

The Hegarty Family as the Epitome of Silence and Sexuality in The Gathering

Rejane de Sousa Ferreira

Abstract: *This article aims to discuss how Irish sexuality is pictured in Anne Enright's novel The Gathering, which is focused on the abuse suffered by eight-year-old Liam Hegarty and the witnessing of this crime by his younger sister Veronica. I argue that, as a witness, she shares the trauma suffered by her brother, as they are both haunted by this experience throughout their lives. As an adult, Liam Hegarty commits suicide, an incident which will lead Veronica to discover who was responsible for her brother's traumatic past. By means of her (re)visiting the Hegarty's sexual life and her (re)writing the past, Veronica provides an overview of Ireland's sexuality during the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first century.*

Keywords: *Silence; sexuality; abuse; vulnerability; Ireland.*

Anne Enright published *The Gathering* after sexual scandals involving the Catholic Church became increasingly known in Ireland. The plot revolves around a woman who receives the news that her brother Liam has committed suicide and is responsible for breaking the news to her family and prepare the funeral. As she is shocked about her brother's death, and especially about the way he was dressed when he died, with no underpants and no socks, she tries to understand what led him to this tragical end. The aim of this article is to analyze the way in which Enright fictionalizes sexuality in Ireland and the importance of the role played by the Catholic Church in the country during the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, as she pictures three generations of the Hegarty family.

Veronica, the protagonist and narrator, believes the "seeds" of her brother's suicide "were sown many years ago" (13), and this is the reason why she puts down on paper the story of her family. She starts by her grandmother, imagining her life story according to what she remembers and creates other facts, as she supposes they must have happened. Halfway through the novel, Veronica decides to face the truth, and reveals that she saw her brother being abused when they were children by her grandmother's landlord, Mr. Nugent, an incident that must have led to Liam's later suicide.

This article is divided into three parts. The first part, "Ireland and sexuality" makes an overview of the Hegartys' sexual life, the second part focusses on the main subject of the novel: "Suicide: consequences of the abuse", and the last one discusses the narrator, "Veronica, as a witness" and the way in which the consequences of the violence her brother suffered affected her. The theoretical perspective from which this analysis will be looked at is based on works by Diarmaid Ferriter, Anne Fogarty, Carol Dell'Amico, among others.

Ireland and sexuality

According to Veronica's narrative, the reader can perceive that even if Irish society has changed in the last years of the novel, women's and children's sexualities remained silenced or ignored. Fintan O' Toole, reflecting on art and Irish culture, cites the existential reflection on Donald Rumsfeld about social wisdom regarding Ireland:

Do you remember Donald Rumsfeld? He was the American Defense Secretary at the time of the invasion of Iraq. He went through this magnificent existential reflection, when he said there are the 'known knowns', things we know we know; the 'known unknowns', things we know we don't know; and then there are the 'unknown unknowns', things we don't know we don't know. In Ireland and Irish society and Irish culture there is a fourth one that even Rumsfeld didn't think about, which is the 'unknown known', which is something that you know, but don't know. And I would suggest that, oddly, all these shifts in Irish society, all these strange things, consist of this phenomenon of things that everybody knows and nobody knows. So, the most terrible example of this is the repression of women and children (107-8).

The childhood of Veronica's grandmother, Ada, is unknown to her. Thus, following on the idea that women and children were repressed and that Ada was an orphaned child, Veronica imagines her grandmother could have been molested in the absence of having someone to protect her. In fact, she could have been a prostitute in order to survive, especially because she was a friend of Frank Duff, founder of the Legion of Mary, who was responsible for "rescuing prostitutes off the streets of Dublin ... and taking them on retreat" (92). Thus, spending her whole life in such a vulnerable situation, Ada could be naturally conniving with the fact that Mr. Nugent or any other adult did whatever they wanted to her children and her grandchildren, especially since it was an unequal relation of power as he was the owner of the house where she lived. After all, what could Ada do from the position in which she had always been, to improve her situation?

As observed by Claire Braken and Susan Cahill, Mr. Nugent's breath made the air heavier, thus reflecting the extent of his ownership over Ada and her family, as if he were owner also of the people and not only of the house. Veronica could only make sense of this situation when she realized that Mr. Nugent was not a friend of Ada's, as she had believed he was, but simply the owner of the house where her grandmother lived. The way he wrote the rent records was so despicable, that Veronica was horrified:

There are gaps and lapses, into which I read anger or desire [...] It seems to me that it was a relationship of sudden pique and petty cruelty. I may be wrong – this may just be the way that landlords speak to their tenants. But there is a sense of thrall to it, too [...] Thirty-eight years of bamboozling him with her female charms, while he sat there and took it, and liked it, because he thought it was his due (233-235).

For generations, silence was the best alternative for women and abused children in Ireland, for it would spare their public exposure. Once credit would be given to the offender and not the victim, the final exposure was the victim's and not the offender's, as the historian

Diarmaid Ferriter states:

When these crimes were publicised it was invariably girls and women rather than boys and men who were seen as sexual deviants. In 1936, for example, the Cork Examiner reported that a judge referred to two teenage girls being used for sex in the backstreets of Cork city as ‘two little girls who were a positive danger to the people of Cork’. Likewise, though a woman who was raped and impregnated could insist that the male defendant was ‘responsible for me going to have a baby’, juries often did not see it that way (7-8).

Apart from crediting women as offenders, and not victims, in the case of sexual abuse Veronica also notices the little attention and importance given to children:

But when it came to love, Nugent was just a small-timer; he didn’t have much of it to throw around. He had the house, and he had the woman, more or less, and he did what he liked with the children passing through. Even his gratifications were small. Because children in those days were of little account. We three Hegartys were manifestly of little account (235-6 – author’s emphasis).

Silence was convenient not only to hide the inconceivable sexual abuses, but mostly for the immense sexual repression that existed in Ireland until the sexual revolution in the 1970s. This explains why Veronica’s father flipped out when she awkwardly took a condom box from her purse when he asked her for a cigarette:

There was nothing Daddy would not say. He had no sense of distance. He might have been talking to himself, almost. I was whoring all over Dublin. I was second-hand goods, I was turning myself into a toilet – I kid you not – though I think what he really wanted to say was that I was not doing what I was told . . . I remember thinking that he himself didn’t believe what he was saying, and that it was this lack of belief, combined with my own, that drove him to such extremes. Back in Belfield, my best friend Deirdre Moloney had just been thrown out by her mother for nothing at all: a very low-key sort of girl, she’d only ever had sex twice. Children were being chucked out all over Dublin (96 – author’s emphasis).

This quote bears relevant information in relation to recurrent changes in the country. When Veronica says that not even her father believed the words he was saying, she implicitly reveals the new Ireland that was emerging in Veronica’s generation, who was young in the 1980s and conflicting with the old one, represented by her father, who had been young decades before. Veronica’s father’s talk represents the values in which he believed in his youth and that he kept as the correct ones, probably for having experienced them in his generation, yet at the same time, without much conviction, since times change. One can understand that, to Veronica’s father, the purpose of sex is just to have children, for the family he created supposedly followed the conventions of the Catholic Church in line with the 1937 Constitution.

The country’s silence about sex was only broken with the advent of the Celtic Tiger. At that moment, Ireland received a large number of immigrants who changed the local mind once the Irish came in contact with them. The critic Giulia Lorenzoni adds that after the

modernization of Ireland, certain values and behaviors remained more for convenience rather than for proper belief. As a result, “[m]ass attendance did not decline but scant participation in other religious ceremonies indicated that flocking to Sunday mass was just an expression of conformity” (*The Gathering* 153). Veronica’s father’s religious compliance is appointed by her:

My father was never pious and I do not think he was afraid of hellfire – so when he had the sex that produced the twelve children and seven miscarriages that happened inside my mother’s body (which is kneeling now at the end of the line), then that was all he was doing – he was having sex. It was nothing to do with what the priests told him or didn’t tell him ... (227)

The apparent contradiction between Veronica’s father’s values and his behavior reveals how the identity of the Irish family has always been a complex matter. As a Catholic man, her father was supposed to believe in Catholic axioms, but Veronica is not convinced of that, she thinks he was just living his life without reflecting upon them. The Hegartys symbolize the Irish family which was idealized by the 1937 Constitution, but that did not exist.

Though Veronica admits inventing the whole story she is telling about her grandmother’s past, this invention is followed by sexual markers from the moment in which Ada is introduced in the narrative. Ada is depicted as a sexy figure from the outset, as it can be noticed at the following excerpt:

Lambert Nugent first saw my grandmother Ada Merriman in a hotel foyer in 1925. This is the moment I choose . . . She pulled a little bracelet out from under her sleeve, and the hand that held the gloves settled in her lap . . . Ada did not pretend to notice him, at first. This may have been the polite thing to do . . . He was not a man much used to hotels. He was not used to women who showed such twitching precision in the way they worked a glove (13-5).

Ada’s boldness in not ignoring the man who looked at her and the accuracy in stripping part of her vestments offers the reader clues that Ada was not naive, but less adept to morality. Ada belonged to a generation before the Independence of Ireland and the 1937 Constitution had taken place, thus this might explain why she could be considered a sexy woman by Veronica and why she had less children than her daughter Maureen, who paradoxically gives up her sexuality to become the mother of many children. As regards the historical image of Irish women after independence, Anne Fogarty comments:

The hegemonic control exercised by the Catholic church until recently further ensured that maternity was seen as the essence of womanhood and that it was associated with purity, asexuality, and self-denying devotion to others. The national constitution drawn up in 1937 further indemnified this assumption that motherhood formed the very basis of women’s social and political identity. [...] The veneration of women in their role as mothers ironically has the effect of diminishing their power; well- intentioned paternalism paves the way for social oppression (87).

Ada, unlike the idealized vision stated in the Constitution of 1937, held practical views

in terms of family life and a pessimistic view about sex: “Sex gets you nowhere in this world. Remember that, sex will get you precisely No Where” (120). In contrast, Maureen’s multiple pregnancies are unforgivable to Veronica:

My mother had twelve children and – as she told me one hard day – seven miscarriages. The holes in her head are not her fault. Even so, I have never forgiven her any of it. I just can’t. [...] I do not forgive her the sex. The stupidity of so much humping. Open and blind. Consequences, Mammy. *Consequences* (8).

The narrator believes that if her mother had not been so busy with the pregnancy of the moment, she would not have transferred her role as a mother to her eldest daughter, who became responsible for the others: “I don’t forgive the endless hand-me-downs, and few toys, and Midge walloping us because my mother was too gentle, or busy, or absent, or pregnant to bother” (*The Gathering* 8). She also believes her mother would not have needed to send a few of her little children to grandma’s house: “When I was just eight and Liam was nearly nine, we were sent with our little sister, Kitty, to stay with Ada in Broadstone” (*The Gathering* 46). The narrator will not forgive her mother for having been so oblivious to their fate and to their harsh realities, as if the only thing that mattered was having more and more children regardless of maternal responsibilities after birth, such as attention, care, comfort, health and education:

I don’t forgive her those dead children either. The way she didn’t even keep a notebook, so you could tell who had what, when, and which jabs. Am I the only woman in Ireland still at risk from polio myelitis? No one knows [...] *Don’t tell Mammy*. It was the mantra of our childhoods, or one of them. *Don’t tell Mammy*. This from Midge, especially, but also from any one of the older ones. [...] And my father said it more than anyone; level, gallant, There’s no need to tell your mother now, as if the reality of his bed was all the reality that this woman should be asked to bear (*The Gathering* 8-9).

The expression “don’t tell Mammy” (9) corroborates the general silence of the time, coming mostly from Veronica’s father, but at the same time she was disturbed by that silence, among other reasons, because she was unable to break with it. This is seen in chapter 30, when the Hegartys are gathered at Liam’s wake, and Veronica imagines herself revealing to her siblings and to her mother what she witnessed from Liam and Nugent, but she cannot.

Suicide: consequences of the abuse

Hedwig Schwall argues that Liam is the representation of the scapegoat of a culture which does not allow criticism or even the articulation of the Catholic ethos, only obliquely:

The repetition of the 'I am saying' indicates that the narrator's first and foremost aim is to articulate what has always been implicit: the fact that sexuality could not be discussed, as it was considered evil by the Catholic Church. Instead, Veronica's parents went along with this prohibition, which only deepened a vague sense of guilt, as we see in Veronica's mother whose epitheton ornans is 'vague' (207).

Schwall explains that “Veronica’s mother’s ‘epitheton ornans’, a term used to characterize her, is ‘vague’” (207), because Veronica renders everything in her mother’s life to be “vague”: she had “vague pregnancies”, “grandchildren who went vaguely wrong” (223), the marital bed responsible for the chaos of the children fate, “or not so much chaos, as a vagueness” (187). Veronica also considers her mother “vague”, and her mother’s vagueness to be her grandmother’s fault. Thus, it is as if Veronica’s mother could be called Maureen, the Vague.

Although Schwall reminds us of the repetition of the expression “I am saying”, the excerpt belongs to Veronica’s thought, not to the outsource of her speech. In fact, she is unable to speak. However, in her thoughts, the narrator does not seem restrained with words. The difference between the speech and thought of the character can be seen in the excerpt:

‘I don’t know’, she says. ‘What are you saying to me?’

Nothing, Mammy.’

‘What are you saying to me?’

I look at her. I am saying that, the year you sent us away, your dead son was interfered with, when you were not there to comfort or protect him, and that interference was enough to send him on a path that ends in the box downstairs. That is what I’m saying, if you want to know.

‘I just liked the sweets, Mammy. Get back into bed, now. I just remembered the sweets is all’. (*The Gathering* 213)

While Veronica does “not say” anything about what in fact took place, she keeps her emotions to herself and this leads her to reflect upon the sexual lives of all the Hegartys and, consequently, of whoever was connected to them. This is the case of Charlie, Nugent, Tom, Michael Weiss, the married men with whom Kitty had connections and the spouses of her other brothers. Nevertheless, about Liam’s sexual life, she concludes: “I don’t know when Liam’s fate was written in his bones. And although Nugent was the first man to put his name there, for some reason, I don’t think he was the last. Not because I saw anything else going on, but because this is the way these things work” (163).

Even without being fully able to understand the complexity of sexuality in general and of how certain sexual experiences leave their marks for the rest of one’s life, Veronica learns that although she does not know how these things are processed, Liam’s abuse is certainly the answer to his insecurity, which also began the year that he and his two younger sisters found themselves living in their grandmother’s house. As a result of the traumatic experience, Liam was the one who suffered from nightmares and needed to be protected by Veronica: “At around this time, Liam became frightened at night, and though Kitty was supposed to sleep in the double bed with me, he would come across in the darkness and worm his way between us, elbowing her out and hissing at her to move into the bed he had left” (117).

Liam was insecure about many aspects of his life. In relation to his emotional affective story, Veronica remembers, in chapter twelve, that the Hegartys never saw his girlfriends, or if they saw them, he did not like anybody speaking to them. Apart from having fleeting relationships, Liam never learned how to deal with his feelings and was inconstant; Veronica says he used to have arbitrary hatred for things: “Queers one year, Americans, the next” (78). He was “prone to sudden switches and changes of tack, but these were as often hilarious as

awful” (51). One example of his awful tack was when Veronica’s father-in-law died and he did not stop talking about rot in front of her husband. Liam felt pleasure in being eccentric: “He pushed beds down corridors and put cancerous lumps into bags and carried severed limbs down to the incinerator, and he enjoyed it, he said. He liked the company” (39). Liam was definitely an alcoholic. He was drunk in most of the memories Veronica had about him. To complete the list of his unsteady profile, Veronica says that “[t]he problem with Liam was never something big. The problem with Liam was a hundred of small things” (124) that any other person could manage easily.

Liam’s suicide was certainly his solution to stop living his meaningless life, or the way he found to put in practice his eccentric ideas, although one hypothesis does not exclude the other. Veronica believes that if her brother had not been abused, he would have had a different life. Talhari²⁹ (qtd in Borges, 2007), draws attention to the deep and eternal consequences that sexual initiation can have on a child who, of course, is not prepared for this:

Children victims of child sexual abuse may exhibit feelings of guilt, difficulty in trusting the other, hipersexualized behavior, fears, nightmares, isolation, feelings of helplessness and anger, running away from home, low self-esteem, somatic symptoms, aggression, [...] psychopathological disorders such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Depression, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Eating Disorders, Psychosomatic Disorders, delinquent behavior and substance abuse. (13-20)

All of these symptoms of depression could be easily applied to Liam, who eventually committed suicide. Schwall states that, to Enright, depression is not an individual problem, but the result of the depressed person in society. A parallel can be drawn between the sexual crime which Liam suffered and that of many abused children in Ireland, either by members of the Church or others. The fact that complaints against sexual abuse have intensified during the Celtic Tiger period only indicates there has been a break of the silence kept for so long, but unfortunately this does not point to a resolution, as it did not solve the Hegartys’ troubles, especially since the ones involved were already dead. After all, the memory of what was witnessed and the lack of explanations about Liam’s life continued to frighten Veronica.

Veronica as a witness

To Carol Dell’Amico, Liam’s death worked to bring out Veronica’s own personal traumas. By getting to know what took place with her brother, she was also affected in the condition of a witness, although she did not realize that: “She believes the event [childhood molestation] was key contributing to his despair and she produces, as she moves along, a searing document of deep feeling and an uncertainty locating of blame that attest more to her own trauma than to her brother’s” (59-60). By remembering the crime scene and putting it on paper, Veronica lets her feeling of fear flow, because at the moment she witnessed the abuse of her brother she felt so shocked by Nugent’s facial expression that she could never deal with it. Veronica still remembered how much this scene was later reflected in her own sexual life as an adult:

I don't know why his [Nugent] pleasure should be the most terrible thing in the room for me. The inwardness of it. The grimace it provokes like a man with a bad fart making its way through his guts, or a man who hears terrible news that is nonetheless funny. It is the struggle on Lamb Nugent's face that is unbearable, between the man who does not approve of this pleasure, and the one who is weak to it. I have slept since with men who are like this [...] I say I have slept with 'men' but you know that is a sort of affectation, because what I mean is that when I sleep with Tom, that this is sometimes what he is like, yearning on the pull-back and hatred in the forward slam. (144-5)

Veronica's perception of herself emerges only when she explores the reasons of her brother's suicide. As a consequence of Liam's death, Veronica is able to realize how much her life has been artificial, as if she were living in quotes:

I thought about this, as I sat in the Shelbourne bar – that I was living my life in inverted commas. I could pick up my keys and go 'home' where I could 'have sex' with my 'husband' just like lots of other people did. This is what I had been doing for years. And I didn't seem to mind the inverted commas, or even notice that I was living in them, until my brother died. (181)

Once Veronica reflected upon her own life, she realized she was dissatisfied with many of its aspects: her sexual life and husband, her job and specially with her mother and grandmother. From then on, she undergoes an identity crisis because she discovers that she had never externalized who she really was and what she really thought. The novel ends with Veronica's resolution to detach herself from her brother's fate. Instead of herself telling the truth about what happened to Liam, she tells her brother Ernest, who is a priest, and endows him with the responsibility to break the news to the other Hegartys. As Veronica's relationship with her husband is restored, grief gives way to hope as she also wishes to have a baby and start a new life.

Final thoughts

This article has discussed the way in which Anne Enright has fictionalized Irish sexuality in her masterpiece *The Gathering* as Veronica, the narrator, looks back into the past and delves deeply into the lives of three generations of her own family. On what concerns Enright's exposition of Ireland's sexuality, it might be said that any art is considered a living element and must be consistent with its socio-historical and cultural context. This is precisely what Enright does with her literature: "I was never interested in stereotypes (...). I'm interested in things that are not static. I'm interested in writing that is alive and has a life independent of me as well" (qtd. in Bracken and Cahill 32).

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