sold or anything like that, but there was money changed hands and some agreement was come to as regards the sharing out of work that wouldn't of been done otherwise. It favoured Daddy and the boys and meant Mommy got a load of things she was wanting for ages" (54). However, immediately after this scene, we encounter another passage in which Melody's mother-in-law, Agnes, shows the importance attributed by her (from an average Irish settled family) to economic aspects when considering the worth of her son's past girlfriend, emphasizing the girl and the girl's family wealth as a favourable aspect for marriage: "at least one farm of land coming to her […]" (55). Following one scene after the other clearly shows that the differences regarding marriage between Travellers and non-Travellers are, sometimes, not as huge as we might think.

In one passage, Mary describes how she noticed people moving further away from the Crotherys the one time they went to the sea (93), "so that they were an island in the sand", which is an accurate analogy for their situation as Irish Travellers within Ireland. As Breda Gray explains "repeated reminders of the suspicion with which Travellers are held constrain their mobility in public places. Public spaces are designed and inhabited as if Travellers had no

right to occupy them" (69). Their criminalization has led to their exclusion from places inhabited and frequented by non-Travellers in Ireland; in fact, due to inability to be identified as Irish Travellers, although they still suffer stigmatization by the English, it is possible that Travellers are given, or so they perceive, a better treatment in England than in Ireland (Gray 78-9). However, Gray emphasizes that Traveller women are policed more than Traveller men in public spaces: "The socio-spatial modes of exclusion experienced by Traveller women extend to spaces of consumption including shops, streets, pubs and social centres where the presence of Travellers produces 'suspicion' and often criminalisation" (68). When in public spaces, Mary feels uncomfortable, she holds herself "straight and stiff, unmoving, as though to conceal herself in stillness" (65). It is obvious that she is aware of the settled people's rejection of Travellers; and it would not be at all farfetched to believe that she has experienced, on multiple occasions, discrimination for no reason other than being a Traveller woman. Traveller women are denied entry to establishments and discriminated against more than Traveller men; they must change their appearance in order to resemble non-Traveller women, as Gray explains, Traveller women must "put on a performance of the feminine that mimics or impersonates middle-class ideals of respectable settled femininity" (71). Furthermore, if Traveller women hope to be treated with dignity and not like criminals, they must appropriately disguise their 'nomadism'. If they do not, they will probably have to deal with a situation similar to Mary's when she and Melody are followed by a security guard in a store and the former confronts him for assuming that her intention is to steal (144-5).

The Pregnant Body and Women's Sexuality

One of the particularities of this novel is the structure, which follows the pregnancy of the main character, starting from the twelfth week of pregnancy, which marks the end of the first

trimester. At this stage, Melody wonders if she would inflict pain on the foetus if she were to kill herself. Melody's first weeks of pregnancy are not a source of happiness, in fact she considers morning sickness to be a light punishment for her actions: "This is more than I can bear and less than I deserve" (5). At times, she thinks of the foetus as a parasite, "This baby is going nowhere. It's funny how I know. If I don't eat, it'll take what it needs from my blood and softening flesh" (33) and sometimes she would feel that the baby, "the only warm part of [her]" (60) would try to interact with her, challenging her opinion of herself. She emphasizes the baby's dependence on her body, "his little heart would stop with mine" (1) because as Iris Marion Young points out, "Pregnancy challenges the integration of my body experience by rendering fluid the boundary between what is within, myself, and what is outside, separate. I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body." (49) Her emotional state affects him as well, "something in my heart was lifted, and I felt the baby settling down to sleep" (26), "I can't seem to focus my mind or still my heart: it's palpitating and irregular and it's frightening me. I must have upset the baby. I must have upset the baby" (68)

Pregnant women are usually treated with more care than non-pregnant women, and as Bailey posits, pregnant women "felt more valued and given more bodily space in the public arena" (123), but, and it is very well reflected in Ryan's novel, this attitude towards pregnant women applies as long as the pregnancy occurred within the boundaries of institutionalized motherhood; Melody's pregnancy, for instance, is met with contempt and insults because it happened outside of marriage, and as Adrienne Rich explains, "Motherhood is 'sacred' so long as its offspring are 'legitimate' –that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother" (42)

Everybody feels entitled to comment on her body, on the physical changes, for instance, as her ex-husband Pat notices "your tits are gone massive" (180), and then he tries to reach out to touch her stomach without her permission, which is a common violation of personal space, a

recurrent habit with pregnant women. In Bailey's study on the pregnant embodiment, in more than one instance did the women interviewed confirm that even strangers would feel entitled to make comments about their pregnant bodies and touch their stomachs. Bailey considers the "discursive desexualization of the pregnant women's body" (122) one possible reason for this behaviour, but it cannot be applied to this particular instance with Melody. The reference to Melody's breasts was very clearly done with sexual undertones, a comment that values them positively because of their increased size.

Melody has suicidal thoughts, and is determined to commit suicide as soon as she "has all [her] loose ends neatly tied" (5); it is a constant thought and it goes as far as suicidal ideation, "I thought of the high hook on the bathroom wall. I wondered how long it would take and how much it would hurt. I wondered if there were Stanley blades in Pat's virgin toolbox in the cracked, untreated shed. I thought about a deep bath of roasting water" (6). She feels guilt over the way she treated some of the closest people in her life, but she includes the "babies [she] couldn't carry" (50) within the same category, blaming herself for having miscarried. She is not the only one to do so; her miscarriages were treated as weapons during arguments with her husband, and often, accusations would be thrown both ways:

> He'd say: A lot you'd know about children, simple or otherwise.
>
> I'd say: You must have a fair shitty seed the way it won't take properly (13)
>
> […] He'd tell me I must have a cold cunt of a womb to say no child would stay in it. (14)

They blame each other for the miscarriages, she attacks his virility and questions his fertility, and he would accuse her of being frigid, unmaternal and not loving enough to be able to carry the babies. After her third miscarriage, a few months prior to the divorce, Melody reckoned "without question or doubt that my body had rid itself of something not right, unviable,

chanceless" (118) and Pat reacts by becoming distant with her and having a vasectomy done "so it [could] never happen again" (118) and in order to "punish his body for the pain it had caused, to punish himself, to save [her], to punish [her]" (119).

A similar situation occurs with Mary and her husband Buzzy, when they learn that she is infertile; Buzzy "hardened himself against her", not verbally attacking her as Pat had done, but by distancing himself from her. His behaviour is excused, "he wasn't able to be any other way because children are precious things", it is not his fault that he is angry with Mary, he cannot help it because when he married her, he did so with the presumption of future children. Infertility among Irish Travellers was viewed as a "stigma" (Helleiner 212) that could lead to the marginalization of Traveller women by their family and husbands; it was a motive of profound shame for everyone involved. To save her husband Buzzy from being childless, she abandons him and returns to her family which do not welcome her back warmly. She is controlled, "watched ever single second" (46), a "disgrace" because she left her husband. Despite being nineteen years old, she is excluded from visits to town, participation in festivities and even denied attendance to religious events; she needs parental permission to leave the camp and she has her phone taken from her, cutting off any possibility of social interaction uncontrolled. Her decision might also have harmed her sisters' prospects of marriage, as Irish Travellers often engage in the "sibling exchange" (Helleiner 187), so that after a match has been made between two Travellers, another match usually follows, pairing the couple's siblings. As Mary explains her sisters "was all mad into his brothers an all" (46). In fact, Mary's sisters' possibilities of marrying Buzzy's brothers have vanished because of Mary's disgrace which has created a conflict between the families. Her siblings seemed to feel compassion for her situation, but her mother is the one to exclude her from the family, and thus, her closest kin must ignore her. Mary's father was more lenient, but he still followed his wife's orders.

Mary is also suspected of having been "damaged inside by some other man", so she is the one to take the initiative and leaves him so that Buzzy does not have to suffer the "punishment that was handed down to her" (87), and so that he could marry again and have children with another woman. Mary, however, does not have the same chance that he does; even if divorced, Mary is not a virgin anymore and she is, in Melody's words, "this pretty outcast, this nineteen-year old girl, this old woman, barren, useless, spent, […]" (73). The construction of virginity is gendered within the Traveller culture as well, with different expectations for men and women. As Helleiner illustrates, "maintaining premarital virginity and marital fidelity, for example, lay disproportionately with women" (192) and men were not under such pressure. Mary becomes an outcast, leaving her husband, so that Buzzy can be "a proper man" (88). Her body has been reduced to its (dis)ability to conceive, and in such a family-centred and gendered culture as hers, infertility could be seen contrary to her nature as a woman to be unable to have children.

Mary is a pariah, not just because she cannot give birth, something out of her control, but because she makes the decision to leave her husband and no matter the reasons, she challenges the Traveller's rules, which demand women's complete devotion to their husbands and family:

> Traveller girls marry young as a rule. Most keeps their mouths shut, though. I seen women getting thrown around the place, bate black and blue. I seen more girls and women stone mad for their men, though, acting like they were gods. I seen a woman one time whose man was killed in a car crash lay herself along the mound of his grave and it took seven or eight people a good few hours to move her off of it. And still she went back every day and lay down alongside that mound of earth and for all I know she's still doing it (186-7)

Women's Oppression and the Catholic Church

Although Melody never seriously considers having an abortion, at least since her pregnancy reached the second trimester, the thought still occasionally crosses her mind, "I could still fly to London and end this" (12). Abortion in Ireland, previous to 2017, had been possible in cases in which the pregnancy posed a risk for the woman, but not if there was threat of suicide. Melody could not have aborted because it was illegal until 2017, year in which abortion was legalized until the twelfth week of pregnancy. Going to London to be able to abort is not a rare occurrence for women whose countries criminalize abortion; she does not do it, but Melody is clearly not against abortion, unlike her father whose Christian beliefs contrast starkly with Melody's in the following passage,:

> He read an article I wrote for a Sunday paper once about abortion and I saw him redden and take his glasses off and wipe them and put them back on, over and over again, as though the reading of my article was hurting his eyes and he needed to stop every now and then, and I heard him say, Hmm, as he read, and he folded the paper to quarters after he'd finished, and he looked at me and said, Well done, love, that's very good, and he went an hour early to devotions (30-1)

Her father's devout religiousness clashes and is sometimes incompatible with his daughter's actions; however, her remorse over causing him pain, although understandable, is misplaced. Given that her father "couldn't help […] believing as he [does]" (142), it is not Melody's responsibility to adhere to her father's faith and is under no obligation to conform with some beliefs that she does not share. Later on the story, Pat asks her to abort so that they can start over somewhere no one knows their past, and it is obvious that he is not willing to raise another man's child. Later on the story, when Melody is already thirty four weeks pregnant, he insists

that they can "try again" (180) and have a child together, he still needs to have a child of his own, being obvious that raising a illegitimate one does not appeal to him.

There is a very relevant passage that addresses the oppression of women exerted by the Catholic Church in Ireland:

> Forty years ago I'd have been taken bodily away and set to work on the stained vestments of righteous men, the shirts and smocks and socks and smalls of those still in good standing with the Almighty, my baby dragged from me and sold and spirited away to live in grace away from my foulness (11)

It makes reference to the 'fallen women', taken to the Magdalen Laundries, a place of labour, which supposedly aimed at improving their living conditions, but would instead exploit women, and in the case of single mothers, take their babies away. These spaces were already functioning in England and Ireland in the 19th century to help women reinsert themselves in society, but after the establishment of the Irish Free State, in 1922, these Laundries, operated by Catholic orders until the end of the 20th century, in 1996, became an institution to punish and oppress women (Killian 22). The initial purpose forgotten, the Magdalen Laundries were employed as an alternative to prison, thus, rather than being helped, women were confined in those places, often on grounds of prostitution, single motherhood or any other 'deviancy' (including victims of sexual aggression), but there were cases in which there was not any reason to explain some girls' incarceration (Killian 23). As Killian explains, these women were unable to remove the stigma attached to the Magdalen Laundries and through them, "unmarried mothers were 'othered'" because they were forced to "[surrender] their status as mothers, sisters and daughters, members of society at large with their own voices, and attained a new classification of unmarried mother" (23). Although women could not be forced to enter the Laundries, they were misled into choosing them over prison (24) and there they were

dehumanized and treated like slaves. “Labour ‘freely’ given”, birthnames changed for numbers, uniforms, the cutting of long hair, isolation and silence were some of the rules ‘fallen’ women were to obey in the Magdalen Laundries (27). It is relevant to bear in mind Adrienne Rich’s statement that both “the experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have […] been channeled [*sic*] to serve male interests” (42), and anything that fell outside the boundaries of sexual morality was a menace.

Mary, in one of the passages, tells the protagonist about her sexual experiences with Buzzy,

> We done it night and day from the very minute we was on our honeymoon to the day I ran from him. I loved him, miss. I didn’t mind one bit doing it with him the whole time. I got fierce sore once or twice, down there, like, but I didn’t say anything the way he wouldn’t be getting vexed. (54)

Mary’s narration is not about her sexual desire or fulfilment, it is one of servitude, in which she “didn’t mind” because she loved him, but at the same time she would not dare complain because Mary thought, Buzzy surely did as well, that it was her duty to give him pleasure him and rejecting the advances of her husband was not a possibility. In relation to this, it is worthy of mentioning that there is still the misconception that rape cannot occur within marriage. In *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (2009), Diarmaid Ferriter speaks about marital rape and that until recent times it was accepted that “the husband [could not] be guilty of rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband which she cannot retract” (Hederman 58, qtd. From Ferriter 440). To all effects and purposes, in marriage women became the property of men, and consent given once meant that men could treat and use women as they pleased for as long as she or he lived. Although views on consent are changing and

society, overall, has a better grasp of what freely given consent is, some reluctance to see marital rape as ‘real’ rape remains.

There are a lot of misconceptions about the Travellers’ sexualities and the dynamics within their personal relationships which emerged as a consequences of the prejudiced and uneducated accounts by the settled community, which regarded them as promiscuous and accused them of engaging in practices such as the sharing and selling of their wives, but as Helleiner explains, their

> survival depended primarily on the labour of family members rather than the transfer of property such as land and dowry. Marriage and child-bearing for them were prerequisites for economic survival, and both occurred at a young age. For propertied farmers, however, the young marriages of the 'tinkers' represented sexuality loosened from economic considerations of landed-class reproduction and Church regulations (45)

In the Traveller culture, having children is of extreme importance, as are the expectations of having them immediately after getting married (Helleiner 210). Traveller women’s reproduction was always controlled: they were “privately encouraged by medical personnel to use contraceptives and/or, after the birth of several children, to undergo sterilization”, as a possible sign of non-Traveller’s view of Travellers’ high fertility as a problem. Having children out of wedlock was much more rare in the Traveller community than the rest of Ireland, “the preservation of a particular form of family life is seen as important for the survival of Traveller culture, placing responsibility for its maintenance on the bodies and practices of Traveller women” (Grey 66)

Men's Victimhood in *All We Shall Know*

Sex work is not a main theme of the novel, but nonetheless it is relevant to mention that Melody's husband had hired the services of a sex worker. Melody confronts a few "crones" who had been staring at her in a café, and suggests that Pat, along with a few other men highly regarded by the town, had also hired sex workers "while their mother were kneeling down at devotions and saying novenas and doing stations of the Cross in thanks to God that their boys are all married to grand girls." (67). Melody considers what the "crones" might have thought of her accusation, and how they would excuse Pat's behaviour because "he was drove to paying for it, the poor misfortune. The flesh is weak" (76), both blaming Melody for it and justifying Pat. It is not a delusion of Melody's to believe this might have been a possible reaction, since she seems to be well aware of the double standards in relation to gendered sexuality; they exculpate Pat because he was a victim of both Melody and the sex worker, the former is to blame because she would not comply with her marital duties so he is 'forced' to seek sexual intercourse with another woman, a sex worker whom he could not resist because "the flesh is weak".

Later in the story, Melody reminiscences about her engagement, how she had wanted a "cluster on band" and not a "solitaire" as her engagement ring, but she thinks that Pat, nervous and intimidated by the clerks of the store, "pretty girls in tight blouses and tighter skirts" (116) might have acceded to buy the solitaire ring, which tend to be more expensive. In Martin Toppy's case, since he is underage, he is exempt from responsibility from a legal stance, but his character is dispossessed of any capacity of decision; Melody's narration implies that he did not have any choice but to desire her: "What boy of seventeen wouldn't go mad for a woman like you?" (120). He is a victim of his sexual desires, "Martin Toppy had no choice but to put his lips on mine that day" (165), in the same fashion that Pat had been back at the store or with the sex worker. In another instance, Pat's father, Paddy, who barely appears in the

novel, is only shown as a puppet manipulated by his wife Agnes, who is believed to have ordered him to 'encourage' Melody to leave the town in exchange of money so that Pat can live more comfortably in the town.

We can see a pattern, in which men tend to be justified for their actions; whatever they do happens because a woman has led them to it, putting always the responsibility on women's bodies, which are sexualized and objectified as a tool to manipulate men.

III. Relationships Between Women: Mother/Daughter, Jealousy and Sisterhood

Idealized Motherhood vs. Lived Experience

Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born,* divides motherhood into two different notions: first, as "the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children", and secondly, as "the *institution,* which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (13). She recognizes that the figure of the mother is one that is distorted by impossible expectations and limitations that do not coincide with most real mothers' experiences. Similarly, O'Reilly introduces the "ten ideological assumptions of patriarchal motherhood", which consist of the "essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticalization of motherhood" (14). To summarize, O'Reilly explains how motherhood under patriarchal conditions, has effectively relegated women to the domestic sphere as the main (an often only) carer of children, as it is in their biology and identity as women, expecting the assumption of the responsibility and expertise, but demanding as well that women's full time is *devoted* to childrearing, setting impossible and unhealthy standards

for women. Patriarchal motherhood prioritizes the biological mother as the "authentic mother" (14) and deems unnatural everything that does not conform to the unrealistic standards it sets for motherhood, shaming women into feeling inadequate and thinking of themselves as bad mothers (19); for O'Reilly motherhood designates the institution but mothering references "women's lived experiences of mothering as they conform to and/or resist the patriarchal institution of motherhood and its oppressive ideology" (19). We can see in the novel a critique on the idealization of motherhood, "Start of second trimester: morning sickness ends. I read that in a book, put just like that, set out perfunctorily as a fact, unassailable, incontrovertible, beneath a photo of a beautiful, smiling, perfect mother-to-be" (10-11). And the love between mother and child is depicted as "the perfect kind, the kind that exists above all earthly things" (Ryan 209).

Susan Nathiel warns us about the harmful effects of the idealization of motherhood as it severely affected women's mental health and their sense of worth as mothers, inevitably leading women to compare themselves with the unrealistic representations of perfect mothers from the magazines and movies, which "stay at home doing housework enthusiastically (in high heels), preparing nutritious after school snacks for her children, effortlessly producing meals, doing the laundry, and creating a soothingly harmonious home atmosphere around the clock—and loving every minute of it (169).

Behind the idealization of motherhood, we find the assumption of a maternal instinct which implies that childrearing is natural and effortless for all women. The invention that all women possess maternal instincts, "rather than intelligence" (Rich 42), implies the inevitable desire inherent in women to wish to become mothers because it is in their biology; however, as Enza Gandolfo expresses, motherhood is a social construction, and this is the reason why "the involuntarily childless—the infertile women—incur pity, while the voluntarily childless—those women who have chosen not to become mothers—are often viewed as selfish" (112). In

fact, women who never have children, whether it is by choice or not, are most often considered to be incomplete, attributing their wholeness as women to their experiences as mothers. They can never be satisfied as women unless they fulfil their biological role of becoming mothers, "the childless woman is the other of the other, doubly lacking first as a woman (not man) and then as a non-mother (not fully woman)" (Gandolfo 114). Mary Crothery, as a childless woman Traveller, is marginalized due to three different circumstances: as a Traveller, she is discriminated by the settled people; as a woman she suffers from sexism originated in both the settled and the travellers communities; finally, her inability to get pregnant leads to her status as an outcast because of the essential condition of motherhood in the particular case of the Irish Travellers.

Usually, women who place babies for adoption are more justifiable and are less likely to be judged if their socio-economic conditions are precarious, if they are teenagers, lack a support system, or if the pregnancy is the result of rape; adult women who are well-off, who can afford to raise a child, or whose pregnancy occurs within marriage, cannot justify abortion or giving the baby up for adoption. This works under the presumption that childless women are so because they do not have the means and are under bad conditions to care for a child. If, on the contrary, the circumstances are favourable (stable job and income, support, etc.) women are considered "abnormal" if they do not wish to become mothers. As Gandolfo explains, "when a childless woman is envied her freedom, it is understood to be at the cost of the most intimate and crucial of human relationships" (113), working once again under the assumption that women cannot have plenty lives unless they have children.

In Ryan's novel motherhood is very important because to some extent, all female characters are conditioned by their status (or lack thereof) as mothers: the different relationships between mothers and daughters in the novel as well as other issues such as Melody's pregnancy or Mary's infertility are the main themes of the novel.

In the particular case of mothers and daughters, Nathiel notes that "The bond between a mother and her children is an idealized one in our culture, and that bond is assumed to be strongest and most mutual between mothers and their daughters" (xv). As we shall see, in Ryan's novel, the relationships between mother and daughter are not all idealized, they are diverse, complex and often ambiguous or confusing.

The protagonist's mother was ambitious and longed for a professional career she could not attain; we are not told the reason, but she might have been forced to sacrifice her career under the pressure to conform with patriarchal gender roles, and become a stay-at-home mom. Melody remembers her as cold and mean, never quite loving or maternal-like, and she appeared to be frustrated by her husband's lack of ambition. Melody's mother devalues her husband's efforts, verbally abusing him, and Melody soon starts imitating her mother's behaviour and belittles her father as well: "I let my perfect love for him be sullied, and eroded, and disintegrated, by the coldness of a woman I didn't even really like, but whom I wanted more than anything to be like" (18). Melody's father passively accepts the treatment received by his wife and daughter as if it was expected and inevitable that Melody would follow her mother's steps. He is rather helpless, taking the belittlement of his family but still supporting them and being loving (19).

Melody refers to herself as an "extension" of her mother, and as Hendrika C. Freud expresses,

> For a woman, the inner bond with the mother can be a source both of strength and of frustration. To a great extent, the child's first relationship is decisive for its identity and sense of self-worth, particularly among women. Subsequent love relationships can be damaged when a woman continues to see herself as the extension of her mother. […] Involuntarily, such a daughter remains inside her mother's range of influence and will continue to be a part of her mother, body and soul. Instead of her own desires, she must

> fulfil her mother's wishes. The instinctive result of this is hostility towards her mother, often hidden even from herself (3)

Melody's relationship with her mother is a complicated one; she did not like her, but she still longed for her approval and therefore started to imitate her, even when that led to Melody's hate towards herself. She is going to be profoundly affected in adulthood by her mother's passing when she is fourteen. While in the funeral parlour, she realizes that in her mother's hands rosary beads had been placed and she is aggressively furious because her mother was not religious and she thought that her mother would have never agreed to it. Melody, still an extension of her mother, still needing her validation, reacts by hitting her child cousin and demanding that the rosary is removed.

Melody's mother had suffered depression during her pregnancy, "she wouldn't eat for a time and hardly drank a sip of water, even, and lay still with the curtains drawn and barely spoke", and her doctor had failed to recognize her mental illness and merely advised her to "buck herself up" (105). As Yolanda Kennedy informs, "16% of pregnant women – attending maternity services across Ireland are at probable risk of depression during their pregnancy" but the mother's mental health is often overlooked which can lead to other medical issues affecting both the mother and the baby, including an increased probability of "neurodevelopmental and behavioural disadvantage during infancy and an increased risk of mental health problems in childhood and later life" (Kennedy). Furthermore, Susan Nathiel dwells in *Daughters of Madness: Growing Up and Older with a Mentally Ill Mother* (2007) on the effects of being raised by a mother (or any other primary caregiver) suffering from mental illness. In her book, she compiles a series of accounts from women whose mothers were mentally ill, in order to identify how this situation affected and shaped their adulthood. Nathiel concludes that "mental health professionals didn't do very well with these women and their mothers".

In Ryan's work, Melody's mother-in-law blames her for being "a lunatic the same way [her] mother was" (124), which falls in line with Nathiel's claims that women's experiences since birth with the main caregiver shape, in unexpected ways, their adulthood. As an adult, Melody is horrified by the way she treated her father, copying her mother; she experiences a sort of "matrophobia", because she regrets having turned into her mother as a child. Her remorse resurfaces now because by recognizing her problematic relationship with her mother, she can be liberated from it, as Rich explains: "Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free" (236).

Radically different is the relationship of Breedie, Melody's childhood friend, and her mother. Breedie had confessed to Melody that she was in love with her father, and she suggests that he had reciprocated her feelings, although he had never acted on them. Through this sort of Electra Complex, she hates her mother because she sees her as competition for her father's attention and affection. There never is a confirmation, Melody as a teenager had "believed Breedie believed it" (157), but there are instances which might insinuate that Breedie's confidence in her father's romantic feelings towards her might not have been wrong, e.g. when the protagonist describes a "darkness behind his eyes, and a strange kind of hungry sadness" (157).

Sisterhood

Women's relationships with each other are popularly said to be characterized by competition, jealousy, and meanness. In *All We Shall Know,* one of the most vicious scenes occurs between Melody and her mother-in-law. Agnes, Pat's mother, accuses Melody of using her sexuality to manipulate her son, describing him as a victim, powerless to her "charms", who was tricked into marrying her because she "[was] wide open for business with [Agnes'] poor gom" (53).

Arranged marriages may be the rule for Irish Travellers, but it does not mean that non-Traveller marriages are free of parental influence, or even manipulation. Furthermore, Agnes blames her for having miscarried, emphasizing how she failed Pat by not giving him any children, "And you not able to keep one safe inside in you for my Pat" (53), and hopes she miscarries again. Melody is not kind in response to Agnes' words; she accuses her of ruining her family's lives, her husband and children, and suggests that she is not a good mother, that Pat would often have nightmares about her. But as soon as the accusations are thrown, they seem to reach a compromise, or at least, an understanding by acknowledging that it is futile to keep hurting each other.

Breedie, Melody's friend, is the target of the "cool girls" who mock, insult and physically abused her. She is beaten, and nicknamed with derogatory terms, "Crater-face and Dykey Flynn and Breedie-freak-o" (50) Breedie's skin causes her low self-esteem and her need to conform to the standards of beauty so as to be accepted and feel as a part of the group, not an outcast. This leads her to take pills to eradicate her acne, whose secondary effects might have led to her suicide. Mental health and low self-esteem often go hand in hand since obsession over beauty standards tend to derail in eating disorders and other self-harm practices, both of which, Breedie seems to be a victim of. Like Melody's mother "she'd leave her curtains closed all day at the weekends and never let the sunlight touch her face", however, in Breedie's case, her depression was diagnosed (159-60). The cuts that she inflicts on herself are a material manifestation of her mental illness, and also a cry for help directed at Melody when she makes sure that her friend sees them (Ryan 158).

There is a hint at possible eating disorders in the novel, or at least, at the harmful culture of thinness, which has for so long made women feel terrible about their body shapes. Melody's mother praises Breedie when she declines food, encouraging her to stay thin, which would lead Melody to compare her body with Breedie's, "[her] childish body, short-legged and chubby,

and […] Breedie's long bare arms, and long legs, and graceful neck, and her pale skin and wide blue eyes" (134) but her envy was not only restricted to the appearance of their bodies, she felt jealousy when her mother would comment positively about Breedie and not about Melody, which insinuates both that Melody saw herself as terribly inadequate and not good enough in her mother's eyes and that she was desperate for her mother's approval. Melody felt envy and was jealous of Breedie, she envied her physical appearance, but also "her sadness because it seemed to [Melody] so heroic and romantic, to be so sad, to have such traumas in a roiling spring, bubbling behind her eyes" (72). Nonetheless, Melody is envious of her friend, she "sometimes hated her" (8) because Breedie better fitted with the standards of beauty established by a patriarchal society that valued women for their physical appearance.

There is always a certain ambiguity in Melody's friendship with Breedie, some of the language used in the novel can lead us to interpret their relationship as a romantic one. Melody refers to Breedie as her "first love" (72) and describes scenes such as the following one:

> Breedie Flynn and I had practised on each other, but we'd never used our tongues, reasoning that to do so would make us lezzers, and anyway we laughed too much to get any serious research done. Breedie drew back from me once and put her hand on my cheek and I put my hand on top of hers and we looked into each other's eyes and time moved liquidly to a forking of paths, and then I laughed and so did she, just at the point of divergence. The universe makes and remakes itself in each moment. I feel those other lives sometimes, going on around me" (16).

This scene could be interpreted as just two young girls, "[practising]", or experimenting with their sexualities, but the emotional component of the scene could suggest that there was some romantic attraction between them. Specially, if we compare Breedie's "Melody, don't leave me alone like this", her desperate cry to Melody (50), which parallels Martin Toppy's "Please,

miss, don't banish me" (35). Therefore, a different reading of Melody and Breedie's relationship is possible, in which abandoning her for Pat could be seen as Melody complying with heteronormativity.

Mary's presence has a soothing effect on Melody, "something in my heart was lifted, and I felt the baby settling down to sleep" (26)); Melody's suicidal wishes after her meeting Mary, that is why visiting her father, which was intended to be her last encounter with him to give them both some closure before killing herself, was not as pressing as before. She feels a connection with Mary, "sometimes I hear Breedie when she says my name" (133), which suggests that Mary might have substituted Breedie, that for Melody to able to forgive herself, she must help and treat Mary the way she was supposed to treat Breedie.

bell hooks explains that women are conditioned to believe that "relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience" (43), and instead, she advocates for a sisterhood, in which if women "[work] together to expose, examine, and eliminate sexist socialization within ourselves, women would strengthen and affirm one another and build a solid foundation for developing political solidarity" (47). But she repeatedly reiterates that it is only possible if we are cognizant of the different experiences of women and how they are conditioned by a series of interlocking oppressions (44). This is a critique to mainstream white feminism, which marginalized women who were non-white, poor, non-heterosexual, disabled or aged, by ignoring the particularities of each situation. Braidotti too negates the notion of woman as "a monolithic essence defined once and for all" (4), an assumption that is the "enemy within" (hooks 46) feminism.

Melody's friendship with Breedie is a symbol of sisterhood, because they are women, of course, but they have different mindsets and come from different ethnicities and social class, and even have a very different education, that sometimes clash. Melody acknowledges Mary's

marginal status within the settled community, and even stands up for her when Mary is immediately treated like a criminal when she enters a store. Even if they might have different viewpoints, they understand the struggles of each one and support each other. At the end of the novel, Melody writes Mary down as the biological mother of the baby and then she gives him to her. Of course, this is an extreme case of women helping women (surrogacy is certainly different), although her relationship with her baby was complicated, the decision of surrendering the baby was not either an easy one, as we have seen. Nonetheless, this action helps Mary get rid of her status as a barren woman and simultaneously, it diminishes the guilt that Melody harbours.

Conclusions

When we first meet Melody, in her twelfth week of pregnancy, she is at a low point; she constantly thinks about dying and is only waiting to visit her father one last time before committing suicide. She is pregnant of a seventeen-year-old Traveller, a student of hers, and recently separated from a man with whom she had a relationship that sometimes bordered on mutually abusive behaviour; furthermore, she is still haunted by both her mother, with whom she had had a complicate relationship, and her friend, a victim of her betrayal and abandonment. She feels broken and purposeless and she is sure that she is a bad person, failing to find any strengths within herself. The initial distorted self-perception is mitigated by her friendship with Mary, and she is able to come to terms with her own errors and realize that her mistakes do not put her beyond redemption, “I’m not all bad. I’m not evil or irredeemable” (60). Melody is not a terrible person, but she is not either a flawless character, or a martyr; she does not attempt to justify her actions, and she is in fact quite aware of her flaws and the consequences that her past mistakes have at the present time. Melody has punished herself so harshly that her

conscience is much more cleared than it was, as if her pain were her penance for the way she treated her childhood friend. In the same way that she admits her faults, she acknowledges, albeit more reluctantly, that she has the capacity to be good and selfless, and that she can be at peace with herself over all the suffering that she both provoked and endured.

This is a peculiarity of Ryan's storytelling, the complexity and layered personalities of his characters, the lack of absolutes since they are not flawless nor so completely corrupted that they cannot redeem themselves. The author offers the same treatment to the issues handled in the novel; topics such as motherhood, pregnancy and both romantic and platonic relationships are not at all idealized but depicted in a way that renders them realistic, imperfect but hopeful, and with the potential to improve. As for the representation of the Irish Travellers, while the author might accentuate the violence in the Traveller community and, at times, rely in excess on certain stereotypes and misconceptions about this ethnic group, we can appreciate the nuances in the construction. The Travellers are not simplified or generalized, and characters such as Mary Crothery or Martin Toppy demonstrate that the author made an effort to write them as complex individuals rather than as a homogeneous group. In an article in which he comments this novel and his personal experiences with Travellers, Ryan offers his particular vision of the difficult relationship between Travellers and non-Travellers:

> They're as real to us as a fairy story, a tale set elsewhere, in a different dimension, on a different plane […] their world is dark to us; they live beyond the trees where the wolves are. They are, in their very existence, a kind of magic ("Donal Ryan on his Brush with Traveller Magic")

He even uses the term "other" to refer to them as he considers that "the gap between us is short but never traversable". This mindset seems to reinforce the treatment of the Travellers as outsiders in Ireland as we have seen in the first section of this dissertation; Ryan, nonetheless

differs from the mainstream opinion, and does not believe that an understanding between the Travellers and the non-Travellers, in which the former are given the same opportunities, resources and consideration as the latter, is out of reach.

Ryan offers visibility to a silenced and ostracized minority that has struggled to find recognition in Ireland. Notwithstanding, the novel is not to be taken as an exact description of the community and it should absolutely not substitute the accounts given by Travellers themselves. Nan Joyce, Betsy Whyte or Rosaleen McDonagh are Traveller authors who have already provided authentic reports of their lifestyles and in particular, of their role as women within the community. It could be certainly interesting to contrast, in future works of research, their own voices with that of authors such as Ryan whose approach to the community of the Travellers is of undeniable interest, as we hope to have demonstrated.

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