Insidious Vulnerability: Women's Grief and Trauma in Modern and Contemporary Irish Fiction

Author: Trista Dawn Doyle

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Trista Dawn Doyle

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Trista Dawn Doyle

Advisor: James M. Smith, Ph.D.

Abstract

This dissertation examines individual experiences of grief and trauma in Irish writing from 1935 to 2013, focusing specifically on novels by Elizabeth Bowen, Samuel Beckett, Sebastian Barry, and Eimear McBride. It offers a feminist reclamation of personal forms of loss that fall outside the purview of documented history and that typically go overlooked in literary criticism. Examples in this study include the suffering caused by the natural death of a family member, infertility, domestic and sexual abuse, social ostracism, institutionalization, and forced adoption. Through careful close readings of Bowen's *The House in Paris* (1935) and *The Death of the Heart* (1938), Beckett's *Molloy* (1955), Barry's *The Secret Scripture* (2008), and McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), I unpack how women's insidious vulnerability to grief and trauma manifests in modern and contemporary Irish fiction. The works I discuss here reveal the depth and complexity of grief—making visible forms of loss and violence that society tends to ignore, working through what impedes the grieving process, and giving voice to underrepresented experiences of emotional and psychological suffering.

Over three chapters, I engage with the discourses of trauma theory, Irish memory studies, and modernism and its afterlives. I draw on feminist psychiatrist Laura S. Brown's discussion of "insidious trauma" to inform my own concept, "insidious vulnerability," which I use to refer to the persistent threat of loss and violence that haunts marginalized groups in their daily lives. Likewise, I make reference to the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic definition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to distinguish trauma from other forms of emotional and psychological distress. I contribute to Irish memory studies by extending the critical conversation beyond public historical events (like the Easter Rising of 1916)—to include private forms of grief and trauma, particularly in the lives of women. Furthermore, I focus on authors who innovate, whose novels exhibit dissatisfaction with the limitations of conventional realist narratives and who attempt new modes of representation in an effort to articulate the inexpressible and the unexpressed. Bowen and Beckett stand as representatives of late modernism (1930s-1950s), while Barry and McBride help extend literary modernist afterlives into the twenty-first century.

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INTRODUCTION

It was a pain competition, one that women couldn't win.
— Anne Enright

What is recorded as history seldom represents the typical,
and what is typical seldom becomes visible as history—
though it often becomes visible as literature.
— Rebecca Solnit

Grief is personal, but writing about grief is political. This dissertation examines the intersections of the personal and the political in representations of individual experiences of loss in Irish writing from 1935 to 2013, focusing specifically on novels by Elizabeth Bowen, Samuel Beckett, Sebastian Barry, and Eimear McBride. I offer extended analytical discussions of Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris* (1935) and *The Death of the Heart* (1938), Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1955), Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* (2008), and Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013).[1] Throughout, I argue for a feminist reconsideration of how ordinary modes of grief manifest in modern and contemporary literature. I closely examine fictional representations of the commonplace losses individuals experience in their everyday

[1] I also briefly discuss Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1995), Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996), Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1996), and Colum McCann's *Zoli* (2006) to help contextualize the works of Barry and McBride.

lives—those occasions for grief that do not register on the national, historical scale, such as the natural or accidental death of a loved one. In doing so, I identify feminist impulses within the novels themselves. The works I discuss here reveal the depth and complexity of grief—making visible forms of loss and trauma that society tends to overlook, working through what impedes the grieving process, and giving voice to underrepresented experiences of emotional and psychological suffering.

In this dissertation, I propose that we can better understand the relationship between grief and trauma through my concept of "insidious vulnerability." Drawing on the work of feminist psychiatrist Laura S. Brown, I develop the term, "insidious vulnerability" to describe women's persistent exposure to threats of loss and violence in their daily lives.[2] Women's vulnerability to loss suspends them in constant anticipation of grief, while their vulnerability to violence makes them keenly aware of the possibility of trauma. Thus, even though I regard grief and trauma as distinct experiences—rooted in loss and violence respectively—I consider both to be categories of experience that plague women as potential sources of suffering.[3] Women gain consciousness of their insidious

[2] Although my dissertation focuses primarily on women, the concept of "insidious vulnerability" could also be used productively in discussions of other forms of marginalization, such as oppression based on race, class, sexuality, or disability.

[3] To be clear, when I write of "trauma," I am referring specifically to psychiatric definitions of post-traumatic stress disorder, and I limit my use of the word "trauma" to cases that meet the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic definition or Brown's modified definition of "insidious trauma."

vulnerability vicariously (through witnessing others' suffering) or directly (through firsthand experiences of grief and trauma or the buildup of microaggressions over time). For the purposes of this dissertation project, however, I narrow the scope and perform close readings specifically of women who have direct personal experience of significant loss: each chapter offers in-depth analysis of female characters who have lost loved ones.

While Chapters 1 and 2 focus almost exclusively on this more traditional conception of "loss" as bereavement, Chapter 3 reveals the close relationship between loss and trauma by featuring women who also exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress. In the early 1990s and after, psychiatric terms seep into public discourse, which allows the contemporary Irish writers I discuss in Chapter 3 to draw increasingly on trauma theory's concepts—such as "testimony," "flashback," "witness," and "repetition compulsion"—for their novels' characters, plots, and narrative forms. The novels in Chapter 3 touch on instances of both grief and trauma (the deaths of loved ones occur alongside violent sexual trauma), and I show the relationships between the two. My close analysis of trauma in that section illustrates that traumatic experiences inevitably trigger some form of grief—due to the victim's loss of security, memories, or peace of mind, for instance. Therefore, while I emphasize post-traumatic stress in Chapter 3, I also identify various trauma-induced forms of loss and grief alongside the characters' experiences of bereavement.[4]

[4] This connection between trauma and grief also allows me to use "loss" and "grief" as catch-all terms for psychological and emotional anguish, including that which is caused by trauma.

Throughout my analysis, I deliberately foreground forms of loss and violence that fall outside the purview of documented history. Examples within this dissertation include the suffering caused by the natural death of a family member, infertility, domestic and sexual abuse, social ostracism, institutionalization, and forced adoption. Such experiences tend not to appear in official national narratives. They typically slip by established methods of record-keeping, so they cannot be found easily in conventional archives or recovered by traditional historiography. Likewise, these private experiences rarely feature in literary criticism, which—in Irish Studies especially—mirrors history's emphasis on public events and documented history. Yet, the impact of ordinary grief on the individual is often immense. Each of the examples I name involves substantial loss and inflicts psychological and emotional pain on the individual. And, as the list suggests, women and girls endure particularly persistent exposure to the threat of grief and trauma in their everyday lives. Thus, a closer examination of women's insidious vulnerability opens up new ways of thinking about how society represses certain experiences of grief and co-opts others.

Using modern and contemporary Irish fiction as a case study, then, I analyze representations of women's insidious vulnerability in order to show how personal grief is silenced and suppressed, how the burden of public mourning falls disproportionately on women, and how the authors' own gendered subject positions affect their perspectives on these issues. In doing so, I pair intellectual inquiry with a call to action on behalf of those who grieve private losses. Academically, I seek to establish a more thorough understanding of select novels by examining important aspects that literary critics have thus far overlooked; politically, I aim to raise the profile of commonplace forms of grief

and trauma in the service of facilitating readers' ethical engagement with these concerns. I anticipate that readers' increased awareness of everyday psychological and emotional distress in fiction will lead to greater empathy and support for those who suffer it in real life.

My dissertation project began as a response to trends emerging in Irish memory studies. This subfield within Irish Studies—which owes much to the leadership of Oona Frawley and Emilie Pine—interrogates "what and how we remember; what and how we choose to commemorate; and what we forget" (Irish Memory Studies Network).[5] This dissertation contributes to Irish memory studies by extending the critical conversation to include individual experiences of grief and trauma that bear no direct relation to Ireland's most recognized historical events. So far—and especially during the country's "Decade of Centenaries" (2012-2022)—the topics of commemoration, historiography, and the relationship between memory and official history dominate Irish memory studies scholarship.[6] For example, Guy Beiner forges new methods of historiography as he reconstructs how historical events of 1798 ("The Year of the French") reverberate through Irish folk history and social memory for generations, and Richard Kearney and

[5] Oona Frawley edited the valuable four-volume series, *Memory Ireland* (2010-2014), and both she and Emilie Pine have been instrumental in establishing the Irish Memory Studies Network, which is based at University College Dublin but aims for international engagement.

[6] Examples are too numerous to list exhaustively. For a selection of key essays, however, see the collections edited by Frawley and Ian McBride.

Sheila Gallagher offer a performative, multimedia reconsideration of 1916 and the relationship between the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme. These projects are typical of Irish memory studies—not only in their innovative interdisciplinary methods but also in their privileging of documented historical events. Due to the public nature of such topics, the field tends to regard memory and forgetting in terms of collective consciousness or social memory, putting national perspectives ahead of individual, private forms of remembrance and amnesia. Given women's traditional association with the private sphere, however, scholars who emphasize public history can easily overlook women and their individual experiences of ordinary loss. Irish memory studies scholars like Mary McAuliffe, Liz Gillis, and Lucy McDiarmid do important work to restore women to their rightful place in Ireland's official history,[7] and my work supplements these efforts by revealing insights into women's experiences via their personal social histories. Therefore, I emphasize ordinary, everyday experiences of loss, sacrifice, and suffering to bring into focus the experiences that events of historical significance generally obscure. By spotlighting individual experiences of these eclipsed, insidious forms of grief and trauma, my project contributes to a fuller feminist reclamation of women's stories.

[7] For more on women's involvement in the 1916 Easter Rising, for instance, see Mary McAuliffe and Liz Gillis, *Richmond Barracks: We Were There: 77 Women of the Easter Rising* (2016) as well as Lucy McDiarmid, *At Home in the Revolution: What Women Said and Did in 1916* (2016).

To this end, I draw on the work of Laura S. Brown, whose feminist intervention in the early development of trauma theory informs my thinking about the vulnerability of the marginalized and oppressed. When the American Psychiatric Association first recognized post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1987, Brown expressed concern about the narrow parameters of the diagnostic criteria, which dictated that the triggering event must be "*outside the range of human experience*" (100).[8] She explained that this classification relies on "an androcentric norm" of "what is usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men" for its understanding of "human experience" (Brown 103, 101). Although the American Psychiatric Association has since updated the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, the implicit bias in the original definition caused lasting misperceptions in laypeople's understanding of trauma. In other words, the clinical bias reinforced social and cultural biases. As a result, public events that cause trauma generally garner more recognition than private, secret causes. For instance, governments allocate funding to mental health services for

[8] Brown was responding to the language about PTSD in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1987). The *DSM* is now in its fifth edition (2013) and has revised the criteria for PTSD. Significantly, it has eliminated the criterion that the traumatic event must lie "outside the range of human experience." The newest guidelines identify the trigger of PTSD as "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation" (American Psychiatric Association). Thus, the unexpected natural death of a loved one would not typically qualify, but this criterion grants more leeway to include the sort of "insidious trauma" Brown discusses.

soldiers traumatized by war and to support victims of natural disasters, but far too often, contemporary society still stigmatizes or ignores women who survive domestic abuse, rape, or incest. Additionally, everyday aggressions against non-dominant groups, such as racial slurs or the sexual objectification of women, which fall well within the typical range of minorities' human experience, often fail to register adequately—even when they trigger PTSD symptoms.[9]

In response to such misconceptions, Brown argued that we "need to expand and make more complex our definitions of psychic trauma" (107). Drawing on the work of Maria Root, she promoted the concept of "insidious trauma" as a way to talk about "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (Brown 107). "Insidious trauma" recognizes that the causes of PTSD may be more diverse—more subtle and more persistent—than the initial diagnostic definition acknowledged. Thus, by "look[ing] beyond the public and male experiences of trauma to the private, secret experiences that women encounter in the interpersonal realm," Brown called for a more nuanced understanding of how and why the symptoms of post-traumatic stress occur even in circumstances where there has not been an identifiable "event outside the range of human experience" (102). My dissertation makes a similar move: I look

[9] Brown summarized the potential symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as follows: "reexperiencing symptoms, nightmares, and flashbacks; avoidance symptoms, the marks of psychic numbing; and the symptoms of heightened physiological arousal: hypervigilance, disturbed sleep, a distracted mind" (100).

beyond "public and male experiences"—beyond the mainstays of Irish Studies (i.e., nation, politics, and religion)—to the private lives of women and girls in order to gain a more complete understanding of the nature of loss in modern and contemporary Irish society.

Not many fictional depictions of loss in this dissertation meet the full complement of diagnostic criteria for PTSD, but the psychological and emotional similarities between grief and trauma justify my rationale for thinking about the two together. Indeed, PTSD-like symptoms frequently appear in literary representations of grief. The most recent definition of PTSD outlines four clusters of behavioral symptoms: "re-experiencing, avoidance, negative cognitions and mood, and arousal" (American Psychiatric Association). We can observe resonances with each branch of this symptomology in the novels I discuss here. First, characters often recall their lost loved ones in flashbacks, a common form of "re-experiencing" in fiction. In Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*, Portia falls into a reverie about her mother Irene, and in Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1995), Pen's first-person narrative contains flashbacks of memories with her partner, Cara. Other characters respond to the pain of loss with "avoidance." For instance, Anna persistently rejects Portia's emotions in *The Death of the Heart* because she fears that the girl's grief will serve as a reminder of her own past suffering. Likewise, the narrator of *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* exhibits both "negative cognitions" and "arousal" as she tries to suppress her anticipatory grief for her brother: her estrangement from her sibling and her peers signals "negative cognitions" while her quest for violent sexual encounters fits the diagnostic definition of "arousal," which includes "aggressive, reckless or self-destructive behavior" (American Psychiatric Association). Dr. Grene in Barry's *The*

Secret Scripture, too, evinces a milder form of "arousal" in his disturbed sleep and distracted mind following the death of his wife, Bet. These examples illustrate how the symptoms of grief and trauma often align in fiction, even though most of these examples would not meet the full diagnostic definition of PTSD.

My main purpose in this dissertation, however, is neither to identify and diagnose symptoms in literary characters nor to contend that all grief is traumatic in the psychiatric sense. Instead, I demonstrate more broadly how oppression places non-dominant groups—and particularly women—permanently at risk of loss and violence. I explore the relationship between grief and trauma without conflating the two. My concept of "insidious vulnerability," therefore, adapts "insidious trauma" to fit my non-diagnostic purposes; I move away from Brown's emphasis on the hallmarks of PTSD but retain her insistence that we recognize certain individuals' persistent exposure to potentially traumatic stressors. When I speak of "insidious vulnerability" in this dissertation, I refer to the way that women live in oppressive conditions, which simultaneously put them at greater risk of loss and violence and complicate their efforts to cope with grief and trauma. For example, society regards girls' emotions as potentially disruptive and tries to contain them; it charges women with carrying out public mourning rituals, regardless of the woman's personal difficulties with the task;[10] it sexually objectifies young women

[10] Ireland in particular has a long history of public mourning rituals serving political objectives. To name just one prominent example, the 1915 funeral for Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa consolidated nationalist sentiment through oratory and mass demonstrations. Irish literature documents how heavily the burden of communal

from early adolescence then punishes them for their sexuality. Still, I do not necessarily insist that such vulnerabilities produce traumatic symptoms in every character I examine. Brown's concept of "insidious trauma" and the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic criteria for PTSD are most relevant to the texts I discuss in Chapter 3, "Gendered Approaches to Representing Women's Insidious Vulnerability to Grief and Trauma in Contemporary Irish Fiction," because those novels were written after theories of trauma filtered into public knowledge in the 1990s and after. Roseanne in Barry's *The Secret Scripture* and the unnamed protagonist of McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* present almost all the symptoms of PTSD, for instance, but characters like Henrietta in Bowen's *The House in Paris* or Lousse in Beckett's *Molloy* do not.

Loss can cause trauma or exist alongside trauma, but most often it manifests as grief without the full range of symptoms that would need to be present for a proper diagnosis as the mental disorder, PTSD. Indeed, this dissertation engages a wide spectrum of reactions to loss, from affectless bereavement in Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*, to the grieving girls in Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris* and *The Death of the Heart*, and from their suppressed sadness to the more obviously traumatized female narrator-protagonists of Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* and Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. In my readings of these novels, I endeavor to uncover the hidden

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mourning falls on women, who are expected to grieve publicly for male political martyrs. See Maurya keening for her sons in J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) and Mrs. Tancred participating in the funeral procession for her son in Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924).

realities of how insidious vulnerability—the threat posed by trauma and grief—affects women and girls through close analysis of fictional representations of individual losses.

The ethical impulse motivating my work draws inspiration from scholars who already bear witness to the hidden narratives of Ireland's recent social history. I find the work of literary critics like Kathryn A. Conrad, Emilie Pine, and James M. Smith compelling not only for their intellectual insights but also for their productive engagement with difficult contemporary issues, ranging from sexual and gender politics to institutional abuse in industrial schools and Magdalen laundries. Like Brown's feminist psychiatric perspective, their influence pervades my thinking and my work. I, too, strive to reveal as yet unacknowledged forms of repression and to articulate heretofore unspeakable experiences of grief and trauma. I tackle themes and issues related to the work of Conrad, Pine, and Smith as I confront the dark truths, power imbalances, and persisting injustices that are observable in Irish fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

To achieve these goals, I call into question assumptions that critics make when they read the novels I discuss. In other words, my analytical method frequently goes against the grain of existing literary criticism in an effort to reveal unexamined facets of works by Elizabeth Bowen, Samuel Beckett, Sebastian Barry, and Eimear McBride.[11]

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[11] Chapter 1, which focuses on Elizabeth Bowen, discusses this skeptical interpretive method in greater detail—with particular reference to Judith Fetterley's feminist concept of the "resisting reader" and Margot Norris's "suspicious readings" of James Joyce.

Two guiding principles direct my analysis: first, to pay close attention to characters' individual experiences of loss; and secondly, to push back against implicit gender biases. These two principles work in tandem, as implicit gender biases often lead readers to give short shrift to an individual character's grief, to ignore what belongs to the so-called "private" sphere, or to interpret female characters as symbols rather than as individuals whose life experiences have their own intrinsic value. For each novel I discuss, I assert that grief plays a much more significant and complex role than previous interpretations have taken into account. This observation plays out differently in each chapter, but in every instance, the practice of looking more closely at representations of individual grief highlights overlooked social issues (e.g., childhood loss or grief for same-sex partners), it encourages empathetic engagement with marginalized characters, and it establishes the grounds for readers' ethical response to women's insidious vulnerability.

In identifying novels to examine, I select writers who innovate, whose works exhibit dissatisfaction with the limitations of conventional realist narratives and who attempt new modes of representation in an effort to articulate the inexpressible and the unexpressed. Indeed, I hypothesize that an adequate rendering of the unruly nature of grief mandates the disruption of narrative expectations, so that form echoes content. Just as loss disrupts the flow of an individual's life, Bowen, Beckett, Barry, and McBride unsettle novelistic conventions like chronological narrative time in their representations of grief and trauma. Thus, I focus primarily on literary modernism and its afterlives.[12]

[12] For my understanding of "modernist afterlives," I draw on the research of Paige Reynolds, who edited the collection *Modernist Afterlives in Irish Literature and Culture*

Elizabeth Bowen and Samuel Beckett represent important figures of late Irish modernism—and in late modernism more generally. While Beckett's status as a prominent literary figure has never been in doubt, critics have reclaimed Bowen as a significant modernist writer in recent years. Anne Fogarty, for instance, positions Bowen as part of a second wave of Irish women modernist writers in the mid-twentieth century, alongside Kate O'Brien and Maeve Brennan. Fogarty argues that this group of writers "self-consciously carries forward the earlier modernist quarrel with the literary form while continuing to . . . unpick the ideological stances that insist on the fixity of gender roles and of national and sexual identities" (148). So, while Bowen and Beckett represent late modernism (1930s-1950s), my discussion of Eimear McBride helps establish this twenty-first-century writer as a much more recent proponent of an ongoing modernist literary tradition.[13] Sebastian Barry, whose novels fit more comfortably within a realist tradition, also plays with structure and polyvocal narration in *The Secret Scripture* in a self-critical attempt to undermine his privileged position within the patriarchal ideology. In sum, I feature each of these authors in this dissertation because they deliberately manipulate or break formal conventions in order to interrogate the precarious position of individual grief in modern society.

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to "explore how the themes, forms and practices of high modernism are manifest in Irish literature and culture produced subsequent to that cultural movement" (1).

[13] My identification of McBride's formal innovations as distinctly "modernist" builds on work by Reynolds, who regards the narrative style of *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* as a "canny adoption of modernist form" ("Trauma").

"Modern society" in this study does not always correlate directly or exclusively with Ireland, even though all of the writers I discuss are tethered in some way to Irish soil.[14] Bowen, for example, depicts upper-middle-class Anglo-Europeans in Paris and London in *The House in Paris* and *The Death of the Heart* and draws on her familiarity with Ireland only for a brief interlude in the former novel.[15] Similarly, readers can identify the settings of Beckett's *Molloy* and McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* as distinctly Irish, but the narratives refuse to name the location specifically. So, while "Irishness" loosely links these writers, their commonalities have as much to do with their literary heritage and thematic interests as with their national identities. Because my critical method focuses on individual grief and trauma, the "Irishness" of these novels often matters less to my argument than each character's personal experience of their place within their given political and geographical context. I make reference, therefore, to relevant historical context as it is pertinent to the author's representation of gendered insidious vulnerability to grief and trauma. In Beckett's *Molloy*, for instance, I perceive Lousse acting out bathetic imitations of Irish nationalist mourning rituals, and in Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, readers can only properly understand Roseanne's circumstances in

[14] Bowen, Beckett, and Barry were all born in or near Dublin. McBride was born to Northern Irish parents in Liverpool, England, but she grew up in Ireland from the age of two.

[15] Bowen does situate other works in Ireland. Examples include *The Last September* (1929), *A World of Love* (1955), and select short stories and non-fiction.

relation to the hegemonic role of the Catholic Church and the prevalence of institutionalization in twentieth-century Ireland.

I also want to pause briefly to discuss the relevance of biographical readings, which I largely avoid within my chapters. Personal experiences—or, at least, personal family history—inform the works of Bowen, Beckett, Barry, and McBride. Bowen's depictions of girls grieving for dead mothers reflect her own early loss of her mother, for instance. Critic Elizabeth Cullingford describes the time Bowen and her mother, Florence, spent living alone together as "an extraordinary period of intimacy that ended abruptly when, in Elizabeth's thirteenth year, her mother died of cancer" (279). Readers can observe some parallels with Henrietta in *The House in Paris*, but the resonances with Portia in *The Death of the Heart* are even stronger: Portia's narrative describes a comparable period of intimacy with her mother, Irene. In similar fashion, Beckett writes and translates *Molloy* in the context of his mother's final illness. As the titular character ruminates over his fraught relationship with his mother, readers can perceive the author's own anxieties about May Beckett's imminent death (Ackerley and Gontarski xxiii-xxiv). Although Barry establishes more critical distance than Bowen or Beckett in *The Secret Scripture*, he consistently draws on family lore in crafting fictional characters and plots (O'Hagan). Finally, McBride inflects *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* with her own first-hand experience of losing her brother to a brain tumor. *New Yorker* reviewer James Wood notes that McBride "has rightly been at pains to emphasize the fictionality of her novelistic account" but adds that "the force of lament at the novel's close seems to carry a special authorial impress, remembrance painfully mixed with invention." While I believe that each writer's underlying experience lends emotional depth to their fictional

portrayals of loss and grief, my analytical treatment focuses on what happens within the novels themselves rather than engaging in extended biographical readings. My rationale is simple: these authors choose to write fiction, and critics should therefore understand their novels first and foremost as works of literary invention. The writers' personal experiences bolster their authority to write about themes of loss and grief, to be sure, but the creativity and formal innovation of these novels reward analytical close readings that go well beyond correlating textual details to biographical facts.

Chapter 1, "Grief in Girlhood: Mourning Parental Loss in Elizabeth Bowen's Late 1930s Novels," reveals the nearly invisible presence of girls' grief in *The House in Paris* (1935) and *The Death of the Heart* (1938). I read these novels against the grain, resisting the narratives' cues as they work to suppress the psychological and emotional effects of losing a parent. Through careful close readings, I account for Henrietta's essential role in *The House in Paris*, even as other characters steamroll her grief in their preoccupation with the more melodramatic tensions surrounding a young boy, Leopold. Both children stop for the day in Paris, but the charged question of whether or not Leopold's birth mother will appear stifles any potential narrative attention to the recent death of Henrietta's mother. My interpretation shows that Bowen subtly marks the erasure of the girl's sense of loss in what amounts to a cautious critique of Anglo-European society's repressive tendencies. However, *The Death of the Heart* offers a more direct indictment of bourgeoisie affectations and suggests that the aloof, unemotional posture adopted by characters like Anna Quayne is only a façade meant to mask wells of past grief and disappointment. I explain not only how Anna tries to contain her sister-in-law's emotions after the girl's parents die but also why Anna has such anxiety about grief's power to

breach the strict decorum she maintains in her household. In the process, I also demonstrate—through a close reading of Portia's extended reverie of her last summer in Switzerland with her mother, Irene—how Bowen interrupts her narrative's established logic in order to register the girl's suppressed grief. Throughout both novels, Bowen makes it difficult for readers to secure an unobstructed view of Henrietta's and Portia's grief, but she quietly challenges her audience to consider the significance of the girls' private, individual experiences of loss in the midst of distracting melodrama.

Chapter 2, "Unable to Grieve: Affectless Bereavement and Female Mourning in Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1955)," posits that Beckett's bifurcated novel, which focuses on Molloy in the first half and his counterpart Moran in the second, should be read as a meditation on loss. Specifically, I argue that the characters' fundamental inability to grieve effectively constitutes the central theme of *Molloy*. The main characters can name their losses, but they cannot come to terms with the reality of their bereavement in any productive sense. I offer alternative readings of Molloy, Moran, and the novel's only significant female character,[16] Lousse, to counter-balance existing psychoanalytic readings, which tend to construct a gendered dichotomy wherein the men are conscious beings and the women mere projections or symbols. Treating Molloy, Moran, and Lousse more as realist characters than as psychoanalytic concepts, I show that loss preoccupies each of them. Molloy and Moran manifest affectless bereavement as they both lack the

[16] Molloy's mother is significant to the novel as well, but she is not an acting, speaking character like Lousse. Instead, Molloy's mother features primarily as an absent figure.

required emotional capacity to respond to loss in healthy ways. Yet, Molloy perpetually seeks what he has lost (his mother), while Moran waits for what he has lost (his son) to return to him. Lousse's reaction to the death of her dog represents a potential—but by no means guaranteed—path out of this impasse. She performs public mourning rituals, complete with a eulogy, funeral procession, and burial to commemorate her dead dog. However, Beckett signals reservations about the effectiveness of Lousse's mourning methods as well since she repeatedly finds substitutes to replace her lost companions. In this chapter, I illustrate how Beckett's *Molloy* documents the disproportionate burden society places on women to grieve for the dead, and I offer a new way of reading this perplexing text—namely, as a novel about loss. In contrast to Bowen's works, which postulate that grief is always at risk of erasure, Beckett's novel suggests that bereft individuals have virtually no means to escape their bereavement. Unable to do the psychological and emotional work of grieving, they indulge ineffectual coping mechanisms instead.

Chapter 3, "Gendered Approaches to Representing Women's Trauma and Grief in Contemporary Irish Fiction," explores the ethical question of how novelists approach women's suffering in their works. From the 1990s onward, a significant cohort of Irish writers—including Sebastian Barry and Eimear McBride—make a concerted effort to give voice to previously silenced stories of trauma and grief.[17] In this dissertation's final

[17] This reclamation of women's secret, individual experiences in fiction is just one facet of the drastic cultural changes taking hold in Ireland in the 1990s and after. Public revelations and open discussion about issues like child abuse, domestic violence, and

chapter, I argue that contemporary writers' approaches to this feminist reckoning with women's insidious vulnerability ultimately fall along gendered lines. All the novelists I discuss in Chapter 3 powerfully narrate underrepresented experiences, but the men tend to exhibit more self-critical awareness of their privileged subject position within their still-patriarchal society while the women tend to emphasize the inadequacy of language itself, as it fails to articulate the losses and transgressions their protagonists suffer. Although I analyze Barry's *The Secret Scripture* (2008) and Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) in greatest depth, I also briefly discuss four other contemporary Irish novels that deal with women's trauma and grief in order to contextualize Barry's and McBride's literary techniques and thematic concerns. The narrative strategies of Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and Colum McCann's *Zoli* (2006) set the stage for Barry's purposeful framing of distinct voices for his traumatized female protagonist, Roseanne Clear McNulty, and his observing male character, the psychiatrist Dr. William Grene. And, in similar fashion, the critique of the limits of language in Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1995) and Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1996) pave the way for McBride's deliberate linguistic fragmentation, which simultaneously reveals how conventional language excludes the young female narrator and fights back ferociously against that exclusion. Most significantly, Chapter 3 critically reassesses how readers should understand Barry's and McBride's novels: I dissent from the conventional reading of Dr. Grene in *The Secret*

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wrongful institutionalization propelled Irish society toward a more direct confrontation with the particular vulnerability of women and children.

Scripture as a paragon of analytical objectivity, and I insist that critics and readers take into account the narrator's anticipatory grief for her dying brother in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*.

Ultimately, through this dissertation project, I seek to join the feminist fight I observe being waged in modern and contemporary Irish fiction. For my part, I argue for greater inclusion and recognition of women's experiences in literary criticism, taking fictional representations of individuals' losses as my starting point. I foreground everyday forms of grief and thereby illustrate literature's great capacity for making what is typical for women and girls visible. I find that reading against the grain of existing criticism allows me to speak more directly to issues that tend to go overlooked. I would also suggest that the "androcentric norm" Laura S. Brown perceived in psychiatry has its own equivalent in today's Irish memory studies, where public historical events still generally outweigh private experiences. Thankfully, though, the movement toward greater recognition for women's insidious vulnerability to pain and distress has been growing ever stronger, and I hope this dissertation project contributes productively to that effort.

CHAPTER 1 – GRIEF IN GIRLHOOD: MOURNING PARENTAL LOSS IN ELIZABETH BOWEN'S LATE-1930S NOVELS

In her first novel, *The Hotel* (1927), Elizabeth Bowen writes, "One's own visibility is impossible to calculate" (48). Throughout her long literary career, Bowen troubles over the implications of visibility and invisibility for her characters as they try to navigate the societies in which they live, and she consistently illustrates the heightened emotional stakes for individuals reeling from loss. *The House in Paris* (1935) and *The Death of the Heart* (1938) exemplify Bowen's concerns in their portrayals of girls grieving for recently deceased parents. Both Henrietta Mountjoy in *The House in Paris* and Portia Quayne in *The Death of the Heart* experience individual bereavement, but neither receives much recognition of her suffering. Other characters offer very little sincere sympathy; the narrative itself makes only glancing references to their emotional distress; and readers and critics tend to follow suit, disregarding the girls' personal experiences of loss. Thus, each girl's grief lurks at the very edge of visibility. I argue that suppression of these girls' grief compounds their insidious vulnerability by subjecting them to additional emotional injuries. This chapter seeks to bring that grief out into the open. In doing so, I demonstrate Bowen's nuanced, if surreptitious, reclamation of ordinary individual losses in her late-1930s novels.

To read Bowen's works with an eye toward grieving girls is to read against the grain of the novels' overt meanings. By interpreting *The House in Paris* and *The Death of the Heart* in this resistant manner, I engage in a feminist critical approach in order to reveal the systems of repression that force loss and grief into the shadows. In keeping with Judith Fetterley's seminal definition of a "resisting reader," I question the texts' "values and assumptions" and make "available to consciousness precisely that which the literature wishes to keep hidden" (xx). Indeed, my interpretation of Bowen's novels posits that the writer subtly invites resistant readings. The strangeness of her prose causes readers to distrust the narration, as her "language and syntax . . . [require] deliberate unpacking without definitive resolution" (White 84). Margot Norris presents similar logic in her rationale for offering "suspicious readings" of James Joyce's *Dubliners*. She explains that readers experience "unease or dissatisfaction with . . . *narrational prompts*—cues that the narration gives us in order to lead us (that is, the implied interlocutor of the story or its narratee) to one or another interpretation," and she recommends a form of engaged, resistant reading that analyzes the "narrational practice itself" (Norris 10). Norris even proposes that this critical resistance may result in more ethical literary analysis:

> If the reader begins rather naively by occupying the position of a narratee who more or less figuratively *swallows* the narrative line, then the turn toward questioning the way the story is told and resisting the interpretations it prompts also makes the reader objectify and interrogate her or his own reading practice and the bases of her or his own judgment. (10)

This ethical impetus motivates my own work, as I challenge readers not to be complacent when Bowen's narratives skim over girls' losses and as I reveal hidden reservoirs of grief in these novels.

The House in Paris and *The Death of the Heart*, written and published in the turbulent years between two world wars, implicitly map their characters' lives onto the landscape of war-weary Europe. This context makes the losses Henrietta and Portia experience appear trivial, given the vast number of casualties observed during the Great War. Indeed, although set primarily in Paris and London, these late-1930s novels reference not only World War I but also the Irish Civil War, the Boer War, and pre-World War II tensions that portend further conflict. Bowen writes from a moment that is not simply a lull in international violence but rather a period suspended uneasily between hopeful European recovery efforts following World War I and despairing anticipation of the onset of World War II. In the geopolitical context of the interwar period, themes of death, loss, and grief are inevitably steeped in the legacy of the violent clashes of preceding decades. And yet, in these two novels, Bowen addresses grief brought about by ordinary, natural causes. In doing so, she reminds readers that a regular, insidious threat of loss or trauma persists even in peacetime as what Laura S. Brown later calls "a continuing background noise" (102).

This insight emerges when one closely examines Bowen's descriptions of the deaths of Henrietta's mother and Portia's parents. These deaths are neither sensational nor heroic, yet they figure in the novels as significant instances of loss that the daughters must grieve—despite society's dismissal and repression of their pain. Bowen never reveals the exact cause of death for Henrietta's mother, but the implication is that it is too

banal to bother mentioning. As for Portia's parents, Mr. Quayne "caught a chill and died in a nursing home," and Irene, his second wife, developed an unnamed illness that caused her "such pain" that she was admitted to "the Lucerne clinic, where Irene had the operation and died" (Bowen, *Death* 10, 33). Because of the novels' temporal and geographic proximity to the massacres of World War I and the impending catastrophes of World War II, readers may register the girls' experiences of loss as trivial and prosaic—and their manifestations of grief as insignificant or even petty. After all, in times of heightened violence and nationalism, society no longer recognizes certain forms of loss. Indeed, at such times, society often represses mundane losses that do not readily serve collective aspirations or mythology. The mounting scale of wartime atrocities in the early decades of the twentieth century obscures minor, commonplace losses, including the natural death of a parent. Consequently, a girl who laments her own personal misfortune in the late 1930s is not likely to find much sympathy in those around her. When international and civil wars have reduced vast swathes of Europe to rubble, documented history counts the fatalities of combat in the thousands and millions; yet, history does not record these more banal deaths or the impact of such loss on individuals. But novels can, and Bowen's novels do.

In portraying girls experiencing personal grief in this milieu, Bowen questions what space remains for recognition or redress of individual, ordinary experiences of loss amid the political, economic, and social upheavals she witnesses—in England, Ireland, and abroad. She implies that a death need not be dramatic or symbolic to be deeply affecting. In fact, I argue that *The Death of the Heart* and *The House in Paris* assert the singularity of individual experience. Bowen's characters refuse to be simply emblematic

of national or cultural identities, even as they speak to sociohistorical trends of the time. Thus, I concur with Eibhear Walshe's assessment of this period of Bowen's writing: that these novels—along with *The Heat of the Day* (1949)—"mark Bowen's fictive depiction of the personal within history and the intrusion of history into the personal" (95). This intersection of the individual with the historical context of the 1930s and 1940s leads some scholars toward symbolic readings. Neil Corcoran, for instance, interprets particular characters as representing entire populations. He reads *The House in Paris* as conveying "the anti-Semitism of the Michaelisis and, through them, of upper-class educated English liberal culture," and he reads *The Death of the Heart* as "an analysis of [upper-middle-class] England in the 1930s" (Corcoran 97, 102). According to Corcoran's decoding of Bowen's characters, the Michaelises stand in for English repressiveness, Max Ebhart for Jewishness, and the Quaynes for a comically bourgeois Englishness. While this interpretation rightly demonstrates Bowen's attentiveness to the socio-political circumstances of her time, signaling her awareness of the ongoing recovery process after World War I as well as her prescience regarding the approach of World War II, I want to emphasize Bowen's evident interest in the personal and the local in my reading of these novels. When Bowen writes about grief in the late 1930s, she writes predominantly about how it is experienced by individuals. She gestures toward collective, society-wide losses and trauma sustained during the Great War through figures like Major Brutt, who fought at the Somme, but she focuses predominantly on specific, singular manifestations of loss and mourning (Bowen, *Death* 47).

By resisting the impulse to interpret individuals as stand-ins for entire national, ethnic, or economic identities, I am able to highlight characters that generally get

overlooked in existing literary criticism. For example, Henrietta virtually disappears from Corcoran's reading of *The House in Paris*, yet I will argue that her place there is essential for what her character teaches readers about grief. Therefore, I investigate Bowen's nuanced representations of Henrietta's and Portia's grief in *The House in Paris* and *The Death of the Heart* while insisting on their intricate particularities, and I examine how Bowen recreates the restrained modes of discourse available to mourners and those around them during the 1930s. In her own skeptical, often indirect, manner, Bowen notes not only characters' conscious efforts to assuage grief but also their persistent inability to do so. I argue that a resistant reading, a feminist reading, brings these issues to the fore, not only providing valuable insight into historically contextualized perspectives on grief but also marking the particular vulnerability of girls. By locating grief in girlhood, I argue, Bowen emphasizes how easily it is silenced and pushed to the very bounds of visibility.

Grief, Bowen suggests, sets an individual apart from society—but all the more so when the one who mourns is young and female. Because of their age and gender, girls like Henrietta and Portia are already liable to fade from society's view. When they grieve, however, their emotions threaten social norms, and they run the risk of disappearing altogether. Their fraught feelings undermine the calm stability of polite society, leading many adults around them to police or ignore the girls and their grief. Jennifer Margaret Fraser confirms the potentially disruptive nature of childhood grief in her study of modernist novels, where she states that "the expression of grief, especially childhood

grief, challenges social mores and traditional narration" (4).[1] In the case of Bowen's fiction, the girls never receive sufficient acknowledgment of their need to mourn the deaths of their parents, but I argue that the novelist insistently marks the erasure of the girls' bereavement, often by disrupting her narrative's established logic. She draws parallels between characters who never meet, shifts narrative registers from third-person omniscient to first-person limited, and signposts past losses through exposition—all while the narrative directs our attention to other matters. Thus, Bowen documents the near invisibility of Henrietta's and Portia's emotional anguish allowing attentive, resisting readers to see how their suffering eludes other characters and, very often, the narrative itself.

Yet, as Bowen demonstrates the effacement of grief in girlhood and reveals the truer nature of Henrietta's and Portia's emotional states, she also signals the danger posed by the opposite extreme. Overexposure, too, menaces the girls' emotional well-being; too much visibility threatens just as much as invisibility. As Bowen explores these themes in *The House in Paris* and *The Death of the Heart*, she repeatedly juxtaposes visibility, publicity, and external appearances with invisibility, secrecy, and internal life. Mourning, as a process both private and ritualized, slips too easily between repressive obscurity and

[1] Fraser examines novels by Joseph Conrad, Jean Rhys, Rebecca West, Ford Madox Ford, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce—but does not mention Bowen. Still, she performs her own sort of resistant reading, describing her methods as follows: "Rather than trying to normalize, or silence by ignoring, the disruptive childhood voices of modernist narratives, my approach foregrounds their disruption" (5).

the glaring spotlight. In its emphasis on seeing and being seen, Bowen's first novel, *The Hotel*, foreshadows the limited control and consciousness Henrietta and Portia will have of their own visibility as they mourn. The notion that one's "own visibility is impossible to calculate" applies as much to these two grieving girls as to any of Bowen's earlier characters (*The Hotel* 48). Bowen vividly captures the intrinsic dilemmas of visibility: that sometimes other characters see too much; that sometimes they do not see enough (or simply do not respond adequately); that being seen can open a grieving girl to others' recognition and support, or to their evasion and contempt; and that when characters are blind to each other's grief, unresisting readers are likely to adopt similar emotional blinders, even if unconsciously. Ultimately, Henrietta's and Portia's visibility depends as much on what those around them choose to attend to or ignore as it does on what each girl chooses to express outwardly.

As my interpretations of *The House in Paris* and *The Death of the Heart* will show, Bowen situates her girl characters in environments inhospitable to productive grieving. Parental loss dislodges Henrietta and Portia from any familiar sense of "home" or "family" they once had. At best, Bowen's characters regard "home" with a sense of uneasy belonging, "dislocation," or "psychic homelessness" (Sceats 86; Kreilkamp 15). Bereft of their parents and their domestic routines, the girls must endure the officiousness of complex, flawed adults who think they know best. Spending time in unfamiliar houses amongst extended family or family friends, children and adolescents like these girls have good cause to be anxious. In novels like *The Last September* (1929), *The House in Paris* (1935), and *The Death of the Heart* (1938), all written during the age of authoritarian Europe, imperious guardians impose their sense of what is right and proper on their

wards. Or they embroil the children in the messy affairs of adult society, exposing the young characters to harsh truths about adults' infidelities, jealousies, and failures. All this is easily done when the question of who can and ought to take responsibility for the bereaved minor remains unsettled. In Bowen's fiction, a child who loses her primary caretaker to death instantly becomes an imposition on others, and the grieving girl often knows it. As a result, Bowen's young characters typically suffer their losses alone, in isolation and secrecy. Effective grieving requires self-determination and self-expression, but children in these works—particularly the girls—are trapped within the parameters others set for them. Indeed, the effort adults make toward restoring a child's sense of home and family tends to be the very thing that thwarts the child's ability to come to terms with her loss. The assumption that a grieving girl can resume an orderly, ordinary life contravenes the absolute breach in normalcy that the death of a beloved parent occasions.

Thus, when resisting readers begin to consider what impediments block characters' grief from our view, we find that both repressive social manners and Bowen's narration itself conceal Henrietta's and Portia's individual suffering. Bowen's works fluctuate drastically in terms of narrative style and genre—even within a single text—but when her works tend toward realism, they hold readers at arm's length from the main characters' inner lives.[2] In each novel, the narrative encourages the reading Janice Rossen

[2] See Maud Ellmann and Neil Corcoran for more on Bowen's category-breaking approaches to genre and form. Ellmann observes Bowen's "penchant for florid clashes between literary forms" (3). Corcoran then elaborates on this idea, arguing that Bowen

offers of how Bowen's characters respond to loss, in which she claims that the author "portrays characters who struggle with grief and abandonment by warding it off, trying to diminish it, or travestying its effects by consciously dining well" (133). Yet, despite the narratives' equivocation about the girls' losses and the suggestion that the characters are immune to the potentially devastating nature of personal loss, Bowen peppers *The House in Paris* and *The Death of the Heart* with references to characters' losses and evidence of the girls' grief. At first, the narratives' withholding of the emotional impact of loss appears protective, as this guards characters from the prying eyes and keen ears of readers. However, more often it is damaging, isolating characters in their own separate echo chambers of suffering. Therefore, as a resisting reader, I press the question of why the narratives so often deny us access to characters' interiority. Through a close reading of Bowen's grieving girls in *The House in Paris* and *The Death of the Heart*, I will demonstrate that the answer lies in Bowen's attentiveness to the restrained modes of discourse surrounding personal loss. She understands and represents the limitations of articulating one's bereaved state, especially in Anglo-European bourgeois society. By approaching her novels with this in mind, I explore a new set of questions about Bowen's grieving characters. What is it about these individuals and their social milieu that inhibits

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not only "returns to modernist experimentation for her own sense of the possibilities of a modern writing" but also "returns to other traditions of writing too, and in ways which may suggest either an instinctive or a deliberate attempt at generic revision" (5). He suggests that Bowen playfully riffs on the gothic, the nineteenth-century novel of adultery, and Shakespeare—among other genres and influences.

open self-expression? Why does Bowen's prose trivialize certain losses while fixating on others? Why does she render some emotional wounds visible and others invisible? And how does she manage to make readers aware that those unseen wounds exist—without exposing them directly? What importance does this invisible grief bear in Bowen's fictional worlds?

Ultimately, I argue that careful, resistant readings of Henrietta Mountjoy and Portia Quayne demonstrate that Elizabeth Bowen perceives the insidious vulnerability of girls in their non-dominant position, and I contend that her fiction quietly marks the "everyday, repetitive, interpersonal events that are so often the sources of psychic pain" (Brown 107, 108). Bowen crafts novels that subtly unveil dense emotional landscapes within full and complex characters, even when her narrative rushes on without exploring them. Although the processes of mourning in Bowen's works are often barely perceptible, that does not mean that they are not present. They are there, submerged yet significant. I argue that, counterintuitively, Bowen draws attention to Henrietta's and Portia's grief by pushing their symptoms just below the surface of the text. Her narrative stifles the girls' direct expressions of emotion, but then the author manipulates the structure, style, and imagery of her narratives to gesture toward the grief that churns just out of view. In short, Bowen's literary creations live lives that bleed off the edges of the page; they live beyond what traditional, mannered realism can contain. Only by reading the gaps, the silences, the ambiguities, the strangeness in Bowen's fiction can we recover the fullness and import of these grieving girls.

1.1 *THE HOUSE IN PARIS* (1935)

In *The House in Paris*, Elizabeth Bowen suspends her characters in a dialectic between silence and articulation. Henrietta Mountjoy suffers under an enforced repression of her feelings while the narrative lays bare the sensational story of Leopold Grant Moody. The eponymous house in Paris functions as a way station for the two children, and both experience serious emotional strain during their day at the Fishers' residence. Henrietta halts under the guardianship of Miss Naomi Fisher as she travels from England to Mentone in the south of France, a journey occasioned by her mother's death. Though few acknowledge it—and the narrative hardly notes it—Henrietta grieves for her mother; she smarts when Leopold interrogates her about their relationship, and she often finds herself on the brink of tears. Leopold, on the other hand, has come to Paris with the expectation that he will meet and speak with his birth mother, Karen (Michaelis) Forrestier, for the first time in his young life. The main crisis of the novel, however, is that his "mother is not coming; she cannot come" (Bowen, *House* 58).

While the narrative of *The House in Paris* stifles Henrietta's individual grief, it goes to great lengths to fill in the gaps in the story surrounding Leopold, dedicating the entire middle section of the novel to an extended explication of the boy's parentage. There is much that Bowen's characters do not say to each other, but the narrative often informs the reader what goes unsaid. In this case, it calls upon readers to imagine Karen candidly explaining to her son the truth of his parents' past—not the "grown-up falsified view of what had been once" but the "past as plain as the present, simply present elsewhere" (Bowen, *House* 61). Part Two provides this imagined account, and thus, the

novel narrates an exchange that would not take place even if Karen were present. In doing so, it responds to Leopold's desire for the truth about his parents' past while acknowledging that only in "art, with truth and imagination informing every word" could Karen comport herself with the candor the boy desires (Bowen, *House* 61). Without having to articulate anything—without even having to be present, in Karen's case—the characters concerned with Leopold have their emotional struggles addressed in the text. At the same time, Henrietta is forced to speak but her grief goes largely unacknowledged. I argue, therefore, that Bowen dissociates self-articulation from sympathy in this work. The disparity between the novel's treatment of Henrietta and Leopold reinforces Bowen's perennial themes of grief and invisibility while introducing the motif of sacrifice, an especial concern of *The House in Paris*.

Amongst a cast of sacrificial victims and self-sacrificing martyrs, Henrietta garners the least sympathy for her troubles—from the narrative, from characters, and from many readers. When Henrietta's emotions surface in *The House in Paris*, the narrative typically notes her feelings with a hint of bewilderment before returning promptly to other concerns. Most often, those other concerns are Leopold and the melodramatic past of his parents, Karen and Max. I posit that Bowen includes Henrietta in this novel as a model of quiet endurance, a character who manages her own grief as best she can while her hardship remains unrecognized. She mourns the loss of her mother and adjusts to her exile in France, but the narrative maintains a significant reticence regarding her plight. Resisting readers, however, can understand Bowen's depiction of Henrietta as a revealing portrait of how society ignores ordinary forms of grief while

heaping attention on the more scandalous drama of affairs, social machinations, and suicide—all of which feature in the story of Karen and Max.

At the start of *The House in Paris*, Bowen introduces readers to the girl and her grief. Henrietta Mountjoy, a reflective and outspoken eleven-year-old, is on her way to spend time with her grandmother, Mrs. Arbuthnot, in the wake of her mother's demise. Though her father survives and she has a grown, married sister named Caroline, the family exiles Henrietta to France. Bowen explains the transfer of custody from father to grandmother as the logical outcome given Colonel Mountjoy's "self-mistrust": "His wife's death left him helpless: it had seemed highly natural that Mrs Arbuthnot should take Henrietta on" (*House* 20). As a result, the adults in the family arrange for the young girl to "finish the winter" with her grandmother. Mrs. Arbuthnot confirms these circumstances in a letter to Miss Fisher, where she writes that Henrietta's "invaluable governess is away, ill, and her father does not know what else to do with her" (Bowen, *House* 32). Without the care of her mother or governess, Henrietta embarks on her somber journey away from her childhood home.

Although Henrietta is in mourning and in exile, the narrative presents Henrietta's trip from London to Mentone as a potential adventure, characterizing it as an exciting holiday of her choosing rather than a displacement caused by loss. Miss Fisher, in particular, casts the girl's journey in this light. Upon meeting her charge at the train station, she declares, "How happy you are to be going south, Henrietta. If I were a swallow you would not find *me* here!" (Bowen, *House* 5). By focusing on the thrill of travel, Miss Fisher suggests that Henrietta's circumstances are enviable. Her assumption that Henrietta is "happy" sidesteps the issue of the girl's recent loss and grief entirely.

Indeed, Miss Fisher repeats this sentiment in a more demanding register when she bids Henrietta farewell several hours later, as she tells the girl, "You must have a happy journey" (Bowen, *House* 242). This insistence that girls and young women should be cheerful pervades the bourgeois Anglo-European society Bowen depicts as it smothers various forms of discontent. Karen, for instance, experiences similar policing of her mood following the announcement of her engagement to Ray Forrestier years earlier, despite how "uninfectious" she finds "everyone's pleased excitement": "'You must be so very happy,' they kept saying: she felt the expected smile so pasted across her face that she even sometimes woke with it" (Bowen, *House* 63-64). Waking with the requisite smile, Karen, at the age of twenty-three, proves more adept at adhering to social expectations than eleven-year-old Henrietta, whose true emotions are more liable to break through as tears. Though young, Henrietta signals awareness of how her loss mortifies polite society, expressing embarrassment when she has to inform Leopold that her mother is dead (Bowen, *House* 16). Still, she breaks into "[h]elpless tears" when the boy presses her on the subject (Bowen, *House* 19). My reading suggests that Henrietta's incomplete control over her emotions helps explain why the narrative directs narratees' attention away from the grieving girl; her expressions of loss are so anathema to society's sense of propriety that the narrative changes the subject.

I argue that, like Henrietta's father, the narrative "does not know what else to do with her" (Bowen, *House* 32). In the early chapters, *The House in Paris* seems poised to narrate Henrietta's parallel journeys—her emotional journey through mourning and her physical journey through new cities and landscapes. Indeed, Sanja Bahun notes in her discussion of melancholia in modernism that the period of mourning has traditionally

been "symbolized by the metaphor of the journey" in literature (16). However, this novel does not pursue the narratological or metaphorical possibilities of Henrietta's journey in this way. Instead, much as Colonel Mountjoy shunts his daughter out of his house and away from his immediate concerns, Bowen relegates Henrietta to the margins of the novel, making room instead for Leopold's origin story. Henrietta's presence helps structure the temporal unity of the novel: the present day of *The House in Paris* spans from just after Henrietta's arrival at the Gare du Nord "one dark greasy morning" to shortly after her departure from the Gare de Lyon that very evening (Bowen 3, 248). Yet, although Henrietta occupies Parts One and Three (both titled "The Present"), she is the only character utterly excluded from Part Two, "The Past," which recounts how Leopold came into being and tells the melodramatic story of his parents' ill-starred romance. Displaced from the narrative for the duration of the middle section, Henrietta's status within the literary work parallels her geographical and emotional dislocation. That is, the text drives Henrietta into a form of narratological exile. The question resisting readers must ask, then, is this: Why does Bowen stall this grieving young character, halting her forward momentum toward either emotional catharsis or Mentone? Does she include the girl merely to serve utilitarian literary functions?

My reading claims that Henrietta occupies a critical role in *The House in Paris*, despite appearing to be cast off by both her family and the narrative. Yes, on the one hand, Henrietta acts as a convenient third party at the Fishers' house on a day of crisis. All the other characters present are wrapped up in the question of whether Karen and Leopold—estranged mother and son—will reunite, and as they talk of this current crisis, the past, and scarcely anything else, Henrietta serves as a useful interlocutor, a

disinterested bystander whom they can coerce into being their sounding board. Thus, the girl undeniably has a necessary literary purpose: she converses with Leopold and begrudgingly hears what Miss Fisher and her mother, Mme. Fisher, choose to tell her. In this role of interlocutor, however, Henrietta gets cast primarily as the listener and receives no sympathy for her mother's recent death. On the other hand, however, Henrietta figures as much more than just an expendable set of ears. Her bereavement may be secondary to Leopold's impending confrontation—it may not be as volatile or affect as many people—but Bowen includes it to further the novel's discourse on sacrifice and grief.

Henrietta remains essential to the meaning of *The House in Paris* despite characters' and the narrative's distractions from her grief because her quandary exemplifies forms of loss that get drowned out by more sensational issues. Compared to Leopold's situation, which has been complicated by sexual infidelity, suicide, adoption, and withheld knowledge, Henrietta's grief for her mother and her home looks simple, commonplace, even mundane. Yet, I contend that Bowen wants her audience to discern that the prosaic nature of the girl's emotional burden makes it no lighter, even if it means her suffering is less readily acknowledged by others. I argue that this lack of recognition is a key feature of insidious vulnerability, which Bowen reveals through the discussion between Leopold and Henrietta about mothers, recurring ship imagery, drawing parallels between Karen and Henrietta, and—most importantly—the themes of sacrifice and victimhood. Bowen sacrifices Henrietta for the sake of Leopold's crisis, but the author's more explicit discussion of sacrifice in the novel ought to alert readers that she does so

consciously. An offering must be made in the telling of Leopold's origin story, and Henrietta is its bereaved victim.

Bowen begins exploring the themes of sacrifice and grief during the first exchange between Henrietta and Leopold. The nine-year-old boy insensitively pries into the eleven-year-old girl's relationship with her deceased mother, but he operates with selfish intent. Leopold queries Henrietta about her mother only because he anticipates meeting his own for the first time in his memory. In effect, he sacrifices Henrietta's feelings for his own gain. Not perceiving, much less comprehending, the pain Henrietta feels, Leopold interrogates her: "Look – now your mother's dead so you can't possibly see her, do you still mean to love her, or is that no good now? When you want to love her, what do you do, remember her? But if you couldn't remember her, but heard you could see her, would you enjoy loving her more, or less?" (Bowen, *House* 18). Leopold's line of questioning skips from implicit recognition of Henrietta's loss (if not of her attendant feelings) and curiosity about what new relationship Henrietta might have with her now-dead mother to a hypothetical question that pertains to his situation, not hers. When Leopold asks, "But if you couldn't remember her, but heard you could see her, would you enjoy loving her more, or less?" he describes his own position. He pries into Henrietta's grief only as a means to investigate his own circumstances. In his last question, Leopold makes clear that he seeks insight into how he ought to feel. He wants validation of his own tense thoughts and emotions but fails to realize his questions' effect on Henrietta.

She, though, being two years older and having more life experience, understands that Leopold sacrifices her feelings unthinkingly. Bowen describes Henrietta's response to the boy's impertinent inquiries as follows:

> 'I don't see what you mean,' said Henrietta, distracted – in fact in quite a new kind of pain. She saw only too well that this inquisition had no bearing on Henrietta at all, that Leopold was not even interested in hurting, and was only tweaking her petals off or her wings off with the intention of exploring himself. His dispassionateness was more dire, to Henrietta, than cruelty. With no banal reassuring grown-ups present, with grown-up intervention taken away, there is no limit to the terror strange children feel of each other, a terror life obscures but never ceases to justify. There is no end to the violations committed by children on children, quietly talking alone. Henrietta dreaded what he might say next. Helpless tears began making her eyelids twitch. (*House* 18-19)

In this passage, Bowen depicts the subdued damage that can occur in an unsupervised conversation between children. Although Henrietta is already experiencing the heartache of losing her mother, Leopold's questions induce "quite a new kind of pain." Since she understands that the boy prods her emotional wounds for his own gain, she has the novel, upsetting realization that his self-interest dehumanizes her. She becomes a nonentity, no more closely regarded than a flower or insect would be, in the intensity of his childish self-concern.

The aforementioned passage amplifies the tone of menacing, transgressive danger with its accrual of sinister language—with Leopold's "dire" conduct, "the terror strange children feel of each other," and "the violations committed by children on children." It

thereby constructs a worldview in which children pose a threat and only adults can provide safety. Because children are young, they are not fully acculturated; they have not yet been inculcated with the banality that makes grown-ups "reassuring." The heightened pitch of Henrietta's reaction to Leopold's questions affirms that polite, adult society offers refuge from merciless children. In the presence of Miss Fisher, for instance, Henrietta can at least expect "grown-up intervention" to defuse Leopold's unfeeling inquisitiveness. But, in a syntactically convoluted sentence, Bowen insists on the absence of adult supervision: "With no banal reassuring grown-ups present, with grown-up intervention taken away, there is no limit to the terror strange children feel of each other, a terror life obscures but never ceases to justify" (*House* 18). The first prepositional phrase in this statement gestures toward the fact that the upsetting conversation between Leopold and Henrietta takes place while Miss Fisher, the adult tending the two children for the day, is not present in the salon. However, the second prepositional phrase, "with grown-up intervention taken away," may or may not work as an appositive. The sentence may refer to Miss Fisher in both phrases—stating that she is "not present" and that she has been "taken away" to another part of the house. Or, as I argue, that second phrase may make subtle reference to Henrietta's recent loss. If it is not—or is not only—an appositional phrase, it signals that the security of "grown-up intervention" that her mother once represented has been "taken away"—by death. Read in this way, the passage validates Henrietta's terror by alluding to her greater vulnerability following her mother's death. She, more than most children, finds herself "with grown-up intervention taken away"; grieving, she is exceedingly defenseless.

Henrietta's reaction betrays her emotional distress and her sensitivity to the topic of conversation her interlocutor foists upon her, but this is not to say that Henrietta does not want to talk about her mother. Rather, it suggests that Henrietta has not yet found a compassionate audience for her grief.[3] She cannot work through her loss while talking to Leopold because he only has the "intention of exploring himself." His dominance in this exchange forecloses Henrietta's own self-examination and self-exploration. Instead of quailing under Leopold's interrogation, though, Henrietta assumes a defensive posture. While this stance guards her against the boy's stinging questions, it also restricts her ability to come to terms with the death of her mother. Grieving requires a safe space in which an individual can test the limits of her new condition. Furthermore, it requires that the individual think actively about the deceased person and face the complex, ambivalent emotions precipitated by her loss. Yet, when Leopold asks, "Why, are you still unhappy about your mother?" Henrietta denies her pain:

> Henrietta sharply turned her face to the wallpaper.
>
> 'I'm not thinking about her. I simply don't like Paris; I wish I was in the train.' (Bowen, *House* 19)

Henrietta is in no position to query her own feelings in this moment, so she turns to shield herself from Leopold's gaze. Facing the wallpaper, she not only protects herself from exposing her tears and emotions to this dispassionate boy but also prevents him from

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[3] Henrietta's lack of an adequate audience for her grief resonates with Mary McNamara's dilemma at the end of Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1996), which I discuss in Chapter 3.

reading the lie on her face. For, her claim that she is not thinking of her mother contains elements of both truth and falsehood. According to what the text explicitly narrates, Henrietta's thoughts focus more on Leopold's insensitivity than on her mother. We get, for instance, no clear sense of who Mrs. Mountjoy was or what she meant to her daughter. So, in this way, Henrietta tells the truth when she says, "I'm not thinking about her." But avoiding thinking too much about her late mother in this situation requires conscious effort. And so, Henrietta falls prey to a catch-22: by actively trying not to think about her mother, she inevitably thinks about her. Henrietta's repression of her grief proves to be inexpert and incomplete, though. Her incipient tears, movements, and words give her away. In short, paradoxically, while Henrietta is not thinking deeply or productively about her mother, so is also clearly not "not thinking" about her.

Following her denial of grief, Henrietta attributes any visible distress Leopold detects in her visage to minor, ancillary causes. She insists, "I simply don't like Paris; I wish I was in the train" (Bowen, *House* 19). By an act of transference, the girl shifts the pain she feels about her mother's death to her dissatisfaction with Paris. From her taxi ride from Gare du Nord to the Fishers' residence, Henrietta feels disillusioned by the city. Bowen describes Henrietta's early impressions, her unmet expectations: "These indifferent streets and early morning faces oppressed Henrietta, who was expecting to find Paris more gay and kind" (*House* 3). Much like Leopold, the French capital itself strikes Henrietta as apathetic; she hopes for warmth and kindness but encounters only indifference. The connection between Paris's "indifferent streets" and Leopold's "dispassionateness" primes Henrietta to channel her internal regret and sorrow for her mother into her spoken lament that Paris has been a letdown. She longs instead to be on

the train again, a symbol of progress, movement, escape. The house in Paris—with the dispassionate boy, alienating Miss Fisher, and overbearing Mme. Fisher—confines Henrietta and her grief. Within its walls—and within the covers of the novel—Henrietta does not have enough space to process her loss. The salon's air, already thick with the history of Leopold and his parents, oppresses her.

As little support as he offers, Leopold alone is not wholly to blame for Henrietta's inability to grieve her mother's death. Although *The House in Paris* offers "banal reassuring grown-ups" as a counterpoint to Leopold, the work as a whole illustrates that adults can be just as disquieting and terrible (Bowen 18). Leopold, at least, commits his "violation" against Henrietta because his childish self-absorption renders others' feelings invisible to him. Grown-up characters, particularly those who have experienced grief in their own lives, may be more attuned to others' feelings, yet Henrietta's grief eludes all adults in the novel as well. Not one grown-up explicitly speaks to her of her recent loss or expresses concern for how she copes with her mother's death. While this means that no adult tramples Henrietta's raw feelings in quite the same way as Leopold does, the lack of acknowledgment further effaces her grief.

Indeed, adults in *The House in Paris* are quite at ease manipulating both children and each other as though they are pawns, perpetuating the novel's themes of sacrifice and victimhood. Far from being banal or reassuring, the likes of Mme. Fisher knowingly cause others emotional and psychological harm. As it turns out, Leopold's nonchalance, his "dispassionateness," actually makes him paradigmatic in *The House in Paris* rather than an outlier. In Bowen's exploration of how individuals sacrifice others for their own gain, Mme. Fisher's cruel manipulations of Max Ebhart, Leopold's father, stands as the

most extreme example. In Part Two, "The Past," the narrative reports that Mme. Fisher drove Max to suicide, denying him agency by enforcing her own will and power over him. When Naomi (Miss Fisher) describes the last moments she spent with Max, she tells Karen, "I saw then that Max did not belong to himself. He could do nothing that she [Mme. Fisher] had not expected; my mother was at the root of him" (Bowen, *House* 188). If Leopold wrenches Henrietta's "petals off or her wings off" with his questions, Mme. Fisher takes it several fatal steps farther in her final conversations with Max, in which she provokes him into killing himself (Bowen, *House* 18, 191). Mme. Fisher's dehumanization of Leopold's father is far more sinister, more sustained—and eventually has far more permanent consequences—than the boy's terrorization of Henrietta.

Despite now being on her deathbed, Mme. Fisher extends the range of her control to encompass Henrietta (and Leopold) as well. Both she and her daughter wield malignant forms of power over the children, a dynamic Bowen emphasizes with language of sacrificial victimhood. First, Mme. Fisher—with Miss Fisher's complicity—exerts her dominance over Henrietta, rendering the girl helplessly unable to resist her will. Although Henrietta repeatedly expresses her wish to see the Trocadéro, the bed-ridden woman derails the girl's hopes for the day simply by "tapping decisively overhead" (Bowen, *House* 26). The younger Fisher interprets the tapping: "'My mother is waiting all this time,' cried Miss Fisher. 'She did not sleep much last night but slept on into this morning; she awoke most anxious to see you, Henrietta, at any cost'" (Bowen, *House* 26). The ominous implications of the phrase, "at any cost," contribute to Henrietta's sense of unease. She fears the old woman's illness and feels unjustly singled out. As she tries to resist the overwhelming pull of Mme. Fisher, Henrietta asks Miss Fisher, "Isn't she much

too ill?" and "Doesn't she want to see Leopold?" (Bowen, *House* 26). Neither question sways Miss Fisher from her purpose, however, as she practically frogmarches the girl upstairs for an interview with her mother. Significantly, Bowen pauses to note the effect this imposition has on Henrietta, of which she writes simply: "She felt victimized" (*House* 27). But the Fishers' control over Henrietta is absolute, heedless of the fact that the girl has "a dread of sick-rooms" (Bowen, *House* 5).[4] Bowen thus concludes the scene as follows: "But Miss Fisher, taking no notice, waited with what seemed to Henrietta a smile of the sheerest fanaticism, holding the door open. Henrietta, having glanced once at Leopold, walked out ahead of her. The door shut behind them with a triumphant click" (*House* 27). Miss Fisher's zealous adherence to her mother's whims alarms Henrietta nearly as much as the prospect of facing the dying woman herself. As Bowen describes the exchange, Miss Fisher plays the "triumphant" devotee, offering Henrietta as a sacrificial victim to the omnipotent being tapping away overhead.

Once Henrietta has experienced the impotence of being forced to speak with Mme. Fisher, she watches in dismay as Miss Fisher tries to enact a similar victimization of Leopold. When Miss Fisher enters the salon with the news that Karen "is not coming, she cannot come," Leopold manages to bear up under the pressure, but Henrietta fears for him. Bowen casts Henrietta as a reluctant witness to Miss Fisher's exaggerated prelude to the announcement:

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[4] Though we do not learn the cause of death for Henrietta's mother, the girl's fear of illness may provide a clue. If Mrs. Mountjoy died of an illness, this may account for Henrietta's "dread of sick-rooms" (Bowen, *House* 5).

> She [Henrietta] felt an intense morbid solicitude, as though Leopold were about to be executed in front of her. His cut-off air, white face and trembling defensive anger heightened the thought, as Miss Fisher, farouchely, lost to all but the crisis, held her arms out to him, dropped on her knees and advanced on her knees, arms out. (*House* 58)

Again, Miss Fisher conducts herself in a way that is reminiscent of a religious fanatic; like a pilgrim expressing the intensity and scope of her devout emotion, she proceeds toward her object on her knees. But Henrietta's presentiment of Leopold's victimhood dissolves into bathos as the boy is made to anticipate the worst possible news about his mother ("—Oh. Dead?") only to learn moments later that it is "only a change" in plans (Bowen, *House* 58). In response to this anticlimax, Leopold raises his only weapon, the same dispassionateness that upset Henrietta earlier that morning: "Leopold, having backed as far as he could, suddenly put up nonchalance at Miss Fisher. . . . She, dumb again, knelt there frustrated in the patch of weak sun – was her only object, then, to spill tears on him?" (Bowen, *House* 58). Overwhelmed by the boy's nonchalance, Miss Fisher deflates in defeat. Her attempt to use the boy as a human handkerchief fails when Leopold refuses to submit to her melodrama. Consequently, this scene allows readers to contrast the "triumphant" nature of the Fishers' dominance over Henrietta with Miss Fisher's "frustrated" attempt to manipulate Leopold. Both children face forms of sacrificial victimhood at the hands of grown-ups—grown-ups who are anything but banal or reassuring—but Leopold's defense succeeds to a greater degree than Henrietta's. Still, he does not emerge completely unscathed. Bowen's last image of Leopold in Part One

describes him as "flattened against the mantelpiece like a specimen," a line that recalls the dehumanization Henrietta felt under his interrogation earlier in the day (*House* 58).

If Leopold is a "specimen" pinned up for inspection, then Henrietta becomes a castoff, easily discarded by the narrative in its drive to compensate or account for the absence of Karen, Leopold's mother. Bowen links Parts One and Three by their common title, "The Present," and with Miss Fisher's repeated declaration: "Your mother is not coming; she cannot come" (*House* 58, 199). However, with Part Two, "The Past," the narrative opens an imaginative space in which it reports what Karen "would have had to say" to Leopold (Bowen, *House* 63). The narrative directly calls on readers to participate in this act of imagination: "Suppose it had all *been* possible, suppose her not only here today in the salon but being as he foresaw, speaking without deception as he had thought she would" (Bowen, *House* 62). Readers who take up this directive immerse themselves in Karen's personal tale of her affair with Max, Leopold's conception, and Max's suicide. The narration of these events, though, excludes Henrietta. The narrative jettisons Henrietta and her grief, and readers—following the narrative's cues—may easily ignore this sacrifice and let Henrietta recede into the background. In keeping with my "resisting" reading, however, I remain skeptical of the narrative's push and seek instead to discover how Part Two speaks to Henrietta's experiences despite excluding her.

By insisting on understanding Henrietta's role in *The House in Paris*, my interpretation addresses a gap in existing criticism, which currently lacks an adequate explanation for her presence in the novel. Most scholars—including Corcoran, Nicola Darwood, and Rossen—focus instead on the heavy, melodramatic events leading up to Leopold's birth and say very little about Henrietta. Rossen's analysis of the work as a

"traditional Victorian melodrama" infused with Bowen's "scathing comment on Englishness" leads her to dwell on Karen and Max, effectively sidelining both Leopold and Henrietta for the duration of her reading (97, 98). While Corcoran and Darwood pay more attention to the children, they mention Henrietta largely as a point of comparison for Leopold, dedicating more effort to understanding his character. Corcoran writes, for instance, that the two children are "both lonely, anxious, intensely nervous, and highly sensitive and intelligent" but discusses Henrietta's recent loss only in vague terms: he does not explain why Henrietta is "in transit to her grandmother in Mentone," he generalizes about the "circumstances which left [Leopold and Henrietta] stranded together in this brief Parisian halt," and he explains Henrietta's empathy toward Leopold's despair as something "we are to presume derives from at least comparable sufferings of her own" (81-83). Despite Corcoran's interest in this novel's exploration of "parentlessness" and the relationship between mother and child, his reading omits Henrietta's potential contribution to these themes (83). In contrast, my interpretation of *The House in Paris* keeps the girl and her grief in mind, and it posits that connections exist between the narrative's portrayal of Henrietta in Parts One and Three and the narrative's discussion of Karen in Part Two, connections not previously recognized.

Thus, I argue that even as Bowen invites readers to imagine what Karen "would have had to say" to Leopold she also lays the groundwork for readers to find parallels between Henrietta and the events and emotions of Part Two, "The Past." Through motifs and more explicit discussions of the themes of death and grief, Bowen ties Karen's narrative to Henrietta's unacknowledged loss. Specifically, I examine the novel's nautical imagery and its depiction of the death of Karen's aunt. Practically speaking, Henrietta

and Leopold's mother have very little bearing on each other. And yet, Henrietta's grief anticipates Karen's emotional distress, and Karen's experiences of loss and grief aid readers in understanding why the narrative diverts attention away from Henrietta's loss and why the other characters in this upper-middle-class European society fail to recognize it.

Bowen deploys ship imagery, a motif that takes on various disparate meanings, to link characters, including Henrietta and Karen, across the three parts of *The House in Paris* and across the decades. This nautical imagery starts with a pack of playing cards that Henrietta has with her, which feature a "pink and gold ship" (Bowen, *House* 54). By initiating the sequence of boat references with Henrietta's cards, Bowen allows her audience to read all subsequent maritime references as being linked to the girl—however indirectly. So, when Leopold urges Henrietta to use the cards to read his fortune, his desire that they will predict "[c]rossing the sea" speaks not only to his hope that his birth mother will take him—aboard a ship—across the English Channel to live with her in England, but it also provides a distorted echo of Henrietta's own experience (Bowen, *House* 56). Though the narrative makes no overt reference to it here, Henrietta's recent sea-crossing haunts the scene as the uncanny opposite of what Leopold longs for. Literally, the girl travels in the reverse direction, from England to France and away from home. Figuratively, she also moves away from the time when she was last with her mother, while Leopold hopes to move toward a happy and lasting reunion with his.

The ambivalent symbolism of this ship imagery takes on an increasingly portentous overtone, especially in the description of Miss Fisher as she approaches Leopold to break the news that his mother will not come. Bowen writes, "Her eyes

streamed as she rode at him like the figurehead of a ship" (*House* 58). As Miss Fisher bears down on Leopold like the bow of a seemingly unstoppable vessel, Bowen signals that the woman's announcement has the potential to ram the boy to pieces. However, with his nonchalant rebuff of Miss Fisher's pathos, Leopold neutralizes the threat. In doing so, he strips her of the prominence and stature the figurehead simile temporarily bestows. Leopold reduces Miss Fisher to her real stature—as an abject, melodramatic adult kneeling "frustrated in the patch of weak sun" (Bowen, *House* 58).

As Bowen shifts the scene to the past in Part Two of *The House in Paris*, she extends this imagery to the initial depiction we get of Karen, as she lay "in her berth under the porthole, hearing the sea sough past" (63). With ongoing nautical imagery, therefore, Bowen connects Karen's "past" narrative to the present-day concerns and characters of Part One. Karen's passage is not between England and France in this case, however. Ten years before Leopold and Henrietta meet at the Fishers' home, Karen is "steaming up the tidal river to Cork" to visit her Aunt Violet (Bowen, *House* 63). Newly engaged to Ray Forrestier, the young Karen Michaelis does not yet anticipate that her aunt will die, that she and Max Ebhart will have an affair, or that she will conceive Leopold during that tryst. Indeed, on her journey to Cork, Karen considers herself calm, assured, and stable: "She felt calm enough to have steadied a ship in a rough sea" (Bowen, *House* 63). This metaphor appears to please Karen, and the narrative repeats it a page later: "Having since last night left London behind, she already felt calm enough to steady a ship" (Bowen, *House* 64).

Karen's resolute calm, however, cannot last. While visiting her relations in Ireland, she learns from her Uncle Bill that Aunt Violet is terminally ill. Though he tells

his niece only that Aunt Violet is "going to have an operation," Karen understands from his demeanor that it will be fatal (Bowen, *House* 74). Bowen writes of the older woman's distant presence in this moment: "Up there in the drawing-room Aunt Violet began playing Schubert: notes came stepping lightly on to the moment in which Karen realized she was going to die" (*House* 74). The ambiguous reference in the pronoun "she," which could refer to either Aunt Violet or Karen herself, suggests that Karen faces not only the death of a loved one but also intimations of her own mortality. Bowen reinforces this message as she explains how new this experience is for Karen, writing, "No one familiar in Karen's life had died yet: the scene round her looked at once momentous and ghostly, as in that light that sometimes comes before storms" (*House* 75). The prospect of death renders the scene sublime, gothic, ominous to the young woman's eyes. And, in time, the storm arrives: news of Aunt Violet's death reaches Karen and her mother, Mrs. Michaelis, in London not long after Karen returns home (Bowen, *House* 126).

When Uncle Bill's letter arrives bearing the grave news, Bowen emphasizes how inexperienced the Michaelis family is with regard to matters of mortality. With a glancing reference to the Great War, Bowen reports Karen's and Mrs. Michaelis's initial responses to Violet's death: "Karen, who had got up, came across to stand dumbly beside her mother. They had not met like this before; no one had ever died; her brother Robin had come safely through the war. . . . Mrs Michaelis put out a hand towards Karen – not wanting to touch, to show she was glad she was there. There was nothing whatever to say" (*House* 126). Language fails; physical gestures mark both the sympathy and distance between mother and daughter. For both women, this initiation into bereavement forebodes further grief. Mrs. Michaelis comments to Karen that Violet's death "is not the

worst that will happen" (Bowen, *House* 127). And Karen agrees: "Mother was right in saying worse could happen: once a board gives, the raft begins breaking up" (Bowen, *House* 128). Here, Bowen returns to nautical imagery, but instead of a steady ship on easy waters, she gives readers the image of a fragile, makeshift raft falling to pieces. In this altered nautical motif, Bowen links Karen's grief to those earlier scenes of *The House in Paris* that feature Henrietta , a grieving girl with her deck of ship-themed playing cards.

The connection between Karen and Henrietta matters because Karen, like Henrietta, is a female character who grieves. Henrietta's loss sets the tone for the losses Karen suffers, but the parallels work both ways. By picking up the thread of nautical imagery, Karen's story inflects Henrietta's marginal position in the novel with additional meaning. Karen's bereavement following her aunt's death differs from Henrietta's mourning for her mother, but it still sheds some light on what the younger girl may feel, how her loss may affect her decisions, and what her position is within a society that does not readily recognize all forms of loss. In this way, Bowen deepens and extends Henrietta's character—even when the narrative structure casts her aside. When we read, for instance, that Karen "saw that in Mrs Michaelis's view a woman's real life only began with marriage, that girlhood amounts to no more than a privileged looking on," we find a partial answer to the question of why adults in Henrietta's life pay so little heed to her experience of loss and grief (Bowen, *House* 63). If Mrs. Michaelis's opinion represents the general view of the Anglo-European upper-middle class, then the disregard Henrietta experiences as she shuttles from her parents' house to her grandmother's and as she interacts with the Fishers reflects the adults' shared perspective. If they view the girl as

only "looking on," not yet living a "real life," then they would have little reason to suspect that she has a real emotional reaction to loss.

Ultimately, it is in the context of Aunt Violet's death that Bowen remarks on an essential truth that affects Henrietta as much as Karen and Mrs. Michaelis: "A death can only touch what the life touched" (*House* 127). For the Michaelis women, this truism explains why the "sea of trees in the Park" appears indifferent to their grief (Bowen, *House* 127). However, the gravitas and poignancy of the observation increases if readers consider what it means for Henrietta. On the one hand, the line helps explain why the death of Henrietta's mother has so little emotional impact on the Fishers; her life did not "touch" theirs. On the other hand, though, it underscores the fact that in sending Henrietta to Mentone her relatives send her away from most of the people, objects, and spaces her mother's life had touched. True, she will join her maternal grandmother in the south of France, but in the meantime, Henrietta finds herself amongst a cast of characters who are unmoved by her mother's death.

To conclude my reading of this girl and her grief, I turn to a scene late in *The House in Paris*, in which Leopold continues to be indifferent to Henrietta's grief but in which she openly cries. This is, in fact, the only time she allows herself to express sorrow without trying to hide or deny it. Yet, her tears flow freely only in tandem with Leopold's as he sobs for the many grievances that shadow his young life. Bowen lists the reasons the boy cries: "He is weeping because he is not going to England; his mother is not coming to take him there. He is weeping because he has been adopted; he is weeping because he has got nowhere to go" (*House* 205). Henrietta could weep for many similar

reasons, but the narrative makes her tears secondary to Leopold's. Indeed, the narrative treats Leopold's grief as a synecdoche for the suppressed grief of all of humanity:

> His undeniable tears were more than his own, they seemed to be all the tears that ever had been denied, that dryness of body, age, ungreatness or anger ever had made impossible – for the man standing beside his own crashed plane, the woman tearing up somebody's fatal letter and dropping pieces dryly into the grate, people watching their family house burn, the general giving his sword up – arrears of tears starting up at one moment's unobscured view of grief. (Bowen, *House* 204)

Bowen does not make direct reference to the death of Henrietta's mother here; nor does she mention Henrietta's exile from her childhood home. And yet, through Leopold's all-encompassing tears, Bowen gestures toward the girl's repressed grief. Henrietta's loss may be denied, made impossible due to its "ungreatness," but Bowen persistently marks its erasure. This chapter shows that Bowen achieves this through strategic use of nautical imagery and parallels between characters, yet in this scene, where grief is most visible as both children cry, the narrative still insists on ignoring Henrietta's personal loss. When she cries here, the narrative describes Henrietta as a conduit for Leopold's tears. Once again, Henrietta is rendered inanimate by the boy's intense self-absorption: "Leopold's solitary despair made Henrietta no more than the walls or table" (Bowen, *House* 205). Her mere physical presence calms him, though, as she begins to shed tears on his behalf, "pressing her ribs to his elbow so that his sobs began to go through her too" (Bowen, *House* 205). When his "breathing steadied itself," however, she keeps crying "tears, from her own eyes but not from a self she knew of" (Bowen, *House* 205-206). The ambiguity of this last phrase suggests at first that Henrietta feels alienated from her own identity in

this moment, which would fit with the narrative's claim that Leopold's anguish has reduced the girl to "no more than the walls or table" (Bowen, *House* 205). Alternatively, though, it might suggest a moment of transformation as Henrietta becomes aware of a change in herself, a change that introduces her to a new and unrecognizable version of herself. This reading would imply that Henrietta's very makeup has been altered by her grief, by the lack of recognition for her loss, or by the way Leopold's despair possesses her here. Starting with the children's early-morning conversation about mothers, Bowen surreptitiously prepares resisting readers to interpret Henrietta's tears in this late scene not only as a sign of her sympathy for Leopold but also as an expression of her own grief, a grief that marks the passing of her mother.

1.2 *THE DEATH OF THE HEART* (1938)

If the surrounding characters in *The House in Paris* are largely oblivious to Henrietta Mountjoy's grief, the characters in *The Death of the Heart* fail to understand each other in more willful, hypocritical ways. Much like Henrietta, Portia Quayne is thrown into an unfamiliar setting. In this case, she stays with her half-brother and his wife—Thomas and Anna Quayne—after both her parents die. In the Quayne family's social world of post-World War I London, sophisticates favor bluff and bluster over sincerity, and outsiders—like the affable but guileless Major Brutt—misread civility as approbation or affection. This setting leaves little room for grieving to play out naturally; past losses are suppressed even as they continue to affect characters' lives in the present.

The novel provides plenty of contextual details to fill in the tragedies that lurk in the corners of characters' memories, but in the main, the narrative sidelines any active working through of loss. Readers learn of deaths in the family, estrangements, lost prospects, and more—often in very matter-of-fact terms. Yet, the narrative mostly holds readers at a distance from the internal thoughts of Portia and the others. Bowen uses great restraint when revealing individual psychologies and emotions. She offers only limited insight via brief flashbacks, cryptic diary entries, and occasional shifts to first-person narration. Otherwise, characterization in *The Death of the Heart* must be gleaned primarily from the surfaces of what characters say, how they carry themselves, and how they interact. Consequently, I argue that this novel, too, calls for a reading that goes against the grain, one that remains skeptical of the cues the narrative offers to readers. While characters and the narrative itself direct attention away from losses and grief, resisting readers can understand the novel in deeper, more compelling ways when they look past the diversionary tactics. Thus, I again call for readers to resist complacency and linger over the implications of individual grief instead.

My interpretation dovetails with the common critical reading of *The Death of the Heart* as a *Bildungsroman* but pushes beyond it to elucidate features of the text that have not yet been adequately addressed by scholars.[5] To begin with, I consider it not only valid but powerfully persuasive to read *The Death of the Heart* as a coming-of-age narrative. Contemporary criticism that follows this line of thought usefully illustrates how Portia's

[5] See Nicola Darwood, Rochelle Rives, and Eibhear Walshe for readings of *The Death of the Heart* as a coming-of-age novel.

youthful innocence ebbs away as society's corrupting influences gradually take hold. Thus, this popular reading slots the novel in nicely with the way Maud Ellmann understands Bowen's early fiction—as "coherent narratives, often concerned with the vintage theme of the harsh awakenings of youth" (19). *The Death of the Heart* actively promotes this interpretation, too. Bowen's headings for the three parts of this work—"The World," "The Flesh," and "The Devil"—imply a modern moral tale in which the author will increasingly expose her young female protagonist, Portia, to society's darkest nature. It is, in Corcoran's terms, "an ethically instructive novel" (103). Plus, throughout this traditional melodramatic plot, the narrative makes copious references to the sixteen-year-old's youth and naiveté. Bowen goes so far as to include a passage theorizing innocence:

> Innocence so constantly finds itself in a false position that inwardly innocent people learn to be disingenuous. Finding no language in which to speak in their own terms they resign themselves to being translated imperfectly. They exist alone; when they try to enter into relations they compromise falsifyingly – through anxiety, through desire to impart and to feel warmth. The system of our affections is too corrupt for them. They are bound to blunder, then to be told they cheat. In love, the sweetness and violence they have to offer involves a thousand betrayals for the less innocent. Incurable strangers to the world, they never cease to exact a heroic happiness. Their singleness, their ruthlessness, their one continuous wish makes them bound to be cruel, and to suffer cruelty. The innocent are so few that two of them seldom meet – when they do meet, their victims lie strewn all round. (*Death* 112)

This passage invites readings that focus on the difficult transition from adolescence into adulthood, even as it shrewdly complicates the usual themes of *Bildungsromane*. Bowen exposes the ways in which "inwardly innocent people" not only are acted upon but also exert their own force in the world, even to the point of inflicting damage. Consequently, scholars have examined how *The Death of the Heart* undermines assumptions about the harmlessness of youth, revealing "both the betrayal of innocence and the betrayal by the innocents" (Darwood 111).

Yet, the loss of innocence is not the only loss Portia sustains. She and other characters suffer various forms of grief in Bowen's novel, even though the narrative again tends to shift readers' focus away from these other substantial forms of loss. Most critics, even when they acknowledge the indirectness of Bowen's prose in *The Death of the Heart*, do not broach the question of whether the narrative itself may be conducting purposeful misdirection. I argue that we can glean more from this text if we doubt that the coming-of-age arc tells the whole story—that is, if we resist the narrational prompts it provides. Doing so exposes how little is actually said—by the narrative, other characters, or Portia herself—about what lingering effects Portia's past might have on her in the present moment. What happens when an individual does not address her own grief? What if other characters fail to recognize her loss? What if the narrative itself mutes her pain? And what if readers settle for ready-made interpretations rather than tackling such questions?

To address these issues, we must read differently. We start with the coming-of-age interpretation, but we must go beyond it. As the passage above states, innocent characters can find "no language in which to speak in their own terms" (Bowen, *Death*

112). In this way, innocent characters have much in common with grieving individuals: both are afflicted by the impossibility of clear, communicative self-expression. The innocent and the bereaved lack a common language with society; their truest emotions cannot be perceived or adequately addressed by others. Thus, Portia—as teenager and orphan—finds herself doubly inarticulate. Her loss of innocence takes root not only in her growing awareness of sexuality and her experience of betrayal but also in the sense of vulnerability and isolation that attends her parents' deaths. She must endure the disillusionment that comes with losing loved ones, and with losing faith in family stability at the same time. She must struggle to meet her own emotional needs while facing others' general disregard for her bereavement.

And Portia is not alone in this. Virtually every character in *The Death of the Heart* harbors some personal form of grief that goes unacknowledged by others. The figure of St. Quentin offers a minor but illustrative example: he is a functionary planted in the novel principally as Anna Quayne's confidante, but even this marginal secondary character suffers inner anguish. Bowen does not elaborate upon the matter, but in describing his character, she writes that he, "apart from the slackish kindness he used with Anna and one or two other friends, detested intimacy, which, so far, had brought him nothing but pain" (*Death* 9). The frequent pauses in this sentence signal the narrative's stuttering hesitancy to discuss intimacy even as it registers emotional distress. Without revealing St. Quentin's specific woes, the characterization continues: "From this dread of exposure came his tendencies to hurry on, to be insultingly facile, to misunderstand perversely" (Bowen, *Death* 9). St. Quentin shields himself from the vulnerabilities of emotional attachment and thereby validates Rossen's claim that Bowen

"portrays characters who struggle with grief and abandonment by warding it off, trying to diminish it, or travestying its effects by consciously dining well" (133). However characters may try to avoid it, life in Bowen's fiction is a crucible that no one can escape unharmed. At the center of the various betrayals, shattered illusions, unreciprocated loves, class-based slights, and gendered vulnerabilities in *The Death of the Heart*, however, Portia Quayne stands apart—as the protagonist, as the one character who tries the hardest to make sense of it all.

Already, the strategy of reading *The Death of the Heart* against the grain begins to open new interpretive possibilities. Though the narrative leads readers toward simple, overt readings, there are other significant facets to consider. In particular, I contend that Portia Quayne's bereavement following her parents' deaths is crucial to the novel's meaning. Indeed, by reading Portia's grief, we can better position ourselves to recognize and analyze other unacknowledged losses that pervade the work. Therefore, in my call for critics to be resisting readers, I ask that they engage in a studious effort to incorporate Portia's recent loss and the obscured losses of other characters into their understanding of the work as a whole. This requires pushing back against the inclination—shown by both the narrative and the society it depicts—to suppress grief and emotional suffering. My critical approach to *The Death of the Heart* relies on three essential observations: first, that social propriety and the narrative itself sublimate Portia's grief; second, that Bowen makes Portia's internal suffering just visible enough for attentive readers to bear witness to it; and third, that keeping all characters' past experiences in mind as we read unlocks new meaning.

Building upon these tenets requires that we gather what we know about the losses sustained by Bowen's characters. Thus, in my interpretation, the novel's extensive exposition provides crucial background information that fleshes out individual characters in *The Death of the Heart* and helps to explain their conduct over the course of the novel. Although I believe this approach to the text has the potential to reveal insights into most of the characters, I will limit my reading to in-depth examinations of Portia and Anna. Initially, these two women look like foils of each other, but my analysis shows that they have more in common than first meets the eye. Their attitudes toward grief pit them against each other, but they are united in their experiences of loss and disillusionment.

Portia's backstory emerges in Part One ("The World") as it lingers over the Quayne family history. Early in *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen details the elder Mr. Quayne's extramarital affair, which ended his marriage to Thomas's mother—Mrs. Quayne, initiated his marriage with Portia's mother—Irene, and yielded a child—Portia. Readers also learn that Portia's parents died recently in quick succession, leaving the sixteen-year-old girl orphaned and entrusted to her half-brother and his wife—Thomas and Anna Quayne. Noting Portia's fresh emotional wounds allows us to comprehend her position better, and it brings to the fore the role of grief in her everyday life. Even though other losses and betrayals will eclipse Portia's filial grief as the novel progresses, her suppressed mourning process continues to influence her approach to life and society.

Similarly, when readers take into account Anna's personal losses—her parents' deaths, her failed career, her physical inability to have children, to name a few—they can begin to understand that her desire to stifle Portia's emotional expression derives from her own unresolved pain. Anna exhibits all the stereotypical characteristics of an

unattached, invasive, resentful mother-replacement for Portia; indeed, she is in many ways a variation on the familiar fairytale trope of the wicked stepmother. Yet, her betrayals of her young ward cannot be explained away as the actions of a purely evil, amoral character. Lacking self-awareness and sympathy, Anna certainly has her moments of cruel hypocrisy, but Bowen provides too many details of the character's unhappy past for attentive readers to separate her treatment of Portia from her own significant reasons for bitterness, jealousy, and coldness.

So, even when the narrative denies access to interiority, even when the Quaynes and their friends largely fail to plumb the depths of their own emotions, readers should use what expositional information we have to aid our interpretations of this novel. The contradiction of *The Death of the Heart* is that Bowen both provides the means for such a reading and makes its deployment challenging. Or, to put it another way, only by analyzing the work to pinpoint what it suppresses can readers make the invisible visible.

As in *The House in Paris*, Bowen uses a diverse set of tactics to facilitate this sort of grief-conscious reading. In fact, her methods of handling themes of loss and grief in *The Death of the Heart* closely correspond to those I find at work in *The House in Paris*. For both novels of the late 1930s, Bowen plays with narrative time and disrupts conventional narrative logic in order to mask and unveil individual characters' grievances simultaneously. While the extended middle section in *The House in Paris* interrupts the present-day narration with its imagined hypothesis of what Karen would say to her son if she were present and if she were capable of the direct honesty he expects of her, Portia's flashback to the life she shared with her mother runs counter to the straightforward timeline and external third-person voice that the narrative in *The Death of the Heart*

generally maintains. Additionally, in lieu of the earlier novel's ship imagery, the later novel returns several times to an *escritoire* loaded with symbolic meaning. In both, too, Bowen raises questions about the role of family and society as potential support networks for those who grieve. And, finally, Bowen again makes subtle, implicit connections between a grieving girl and a grieving woman—in this case, Portia and Anna Quayne. More than previously, however, Bowen accentuates the ethics of visibility and invisibility. *The Death of the Heart* is a novel that concerns itself with what it means to be unseen or overexposed, and it suggests that those questions have higher stakes when personal grief is involved.

Early in *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen introduces her themes of privacy and exposure through the metaphor of the *escritoire*. In preparation for Portia's arrival in London, Anna furnishes a spare bedroom for the girl's use. The *escritoire*, placed in the room at Anna's behest, represents her hope that Portia will keep her internal life private. As Anna speaks of the arrangements for the newly orphaned girl, she defines the desk as a tool to facilitate concealment. She explains her intent to a friend, St. Quentin: "[The *escritoire*] has drawers that lock and quite a big flap to write on. The flap locks too: I hoped that would make her see that I quite meant her to have a life of her own" (Bowen, *Death* 5). While this gesture may be seen as empowering, as recognition of Portia's individuality, Anna's repugnance toward Portia's grief soon disabuses readers of that notion and confirms that her goals are confinement and repression. We come to understand that the Quayne's circle tolerates only guarded, staged effusiveness from people like their friend Eddie; it falters at the genuine, vulnerable expression of emotion by someone like Portia. Fundamentally, the *escritoire* is meant to encourage Portia to

lock away her true feelings and to present an acceptable, conforming, stoic face to the world—regardless of the force of her grief.

To Anna's great frustration, however, Portia does not adhere to the tidy, conventional manner of conduct set out for her. Whether out of ignorance, unwillingness, or sheer inability, Portia fails to maintain the polite secrecy that Anna expects. Given keys to lock the desk, Portia leaves the drawers ajar; given a structure meant for organization and storage, Portia allows disorder to reign. Her supposed misuse of the *escritoire* indicates an apparent disregard for her own privacy, and it suggests that an emotional tumult agitates her from within. Therefore, Portia assumes the role of the ruthless innocent who must be tamed, who must be trained by society to conform to certain shared codes. And Anna stands as the chief enforcer. Crucially, though, readers see only Anna's bewilderment regarding the clutter in the opening pages of *The Death of the Heart*. Bowen forces her audience to defer their interpretation of Portia's haphazard use of the desk until we learn more about the girl's personality and personal history. This is significant because it establishes that we have only a limited view of Portia when we perceive her through Anna's eyes. Thus, the narrative privileges societal norms through privileging Anna's perspective, but Bowen flags the absence of Portia's perspective for skeptical readers at the same time.

Anna goes on to speculate as to why Portia forgoes the opportunity for privacy, saying to St. Quentin, "But she seems to have lost the keys – nothing was locked, and there was no sign of them" (Bowen, *Death* 5). She expresses even greater confusion regarding the content and quality of what Portia stores in the desk: "She had crammed it, but really, stuffed it, as though it were a bin. She seems to like hoarding paper; she gets

almost no letters, but she'd been keeping all sorts of things Thomas and I throw away – begging letters, for instance, or quack talks about health" (Bowen, *Death* 5). Although Anna cannot make sense of why Portia retains this miscellany of papers, readers can infer that what society (represented here by Anna) regards as meaningless chaff may hold deep personal meaning for the young protagonist. Still, the novel never offers a direct explanation for Portia's retention of "begging letters" and "quack talks about health." Are the papers early indicators of her awareness of the straits of poverty and of human susceptibility to illness—both of which she witnessed in her parents' hardships? Are they mere placeholders until Portia has her own letters and documents to fill the space? We can never conclusively answer these questions, but their very intractability reinforces the fact that some part of Portia's inner life will always remain inaccessible to others—inaccessible to Anna and readers alike.

Anna's discovery of the disarray of Portia's *escritoire* also points to the hypocrisy of Anna's own behavior: she touts a young woman's right to secrecy, but when given the chance, she snoops through Portia's belongings. As Portia's temporary guardian, Anna has license to do so in order to verify familial respectability and to enforce social mores in her home.[6] Anna's outrage at the disorganized mess of the *escritoire* leads to her

[6] My understanding of how Anna polices Portia's social respectability within their home draws on Kathryn A. Conrad's discussion of the "family cell." According to Conrad, the family cell serves a regulatory function; its members monitor each other, generally with the aim of censuring non-normative behavior and imposing the dominant ideology of society (14).

greatest invasion of her adolescent sister-in-law's privacy, namely, her perusal of Portia's diary. Here, the legibility of the written word makes Portia vulnerable to overexposure. Such textual documents in Bowen's novels are violable not only because of their materiality, which allows them to fall into the wrong hands, but also because of their representative nature, as a transcription of an individual's internal thoughts and feelings. Corcoran identifies the proliferation of texts within Bowen's works as being "constantly offered to readerly inspection and interpretation, and they are slippery with secrets, duplicities, treacheries, betrayals, the second selves which the traces of script inscribe on the page, the selves we may wish to eradicate but which remain ineradicably behind us, in evidence" (3). Thus, by reading Portia's diary, Anna violates her privacy and renders the girl more visible than she may wish to be. Anna tries, unsuccessfully, to explain to St. Quentin why she opened the desk in the first place: "Well, it looked so awful, you see. The flap would not shut – papers gushed out all round it and even stuck through the hinge. Which made me shake with anger – I really can't tell you why" (Bowen, *Death* 6). Anna's attempt at self-justification hints at what she really fears; she cannot stand the appearance of anything that is not proper, contained, and strictly managed. The possibility that the desk may contain written documentation divulging Portia's feelings threatens Anna's sense of domestic, bourgeois respectability. Therefore, Anna imposes harsh strictures on Portia's self-expression, and her intrusion on the privacy of Portia's journal redoubles her violations against the young woman. Anna expects Portia to be conventional and unambiguous, but she misunderstands what the girl is experiencing in the wake of her parents' deaths and what she really needs.

By its very nature, grieving tends to be a messy process. Among its many variable aspects, it can spur outbursts of emotion and has no single normative course. Yet, Anna cannot abide—or even comprehend a possible reason for—what the *escritoire* and diary represent for Portia: that is to say, an effusion of feelings. For reasons this chapter will explore, Anna is manifestly ill-equipped to comprehend Portia's ongoing grief or the immensity of her loss. The girl's emotional expression through her use of the desk and diary opposes the aloof self-containment that Anna idealizes, but it also offers an accurate, unbridled response to the disorder and fracture Portia experiences as a result of her repressed and unarticulated grief. So, contrary to what the narrative's emphasis on the coming-of-age plot might suggest, Portia's periodic outbursts of feeling and her feeble bids to win affection are as much byproducts of her efforts to come to terms with the recent deaths of her parents and find sympathy as they are of her youth or innocence.

When Bowen conveys Portia's perspective regarding the *escritoire*, she shows that the lack of understanding between Anna and Portia is mutual. Portia reacts with surprise and dismay to the news that Anna has been in her room. Neither woman can make sense of the other's actions. Anna frets over how to account for Portia's conduct, and Portia quizzes Matchett, the servant, about why Anna went into her bedroom and what she did there. While Anna avoids addressing the bad faith she demonstrates by promising privacy and subsequently violating it, Portia quickly draws attention to Anna's duplicity. The girl pointedly asks Matchett, "But what was she doing in my room?" and "But she always says it's my room… Has she touched things?" (Bowen *Death* 23). Even allowing for the fact that Portia has not taken great care in securing her diary safely in the *escritoire*, she undoubtedly has absorbed Anna's message that she ought to be able "to

have a life of her own" (Bowen, *Death* 5). Portia either trusted Anna too readily or underestimated the care required to protect her secrets. Thus, her experience of breeched privacy serves as a cautionary tale within Bowen's novel, revealing that an individual's space, thoughts, and feelings are never wholly inviolable. We may never see the full scope of Portia's internal life, but her diary puts more of it on display than she intends to share.

Ultimately, the problem, as Bowen portrays it in *The Death of the Heart*, is that one can be too visible and invisible at the same time. What one means to keep hidden, like a diary, might be exposed. But what one hopes might be recognized by—or even shared with—others, like one's feelings of loss and sadness, might remain obscured. The metaphor of the *escritoire* shows that a grieving girl like Portia, under the guardianship of a woman deeply invested in social appearances like Anna, is particularly vulnerable. The fact of the matter is that Portia is orphaned and grieving, even if other characters cannot fully perceive the implications of that reality.

For readers, the challenge is to note the progress of Portia's mourning even as the narrative and its characters fail to do so. In order to mark the presence of Portia's grief without explicitly discussing it, I argue, Bowen manipulates the narrative form. Once again, though, when Bowen pushes with one hand, she pulls with the other. For instance, as Corcoran points out, when the narrative offers up pages directly from Portia's diary,[7] it implicates readers in the same transgression I just observed of Anna; thus, "to read *The Death of the Heart* is also to become the illicit reader of another's private writing" (122).

[7] See Bowen, *Death* 246-252.

Yet, elsewhere in the novel, Bowen disrupts the novel's established timeline and point of view to allow Portia a brief outlet for her grief-stricken memories of her mother and their life together. With "shifting focalizations," Bowen undermines the narrative logic of the novel and carves out textual space for the grieving girl to reflect upon her loss (White 79). Siân White observes similar shifts in Bowen's Irish novels, *The Last September* and *A World of Love*, and contends that this represents a particular subtlety on the author's part:

> Narrative theorists have, at least for the past fifty or so years, suggested that consistent, singular narrative voices are rather rare, and therefore the fact of shifting focalization in Bowen's work is not unusual in fiction generally. What is particularly noteworthy in Bowen's style, however, is the subtlety with which the focalization shifts, transitioning in and out of the space of the story world without explicitly signaling the shifts or always clearly designating the boundaries of diegesis, disrupting what we might call normal indirect discourse. (80)

It is within this critical vein that I read *The Death of the Heart*. The novel begins with third-person omniscient narration, but it becomes a modernist collage of narrative styles, moving from free indirect discourse to first-person stream of consciousness and back to the third-person narration that focuses on surfaces rather than delving into characters' psychologies. Examining these shifts, I find that Bowen's narratological disruptions typically coincide with moments that are particularly tense or emotional for the characters. I argue, therefore, that Bowen's shifting focalizations in *The Death of the Heart*—the text's modulations in voice and style—give readers access to characters' inner lives in new, oblique ways. Bowen rarely describes characters' emotions directly,

but when she unsettles the narrative logic of the novel, we glimpse characters' internalized, unarticulated feelings. So, for instance, even though Portia does not document her grief for her mother in the diary entries we—and Anna—read, Bowen reveals the girl's bereaved state through other narratological shifts.

The key instance of Bowen's manipulation of point of view and voice for the purposes of this discussion occurs early on, in the second chapter of *The Death of the Heart* (31-33). This passage, which I will quote in full before analyzing it in greater depth, indicates that the narrative's focalization is less fixed than it first appears. It is significant, I think, that this example offers a rare acknowledgment that Portia is still very much in mourning, as it relates to her memory of her recently deceased mother. In the presence of her half-brother, Thomas, Portia falls into a reverie about her final days with her mother, Irene:

> But she only looked through him, and Thomas felt the force of not being seen … What she did see was the *pension* on the crag in Switzerland, that had been wrapped in rain that whole afternoon. Swiss summer rain is dark, and makes a tent for the mind. At the foot of the precipice, beyond the paling, the lake made black wounds in the white mist. Precarious high-upness had been an element of their life up there, which had been the end of their life together. That night they came back from Lucerne on the late steamer, they had looked up, seen the village lights at star-level through the rain, and felt that that was their dear home. They went up, arm-in-arm in the dark, up the steep zigzag, pressing each others' elbows, hearing the night rain sough down through the pines: they were not frightened at all. They always stayed in places before the season, when the

funicular was not working yet. All the other people in that *pension* had been German or Swiss: it was a wooden building with fretwork balconies. Their room, though it was a back room facing into the pinewoods, had a balcony; they would lie down covered with coats, leaving the window open, smelling the wet woodwork, hearing the gutters run. Turn abouts, they would read aloud to each other the Tauchnitz novels they had bought in Lucerne. Things for tea, the little stove, and a bottle of violet methylated spirits stood on the wobbly commode between their beds, and at four o'clock Portia would make tea. They ate, in alternate mouthfuls, block chocolate and *brioches*. Postcards they liked, and Irene's and Portia's sketches were pinned to the pine walls; stockings they had just washed would be exposed to dry on the radiator, although the heating was off. Sometimes they heard a cow bell in the thick distance, or people talking German in the room next door. Between five and six the rain quite often stopped, wet light crept down the trunks of the pines. Then they rolled off their beds, put their shoes on, and walked down the village street to the viewpoint over the lake. Through torn mist they would watch the six o'clock steamer chuff round the cliff and pull in at the pier. Or they would attempt to read the names on the big still shut hotels on the heights opposite. They looked at the high chalets stuck on brackets of grass – they often used to wish they had field-glasses, but Mr Quayne's field-glasses had been sent home to Thomas. On the way home they met the cows being driven down through the village – kind cows, damp, stumbling, plagued by their own bells. Or the Angelus coming muffled across the plateau would make Irene sigh, for once she had loved church. To the little Catholic church they had sometimes

> guiltily been, afraid of doing the wrong thing, feeling they stole grace. When they left that high-up village, when they left for ever, the big hotels were just being thrown open, the funicular would begin in another day. They drove down in a fly, down the familiar zigzag, Irene moaning and clutching Portia's hand. Portia could not weep at leaving the village, because her mother was in such pain. But she used to think of it while she waited at the Lucerne clinic, where Irene had the operation and died: she died at six in the evening, which had always been their happiest hour.
>
> A whir from Thomas's clock – it was just going to strike six. Six, but not six in June. At this hour, the plateau must be in snow, and but for the snow dark, with lights behind shutters, perhaps a light in the church. Thomas sits so fallen-in, waiting for Anna, that his clock makes the only sound in his room. But our street must be completely silent with snow, and there must be snow on our balcony. (Bowen, *Death* 32-33)

Although this extended remembrance features one of the most striking—and moving—narrative shifts in the novel, it rarely features in literary criticism on *The Death of the Heart*. The passage itself is replete with meaningful details—the humble happiness of Portia's routines with Irene, the awareness in hindsight that this scene represents "the end of their life together," even the mother and daughter "feeling [that] they stole grace." Corcoran, who also quotes the passage in full, glosses some of that content. He argues that it reveals Portia's capacity for creating "a loving existence, a kind of eager, almost animally instinctual shelter out of physical togetherness," and he therefore establishes Portia as the novel's "moral arbiter as well as suffering victim," but a "victim who

refuses the role" (Corcoran 103-105). Additionally, I would draw attention to other textual details that speak specifically to Portia's grief. First, Bowen's use of the word "home" here signals the girl's bifurcated sense of self in the present moment—as she still identifies with her mother and their life in Switzerland but now resides at the Quaynes' London home. Within two sentences, the point of reference for "home" shifts: Mr. Quayne's binoculars were sent "home" to Thomas, and they were missed when Portia and Irene walked "home" to the *pension*. Secondly, the narrative repeats the pronoun "they" throughout most of this reverie, grouping Portia and her mother together as an indivisible unit. This unity dissolves, however, as the narration approaches Irene's death; by the time they descend towards the Lucerne clinic, the narration separates them by name—"Irene moaning and clutching Portia's hand"—and refers to each as "she" thereafter (Bowen, *Death* 33). And, thirdly, Bowen's description of Portia's suppressed grief as they leave the *pension* suggests an implicit hierarchy of emotions: "Portia could not weep at leaving the village, because her mother was in such pain." The severity of her mother's immediate health crisis stifles the girl's sense of loss at departing from "their dear home." Bowen compresses much insight regarding both Portia and her grief into this passage, but she speaks through the passage's form as well as its content. Here, we can observe what White refers to as "shifting focalization," as the narrative moves out of third-person narration and into new registers.

Bowen introduces the passage above with third-person narration as Thomas speaks to Portia about her mother's death. She sets up the possibility of sympathy between the half-siblings, but that prospect swiftly dissipates and remains unrealized. When talk of hotels triggers Portia's recollection of her mother, Irene, and their transient

life together, Thomas inattentively responds, saying that Portia must miss the life she knew so well. However, her wordless response sharpens his consciousness of her buried grief. Bowen writes, "At that, she looked away in such overcome silence that he beat a tattoo on the floor with his hanging-down hand. He said: 'I realize much more than that, of course. It was rotten about your mother – things like that shouldn't happen'" (*Death* 31). Thomas's perceptiveness and self-admonition here are commendable, but he does not have the wisdom, will, or wherewithal to share the burden of Portia's grief for long.[8] Bowen makes his discomfort palpable in the nervous rapping of his hand and in his avoidance of speaking explicitly about the "things" that happened to Irene. He tries to understand Portia's pain, but he quickly exhausts his emotional resources. Within moments of acknowledging Portia's loss and the tragedy of Irene's death, Thomas turns his attention to safer comforts, pondering "whether to get a drink" and picking up *The Evening Standard* to glance at the headlines (Bowen, *Death* 31).

But it is at precisely that moment that Bowen complicates the narrative's point-of-view. As Thomas calls his wife, who is elsewhere in the house hosting St. Quentin, on the house telephone, Portia's mind launches backward in time to those final days at the hotel in Switzerland:

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[8] Thomas is unable to sympathize with Portia over the death of her mother despite the fact that the half-siblings have both lost their father, Mr. Quayne (and Thomas has also lost his mother, the first Mrs. Quayne). Yet, the loss of Mr. Quayne hardly registers within the novel, for either Thomas or Portia. This apparent lack of grief is notable, especially as one begins to perceive how Portia's grief for Irene manifests.

> ‘I say,’ he said into the receiver, ‘is St Quentin living here? . . . Well, as soon as he does, then . . . No, don’t do that . . . Yes, I suppose I am, rather.’ He hung up the receiver and looked at Portia. ‘I suppose I *am* back rather early,’ he said.
>
> But she only looked through him, and Thomas felt the force of not being seen . . . What she did see was the *pension* on the crag in Switzerland, that had been wrapped in rain the whole afternoon. (Bowen, *Death* 32)

By broaching the topic of Portia’s loss, Thomas leads the girl to think of the past, but his haste to move on to more banal, everyday matters breaks their fleeting connection. Therefore, when the narrative dives into Portia’s memory, Bowen immerses the readers in the details and setting of that earlier time and place. We, like Portia and the narrative, leave Thomas behind during the girl’s vivid remembrance. When Bowen describes Thomas feeling “the force of not being seen,” she implies that deep emotion and seeing are incompatible; not only are the characters in her novels frequently blind to others’ feelings, but those characters who experience intense affect can lose sight of their immediate surroundings. The emotive power of grief is that fierce.

As this flashback delves into Portia’s memory, it retains the third-person narration. Thus, the narration, which had previously skimmed the surfaces of characters by reporting primarily their external words and actions, now swerves into a different mode, much closer to free indirect style than anything that came before. Readers suddenly see into Portia’s emotional life, as though Bowen resists her own narrative’s impulse to keep its reportage superficial. Bowen allows us—at least for one lengthy paragraph—to see into the girl’s inner thoughts. Alongside Portia, we, too, observe “the *pension* on the crag.” Initially, Bowen mitigates the peculiarity of this moment by

introducing it subtly. She continues the third-person narration throughout the majority of Portia's reminiscence, and she does not set this episode apart with prominent typographical clues—even though she uses white space as a device to differentiate between perspectives and settings elsewhere in the novel. In other words, the entry into Portia's reflection is relatively smooth. Once Bowen tells us what the girl sees, readers are immediately there with Portia in her memory. As readers reach the conclusion of the passage, however, Bowen's prose looks increasingly bizarre.

The narrative's transition out of Portia's reverie and back to the present-day setting of the novel is much more jarring for readers. As we return from Portia's memories of summer on a Swiss plateau to the wintry evening at the Quayne's London home, the narrative entangles free indirect style and third-person omniscience. Then, unexpectedly, the passage slips into first-person narration—for one sentence and one sentence only. Over the course of this scene, Bowen's prose takes a circuitous path through various narrative modes in order to emphasize Portia's memory of her mother's death as well as her continuing grief:

> Portia could not weep at leaving the village, because her mother was in such pain. But she used to think of it while she waited at the Lucerne clinic, where Irene had the operation and died; she died at six in the evening, which had always been their happiest hour.
>
> A whir from Thomas's clock – it was just going to strike six. Six, but not six in June. At this hour, the plateau must be in snow, and but for the snow dark, with lights behind shutters, perhaps a light in the church. Thomas sits so fallen-in,

waiting for Anna, that his clock makes the only sound in his room. But our street must be completely silent with snow, and there must be snow on our balcony.

'The lake was frozen this morning,' she said to him.

'Yes, so I saw.' (*Death* 33)

We watch as Portia imaginatively shuttles back and forth between the site of her memory and her location in the present moment. In the repetition of "six," we see how Portia's associations with time have shifted and multiplied. At six o'clock, she simultaneously occupies that time in her pleasant memories of the *pension*, her tragic memories of the Lucerne clinic, and the present scene in Thomas's study. In subtle contrast, Thomas barely exists in the present; his "fallen-in" posture gives readers the image of a man who deflates, who loses his vitality and presence, without the conversation of others to prop him up. His clock marks the time, but he only rouses himself when Portia speaks directly to him. We may very well ask whether Thomas also has some unseen and complex inner life, especially since he, too, is an orphan (if a fully grown one). But the most that the narrative reveals is that he is well-practiced in sophisticated society's arts of avoidance and repression.

Significantly, though, near the end of this excerpt, Bowen drops the first-person plural into the midst of the usual third-person narration—"*our* snow . . . *our* balcony" (emphasis added). Even though the narrative quickly recalibrates and refers to Portia again in the third-person as "she" in the very next line, that possessive, "our," refers to both Portia and Irene and so must be understood as a fleeting instance of first-person narration from Portia herself. It also echoes the unity suggested by the longer passage's frequent use of "they" when speaking of the mother and daughter together. Here, the

unanticipated, unmediated emergence of Portia's voice marks this passage as pivotal to Bowen's conception of *The Death of the Heart*.

Bowen's decision to initiate her manipulations of the narrative in this scene works along multiple axes, joining her formal experimentation with the novel's undercurrents of bereavement and loss. In other words, she plays with narrative focalization in order to establish the work's themes. Because the passage conveys Portia's memory of her deceased mother, it identifies grief as central to *The Death of the Heart*—not just the grief of romantic heartbreak, which Portia experiences in Part Two of the novel, but the grief of mourning one's parent.[9] Furthermore, as the narration fluctuates from third-person omniscience to free indirect style to first-person narration and back again, Bowen calls into question the reliability, stability, and objectivity of the narrative voice. This encourages readers to second-guess what governs the narrative. Bowen's questioning of narrative authority draws our attention to what principles dictate what is included or excluded from the page. Thus, as we increasingly resist the narrative's prompts, we detect that the narrative works much of the time to submerge loss and grief, which in turn exposes the extent to which Anna, Thomas, and other figures of polite adult society in the novel suppress and constrain emotional expression. In fact, this is the only scene where the novel allows Portia to own her emotional anguish over her mother's passing. Even in the diary entries that Bowen includes later in the novel, Portia makes no direct reference to her loss, perhaps because she already suspects Anna of reading her diary.

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[9] See Rossen for more on *The Death of the Heart* as a melodramatic romance interested in the themes of female sexuality, rivalry, and power (98-102).

Since the *pension* passage affirms that Portia does indeed grieve for her mother, she could use familial support. But, as we have seen, Anna and Thomas Quayne are ill-prepared for that role. They are young and childless, and they do not know how to translate their own experiences of loss into meaningful relief for Portia's emotional turmoil. In fact, Bowen suggests that the concept of "family" rings hollow in the society of *The Death of the Heart*. Because the family unit often plays a mediating role between the individual and society at large, it can provide shelter from external assaults on the psyche and prepare a person to encounter the unknown. In ideal circumstances, it can provide the safety required for working through losses. For Bowen, however, the romanticized nuclear family consisting of mother, father, and child does not exist. Or, if it ever existed, it is always already lost at the start of her novels: in *The House in Paris*, neither Henrietta's father nor her grown sister takes responsibility for her after her mother's death, and in *The Death of the Heart*, infidelity, divorce, and remarriage all feature prominently in the Quayne family's history. Furthermore, such an idealized construction is incompatible with the urbane sophistication of the Quaynes and their milieu. Bowen signals the tension between familial responsibilities and sophisticated indifference early on when she describes St. Quentin's relation to Anna and Thomas: "In so far as the Quaynes were a family, St Quentin was the family friend" (*Death* 9). The phrasing of this statement quietly interrogates the status of a couple that does not procreate; it plants seeds of doubt as to whether "family" is an apt term for the Quayne couple at all. Still, the fact remains that Portia "is Thomas's sister after all"—though even that is qualified given that they are only half-siblings (Bowen, *Death* 6).

Bowen's characters stumble over what exactly the familial relationship between Thomas and Portia ought to mean. Thomas and Portia share a biological father, but this establishes only a fragile link between the two. Mr. Quayne's long-term estrangement from Thomas undermines his paternal standing in his son's life. Anna describes the few times she met the elder Mr. Quayne, saying that "he did not behave at all like Thomas's father, but like an off-the-map, seedy old family friend who doubts if he has done right in showing up" (Bowen, *Death* 11). In other words, Mr. Quayne's relationship with the younger Quayne couple is as insubstantial and inessential as St. Quentin's—despite the blood bond. Thus, Bowen broadens her questioning of what family kinship means in this context. What can "family" mean when an affair dismantles a marriage and reconfigures relations, when a young couple (Thomas and Anna) cannot bear children, when the world still suffers the aftershocks of the Great War? In the *pension* passage, we see Portia's experience of the happiness and sense of security that family can offer. But how does the taint of her parents' adultery alter the family cell—for all and sundry? Anna comments to St. Quentin that the late Mr. Quayne's final correspondence expressed doubt about how he had provided for Portia: "He had felt, he said in the letter, that, because of being his daughter (and from becoming his daughter in the way that she had) Portia had grown up exiled not only from her own country but from *normal, cheerful* family life" (Bowen, *Death* 11). The guilt and shame Mr. Quayne felt for subjecting his daughter to a life of indignity as the byproduct of an extramarital affair opposes the serene contentment Portia remembers of her life abroad. It is only in England, which Mr. Quayne identifies as his daughter's "own country" despite its foreignness to her, that Portia's status as the child of an illicit sexual relationship impinges on her sense of self and family. In Anna's version

of the Quayne family history, at least, Mr. Quayne's transgression against the bonds of marriage with his first wife destabilizes the concept of family for all involved. Mr. Quayne loses his authority as a father to Thomas when his affair with Irene leads to her pregnancy with Portia, and Mr. Quayne's exile from his family's home in England, abroad with Irene, forecloses the possibility of a "normal" family life for them and their child.

But even if Anna cannot regard Mr. Quayne as a legitimate paternal figure, even if Mr. Quayne himself felt he deprived Portia of an ordinary familial upbringing, Portia does not immediately experience her childhood as lacking "family." The other characters—alive and dead—simply cannot see what Portia perceives as her own "*normal, cheerful* life," her "happiest hour." As a result, they cannot see that the loss of the only family life she knew, the only life she experienced as "normal," might be worth pausing over, even worth mourning. In short, the others fail to see that the loss was devastating for her. When Portia's parents die, she loses her family; when Portia lands in proper London society, she loses the isolation that sustained the illusion that her family was ordinary and beyond reproach.

On the rare occasion that adults in the novel do register Portia's inner emotions, their responses are inadequate to her needs. In *The Death of the Heart*, adults struggle to meet Portia's candor. Instead, they deflect attention away from the crux of her unhappiness. Thomas slips from clumsy, even embarrassed awareness of her loss into boredom; Anna and Matchett focus more on her parents' marital affair than on their recent deaths; and other figures like Eddie, Major Brutt, St. Quentin, and Mrs. Heccomb are constrained by convention and therefore remain too aloof to address Portia's needs

directly. With no viable confidant, Portia has little opportunity to express herself openly. She is entitled to have her emotions recognized, validated, and discussed, but her muffled expressions of grief in *The Death of the Heart* elicit very little sympathy and virtually no support. This general neglect of Portia's grief lays bare a troubling double bind: those who have the most grounds to perceive and partake in Portia's sorrow fail to do so while those most willing to ease her pain are barred from doing so by their respectable social manners.

Further into the novel, Bowen illustrates this paradox and reiterates Thomas's inhibited compassion for Portia's bereavement as he explains his half-sister's losses to Major Brutt. Thomas outlines the circumstances that brought Portia to London but tires of the topic almost immediately. Bowen writes, "Overcome by the dullness of what he had been saying, Thomas trailed off and slumped further back into his chair. But Major Brutt, having listened with close attention, evidently expected more to come" (*Death* 98). A misfit in London in his own way, Major Brutt is a keen listener and displays genuine interest in young Portia. But he also fails to provide the sympathy her grief might require. Social propriety precludes him from speaking openly with her about her parents' deaths, and a man of his age could not be the sixteen-year-old girl's confidant without raising eyebrows. So, Major Brutt satisfies himself with giving her presents of jigsaw puzzles, a kindness she recalls near the novel's conclusion while in her greatest despair (Bowen, *Death* 328). Yet, learning to put together the pieces of a puzzle will not teach her how to reassemble the life that loss has shattered. Overall, then, the general, unspoken consensus is that the less said about Portia's bereavement, the better.

Indeed, to briefly recap—and thereby exhibit how little the characters say about Portia's loss—only four conversations in the course of *The Death of the Heart* address Portia's parents in any substantive way. My analysis so far touches on three of them: Anna's explanation to St. Quentin of the marital affair and subsequent fallout, Thomas's abandoned attempt to sympathize with Portia's grief over her deceased mother, and Thomas's summarizing of the situation for Major Brutt. The only missing piece so far is Matchett's discussion with Portia about Thomas's mother and her treatment of Mr. Quayne and Irene, which emphasizes not Portia's loss or her parents' deaths but family drama that preceded the girl's birth. Beyond these few instances, characters—and the narrative itself—deflect attention away from Portia's suffering in losing her parents. No one bothers much to inquire into the young woman's emotional well-being despite her precarious situation; it would not be polite. This omission in turn suppresses Portia's grief, and the narrative does little to draw attention to this fact. Bowen's revealing narratological manipulations, like those we saw in the *pension* passage, manifest in fits and starts.

Bowen's commentary on grief and self-expression finds other channels in *The Death of the Heart* as well, though. When we read closely, watching for evidence of Portia's mourning, her clothes take on new significance. Apparel functions as a principal marker for bereavement; wearing mourning black would have been one of the only socially-sanctioned exhibitions of private grief in England during this period. Because Portia is sixteen years old, however, she is treated as a child and has no say regarding what attire she wears. Anna and Matchett hold conflicting views regarding whether or not Portia should be kept in funereal black, but no one asks the girl how she feels about it.

They react to the fact of her loss without considering its emotional impact. It is merely a practical question. Thus, I argue, by denying Portia the chance to choose whether or not she will signify her mourning outwardly, Anna and Matchett deprive her of agency in her grieving process and once again force her to internalize her pain.

The social prohibition against self-expression undergirds Anna and Matchett's debate about Portia's clothes. Upon Portia's arrival in London, Anna promptly tried to divest the girl of her mourning weeds. As a result, she clashed with her outspoken servant, Matchett, who believed it was too soon. If Anna represents the pragmatic perspective that advocates for a stiff upper lip and a steady march onward from loss, then Matchett represents an older, more Victorian approach, which Tammy Clewell describes as "the traditional role of submissive and passive mourner, a role historically burdensome to women who carried out the restrictive sartorial codes and social isolation of grieving to a much greater extent than their male counterparts" (204-205).[10] Clewell helps explain why these questions of grief—and clothing—fall to the women, but Bowen's novel shows that a woman like Matchett might find these traditions and codes comforting, not just restricting. Bowen describes Anna and Matchett's disagreement as follows:

> Portia arrived as black as a little crow, in heavy Swiss mourning chosen by her aunt – back from the East in time to take charge of things. Anna explained at once that mourning not only did not bring the dead back but did nobody good. She got a cheque from Thomas, took Portia shopping round London and bought her

[10] Clewell's discussion also pertains to Lousse in Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*, as she bears the responsibility of public mourning.

frocks, hats, coats, blue, grey, red, jaunty, and trim. Matchett, unpacking these when they came home, said: 'You have put her in colours, madam?'

'She need not look like an orphan: it's bad for her.'

Matchett only folded her lips.

'Well, what, Matchett?' Anna said touchily.

'Young people like to wear what is usual.' (*Death* 41)

Anna's campaign against demonstrable bereavement disavows any palliative benefits of actively mourning a loved one's death. To be marked by mourning dress is to elicit a response from society. But, to Anna, grieving is more akin to sickness than to a cure. She states that if Portia really misses Irene it would be "like having someone very ill in the house" (Bowen, *Death* 35). So, Anna would prefer that Portia cope dispassionately, and she tries to counter the visibility of Portia's grief by cloaking it in charming, vivid fashions, making the girl present an entirely different hue.

Anna disdains showing one's loss outwardly, but she privileges appearances to excess. Furthermore, her statement that Portia "need not look like an orphan" because "it's bad for her" denies the girl's reality (Bowen, *Death* 41). The ambiguous phrasing of Anna's comment (i.e., that Portia need not look *like* an orphan) suggests either that she does not recognize Portia's status as an orphan or that she believes it possible for Portia to overcome that identity by donning bright clothes. Either way, she avoids the inescapable fact that the girl's parents are deceased. For Anna, grief is a disability to be disguised and denied in the hopes that it will vanish by sheer power of one's will. In that multivalent phrase, "She need not look like an orphan," Bowen intimates both that Anna is incapable of understanding the reality of Portia's loss and that she believes a simple

change of dress, of appearance, can alter the status one has in the world. Being presentable in society takes precedence in Anna's mind.

Matchett's opposing perspective values the ritual of mourning black. To her, its visibility demonstrates Portia's participation in what is "usual" more than denying her loss would. In contrast to Anna, she feels that Portia ought to dress appropriately for her actual circumstances. Yet, she takes this position on the basis of what is conventional, concerning herself with tradition rather than Portia's need for self-expression. In fact, the "heavy Swiss mourning" Portia wore when she arrived had been "chosen by her aunt" in the first place (Bowen, *Death* 41). This detail indicates that the black clothes were not self-determined by Portia any more than the bright, cheerful clothing Anna picked out for her. It also makes Matchett a spokesperson for Portia's absent aunt and an older generation, that remains closer to Victorian social mores. But nowhere in the conversation between Anna and Matchett does Bowen allow Portia's voice or perspective to intervene. They reduce her to the figure of a silenced child—one who is seen but not heard—though even the sight of her and her clothing causes contention amongst these adults. What Portia wants to wear, whether she wants to display her personal grief to the world, what she really feels about her parents' deaths—these issues do not factor into the discussion. Decisions regarding her mourning process are made for her, apparently without her input or consent. Indeed, the decisions adults make tend to muffle or contain grief, prioritizing society's norms over the needs of an orphaned girl. Through the brief exchange about Portia's clothing, Bowen shows readers that this society reserves agency for adults—and even then, self-determination only extends as far as strict, repressive

social codes allow. Anna and Matchett do not trust a sixteen-year-old girl to follow those codes on her own, so they force their own notions of what is most acceptable upon her.

Considering that Bowen positions Anna and Portia as character foils, it is instructive to think more deeply about why Anna is so invested in this sartorial program of repression and her broader denial of Portia's grief. As I indicated early in this section, we can better understand Anna Quayne when we take into account her personal history. Losses haunt Anna's past, but she consistently fails to address others' emotional needs—or her own. Of all the characters in *The Death of the Heart*, Anna harbors the least sympathy or patience for genuine mourning; she advocates a complete denial of grief. Her obtuseness about how people respond to the deaths of loved ones is persistent and resolute. The irony of Anna Quayne's iron heart, though, is that she never realizes that her ill-treatment of Portia imitates and perpetuates ill-treatment she experienced in her own times of grief.

From early in *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen characterizes Anna as almost cruelly insensitive. Anna's initial conversation with St. Quentin in the first chapter, for instance, provides crucial exposition but frames it within Anna's cool reportage. What she says informs readers that three people have died within the last "four or five years": first, Thomas's mother; then, more recently, Mr. Quayne (father of Thomas and Portia); and finally, Portia's mother, Irene (Bowen, *Death* 10-11). Three parents are dead, two children are orphaned, and two families are obliterated. But Anna delivers this information without evidence of sadness. Her observations are matter-of-fact, almost callous; her only perceptible emotion is sour distaste when she thinks of Irene:

> Thomas's mother, as no doubt you remember, died four or five years ago. I think, in some curious way, that it was her death, in the distance, that finished poor Mr Quayne, though I daresay life with Irene helped. . . . But he [Mr. Quayne] had foreseen, I suppose, that Irene would be too incompetent to go on living for long [after he died], and of course he turned out to be right. (Bowen, *Death* 10-11)

This speech makes plain Anna's judgment of the affair that ended the marriage between Thomas's parents and incited the union of Portia's. She views Mrs. Quayne as a righteous but generous victim, Mr. Quayne as an abashedly guilty party who remains always beholden to his first wife, and Irene as a pernicious and defective interloper.

The concept of loss never enters Anna's purview. She remains untouched by the immensity of the tragedy even when St. Quentin exclaims, "What a number of deaths in Thomas's family!" (Bowen, *Death* 11). It is at this point that Anna's animosity toward Irene finds its fullest expression. She responds, "Irene's [death], of course, was a frank relief – till we got the letter and realized what it would mean. My heavens, what an awful woman she was!" (Bowen, *Death* 11). The letter Anna mentions here is the last communication Thomas received from his father, which requested that he and Anna "give [Portia] a taste of [*normal, cheerful* family life] for a year" in London (Bowen, *Death* 11). Far from regarding Irene's passing as a regrettable occurrence, Anna sees it as a godsend for ridding her family of an unwanted appendage. She only bemoans that the woman's death temporarily foists responsibility for Portia upon her and her husband. At no point does she acknowledge the possibility that others—Portia in particular—might lament Irene's death, even if she cannot herself feel sorrow for the loss. So much does

Anna's dislike for Irene dominate her perspective that she remains untouched by the passing of her husband's parents as well.

Anna shows the limits of her perspicacity when she discovers that Portia has been crying for her mother. She mistakes Portia's sniffled tears for a cold at first, which reveals her ineptitude at identifying grief. Yet, even after Portia exits "with stricken determination . . . straight past Anna" and Thomas explains that he thinks "she's missing her mother," Anna fails to comprehend the girl's sadness (Bowen, *Death* 34). She does nothing to cover her surprise: "'Goodness!' said Anna, stricken. 'But what started her off? Why is she missing her mother *now*?'" (Bowen, *Death* 34). Interestingly, Bowen draws a parallel between the emotions Portia and Anna feel in this scene, describing both as "stricken." While my reading will endeavor to show what Portia and Anna have in common, this scene otherwise pits them as opposites since Anna cannot fathom reasons for such an emotional outburst without some immediate external cause. Thus, Anna remains unconvinced by Thomas's explanation and insists that he must have been at fault somehow. She tells him, "In some way, you must have unsettled her" (Bowen, *Death* 34).

In this exchange, Bowen deftly reveals Anna's assumption about how grief works and how those expectations are at odds with Portia's lived reality. When Anna questions why Portia misses her mother *now*, she exposes how little she understands Portia's inner life. She assumes that the girl's day-to-day existence ordinarily excludes thoughts of Irene, so she regards Portia's tears as an anomaly. Moreover, she perceives Portia's grief as unusual, even unsound: "'No, but listen,' said Anna, catching hold of [Thomas's] hand but holding it at a distance away from her, 'is she really missing Irene? Because if so, how awful. It's like having someone ill in the house. Oh, yes, I can easily pity her. I wish

I could manage to like her better" (Bowen, *Death* 35). By categorizing grief as an illness, Anna suggests that the act of mourning evinces frailty or, worse, degeneracy. For Anna, such an illness of the mind threatens to contaminate her family cell; it is no mistake that her thoughts turn to the "house" as Portia's grief-sickness threatens to destabilize her household and the domestic order she so fastidiously maintains. Throughout this passage, Bowen emphasizes Anna's emotional remoteness but also a deep-seated anxiety. Anna holds her husband's hand "at a distance away from her" and can "pity" but not "like" (and certainly not "love") Thomas's half-sister. It is as though Anna cannot bear either physical or emotional proximity with anything that has come into contact with Portia or her raw feelings, but attentive readers—those who accumulate and ponder the details we learn about Anna's past experiences—gradually come to understand the foundations of Anna's stunted emotional capacity.

For, as I have noted, Anna has been through her own momentous losses. Anna Quayne, the narrative tells us, was not always as sure-footed as she now purports to be. She has experienced the deaths of her parents as well as failures in love, her career, and her aspirations toward motherhood. Yet, none of this prepares her to identify or condole with another's grief. Bowen describes the dual failure Anna experienced in her twenties—in her stint as an interior decorator and in her relationship with Robert Pidgeon: "When she and Thomas first met, she was reticent and unhappy: she had not only failed in a half chosen profession but failed in a love affair. The love affair, which had been of several years' duration, had, when Thomas and she met, just come to a silent and – one might guess from her manner – an ignominious end" (*Death* 37). Back then, Anna deigned to express her feelings through a morose demeanor; her concern for

appearances must have emerged later in life. Yet, even as Bowen imparts information about Anna's past losses, she earmarks two topics Anna uses in order to deflect deeper pain: finances and romance. These are the mainstays of Anna's bourgeois lifestyle because her posh society requires capitalism and heterosexual marriage to sustain itself. Literary critics are right to categorize *The Death of the Heart* as a "1930s novel acutely sensitive to the economic situations of its characters" and as the "expression of intense romantic, sexual passion, within the context of upper-middle-class morality" (Corcoran 108; Rossen 103). But it is easier for a woman like Anna to admit to an unsuccessful career and an estranged lover than to direr, more affecting forms of grief.

Indirectly, Bowen discloses that Anna—like Portia—is parentless. She matches Elizabeth Cullingford's description of Sydney Warren, another orphan character in Bowen's oeuvre, perfectly: "Her father is dead and her mother registers simply as an absence" (281).[11] As Bowen fills in the details of Anna's past, the narrative frames the significance of her father's death in terms of monetary gain rather than emotional cost, and it drops oblique clues that suggest that her mother is long deceased. In blunt, bloodless language, the third-person narration informs readers that "Anna, upon the death of her father, had succeeded to five hundred a year" (Bowen, *Death* 39). The importance of her father's death is in the inheritance the man leaves behind—British laws of inheritance being one more prop in the framework supporting a stable, traditional society. The text wastes little time lamenting the passing of Anna's father, but it spends no time at all explaining her mother's absence. We can only spy Anna's mother in the narrative's

[11] Sydney Warren appears in Bowen's *The Hotel* (1927).

gaps and omissions, as when Bowen writes that Anna "was twenty-six when she married Thomas, and had been living with her father at Richmond, in an uphill house with an extensive view" (*Death* 37). Her mother, apparently, was not present. Similarly, when Bowen introduces Mrs. Heccomb (formerly Miss Yardes), she indicates that the woman counted it among her responsibilities as Anna's governess to "escort her to and from day school, see that she practised the piano, and make her feel her position as a motherless girl" (*Death* 137). Bowen leaves it to readers to determine what it might mean to be "a motherless girl"—and what it means that the epithet applies equally to Anna and Portia. In fact, Mrs. Heccomb's insistence on making young Anna "feel her position as a motherless girl" aligns the former governess with the older generation represented by Matchett and Portia's absent aunt. She, too, believes that a child should be reminded of her loss and her new position following her mother's death. Therefore, we can read Anna's emphatic declaration that Portia need not look like an orphan as a refutation of Mrs. Heccomb's perspective. Anna overreaches when she dresses Portia doll-like in bright colors, but when we learn that Anna has experience as "a motherless girl," her actions appear less tyrannical and arbitrary than they originally did.

Here, Bowen illustrates the unique nature of each experience of loss and grief. She draws a subtle parallel between Anna and Portia as motherless girls, but their similarity does not grant Anna access to Portia's grief. Portia misses Irene dreadfully, but Anna scarcely gives a thought to her own absent mother. Rather than enabling Anna to empathize with Portia, her own loss has cauterized her emotional understanding. The façade Anna has built up over time prevents her from connecting on a deep level with anyone. One reason Anna cannot "like [Portia] better" is that the girl's orphanhood

strikes so close to home (Bowen, *Death* 35). It is because Anna identifies too much with what Portia is going through that she tries to repress Portia's grief. Her only options are to contain Portia's emotions or risk the breakdown of her own coping mechanisms. In effect, Bowen sets up the parallel between these motherless girls in a way that allows readers to critique Anna's sophisticated coldness but that also pushes readers to consider why Anna is so insensitive. I posit that Anna's insensitivity is the product of her own experience of the loss of her mother—or, more accurately still, her failure to learn to cope with that loss in healthy ways.

In Bowen's literary constructions, the death of a father often garners less attention and affect than the death of a mother. We may critique Anna for not mourning for her mother as Portia mourns for Irene, but no one weeps over either Anna's father or the elder Mr. Quayne. Although Thomas attempts to sympathize with Portia over the loss of her mother, he makes no such effort to address their mutual loss, the relatively recent death of their father. For Thomas, the passing of his father and stepmother registers as a somewhat milder version of Anna's frank relief: "When his father died, and then finally when Irene died, Thomas had felt himself disembarrassed" (Bowen, *Death* 39). With this welcome release, he can finally put to rest his anxieties about the embarrassment of his father's reckless, passionate affair. After Mr. Quayne and Irene are dead and gone, Thomas's sense of respectability is restored. The narrative describes Thomas's emotional response to the recent deaths not as regret or sadness but rather as "[u]navowed relief at the snuffing-out of two ignominious people" (Bowen, *Death* 39). But even Portia, the novel's "moral arbiter," is similarly circumscribed, with her grief encompassing her

mother but neglecting her father (Corcoran 105). In light of this, Anna's callousness looks less villainous and more symptomatic of a widespread emotional anemia.

While my interpretation suggests we can read Anna as a potential model for how our grieving girl, Portia, might smother her grief and emotions in the future, it also makes visible a different form of loss in its portrayal of Anna Quayne—namely, miscarriage. Bowen complicates Anna's character further through references to her inability to successfully carry a fetus to term, and she reveals another form of grief that often goes unrecognized by society in the process.[12] By noting the Quaynes' childlessness, Bowen suggests that Anna's hardheartedness may have additional identifiable causes: "The Quaynes had expected to have two or three children: in the early years of their marriage Anna had two miscarriages. These exposures to false hopes, then to her friends' pity, had turned her back on herself: she did not want children now. She pursued what had been her interests before marriage in a leisurely, rather defended way" (*Death* 39). Anna does not want to be subject to other people's pity, so she takes active steps to manage appearances. She stops wanting children so that her friends have less cause to pity her; and she defends herself by feigning that she is busily occupied with other interests. Having suffered such a wide range of losses—from a failed career to failed pregnancies—Anna has considerable reasons to turn defensive. Like the ordinary deaths

[12] Again, *The Death of the Heart* resonates with *A House in Paris*, in which Karen and her husband, Ray, fail to have children together. Likewise, the theme of infertility will reappear in Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, affecting Dr. Grene and his wife, Bet.

of Henrietta's mother and Portia's parents, the blows Anna has sustained may appear commonplace or trivial in the grand scheme of early-twentieth-century Europe, but these minor catastrophes loom large in an individual's life. Anna's disappointing and tragic personal experiences to some degree warrant—or at least help explain—her self-protective dissociation from emotions.

Anna may come across to readers as very unkind and lacking empathy in the harsh tone she takes toward Portia's grief, but her own losses, too, are met with icy disdain. Matchett, for instance, makes a snide remark about Anna's miscarriages in conversation with Portia and disparages Anna's decorating efforts at the same time. The servant speaks to Portia of the room Anna had prepared for her, "a room with a high barred window, that could have been the nursery" (Bowen, *Death* 40). That "high barred window" is a telling detail that suggests locking the child in as much as keeping danger out. This image of containment therefore harks back to the *escritoire*, one of the items Anna has put in the room for Portia's use. From Matchett's point of view, it was only right that the Quaynes should welcome the orphaned girl into their home, though Anna's fussy adornment of the bedroom strikes her as excessive:

> 'She had this room empty, waiting,' said Matchett sharply. '*She* never filled it, for all she is so clever. And she knows how to make a diversion of anything – dolling this room up with clocks and desks and frills. (Not but what it's pretty, and you like it, I should hope.) No, she's got her taste, and she dearly likes to use it. Past that she'll never go.' (Bowen, *Death* 87)

Here, Bowen juxtaposes the symbolic emptiness of the room, a result of the couple's lack of children, with the material objects Anna fills the room with prior to Portia's arrival.

Thus, while Matchett sneers at Anna's failed pregnancies and her superficiality, readers may wonder whether the "clocks and desks and frills" might be intended to fill the gaping hole in Anna's life where progeny are meant to be. Indeed, Matchett's phrasing, that the room was "empty, waiting," suggests that Anna might still hold out hope for her own children—despite the many "diversion[s]" she creates to convince herself otherwise.

By concluding with this brief discussion of Anna's childlessness, I aim to illustrate how my interpretive method can extend beyond grief in girlhood. Bowen's novels depict a wide variety of catalysts, experiences, and effects of grief with subtle nuance. Reading against the grain—as I have read Bowen's depictions of characters who quietly mourn the loss of their parents—provides insight into individual experiences of loss as well as Anglo-European society's attitudes toward them. Furthermore, this mode of "resistant" analysis reveals the intricate textures of Bowen's characterization by attending to the psychological and emotional particularities of each individual instance of loss or grief. By using what we learn about each character's past, we can develop a fuller understanding of their motivations, conduct, and emotions within the novel itself. This approach not only brings to the fore underappreciated characters like Henrietta in *The House in Paris*, but it also gives greater depth to characters like Portia and Anna in *The Death of the Heart*: Portia's innocence is complicated by the knowledge of mortality that comes with her grief while Anna's cold-heartedness stems as much from personal disappointments as from social affectations. In summary, then, my model for reading Bowen's fiction urges readers to take note of characters' experiences of loss, to remain skeptical of the narrative's nudges toward specific interpretations, and to observe closely when the author disrupts her narrative's established modes. In doing so, I argue, we can

begin to bear witness to the forms of loss that are rendered nearly invisible by society and by the narrative voice—losses that Bowen takes care to document, especially in her portraits of grieving girls.

CHAPTER 2 – UNABLE TO GRIEVE: AFFECTLESS BEREAVEMENT AND FEMALE MOURNING IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S *MOLLOY* (1955)

In the intervening years between Elizabeth Bowen's 1930s novels and Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1955),[1] an unspeakable watershed in global history occurred. The horrors of World War II and the Holocaust altered the emotional and political landscapes of late modernist authors in irrevocable ways. Whereas many earlier fictional works like Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* (1938) contain the sort of social satire germane to a comedy of manners, post-Holocaust literature bends more toward philosophical questions and existential concerns. This is not to say that fiction becomes less political with this turn; indeed, the issues broached by writers of this period are, if anything, much more politically fraught, ranging from mental illness and the psychology of trauma to the politics and gendering of commemoration. In the case of Bowen, the 1930s were a time to explore the invisibility of young girls' losses and the social mores that stymie grief, while later decades would see her treating loss as a more pervasive, existential problem

[1] The English-language translation of *Molloy*, a work of collaboration between Beckett and Patrick Bowles, was published in 1955. Beckett's first version of the novel was published in French in 1951. For the purposes of this chapter, I use the publication dates for English versions of Beckett's texts since those are the ones I examine herein.

and delving more deeply into the potential pathological repercussions of loss. (See, for instance, *The Heat of the Day* (1948) and *Eva Trout* (1968).)

Likewise, Beckett, though always already of a more philosophical and abstract inclination in his writing, follows a similar trajectory in response to World War II. After Beckett learned of friends, colleagues, and artists extinguished in the concentration camps, his writing would forever bear the imprint of that raw knowledge. Still, as C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski have it in their introduction to *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, "while the cultural dislocation, alienation, and dehumanization of the Shoah that blight the twentieth century dominate his art, it retains a remarkable if surprising coherence, his works forming part of a continuous series, if not a pattern" (x).[2] Within this continuous series, Beckett's *Three Novels* query what losses may be mourned, by whom, and how—questions connected to his earlier works' concerns but of particular urgency in the wake of the Holocaust. At the same time, on a more personal level, the period during which Beckett wrote and translated his *Three Novels* coincided with the decline and eventual death of his mother, with whom he had a difficult relationship and whose descent into ill-health via Parkinson's disease and dementia

[2] For additional insight into how Beckett's work responds to World War II and the Holocaust, see Joseph Anderton, *Beckett's Creatures: Art of Failure of the Holocaust* (2016), which gives a succinct overview of criticism that attends to Beckett in the post-1945 context (25-31). For more on Beckett's own experiences in wartime Europe, see *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive* (2009), edited by Seán Kennedy and Katherine Weiss.

troubled him greatly (Ackerley and Gontarski 127, 42). This coincidence of global catastrophe and private distress manifests in Beckett's fiction as an uneasy tension: the general misery of human existence constantly threatens to subsume—and thereby, obscure—the specific privations and sufferings of each individual. Yet, by including flashes of historical and geographic detail, Beckett rejects any simple generalization of his characters' experiences and refutes any attempt to read the novels as purely allegorical.[3] This chapter explores that tension in *Molloy* by reading the novel as a meditation on loss—and, more precisely, as a meditation on the impossibility of effective grieving. I examine the particular ways in which Molloy, Moran, and Lousse face a nearly inevitable human experience, that of losing an important companion, in order to better understand the prospects and limits of grieving in Beckett's postwar fiction.

Ultimately, I argue that Beckett's *Molloy* ironizes the concepts of loss and grief: its characters know and name their losses yet prove incapable of the emotional and psychological work that healthy grieving entails. Coming to terms with loss is yet one more necessary, impossible thing in Beckett's fictional world. Even as *Molloy* treats its subject with irony, the novel illustrates the looming inevitability of loss, the drudgery of prolonged bereavement, and the individual's propensity to evade loss's emotional effects

[3] Eoin O'Brien first drew attention to these historical and geographical details and their relation to Beckett's past, his family, and his homeland in his book, *The Beckett Country: Samuel Beckett's Ireland* (1986). David Pattie builds on this work in "Beckett and Obsessional Ireland," *A Companion to Samuel Beckett* (edited by S. E. Gontarski, 2010).

by finding substitutes for the lost object or by dissociating oneself from it. *Molloy*'s characters are, I argue, trapped in a peculiarly Beckettian form of affectless bereavement. In this reading, I make purposeful distinctions among bereavement, grieving, and mourning. This approach follows the lead of William Watkin, who draws on anthropological and sociological studies for his terms in *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (2004). Put briefly, "bereavement is the state of loss, grief the activity of loss, and mourning the public expression of these other two" (Watkin 6).[4] Though the three terms are not wholly extricable from each other, they offer subtle distinctions that prove insightful when discussing Beckett's fiction. Most significantly for this chapter, defining bereavement as "the state of loss," the mere fact of having lost

[4] Watkin's definitions draw on sociologist Jeanne Katz's introduction to Jenny Hockey, Jeanne Katz, and Neil Small (editors), *Grief, Mourning and Death Ritual* (2001), pp. 1-15.

Also, it should be noted that these terms differ from Freud's theories on loss, which have previously been brought to bear on Beckett's work by critics including Rina Kim, Jonathan Boulter, and Seán Kennedy. Watkin's "mourning" is not synonymous with Freud's in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), though the two may at times be coterminous. Mourning, for Freud, involves "reality-testing" that "reveal[s] that the beloved object no longer exists," which, in Watkin's schema, could occur alongside either grieving (within the individual) and/or mourning (amongst society) (Freud 204). (I will address Beckett's interest in psychoanalysis and why I have opted not to use psychoanalytic terminology later in this chapter.)

someone or something, frees it of emotional implications. A bereft individual in this sense could be numb or apathetic or deeply affected; they may or may not grieve or mourn.[5] When an individual does the internal emotional and psychological work of coming to terms with the reality of bereavement, only then do they grieve. And when a person externalizes their bereavement or grief-work, turning to social and ritualized responses to loss such as commemoration, that is when they mourn. Two key points are worth emphasizing here: first, not everyone who experiences bereavement grieves, and second, one can, at least in theory, go through the motions of public mourning without activating the internal emotional processes required for healthy grieving. Turning back to *Molloy*, then, we can easily assert that Molloy, Moran, and Lousse experience bereavement because each loses a close companion—mother, son, and pet, respectively. However, it is my especial contention here that the bereavement of Beckett's characters is peculiarly affectless; each character inhabits a state of loss but lacks the capacity to do the sustained psychological and emotional work that effective grieving entails. Further, Beckett genders mourning in the novel, with Lousse performing public mourning rituals while his male protagonists, Molloy and Moran, do not.

In short, I posit that we ought to read *Molloy* as a parable about loss—or, rather, as a parody of such a parable, since the text lacks a clear didactic message or moral. This interpretation of the novel reads its two protagonists as representing binary approaches to

[5] This observation is implicit in Watkin's study, but the implications are not fully explored. I posit that Beckett's fiction lends even greater texture and depth to Watkin's terms.

responding to loss. Either one may pursue the lost object, as Molloy doggedly pursues his mother, or one may await the return of the lost object, as Moran awaits his son's return on more than one occasion. But what happens when the lost object is dead and gone, with no hope left for reunion? The key to answering that question—and to understanding loss as the central theme of *Molloy*—can be found in an important, though often overlooked, secondary character: Lousse. With the narratives of Molloy and Moran, Beckett reveals a chasm between the condition of bereavement and the emotional processing required by grief, but with the inclusion of Lousse, he also registers gendered differences in responses to loss. Lousse does not resolve the question of how people ought to cope with the inevitable human experience of loss, but she provides a counterpoint to the male bereavement embodied by *Molloy*'s narrators. Unlike Molloy and Moran, she performs conventional mourning rituals specifically designed to assist with the emotional processing of loss, including oratory commemorating the dead, a funeral procession, and burial. Notably, though, she conducts these rites for a dead dog, not a human, which mars the depth and seriousness of her mourning with a streak of bathos. While social customs allow Lousse to address her losses more directly than her male counterparts do, the extent to which those customs help her come to terms with her losses emotionally remains indecipherable. (We only get her story through the flawed narration of Molloy, so our understanding of her inner life is inherently limited, distorted, and speculative.) In sum, the gendered juxtaposition of characters in *Molloy* bespeaks a world in which men's emotions have been cauterized and in which the onus of the psycho-emotional work of grief and mourning falls heavily on women—regardless of the limits on their emotional capabilities.

My interpretation of *Molloy*, while not in strict opposition to existing readings of the novel, aims to redress the critical neglect of Lousse with a close examination of her losses: her child, her dog, and Molloy. Existing interpretations of *Molloy* focus primarily on teasing out the implications of the relationship between the two halves of the novel, between Molloy and Moran. Therefore, *Molloy* has most frequently been read as exploring two psychoanalytic theories, putting the emphasis on male subjectivity.[6] Ackerley and Gontarski summarize this prevailing reading as follows: "The novel plays the two giants of **psychoanalysis** against each other, Molloy's Jungian quest for [dis]integration critiqued by Moran's enactment of the Freudian drama" (378). In effect, this reading subjugates female characters in *Molloy*, attributing meaning to them only insofar as they represent something to a male psyche. As a case in point, Ackerley and Gontarski tell us that Lousse "represents the anima" to Molloy as "Molloy enacts the Jungian drama of the Great Mother in the idyll chez Lousse, followed by the expulsion from the embryonic Eden, a paradise lost that can never be regained" (327, 383). While I do not dispute the Jungian and Freudian resonances in *Molloy*, especially given the overwhelming evidence that Beckett took interest in the theorists' work, I want to push back against the notion that the novel's most prominent female character only has meaning in relation to a male character. I inherently distrust readings that circumscribe female characters' import in this way, and I think Beckett's depiction of Lousse warrants

[6] For a more in-depth study of Beckett's work in relation to psychoanalysis, see J. D. O'Hara, *Samuel Beckett's Hidden Drives: Structural Uses of Depth Psychology* (1997) as well as Phil Baker, *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis* (1997).

closer study. If we accept Susan Mooney's assertion that "in *Malone Dies* and most of [Beckett's] oeuvre men upstage women," then, I argue, we must acknowledge that that upstaging has been at least partly the fault of literary critics and the male-centric theoretical frames that have dominated scholarly interpretations of Beckett's works (278).

In my attempt to rectify this gendered bias in Beckett criticism, I have deliberately chosen to take a step back from psychoanalytic terms.[7] (Hence, my use of Watkin's delineation of bereavement, grief, and mourning.) While Rina Kim asks that we "move beyond the Freudian binary distinction of mourning and melancholia" in our interpretations of Beckett's works, she remains locked in the grip of psychoanalytic terms. In arguing that Melanie Klein's theory of psychoanalysis ought to be considered alongside that of Freud in Beckettian studies, Kim extends the conversation in useful ways. However, in her reading of *Molloy*, she, too, resorts to the Freudian binary, associating Beckett's male characters with melancholia and his female characters—including Lousse—with mawkish mourning (50-52). As a result, Kim's reading of Lousse still understands her character largely in relation to what she means to Molloy: "The practices of mourning [exemplified by Lousse] in Beckett's *Novellas* and *Molloy* . . . need to be resisted by the male narrators" (52). Nowhere yet have I found a critical

[7] For other interpretations of Beckett's *Molloy* that look beyond psychoanalytic theory, see Jonathan Boulter's narratological reading in *Narrative in the Novels of Samuel Beckett* (2001), Patrick Bixby's postcolonial reading in *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (2009), and Jennifer M. Jeffers's reading using gender theory in *Beckett's Masculinity* (2009).

reading of *Molloy* that gives sustained attention to why and how Lousse mourns, or to what effect the mourning rituals have on her. By putting greater emphasis on Lousse as a character with her own life story, experiences, and significance, I challenge readers to reconsider the role of women in Beckett's works, even in novels like *Molloy*, where female characters are secondary to male protagonists.[8] While there may be room within psychoanalytic theory to perform this work, I believe that stepping outside that discourse allows me to better illustrate the gendered constraints that have persisted in existing literary criticism of *Molloy*. Perhaps it is true that Lousse's garden is a "numinous sphere of maternal nurture" that "creates an **allegory** of Paradise" for Molloy, but what does it represent to *her* (Ackerley and Gontarski 291, 327)? For Lousse, the house and garden stand as the site of Sisyphean attempts to grieve: she loses loved ones, replaces them, and loses the replacements over and over again.[9]

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[8] This reading also lays groundwork for understanding Beckett's later dramatic depictions of women and loss, including *Not I* (1972), *Footfalls* (1975), and *Rockaby* (1981).

[9] As Kim points out, because Lousse "immediately accepts a new object after the loss of a loved one" she fits the Freudian definition of mourning. Kim also identifies an overlap in Beckett's depiction of Lousse, where "mourning" can be understood according to both Freud's and Watkin's definitions: "The function of the mourning process described in *Molloy* is limited to helping the mourner to find a new object rather than enabling the expression of genuine grief" (51). Here, mourning as public ritual facilitates mourning as the replacement of the lost object with a new object.

When we understand Lousse as a character in her own right, we begin to see afresh how her experiences of loss resonate with the narratives of Molloy and Moran. Although the Lousse episode is overshadowed by Molloy's unfulfilled quest for his lost mother in most existing criticism, I argue that Lousse provides the critical key to reading *Molloy* as a novel about loss. Her name alone, which is an approximate—one might even say feminized or French-sounding—homonym for "lose," indicates how essential this dissertation's theme is to her story, and the rest of the chapter will show how insightful her story is for this dissertation.[10] Although Part I of the novel belongs to Molloy, the episode pertaining to Lousse occupies a place of privilege within his narrative. In effect, Molloy's interaction with Lousse functions as the centerpiece of Part I; it not only comes in the middle of Molloy's narrative but also distills the novel's broader themes of loss and bereavement. What's more, at the heart of that centerpiece is the graveyard scene, in which the two characters bury Lousse's dog, Teddy. The fact that a burial constitutes the very innermost core of Molloy's narrative provides further evidence that loss (and what one does in response to it) should be understood as the central theme of Beckett's *Molloy*. Reading the novel in this way unlocks cogent meaning in an otherwise elusive text; it helps explain the novel's structure, characters' violent outbursts, the recurring motif of

[10] Other critics have attempted to decipher Sophie Lousse's name, signaling that she "combines *wisdom* and *law* with *lice*" and that "the alternative name given for Lousse in *Molloy*, Sophie Loy," suggests a "spade for cutting turf" or the phonetic spelling of how the Irish pronounce "lie" (Ackerley and Gontarski 327; Anderton 123). However, the resonance between "Lousse" and "lose" has not been noted.

dogs, and—most significantly—the role of Lousse. Ultimately, as my conclusion explains, we may even understand this novel, its characters, its bifurcated structure, and all its many oddities as symptoms of bereavement.

A full study of loss in the *Three Novels* would show that loss is as various as it is endemic in Beckett country.[11] For Beckett, the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust confirmed his suspicions about how flimsy a thing civilized society really is; thus, his characters in *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* (1956), and *The Unnamable* (1958) occupy fictional worlds in which no social or physical comfort can be taken for granted. [12] In

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[11] For more on "Beckett country" as a concept, see Eoin O'Brien's *The Beckett Country* (1986) and the "Beckett country" entry in Ackerley and Gontarski's *Grove Companion* (2004). The latter defines Beckett country as a "psychological landscape" that is "grounded in SB's boyhood Dublin" (41).

[12] *Malone Dies* was first published in French as *Malone meurt* in 1951. *The Unnamable* debuted as *L'Innommable* in 1953. Beckett probably refers to these three novels when he writes of a "pseudo trilogy" in a letter in 1959 (Cohn 185). That phrase, "pseudo trilogy," indicates that Beckett thought of these works as a grouping within his literary career. (And they have since been published together as *Three Novels*.) However, the phrase also alerts readers and critics that we should be wary of regarding the three texts as a single, cohesive unit with consistent strategies or concerns. While we may speak of the works as a "trilogy," we must also mark their divergences and disjunctions. Therefore, I understand *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* as a trilogy in a broad sense, as a set of novels engaging with the subjects of loss and bereavement in ways that

turn, this fundamental lack of security shapes how Beckett redevelops the ancient theme of loss anew in the postwar, post-Holocaust period. Like Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) or Winnie in *Happy Days* (1961), characters in the *Three Novels* start with little and end with less. Beckett's narratives feature various forms of decline—corporeal, mental, spiritual, and material. His characters, especially in the more realist *Molloy*, suffer what readers will recognize as familiar forms of loss: bodies age and grow hobbled, memory fails, personal connections and relationships break down, religious beliefs falter and turn cynical, material belongings wear out or disappear, and people vanish or quite simply die.[13] Given my dissertation's emphasis on the loss of loved ones,

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speak to each other suggestively but that also differ significantly. This chapter's reading of *Molloy*, in other words, proposes avenues of inquiry pertinent to Beckett's subsequent prose works, but it does not offer a comprehensive interpretive strategy for understanding those later, more abstract texts.

[13] It is, perhaps, something of a coup to read Molloy, Moran, and Lousse as "characters," emphasizing the qualities they share with characters in realist novels—their distinct entities, their lived experiences, and so on. Others might prefer to read these named figures as less stable and more fragmented than I do, given Beckett's proto-deconstructive impulses and the prominence he has achieved as a postmodernist writer. However, I believe that Beckett relies heavily on the conventions of the realist novel in *Molloy* (the strange correspondences between Molloy and Moran aside) making it still viable to speak of the figures as individual characters. Ackerley and Gontarski note that

however, this chapter limits its focus to the question of how the characters of *Molloy* respond to being estranged from their most familiar companions, whether through separation or death. Specifically, I will address Molloy's unresolved loss of his mother, Moran's temporary loss of his son, Jacques, [14] and Lousse's series of losses—including her child, dog, and Molloy. It is in these contexts that the characters in *Molloy* exhibit a form of bereavement that is unable to grieve. When Molloy or Moran tries to grieve, those efforts are stilted, subverted, and ineffectual; when Lousse mourns, she gets only meager social recognition, and we see little evidence that the public rituals assuage her sense of loss. Grief, the emotional and psychological processing of loss, appears to be inaccessible to Beckett's characters. Loss imprints itself on each one's consciousness, but none can find a healthy, sustained way of dealing with it.

Beckett's "way forward was through a return to the past, displacing the conventions of fiction and simultaneously renewing them" (377).

[14] Moran and his son share the same name, Jacques Moran. Moran states this at the start of his "report": "My name is Moran, Jacques. That is the name I am known by. . . . My son too. . . . His name is Jacques, like mine. This cannot lead to confusion" (Beckett, *Molloy* 87). But because this *can* lead to confusion, I will refer to the narrator-protagonist of Part II of *Molloy* as "Moran" and to his son as "Jacques" throughout this chapter.

It is also worth noting that, though Moran seeks Molloy (as Molloy seeks his mother), Moran has not "lost" Molloy so much as he has not yet found him. Therefore, Moran's repeated loss of Jacques is the text's more salient dynamic for this chapter.

As I mentioned above, the structure of *Molloy* depicts this peculiarly Beckettian phenomenon of loss sans grief twice over in its portrayals of Molloy and Moran. In essence, Molloy and Moran are two takes on what one might do if he loses someone but cannot be sure whether or not a reunion will occur. In Part I, Molloy pursues his lost object, his mother, though his ambivalence toward her and his ignorance about what has happened to her eliminates the possibility that he could grieve her effectively. In Part II, Moran waits for his lost object, his son, to return to him, but his uncertainty about whether this separation will be temporary or permanent makes it impossible to pin down the nature of his loss. In both cases, the psycho-emotional work of grieving is considered, even briefly attempted, but ultimately abandoned.

Moran's response to Jacques's first departure to "buy a bicycle in Hole" illustrates the typical Beckettian movement from feeble attempts to cope with loss to abject, affectless bereavement (Beckett, *Molloy* 138). After his son leaves him, Moran muses, "The day seemed very long. I missed my son! I busied myself as best I could. I ate several times. I took advantage of being alone at last, with no other witness than God, to masturbate" (Beckett, *Molloy* 139). Moran recognizes he has temporarily lost his son's company and expresses a longing for the young man's return. Whether the exclamation point after "I missed my son" signifies heightened emotion or instead inflects the statement with a note of surprise remains stubbornly ambiguous. Still, Moran's attempt to distract himself with self-indulgent activities adheres to the common counsel to "keep busy" in the face of loss. Insofar as Moran's eating and masturbating are coping mechanisms meant to while away the time during his separation from Jacques, his response to loss in this case seems relatively reasonable. But tending to one's baser,

physical appetites cannot stave off one's emotional needs indefinitely, and the tide soon turns.

Moran's initial measured reaction to loss gives way to a less explicable one: on the second day of Jacques's quest to obtain a bicycle, Moran brutally kills a man (or so we assume, given the disturbing evidence of dismemberment Moran reports after he blacks out). This secondary response to loss better represents the way that Molloy and Moran swing to uncanny extremes in their bereavement—at times dissociative or apathetic, at others all-consuming and compulsive, even to the point of violence. Since Moran thinks of Jacques shortly before the murder while he is vulnerable and threatened, Beckett draws a link between the son's absence and the father's violent outburst. When the stranger approaches, Moran states, "I called to my aid the image of my son who might arrive at any moment" (Beckett, *Molloy* 145). Without Jacques immediately at hand, Moran can only call his son's "image" to mind and imagine that Jacques might serendipitously return in this time of need. Father and son have been apart for little more than a day, but already Moran's appraisal of Jacques pertains more to his utility than to his emotional value. When Jacques does not materialize, Moran suffers a sort of psychotic break and attacks the stranger. Afterward, he recounts the occasion as follows: "I do not know what happened then. But a little later, perhaps a long time later, I found him stretched on the ground, his head in a pulp" (Beckett, *Molloy* 145). Thus, the murder, which is depicted as a blind and dispassionate act, traces back to the insecure state in

which Jacques leaves Moran.[15] Bereft of his son for the time being, Moran conducts himself at first by the emotions of grief but soon by cold whims rooted in his bereavement and self-preservation.

In a sense, Moran's belligerent actions are rooted in the cognitive dissonance between wanting his son to return and worrying that he has been abandoned, with both thoughts amplified by fear. It is the uncertainty, in Moran's case, that prevents him from engaging in sustained, healthy grieving. The uncertainty that Moran encounters in his state of bereavement registers at a textual level, too. As much as Beckett's male characters themselves shun emotions, so too Beckett's text creates conditions in which emotional clarity is hard to come by. The textual indeterminacy in which Molloy and Moran exist exacerbates the difficulty of grieving their losses. Literary analysis of *Molloy* shows that readers have just cause to conflate Molloy and Moran, for instance. Ruby Cohn provides a short, helpful summary of the novel that captures this dyadic indeterminacy: "*Molloy* is named for one of its two protagonists, or, in another reading,

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[15] A Freudian reading of the same episode might interpret the unnamed man as a literal manifestation of Moran's melancholic identification with the lost object, one he must kill in order to emerge from the melancholic state. Such a reading is complicated, however, by the man's appearance before and after his death. Moran not only notes that "the face . . . vaguely resembled my own" at first, but also comments after the murder that the man "no longer resembled me" (Beckett, *Molloy* 145, 146). Thus, Moran seems to kill an externalized version of himself rather than the lost object, which is the actual target of Freudian mourning.

for half of its double protagonist. Beckett's novel narrates two quests—that of Molloy for his mother and that of Moran for Molloy" (161). The parallels between Molloy and Moran are inescapable and have been catalogued at length by other critics. (See Ackerley and Gontarski 377; Paul Stewart 103-104.) Generally, the connections linking the two halves of *Molloy* elicit two opposing, but inexact interpretations. If critics read the parallels as playing up the discrepancies that exist between the narratives of Molloy and Moran, then they can ascribe meaning to the resonances without collapsing the two figures into each other. But if critics interpret the parallels as signs justifying reading "Molloy" and "Moran" as two names for one entity, then they must fold the two figures into each other and seek meaning in that amalgamation. These two interpretations may at first appear to be mutually exclusive, but the novel's indeterminacy short-circuits either rigid reading of the Molloy-Moran dynamic. Beckett entices readers to regard Molloy and Moran as extensions of each other or as two voices attempting to speak each other into being, yet neither character maps perfectly onto the other's narrative. In the end, it is most accurate to say that the text vacillates; sometimes it encourages reading Molloy and Moran as two, sometimes as one. While Beckett's method steps outside the bounds of conventional modes of characterization established in earlier, less experimental fiction, what interests me here is what this indeterminacy tells us about the nature of loss and the impossibility of grieving.

Take, for instance, the slippage between Molloy and Moran as they suffer similar bodily complaints. A brief digression from the loss of companions to the loss of physical function will illustrate the way Beckett's postmodernist techniques, too, contribute to *Molloy*'s meditation on loss. When Molloy writes of his "enormous" knees "as stiff as a

life sentence," he hints that what he is telling us may gain greater meaning eventually: "That my knees are enormous, that I still get up from time to time, there are things that do not seem *at first* to signify anything in particular" (Beckett, *Molloy* 56-57, emphasis added). Molloy's swollen joints may not "signify anything in particular" when he mentions them, but his ailment resonates across the text once readers come to Moran's similar complaints later in the novel. In like terms, Moran tells of the moment "[a]n acute pain shot through [his] knee" and, later, when his knee "simply refused to bend" (Beckett, *Molloy* 114, 134). Moran's leg trouble appears to be a new development for him, and his narrative concludes with him using crutches; meanwhile, Molloy begins his tale at the point at which he already requires crutches and continues his story to the point at which he can only proceed by army crawl, "[f]lat on [his] belly, using [his] crutches like grapnels" (Beckett, *Molloy* 169, 8, 84). This parallel has led some readers, including Stewart, to wonder whether Moran might be Molloy at an earlier stage of life or, to put this theory another way, whether Moran's narrative, though second in the text of the novel, might actually precede Molloy's narrative chronologically (105). Yet, as Stewart concedes, "The links between the two narratives . . . are tentative and do not offer the firm ground upon which to construct such an unproblematic reconstruction of the sequential logic of the novel" (107). However closely we observe Molloy and Moran in their times of bereavement, even when that loss is of mobility, the suggestion that their losses might be one and the same never fully goes away, yet it can never be definitively proven. Instead, what we can learn from this slippage, this friction between the two narrator-protagonists, is that their losses are paradoxically similar and singular at the same time: each man suffers unique losses, just like everyone else.

While my approach to modern and contemporary fiction emphasizes loss and grief as experienced by the individual, I want to pause to emphasize this significant insight Beckett conveys through the indeterminate nature of his characters. The possible co-identification of Molloy and Moran highlights the fraught relationship between the singularity of individually experienced loss and the ubiquitousness of shared human conditions. Alysia E. Garrison conducts a similar analysis of historical loss and structural absence in *The Unnamable*, drawing on the work of trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra to distinguish between the singularity of an historical event and the universality of transhistorical trauma (90).[16] Indeed trauma theory, including LaCapra's work, informs much of my thinking about *Molloy*. We could read Molloy's loss of his mother as a traumatic event, for instance, evidenced by his struggle to articulate when or how he lost his mother. While psychoanalytic readings would interpret that trauma as structural, however, I would be more interested in exploring its implications as an historical loss, an historical trauma. Still, the tension between specificity and ubiquity is an important one, and one worth keeping in mind even as I delve into the specific, lived experiences of loss depicted in *Molloy*. If all people suffer loss, Beckett's novel asks, then why should the pain of one man's bereavement matter? If the unique nature of each loss helps facilitate the grieving process, then the inability to separate, say, Molloy's lost physical mobility from Moran's bodily decline reduces the characters' access to the emotions of grief. Therefore, critics must consider each loss in *Molloy* as both an isolated individual experience and as a commonplace occurrence that merely provides further evidence of

[16] See LaCapra's essay, "Reflections on Trauma, Absence, and Loss" (2000).

humankind's susceptibility to loss. In short, the indeterminacy of Beckett's characters challenges readers to hold the singular and the universal qualities of loss in mind simultaneously.

Before returning to my study of the specific losses of Molloy, Moran, and Lousse, I should also acknowledge that the indeterminacy of Beckett's *Molloy* sits uneasily alongside the other texts I examine in this dissertation. Surveys of twentieth-century literature frequently situate Beckett's work at the end of modernism and the start of postmodernism, a designation entrenched by Richard Begam's 1996 monograph, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*. As Begam points out, Beckett's fictional prose, including *Molloy*, deploys "language of equivocation and contradiction" (14). Beckett's writing consequently troubles terms that I use elsewhere in this dissertation without much compunction—chief among them, "grief." Where Elizabeth Bowen's modernist novels reveal the invisibility of certain characters' grief, Beckett's postmodernist novel makes grief indeterminate, perhaps impossible.[17] "Grief" often implies a trajectory toward

[17] Jonathan Boulter and Seán Kennedy have interrogated the viability of "mourning" (in Freud's sense of the word) in *Texts for Nothing* (1967), where, as Boulter puts it, "the Beckettian narrator is unable to present itself as a stable, unified (or potentially unified) subject" (333). Since *Molloy* is an earlier work, however, its narrators can—and do—present themselves as rather more stable and unified by comparison, even though they are not entirely fixed. To reiterate, this is why I deem it appropriate to speak of individual experiences of loss and bereavement in the case of *Molloy*. More than *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, or *Texts for Nothing*, *Molloy* retains vestiges of realism,

healing and recovery, but Beckett denies his protagonists such narratives of progress or closure. This lack of closure stands as yet another reason to speak of "bereavement" rather than "grief" in *Molloy*. Postmodernism's "repudiation of any system of examination or classification that is grounded in subject-object relations" radically compromises the very basis of grief, which requires at least the illusion of subject-object relations in order to be viable as a workable construct (Begam 14). By the logic of postmodernism, grief would be an artificial expedient fulfilling literary realism's narrative expectations, so Beckett evacuates grief from Molloy and Moran, leaving affectless bereavement in its place. Yet, Beckett leaves open a slim possibility for grief to exist in this world: if anyone grieves in *Molloy*, it is Lousse beside her dog's grave. But readers cannot know for sure because Beckett gives us no access to her interiority. Ambiguity, that device much beloved by modernists, rears its head.

In sum, *Molloy* and the rest of the trilogy implement modernist textual strategies and initiate the deconstructive impulse of postmodernism. The works emerge out of Beckett's project of testing the limits of language, plot, character, and genre. And Beckett allows contradictions, ambiguities, and uncertainties to proliferate in the *Three Novels*. Yet, with all the questions and uncertainty *Molloy* raises, Beckett still manages to speak compellingly to the nature of individual human suffering. In *Molloy*, loss manifests in the lives of Molloy, Moran, and Lousse even as Beckett begins to erode the concepts of subjectivity and individuality. By examining *Molloy*'s depiction of loss closely, I aim to

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which allow me to speak relatively clearly of individual characters, their memories, and their individual experiences of bereavement.

further my discussion of a central question of this dissertation: Can grief fit within the bounds of traditional realist narrative, or does it require more innovative literary forms? My research generally supports the argument that modernist and postmodernist texts represent the disruptive, ambivalent nature of bereavement and grief more compellingly than conventional novels. I posit that the very act of formal disruption and distortion in modernism and its afterlives mirrors the way loss interrupts and unsettles a person's life. Handed down to late modernist writers in modified forms, modernist techniques—such as fragmentation, stream of consciousness, and intersubjectivity—can complicate and deepen our understanding of loss; and reading inventive, rule-breaking literature of the mid-twentieth century with an eye toward loss and grief can enrich our understanding of the works themselves. Beckett's trilogy, and *Molloy* in particular, serves as an apt—if challenging—example of this dynamic, of the potential for non-traditional, semi-realist narratives to portray—and ironize— bereavement with moving and troubling authenticity.

This is true despite the fact that Molloy and Moran thwart readerly expectations as they experience loss; their words, thoughts, and actions do not align with the usual schematics for grieving. Discussions of grief (like this chapter) typically allude to the loss of a person, particularly through death, but Molloy and Moran show little remorse for the deaths or disappearances of family members or former lovers. Instead, when they do express longing for what they have lost, it is more often for inanimate objects.[18] In this

[18] In addition to the given examples from Molloy and Moran, there is also Jacques's fastidious attachment to his stamp collection, which Moran tells us "he was in

way, Beckett depicts a form of grief but only with a heavy dose of irony. We see this first in Molloy's fond remembrance of his bicycle: "Dear bicycle, I shall not call you bike, you were green, like so many of your generation, I don't know why. It is a pleasure to meet it again [in memory]. To describe it at length would be a pleasure. . . . And when I had to part from my bicycle I took off the horn and kept it about me. . . . What a rest to speak of bicycles and horns" (Beckett, *Molloy* 12). The satisfaction of this memory contrasts with the distaste Molloy exhibits for his mother in the very next sentence, where he states, "Unfortunately it is not of them [bicycles and horns] I have to speak, but of her who brought me into the world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct" (Beckett, *Molloy* 12). Molloy carries no token of remembrance for his mother as he carries the horn in memory of his bicycle. Indeed, it may be for this reason that Molloy struggles time and time again to recall where and how to find his mother; he has no clues with him to trigger his memory. Likewise, Moran laments the loss of his son's raincoat (which at least provided fairly reliable shelter) more than the loss of his own flesh-and-

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the habit of gloating over daily and could not bring himself to leave, even for a few days" (Beckett, *Molloy* 104). Though Moran exhibits mixed reactions to his own lost companions, he signals appreciation for his son's ability to grieve the loss of his confiscated stamp albums: "But it did not positively displease me that my son should give free vent to his grief. It purges. Sorrow does more harm when dumb, to my mind" (Beckett, *Molloy* 104). The contorted double-negative of "it did not positively displease me" indicates Moran's ambivalence about emotional expression even as he ostensibly approves of it in the given case.

blood son (whom Moran tends to mistrust anyway and by whom Moran feels abandoned) (Beckett, *Molloy* 166). Consequently, I contend that we can identify these main characters as being bereft of certain people, objects, or physical abilities, but it proves far more difficult to claim that they actually grieve for the people they have lost.

Yet, in both parts of *Molloy*, specific losses provide the dramatic action. Molloy's narrative is driven by his resolution "to go and see [his] mother," his mind "rid of all other preoccupation" and "seized with a trembling at the mere idea of being hindered from going there" (Beckett, *Molloy* 11). He pursues no other lost associates with such relentless purpose—though he mentions he may have a son ("Perhaps I have one somewhere. But I think not.") and speaks of former sexual partners (the "little chambermaid" and Edith/Ruth, whose death Molloy met with "indifference") (Beckett, *Molloy* 3, 51-54). Moran's narrative, on the other hand, while driven by his mission to find Molloy, is punctuated by his son's departures and arrivals. Beckett establishes tension within Part II in the twinned questions of whether Jacques will stray from Moran and, when he does, whether he will return. Moran anticipates that his son will leave him as they set out from home, stating that Jacques "lost his way so easily" and contemplating measures to reduce the likelihood of their separation (Beckett, *Molloy* 123). And, as he predicts, they end up apart with Moran impatiently awaiting his son's return more than once in the course of *Molloy*, whether by design or betrayal (Beckett 139, 154).

While the outcomes of Moran's loss of his son have been addressed earlier in this chapter, Molloy's response to being bereft of his mother merits a closer look before I discuss Lousse in greater detail. Starting with the opening passage of the novel, Molloy struggles to makes sense of his loss. Part I of *Molloy* opens with Molloy, the yet-

unnamed narrator, considering his current condition and his mother's putative death. He understands that he has lost his mother, that he is in his mother's room, in her very bed. But he cannot recount when or how he lost her, and he presumes his mother is dead. In a characteristic rhetorical move, Molloy concedes the strict limits of his knowledge and memory. He admits, "The truth is I don't know much. For example, my mother's death. Was she already dead when I came? Or did she only die later? I mean enough to bury. I don't know" (Beckett, *Molloy* 3). Subsequently, Molloy narrates his quest for his mother, positioning himself as the half of the Molloy-Moran dyad that seeks out what he has lost.

Along the way, Molloy reveals three conditions that complicate his bereavement: his own identification with his mother, his confusion and conflation of his mother with other women, and the grey zone between life and death.[19] The first of these becomes apparent as Molloy draws attention to the close correspondence between his current situation and his memory of his mother: "In any case I have her room. I sleep in her bed. I piss and shit in her pot. I have taken her place. I must resemble her more and more" (Beckett, *Molloy* 3). Considering the fact that Molloy's narrative of his quest does not resolve itself with a reunion, Molloy's matter-of-fact identification with his mother's former condition impedes his ability to grieve losing her. He cannot accept that his loss is final—he cannot quite believe his mother to be dead—as long as he continues to seek her; and he will always strive toward his mother because he does not know for certain whether or how she may have died. Molloy thinks of his mother and wonders, "What rid

[19] The first two of these three conditions have been much discussed in relation to Jung's psychoanalytic theory, the man and the anima (Ackerley and Gontarski 291).

me of her, in the end?" (Beckett, *Molloy* 75). Yet, he is never fully rid of his mother, and she is never fully lost, since he sees his mother in himself.

Likewise, Molloy struggles to distinguish his mother from other women who have passed through his life. He laments later in Part I that he cannot keep the women who have entered and exited his life straight in his memory, saying, "And there are days, like this evening, when my memory confuses them and I am tempted to think of them as one and the same old hag, flattened and crazed by life. And God forgive me, to tell you the horrible truth, my mother's image sometimes mingles with theirs, which is literally unendurable, like being crucified, I don't know why and I don't want to" (Beckett, *Molloy* 54). If Molloy's memory confuses and collapses identities, then he risks lumping various losses together as one unpleasant, "unendurable," amorphous loss. Yet, Molloy implicitly cautions against the very moves that psychoanalytic readings of this passage make. A Jungian reading, for instance, would read Molloy's mother and the other women as archetypes, leaving them "flattened" in the process. J. D. O'Hara's extensive reading of *Molloy* and Jungian theory has this effect, and he describes Molloy's mother, Lousse, and Ruth/Edith as "three women, none of whom has displayed ordinary individuality or a human personality" (151). But Molloy regards the flattening of these women as a temptation—that is, something to be avoided. Likewise, the final line of the quoted passage, "I don't know why and I don't want to," rebuffs psychological or psychoanalytic diagnosis. Suffice it to say, then, that Beckett indicates in this slippage among the women of Molloy's past that bereavement is so common that individual instances threaten to bleed together in memory, despite one's efforts to the contrary. Though maintaining

distinctions might be comforting, keeping the loss of a lover distinct from the loss of one's mother, that separation is—at least for Molloy—an impossible task.

The final difficulty hindering Molloy's ability to grieve the loss of his mother is the way living and dying overlap and resist easy definition in Beckett's fiction. Molloy tries in vain to pin down when exactly his mother died, if she died, asking, "Was she already dead when I came? Or did she only die later? I mean enough to bury" (Beckett, *Molloy* 3). Molly seems to realize mid-thought that his queries about his mother's death are too absolute, so he hedges. He shifts from asking when she died to when she became "[dead] enough to bury." One can, in Beckett's prose and dramatic worlds, be buried without yet being completely dead.[20] Death, in Beckett's *Molloy*, is a matter of degree. When Molloy considers his identification with his mother's condition and the murky boundaries of life and death, he begins to understand his bereavement of his mother in relation to his own mortality.

As Molloy articulates his uncertainty about when and how and whether his mother finished dying, he indicates that it is quite likely now his own turn to die. Literally and symbolically, he has taken her place in the deathbed. Facing his own eventual end, he confides to readers, "What I'd like now is to speak of the things that are left, say my goodbyes, finish dying" (Beckett, *Molloy* 3). In this line, Beckett deftly sketches his character's submerged anxieties, priorities, and coping mechanisms. By wanting to

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[20] See, for instance, Beckett's staging for *Happy Days* and *Play* (1963), which feature characters buried in sand and encased in urns—entombed like corpses but not yet dead.

"speak of the things that are left" and "say [his] goodbyes," Molloy reveals an anxiety about dwelling on what he has already lost—and, I would suggest, the emotional and psychological work that grieving his losses would require. He wants to focus on what remains in his possession—or, at least, in his proximity—in the time he has left. (We may suspect, however, that Molloy's remaining time, like that of so many of Beckett's protagonists, will be interminable and tortuous.) He would rather say farewell to those things that are still present than reflect at length on the people and objects that have already disappeared from his life. The implication here is that Molloy would prefer to avoid the work of grieving; little does he know how ill-equipped he would be for the work of grieving even if it were his principal goal.

A painful feature of Molloy's condition, though, is that he must write. In Molloy's words, a man "comes every week," "gives [him] money and takes away the pages" (Beckett, *Molloy* 3). Compelled to write, Molloy relies—in part—on his own experiences, experiences that return him time and again to his quest for his mother and to the possibility of her death. The trick, then, is to acknowledge his losses and chronicle his state of bereavement without invoking the emotions and psychological effects of grief. Beckett's initial protagonist therefore faces a nexus of charged questions: Will he write what he remembers or invent stories? If he writes what he remembers, how liable is he to get the story right? And if he invents, what is the purpose or value of what he writes? Will writing and storytelling be enough to distract from his own decline or his mother's apparent death? Whether or not it does, is distraction itself really to be desired? In the course the novel, Beckett gives some of these questions answers, but the answers are partial, shifting, and contradictory. In many ways, readers are left with as much doubt as

Molloy exhibits, but we can still draw some conclusions about how individual loss affects Molloy and how Molloy experiences bereavement.

Grief is, first and foremost for Molloy, something to avoid—whether through distraction, parody, or denial. When we read *Molloy* as a novel exploring loss, Beckett gives us just cause to interpret the character's many anecdotes and digressions as diversionary tactics that allow Molloy, if only briefly, to supplant the work of grieving with the more emotionally distant narration of his past. Indeed, the very act of narration may function as a substitute for the grief-work Molloy wants to avoid. As readers, I argue, we are meant to sympathize with Molloy's inability to face head-on the losses he has suffered. At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, we pity Molloy for how persistently his narration returns him to the topics of his mother, his journey to reach her, and her presumed death. Even at the seaside, where Molloy finds some semblance of peace, the memory of his mother haunts him. Molloy speaks then of his mother, "whose image, blunted for some time past, was beginning now to harrow [him] again" (Beckett, *Molloy* 70).

The persistent return of the mother recommends another observation about bereavement in *Molloy*. Not only is Molloy's loss something he tries to avoid, but it is also something he cannot avoid forever. Knowledge of loss seeps into Molloy's consciousness time and time again. Beckett asserts, in this way, that bereavement is a permanent state. When loss enters one's life, it stays there. This does not guarantee that one will grieve or even mourn, but the awareness of what it means to be bereft comes and stays. A person may have conflicted, even antagonistic, feelings toward the deceased, but knowledge of loss and mortality settles into the bereaved person's life and can never be

fully forgotten thereafter. Beckett's depiction of Molloy posits that this is true even when the individual willfully refuses to witness the moment of loss. Molloy says in another context, "From things about to disappear I turn away in time. To watch them out of sight, no, I can't do it." (Beckett, *Molloy* 8). But, his declaration betrays his awareness of impending loss. He has to know what it means for things to disappear in order to anticipate and turn away from their disappearance.

So, if Molloy and Moran cannot and will not perform the emotional work of grieving when they experience bereavement, what, then, are we to make of Lousse's public declaration of losses and her investment in social rituals meant to release the emotions of grief? Whereas Molloy fruitlessly pursues closure with regard to his mother and Moran swings like a pendulum between fearing his son's abandonment and anxiously anticipating his son's return, Lousse faces her bereavement armed with customary modes of mourning. Her public expression of her bereavement, however, is—as Kim suggests—closely linked with her coping mechanism, which closely resembles Freud's definition of "mourning" (51). Lousse forestalls the emotional impact of her losses by substituting the lost object with a new one. In effect, Lousse proceeds by way of surrogation, what Joseph Roach describes as "the doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins" (3). "Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure," Roach writes, "survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternatives" (2). For Lousse, the act of replacing a dead child with a dog and then a dead dog with Molloy results in the conflation of unlike entities for the sake of forced, artificial continuity. It coincides with mourning in Watkin's sense, but it exacts its own costs. Thus, the Lousse episode cements loss as the central theme of *Molloy* without proposing a surefire approach to

dealing with bereavement. Since grieving is mental and emotional work, we cannot know the extent to which Lousse grieves. Our only access to Lousse is through Molloy's account of her, and thus, Beckett deprives readers of the opportunity to see into her internal life as we see into Molloy's and Moran's through their narration. Beckett's depiction of Lousse acknowledges that there is no ultimate panacea for loss, satirizes Irish nationalist mourning rituals, but leaves ambiguous the question of whether female mourning might achieve some measure of success in the work of grieving.

When Molloy hits and kills her dog, Teddy, with his bicycle, Lousse demonstrates the role of women in shaping narratives of loss. She makes a speech that dictates the terms by which her pet and his death will be regarded by the observing crowd:

> Leave this poor old man [Molloy] alone. He has killed Teddy, I grant you that, Teddy whom I loved like my own child, but it is not so serious as it seems, for as it happens I was taking him to the veterinary surgeon, to have him put out of his misery. For Teddy was old, blind, deaf, crippled with rheumatism and perpetually incontinent, night and day, indoors and out of doors. Thanks then to this poor old man I have been spared a painful task, not to mention the expense which I am ill able to afford . . . . (Beckett, *Molloy* 28)

Lousse calms the "bloodthirsty mob" by arguing that gratitude, not retribution, is due to Molloy (Beckett, *Molloy* 28). She acknowledges Molloy's culpability in striking down her dog, but she contextualizes the death in a way that rewrites the narrative: Molloy provides Teddy with sweet relief from a tortured existence, even though he administers it

via a violent blow.[21] In short, Lousse rewrites the nature of the loss through a public speech act. In doing so, she lays claim to her state of bereavement and quells the heated reaction of the observing crowd. At the same time, though, she minimizes the significance of her own loss, and the reader may begin to catch a whiff of Beckett's parodic intent. This is a funeral speech, but a funeral speech for a dog; it is a eulogy, but a eulogy that lambastes rather than praises its subject.

Additionally, what we read in *Molloy* is the narrator-protagonist's account of the speech, with no verifiable documentation of the original. Since Molloy's faculties of perception, memory, and recitation falter and err throughout his narrative, Beckett draws attention to the layers of mediation that come between Lousse's reality and the reader. After the dog's burial, Molloy questions the veracity of Lousse's oration in a way that emphasizes the structural and narratological constraints on our access to Lousse's experience of bereavement. Molloy asks whether he ought to take Lousse at her word regarding her dog's condition, identifying a possible point of illogic in her explanation:

> She would see him no more, her Teddy she had loved like an only child, I wonder why, since she had obviously made up her mind to bury the dog at home, she had not asked the vet to call and destroy the brute on the premises. Was she really on her way to the vet at the moment her path crossed mine? Or had she said so solely

[21] Indeed, Molloy envies the dog for his ability to cease existing, saying, "His death must have hurt him less than my fall me. And at least he was dead" (Beckett, *Molloy* 30).

in order to attenuate my guilt? Private calls are naturally more expensive.

(Beckett, *Molloy* 32)

The point I wish to make here is not the extent to which Lousse stretched the truth or her reasons for doing so (i.e., to convince Molloy he owed it to her to help bury the dog—and then to stay with her in her dog's stead). Rather, I read a more subtle but revealing message in the last line of the quoted passage. By conceding that the expense could have prohibited Lousse from having the vet call to her house, Molloy—apparently unwittingly—parrots Lousse's own words about the procedure to put down her dog as an "expense [she is] ill able to afford" (Beckett, *Molloy* 28). Unlike Lousse's foul-mouthed parrot—which, though it was "clear he was doing his best," fails to repeat "Pretty Polly!" for Lousse—Molloy regurgitates part of Lousse's speech even as he casts doubt on the truth of her statement as a whole (Beckett, *Molloy* 33). This episode underscores the tenuous nature of our knowledge of Lousse: Molloy reports to us what he remembers of her, but his own thoughts have been shaped in part by the spin she put on events through her telling—and retelling—of Teddy's death.

Even the speech, which Molloy recounts in the first-person as though quoting Lousse directly, could have been revised between the actual occasion and Molloy's documentation of it. As he introduces her speech within his narrative, Molloy includes this caveat: "She said in effect, she told me so later on and I believed her…" (Beckett, *Molloy* 28). So, in order for readers to accept what Molloy reports of Lousse's explanation of her dog's ill-health, they must trust not only Molloy's recall but also Lousse's consistency and veracity. In the fictional world of *Molloy*, there is little foundation for such blind trust. After all, Molloy cannot remember this woman's exact

name ("the lady, a Mrs. Loy . . . or Lousse, I forget, Christian name something like Sophie") and expresses uncertainty regarding her sex (". . . Lousse was a woman of an extraordinary flatness, physically speaking of course, to such a point that I am still wondering this evening, in the comparative silence of my last abode, if she was not a man rather or at least an androgyne") (Beckett, *Molloy* 29, 51). Therefore, I argue, we must instead accept that we cannot ever get to the root of Lousse's experience of bereavement following the loss of her dog. But there is a lesson embedded in this uncertainty: Beckett teaches us that we can never fully understand another person's grief. And, indeed, Molloy's description of Lousse signals that there is more to her than meets the eye. Having a "Christian name something like Sophie" hints that she may possess something akin to wisdom, and her "extraordinary flatness, physically speaking of course" suggests that, in contrast to her flat physique, her character should be read as round and full.

So, though we must grant that our view of Lousse is mediated and circumscribed, I posit that Lousse still plays an essential role in Beckett's exploration of loss in *Molloy*. Through Molloy's account of Lousse, Beckett demonstrates that even a person who claims her loss publicly will face significant impediments to grieving. For, Lousse's method of coping with loss is to replace the lost companion—whether human or canine—with someone new; surrogation blunts the impact of each loss while creating its own problems. Lousse enlists Molloy to stay with her after Teddy's death and burial, and Molloy describes the gist of Lousse's "propositions" as follows: "I would as it were take the place of the dog I had killed, as it for her had taken the place of a child" (Beckett, *Molloy* 42). It would be easy to skim over the text's suggestion that Lousse lost a child, but this passage establishes Molloy as the latest installment in an ongoing series, not a

one-off.[22] Karalyn Kendall-Morwick critiques this "logic of surrogacy" for making Teddy—and then Molloy—"an infantilized, neutered surrogate" subject to "Lousse's smothering affection" (105-106). Yet, I think Lousse's bereavement merits greater consideration. Her reasons for stifling Teddy and Molloy are tied up with her experience of loss and her inability to grieve in a healthy manner.

Much as Lousse shapes the narrative around Teddy's death-by-bicycle, she uses the same speech to take ownership of the narrative around the death of her "dear departed" (Beckett, *Molloy* 28). When speaking of her strapped financial circumstances—being "ill able to afford" the procedure to have her dog put down by a veterinarian—Lousse explains that she has "no other means of support than the pension of [her] dear departed, fallen in defence of a country that called itself his and from which in his lifetime he never derived the smallest benefit, but only insults and vexations"

[22] Beckett leaves a layer of ambiguity around the question of whether or not Lousse had an actual living child. Did the dog take the place of an existing child, or did it stand in for a child Lousse only wished she had had? Beckett gently pushes readers to believe that there was a child who died with repeated comparisons between the dead dog and a beloved child: "Teddy whom I loved like my own child," Lousse says, and Molloy reiterates, "her Teddy she had loved like an only child" (*Molloy* 28, 32). But, as we have already seen, Molloy has a propensity for parroting snippets of Lousse's speech, so these similes clarify nothing. While I am inclined to believe there was a child, I believe my argument stands even if Teddy took the place of a wished-for child.

(Beckett, *Molloy* 28).[23] Curiously, this is one of the rare moments in *Molloy* when Beckett grounds the narrative in historical contexts, albeit with lingering ambiguity and more than a hint of satire. Rooting Lousse's speech in this way has the effect of making her personal story appear more concrete; her past seems more stable, more fixed than, say, Molloy's. Whereas Molloy waffles about the truth or untruth of his self-narration, Lousse speaks with assurance of tangible historical events. She may bend the interpretation of those events to her own ends, but she anchors her telling and retelling of her story in a firm reality.

Specifically, Lousse reads like an Irish mother (or wife) whose "dear departed" died in World War I fighting with the British military. In this interpretation, Great Britain is the "country that called itself his and from which in his lifetime he never derived the smallest benefit, but only insults and vexations" (Beckett, *Molloy* 28). Lousse's "dear departed" would technically have been a British subject at the time of the Great War, but a young Irishman—despite his service to the crown—might have met certain prejudices amongst the English, especially given Irish nationalists' efforts in the first two decades of the twentieth century to foment revolutionary unrest. Although Lousse expresses only anti-British sentiments and not explicitly pro-Irish ones, Beckett associates her with Irish nationalism through a reference to one of the movement's principal (if ultimately largely symbolic) cultural causes: the Irish language. When Molloy perceives Lousse's emotional reaction at her dog's graveside, though he cannot determine whether she

[23] Again, there is ambiguity about the nature of Lousse's loss. Her "dear departed" could be the child Teddy replaced or, say, a husband or lover.

laughs or cries, he quips, “Tears and laughter, they are so much Gaelic to me” (Beckett, *Molloy* 32).

This association of Lousse with Irish nationalism allows us to understand her speech—and her role in the novel—in a different light. Irish nationalism famously marshalled funerals and oratory to accomplish its goals, and Lousse’s orchestration of proceedings after her dog’s death can be read as a bathetic parody of the same. She gives a sort of public eulogy for Teddy, she and Molloy parade through the streets with the dog’s lifeless body, and then they bury him. However, Beckett mocks these measures every step of the way. First, Molloy describes how “[t]here emanated such tedium from [Lousse’s] droning voice” that the crowd disperses during her speech (Beckett, *Molloy* 28-29). Then, Molloy relates the humiliation of their funeral procession from the site of Teddy’s death to Lousse’s home: “We slung him across the saddle [of Molloy’s bicycle] and set off like an army in retreat, helping each other I suppose, to keep the corpse from falling, to keep the bicycle moving, to keep ourselves moving, through the jeering crowd” (Beckett, *Molloy* 30). Finally, Molloy comments on the lack of ceremony with which they bury Teddy as they place him in the ground with “no box or wrapping of any kind, like a Carthusian monk, but with his collar and lead” (Beckett, *Molloy* 32). On top of all this, the episode chronicles the commemoration, conveyance, and interment not of a nationalist hero, but of a dog.

At one level then, we can read Teddy’s burial as a travesty of Irish nationalist funerary rites, a criticism of “the lack of authentic emotion and the superficiality of the Irish mourning practice” (Kim 51). Yet, Beckett holds out the possibility that this same series of events may have solemn significance for Lousse. It is significant that Molloy

cannot translate Lousse's emotional outburst at the graveside, whether she laughs or cries. The "[t]ears or laughter" are our only clue to whether Lousse manages to achieve the cathartic trinity of bereavement, grief, and mourning. We know she is bereft and mourns publicly, but we would need to understand what is behind her "[t]ears or laughter" in order to know whether she also grieves.

Beckett neither proves nor dismisses the possibility that female mourning might facilitate the psycho-emotional work of grieving. Though the crowd may jeer and Molloy disdain the proceedings as Lousse mourns, they all recognize the loss she has suffered in the death of her beloved pet.[24] The commemorative acts of oration, procession, and burial structure a framework within which Lousse has the opportunity to address her emotional reaction to her bereavement. When she incorporates references to her deceased child in her speech, she links this fresh loss to her past suffering. Indeed, the grave Lousse digs may serve multiple purposes: to hold the body of her dog but also to lay to rest her unresolved bereavement for her lost child and/or "dear departed." However, Beckett ultimately denies readers the comfort of witnessing any clear relief of Lousse's emotional pain. After the burial, all we get of Lousse's reaction to the completion of her mourning

[24] To emphasize the stark contrast between female and male responses to bereavement in *Molloy*, compare Lousse's public mourning with Moran's anxiety about being recognized as a widower. Moran muses about how others perceive him when he is in his son's company: "He [Moran] is taken for a widower, the gaudiest colours are of no avail, rather make things worse, he finds himself saddled with a wife long since deceased, in child-bed as likely as not" (Beckett, *Molloy* 119).

rituals is Molloy's inept observation: "When she had finished her grave she handed me the spade and began to muse, or brood.[25] I thought she was going to cry, it was the thing to do, but on the contrary she laughed. It was perhaps her way of crying. Or perhaps I was mistaken and she was really crying, with the noise of laughter" (Beckett, *Molloy* 32). Is Lousse attuned to the farcical nature of her actions or to the emotional work of grieving in this moment? We cannot tell. Lousse largely adheres to that which is "the thing to do" in the wake of a loved one's death,[26] but Beckett conveys ambivalence about what the results of following social protocol would be.

I surmise that, considering Lousse's subsequent request that Molloy stay in her dog's place, Beckett has his doubts. If she does laugh rather than cry following the dog's burial, she may do so out of recognition that following social conventions in her bereavement has not had the consoling effect she hoped it would. This would help explain why Lousse sets her sights on Molloy's companionship, in lieu of her dog's.

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[25] In his phrasing ("her grave"), Molloy makes it sound as though the grave is Lousse's as well as her dog's. The implication is that some part of Lousse dies as she buries Teddy (and, perhaps, the memory of her child and/or "dear departed"). Furthermore, Molloy regards the grave as his own, too. He states, "On the whole I was a mere spectator, I contributed my presence. As if it had been my own burial. And it was" (Beckett, *Molloy* 32). I would posit that Molloy dies a little here because Lousse strips him of his singularity when she uses him as a replacement for her dog and child.

[26] In her adherence to traditional social codes for mourning, Lousse aligns with Matchett and Mrs. Heccomb in Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*.

Bereft of her son and dog—and finding that mourning rituals do little to ease her emotional pain—Lousse employs a complete stranger as a replacement figure for those she has lost. Much as Molloy wants to "speak of the things that are left," Lousse wants another animate being in her proximity, not for love or intimacy but for his mere presence (Beckett, *Molloy* 20). The substitution provides a sense of continuity in her day-to-day life that bereavement would otherwise disrupt.

To put this coping method of surrogation into effect, Lousse treats Molloy as a composite of her lost pet and child. Certain rules she sets for her arrangement with Molloy would be better suited for a canine or toddler rather than a grown man, including the dictate that he must "not go out on the street, for once out [he] would never find [his] way again" (Beckett, *Molloy* 42). Granted, Molloy has a dreadful sense of direction, but Lousse would issue this mandate primarily because she is accustomed to caring for a pet or child. What is more, Lousse seeks in Molloy's presence precisely what she has lost in the deaths of her dog and child—obedient companionship. In effect, Lousse's conflation of her child, the dog, and Molloy reduces them all to their lowest common denominator—namely, their ability to be present in her life. On the one hand, her coping method, substituting Molloy for dog for child, strips each of them of their singularity, yet on the other hand, it underscores what is at stake for Lousse. That simple ability to be present in her life proves exceedingly fragile: death renders Lousse's child and dog incapable of fulfilling that role, and Molloy eventually opts out of his own accord,

leaving Lousse bereft once more.[27] Molloy recounts for us the tender core of Lousse's proposition, saying, "All she asked was to feel me near her, with her, and the right to contemplate from time to time this extraordinary body both at rest and in motion" (Beckett, *Molloy* 43). Though Molloy allows Lousse this right for a little while, he eventually leaves her to resume his pursuit of his mother.

Knowing that his departure would bring Lousse's other losses back to her, Molloy conjures up a picture of the woman's response as she resigns herself to her bereavement:

> And she did not try and hold me back but she went and sat down on her dog's grave, perhaps, which was mine too in a way, and which by the way she had not sown with grass, as I had thought, but with all kinds of many-coloured flowers and herbaceous plants, selected I imagine in such a way that when some went out others lit up. (Beckett, *Molloy* 54)

In this, which is effectively Lousse's closing scene, Beckett recapitulates themes he develops earlier in the episode. As when Molloy could not decipher whether Lousse laughed or cried, he can only imagine that "perhaps" his description of Lousse beside her dog's grave might be accurate. Once again, Beckett deprives readers of certainty about Lousse and her reaction to loss—this time because Molloy narrates a hypothetical response to his departure that he does not, and cannot, witness himself. In this way,

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[27] When Molloy leaves Lousse's house, it is the result of the inherent conflict between what he and Lousse value. She values his presence in her home, while he values his quest to find his mother. Since their values are directly at odds with each other—hers would hold him in place and his require moving on—their break seems all but inevitable.

Beckett reinforces his point that one cannot truly know another person's experience of bereavement; one can only speculate about the extent to which they grieve.

Likewise, Molloy repeats the idea that Teddy's grave entombs multiple beings, including Molloy—the implication of which is that Molloy leaves Lousse's house less alive in his own being than he was when he started. The dog's grave, Molloy claims, is "mine too in a way" (Beckett, *Molloy* 54). However, for all the times Molloy identifies with the dead dog, he also muses about his own future burial, saying of Lousse, "Me too, if I had stayed, she would have buried. If I had her address I'd write to her, to come and bury me" (Beckett, *Molloy* 33). Thus, Molloy occupies a peculiarly Beckettian state: he is both buried in the dog's grave and yet to be buried. We may even say that he longs to be buried, much as he envies Teddy's death and assumes death frees the dog from physical pain (Beckett, *Molloy* 30).[28] By departing, though, Molloy makes himself one more thing Lousse has lost. When he leaves, he imagines her bereft of himself, the dog, and her child—with no animate replacement in sight.

Yet, Molloy's description of the plant life that grows on the dog's grave bespeaks a change in Lousse's mourning rituals. Molloy corrects his initial impression that Lousse, in "fussing around the grave," was "sowing grass on it, as if grass wouldn't have sown itself on it" (Beckett, *Molloy* 42). Instead, after he leaves her, he explains what she had

[28] Indeed, Molloy attempts suicide shortly after leaving Lousse's house: "I took the vegetable knife from my pocket and set about opening my wrist. But pain soon got the better of me. First I cried out, then I gave up, closed the knife and put it back in my pocket" (Beckett, *Molloy* 56).

really done: "by the way she had not sown [the grave] with grass, as I had thought, but with all kinds of many-coloured flowers and herbaceous plants, selected I imagine in such a way that when some went out others lit up" (Beckett, *Molloy* 54). This image of Lousse, I argue, comes as close as Beckett gets to a depiction of productive grieving (in Watkin's sense) in *Molloy*. At first it may appear that the succession of flowering blooms perpetuates Lousse's coping mechanism of replacing the lost object with something new. However, the flowers and plants function not as another animate substitute for child, pet, and man, but rather as a poignant marker commemorating those Lousse has lost. Little is left of the acerbic tone Beckett takes toward Irish nationalist mourning rites. Instead, we are given a vision of Lousse privately contemplating and personally commemorating her loss, actions which only make sense if she has begun to process her bereavement emotionally as well. Molloy does not suggest that the "multi-coloured flowers and herbaceous plants" function as a sort of surrogate for her dog or, after he leaves, for Molloy. The succession of flowering blooms mirrors the succession Lousse orchestrated as she shifted her attention from one companion to the next, but the flowers represent a less evasive approach to coming to terms with loss.[29] As she sits at Teddy's grave,

[29] Flowers also represent yet another traditional element of Lousse's approach to grief and mourning. Like her funeral oration, procession, and burial for Teddy, flowers at a grave correspond to recognizable social conventions. That Beckett reframes Lousse as a proponent of traditional funeral rites suggests that he remains ambivalent about the symbols and structures society creates to handle loss. Perhaps some measure of relief can be found in their familiarity and comfort after all.

amongst the flowers and herbs (if only in Molloy's mind), Lousse might begin to do the emotional work of dealing with her bereavement. If not, she may instead be seeking out a new replacement figure to perpetuate the cycle of surrogation.

In *Molloy*, then, Beckett presents a view of loss in which the best path forward may be via customary rites and rituals. These at least provide a platform where individuals can face the emotional implications of their losses. Only by facing loss's emotional effects can one begin the work of grieving. *Molloy* shows that there is no surefire solution to the problem of loss; loss is an unavoidable, irremediable human condition. Yet, Lousse, as a representative of female mourning, stands as a potential alternative to the affectless bereavement Beckett depicts in Molloy and Moran. Further study of Beckett's oeuvre in relation to bereavement, grief, and mourning may reveal the extent to which the author regards this difference as gendered. What this reading of *Molloy* begins to suggest is that Lousse represents a longer history of women bearing the responsibility for the emotional process of grief and mourning. The question of how that history and responsibility affects women may be answered, I would propose in closing, through an analytical reading of Beckett's more woman-centric texts, including his plays, such as *Not I* (1972), *Footfalls* (1975), and *Rockaby* (1981).

Ultimately, in the case of *Molloy*, the text itself may be understood as a symptom of Beckett's own bereavement—for those lost in World War II and the Holocaust, and (preemptively) for his own mother. The narratives of Molloy and Moran represent the two paths of bereavement when one does not know the exact nature of his loss: one may seek the lost object with no promise of achieving success or one may wait for the lost one to return and restore normalcy. But neither path satisfies Beckett since neither engages in

the emotional work of grieving. Beckett longs for a third way, and he introduces Lousse as a way of thinking through the possibilities of female mourning. Could the public recognition of female mourning lead to emotional processing and healthy grieving? Beckett is not sure, but his exploration in *Molloy* thoughtfully begins an ongoing process of teasing out the implications of gendered responses to bereavement.

CHAPTER 3 – GENDERED APPROACHES TO REPRESENTING WOMEN'S INSIDIOUS VULNERABILITY TO TRAUMA AND GRIEF IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH FICTION

In her early challenge to the narrow diagnostic definition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a psychiatric condition caused by "an event outside the range of human experience," Laura S. Brown writes, "A feminist perspective, which draws our attention to the lives of girls and women, to the secret, private, hidden experiences of everyday pain, reminds us that traumatic events do lie within the range of normal human experience" (100, 110). Contemporary Irish novelists explore narratives of such "secret, private, hidden experiences of everyday pain," laying bare women's gendered vulnerability to the sort of insidious trauma Brown describes—as well as women's gendered vulnerability to grief, which often goes hand-in-hand with trauma but need not be accompanied by the symptoms of PTSD. Works by Emma Donoghue, Roddy Doyle, Edna O'Brien, Colum McCann, Sebastian Barry, and Eimear McBride tell of women constrained by social strictures, physically and sexually abused, policed for their sexuality, and forcibly silenced in the wake of trauma and grief. Their novels provide intersectional perspectives, highlighting the added pressures where womanhood meets issues of class, race, religion, and sexuality. By giving voice to underrepresented traumatized and grieving female characters in their narratives, the aforementioned authors raise essential political and ethical concerns, write women back into a fuller

reckoning of Irish social history, and enact the feminist critique Brown urges. In so doing, their novels expose the flaws of prevailing ideologies and echo Brown's assessment of gendered cultural norms. As Brown puts it, "[t]o admit that these everyday assaults on integrity and personal safety are sources of psychic trauma, to acknowledge the absence of safety in the daily lives of women and other non-dominant groups, admits to what is deeply wrong in many sacred social institutions and challenges the benign mask behind which everyday oppression operates" (105). As contemporary Irish fiction performs its social critique of "everyday oppression," it advances important questions for public discussion, providing insight into the lived realities of real women—specifically, the beaten, the banished, the silenced, and the grieving.[1]

Yet, as this chapter demonstrates, the effort to address (and, perhaps, in some way begin to redress) the insidious vulnerability women experience also demands that authors think critically about the responsibilities they have in relation to their subjects as they communicate across silences. The works I examine here—Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1995), Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996), Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1996), Colum McCann's *Zoli* (2006), Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* (2008), and Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013)—exhibit the many challenges of tackling topics as fraught as domestic abuse, incest, rape, and

[1] While my chapter focuses on literary representations of women, recent Irish fiction also addresses other non-dominant groups, including for example racial minorities in Ireland. See Oona Frawley's *Flight* (2014) and Donal Ryan's forthcoming *From a Low and Quiet Sea* (2018).

other forms of gendered violence and oppression. The act of inventing fictional accounts of trauma risks adding to victims' suffering, especially when the author has not endured the ordeal firsthand. A writer may inadvertently co-opt the victim's narrative for personal gain, outline too narrow a definition of the transgression, underestimate how contributing factors escalate the victim's stress, or oversimplify the complexity and ambiguity of how an individual responds to the worst modes of physical, psychological, and emotional turmoil. To avoid re-victimizing those vulnerable to insidious forms of trauma, a novelist must engage with survivors' experiences—and ongoing struggles—with sensitivity and self-awareness. Likewise, critics must read the resultant narratives with analytical skepticism with regard to fiction's efficacy in communicating that which society silences. This chapter, therefore, serves as a reminder of the distance separating these writers from their subjects; it illustrates the positive potential of communicating silenced experiences while it investigates the limitations of asking literature to speak for the marginalized and oppressed. Along the way, I hone the critical definition of "insidious trauma" to indicate where it overlaps—and where it diverges—from the standard diagnostic parameters of PTSD, and I show connections between characters' experiences of violence and loss.

My analysis of contemporary Irish writing focuses on select works, chosen for their thoughtful exploration of women's trauma and grief. In some cases, as in Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, the female protagonist clearly suffers psychological effects from repeated, life-long traumas; but in others, like Emma Donoghue's *Hood*, the narrative emphasizes the female narrator's insidious vulnerability, focusing on the persistent threat of loss, pain, and invisibility without insisting that it has traumatic effects. The authors I discuss—Donoghue, Doyle, O'Brien, McCann, Barry,

and McBride—by no means represent a comprehensive overview of contemporary Irish fiction or its engagement with themes of gender, insidious trauma, and grief.[2] However, this selection allows me to map important trends and resonances from the mid-1990s into the twenty-first century. Furthermore, this list signals my effort to rise to the challenge issued by Anne Enright, the inaugural Laureate for Irish Fiction, who calls for the reading public to consider "side by side… men and women together." I agree with Enright's critique of the notion that "women are somehow present when men write poems about them, or have them as characters in their books, or write about their role in Irish history." Therefore, I consider novels by men but insist upon putting them in conversation with novels by women for a fuller examination of women's insidious vulnerability to trauma and grief in contemporary Irish fiction.

My analysis of contemporary Irish writing begins with the premise that Donoghue, Doyle, O'Brien, McCann, Barry, and McBride share a critical, feminist impulse to uncover the secret, hidden lives of girls and women. However, I also argue that the writers exhibit acute awareness of their gendered subject positions when dealing with women's experiences of transgression, trauma, and grief. Without establishing a reductive dichotomy, I contend that a side-by-side comparison reveals significant differences in how male and female novelists engage with women's trauma in their

[2] Other Irish novels from this period dealing with similar themes include, for instance: Jennifer Johnston's *The Invisible Worm* (1991), Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996), Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), and Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007).

fiction. My brief discussions of Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and McCann's *Zoli* set the stage for my in-depth close reading of Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, while Donoghue's *Hood* and O'Brien's *Down by the River* provide a foundation for interpreting McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. Tracing the arc from Doyle to McCann to Barry, I observe that the men exhibit growing unease about the gendered power dynamics embedded in their works. As the sociopolitical landscape in Ireland shifts, men are forced into greater awareness of implicit cultural biases and their own implication in existing hierarchical structures. Thus, these male authors understand that they write of experiences alien to their own, and they increasingly signpost their cognizance of sociopolitical power imbalances and their own privileged subject position. The women writers, meanwhile, spend considerably less time couching their narratives in politically correct packaging. Even when describing circumstances beyond the realm of their own direct experiences, Donoghue, O'Brien, and McBride evince far less anxiety about distancing themselves from their grieving and traumatized protagonists. As women, they share some gendered vulnerabilities with their characters, which helps them establish firmer footing for their imaginative depictions of physical and sexual transgressions. As Donoghue's protagonist, Pen, suggests, a fundamental, insidious vulnerability to danger exists for all women: "Not that women often actually put words to such things . . . but if you listened carefully you could hear the gaps in the conversation" (265). And, indeed, it is in an effort to "put words to such things" that these women writers delve into the raw psychosomatic realities of their protagonists, emphasizing modes of experience that lie beyond ordinary language. While the men try to empower their female characters through first-person narration, therefore, the women express more

fundamental doubts about whether and how their female characters would be allowed to express themselves in contemporary Irish society.

At no point in this chapter do I wish to suggest that men cannot or should not write female protagonists; however, I do insist that readers think critically about how the author's gendered subject position affects their relationship to their grieving and traumatized characters. Furthermore, I call for scholars and reviewers to recognize the implicit bias underlying certain strands of literary criticism. To borrow Anne Enright's words, why should male authors earn an "added sense of authority" merely because they dare to write about women? Enright's observation—that "Irish men writing about women are sometimes praised for their insight, as though this was something women themselves were incapable of"—urges readers to push back, to set writing by men and women on a level playing field and to perceive the insights to be found in both. This chapter identifies some of those insights, paying particular attention to how the author's gendered experiences inform his or her perspective and literary methods. Donoghue, Doyle, O'Brien, McCann, Barry, and McBride all exhibit sophisticated intellectual and aesthetic engagement with the physical, emotional, and psychological fallout of trauma and women's persistent vulnerability to transgression. Yet, their perspectives on this topic generally fall along gendered lines, even as they offer a range of important insights to their audiences.

3.1 SEBASTIAN BARRY'S *THE SECRET SCRIPTURE* (2008)

In the first half of my argument, I argue that what links Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* to its forebears, Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and Colum McCann's *Zoli*—and what stands in contradistinction to the women's works—is the male author's questionable ethical position as he presumes to write women's traumatic experiences in a realistic form. As my discussion of these works shows, the engrained gender hierarchy proves difficult for writers to navigate. Even as Doyle, McCann, and Barry strive to empower their female protagonists, their male presence is in tension with the progressive trajectory of their novels. As I build toward my extended discussion of Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, my overview of the critical reception of Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* proves how readily reviewers attribute credibility and authority to men who write about women, reinscribing male dominance without critically examining the ethical implications of the author's project. Next, drawing on the analytical arguments of Ruth Gilligan, I offer a brief description of McCann's *Zoli* in order to show how the novel rejects the idea that the male writer's presence is immaterial. In an effort to stave off the sort of uncritical response occasioned by Doyle's work, McCann conspicuously characterizes the male writer as an interloper rather than an expert as he narrates Zoli's story. Then, in my in-depth reading of *The Secret Scripture*, I illustrate how Barry extends the strategies of Doyle and McCann and carries them to their logical extremes. Like Doyle, he foregrounds the female protagonist's voice, deliberately crafting her as a storyteller who puts words to her own painful experiences. But, like McCann, he underscores the male author's presence in a

self-critical move that demarcates the limitations of his view. Ultimately, I argue that Barry calls into question whether any definitive account can be constructed of a woman's past that was not properly understood or acknowledged as it was lived. He closely patterns his narrative strategies on methods previously deployed by Doyle and McCann but offers an analytical response—in fictional form—to assumptions present in their works. The subject matter of these writers' novels differs significantly, but Doyle, McCann, and Barry share an interest in elevating female voices and an aptitude for assessing the male writer's privileged cultural status.

The first of these three, Roddy Doyle, offers the story of Paula Spencer in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996). Developing her experiences through first-person narration, Doyle affords Paula some semblance of control over how readers will understand her life. The character narrates her own personal history of victimhood, from the unwanted sexual attention she receives from peers, teachers, and relatives during her schoolgirl days to the brutal domestic abuse and rape she suffers at the hands of her husband, Charlo. Doyle makes direct reference to the act of writing in the opening pages of the novel and thereby suggests that the book should be read as though it is testimony written by Paula herself (10). Readers envision this fictional character engaged in therapeutic writing with cathartic intent. In this way, Doyle empowers his female protagonist even as she struggles to come to terms with her abusive husband's death—and with her abiding love for Charlo despite his violent maltreatment of her over many years. In *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, Doyle prioritizes giving Paula a strong voice and letting her speak her own truth.

At the same time, however, this form of empowerment exposes Paula Spencer's vulnerabilities and the difficulties she faces as she tries to parse the fragments of her traumatic memory. Society sets the bar high for victims of abuse; they are expected to tell the verifiable truth, even if the transgressions they suffer have psychological implications that affect the woman's memory or her sense of culpability. Spencer, therefore, urges herself to stick to the truth in an injunction that becomes a refrain, "Facts, Paula," but she recognizes the impossibility of telling all the particulars of her case clearly or comprehensively after "[s]eventeen years of being hit and kicked" (Doyle 91, 96, 104, 184). Betraying her self-doubt, she asks herself, "How many times did I curl up on the floor? How can I remember one time?" (Doyle 184). Furthermore, she resists the potential pleasures in storytelling. Thus, she chastises herself for embellishing, for "[m]aking things up; a story" and for "beginning to enjoy it" (Doyle 184-185). She severely interrogates the veracity of the brutal scene of abuse she narrates. Having suffered too many transgressions to count, the weight of her long marital history overwhelms her; she insists on truth but doubts her ability to obtain that goal. Throughout, the insidiousness of Charlo's attacks makes her feel complicit for not having had the willpower or strength to resist, for taking a certain sort of pleasure in the pain.

Ultimately, though, Paula stakes her testimony's veracity—and its import—on a catalogue of the residual evidence of her physical and psychological traumas:

> I have a hearing problem, a ruptured eardrum. A present from Charlo. It happened. A finger aches when it's going to rain. Little one on the left; he pulled it back till it snapped. It happened. I have places where there should be teeth. There are things I can't smell any more. I have burn marks where burns used to

> be. I have a backache that rides me all day. I've a scar on my chin. It happened. I have parts of the house that make me cry. I have memories that I can touch and make me wake up screaming. I'm haunted all day and all night. I have mistakes that stab me before I think of them. He hit me, he thumped me, he raped me. It happened. (Doyle 185)

In clipped syntax, this passage braids domestic, corporeal, and psychological effects of the insidious trauma Paula suffers. She does not have the luxury of amnesia where her experience of traumatic abuse is concerned. This fact sets her apart from other trauma victims, who often experience a void in the place where the memory of the event should be. In this way, Doyle's depiction suggests that the symptoms of insidious trauma may differ from the conventional indicators of PTSD. Paula's memories of abuse also have physical, tangible features, existing for her as something "[she] can touch." This description indicates not only that she externalizes her memories of abuse but also that, even as she displaces them outside her being, these memories are more concrete and more implacable than ordinary thoughts. She cannot get distance from them, inscribed as they are in her house, body, and mind. Nor can readers escape from them; Paula Spencer's first-person narration makes them more immediate for readers as well. Paula exhibits PTSD-like symptoms in the way traumatic events "haunt" her and yet—as Brown would argue—the character's repeated traumas lie fully within the realm of her "normal human experience" (110). Though Paula knows the facts of her abuse to be true, she must tell herself over and over again: "It happened." Neither the original diagnostic definition of trauma nor the mores of Irish society in the 1980s setting of the novel

recognize the full extent of her suffering, but both Brown and Doyle bear witness to its existence and to the pain that stems from the sort of domestic violence Paula experiences.

The initial critical reception of Doyle's portrait of Paula Spencer in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* generally celebrates the author for his ability to enter imaginatively into the mind of his battered, conflicted protagonist. Tim Adams, for example, asserts in his *Guardian* review of the novel that "Doyle has always been a great ventriloquist and his voice-throwing is taken to its limits for Paula Spencer: there is not one syllable in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* that could not convincingly have come from her mouth, not a phrase that sounds like an authorial nudge." Likewise, Rick Henry notes "Doyle's ability to efface his (male) presence in his female narrator's voice and sensibilities" (282). Yet, male reviewers are not alone in this assessment. Aisling Foster writes for *The Times* that Doyle is "one of those rare male authors who can bring women alive in fiction" (36). And Mary Gordon posits that "the triumph of this novel [is] that Mr. Doyle – entirely without condescension – shows the inner life of this battered housecleaner to be the same stuff as that of the heroes of the great novels of Europe." Indeed, Gordon sums up the general critical view of Doyle's accomplishment in crafting Paula Spencer's voice when she writes that the question is not "whether a man can satisfactorily write about a woman's experience" but rather how well the writer does so. In this case, Gordon argues, Doyle's novel "honors . . . the experience of this one woman, Paula Spencer . . . with tenderness [and] fearless clearsightedness." Significantly, each of these reviewers acknowledges the otherness of Paula Spencer in order to commend Doyle for his ability to capture her reality. They base his accomplishments on how skillfully he

portrays a life so foreign to his own.[3] Meanwhile, critics dismiss or choose not to examine any ethical implications of writing—and possibly co-opting—another's story.

In contrast, I contend that important ethical considerations exist in writing tales of the oppressed. Even when the rendering of a battered, alcohol-dependent woman's narrative is entirely fictitious, the author still bears responsibilities toward his subject. Novels can promote the political empowerment of the downtrodden as they tell the stories of society's "others." And yet, this effort risks re-victimizing the very individuals the author may want to bear witness to. Novel-writing typically confers upon the writer a sense of authority or ownership over his or her subject matter, which can overshadow the other's rightful claim to their own story.[4] Consequently, authors like Doyle must work to avoid inadvertently co-opting the other's narrative. Readers and critics can still celebrate the literary talent of novelists who, like Roddy Doyle, dare to tell ground-breaking, taboo-shattering stories. To do so ethically, I argue, we must pay attention to authors' strategies for acknowledging the responsibility they bear toward their subject and the

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[3] Doyle's oeuvre exhibits his familiarity with—and keen insight into—the sort of socioeconomic vulnerability Paula experiences in its depictions of Northside Dubliners. So, while Paula's gender, abuse, and alcohol dependence are foreign to Doyle, he has more direct knowledge of her class-based experiences.

[4] Imaginative representations of the lives of the marginalized help to bring attention to injustices, but they should not displace the voices of victims of oppression altogether. Society's others should be given the resources and platforms to tell their own stories insofar as they are able and willing.

methods they use to hold themselves accountable in their work. How does the writer signal his or her own subject position, distinct from that of his protagonist? How do they amplify the voice of their subject—rather than subsuming the other into their own worldview? I investigate such questions throughout this chapter, and *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* serves as an instructive case-in-point of how writers and critics must take ethical considerations into account when they write about women's insidious trauma.

I agree with the aforementioned literary critics in their positive assessment of Doyle's talent in crafting a persuasive, compelling Paula Spencer. But, I would also point out that the novelist himself is attuned to the challenge of balancing self-driven artistic aspiration with thoughtful, respectful engagement with fraught social issues. In an interview with Karen Sbrockey, Doyle explains that Paula's plausibility as a character astounds readers because "[i]t's obviously difficult for a *man*, who's *not* an alcoholic, to write such a novel" (547). Doyle's statement echoes reviewers' praise for his convincing character development. He goes on to explain one motivation for writing *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, saying, "I've never been a forty-year-old woman, nor will I ever be. I've never been the victim, or even the witness, of domestic violence, and I felt I would have a bash at it, as an exercise" (547). Taken in isolation, Doyle's explanation comes across as self-indulgent, even flippant. While Doyle is known for his irreverent style, his tone here raises questions about the ethical implications of a man appropriating women's victimhood for his own aesthetic "exercise." One may justifiably ask: to what extent is he exploiting abuse victims to burnish his own literary reputation?

In this case, I would argue that the personal artistic challenge Doyle sets for himself remains closely linked with his political motivations, as the rest of his interview

reveals. He signals his progressive purpose in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* by foregrounding the agency in Paula's female voice, and in his conversation with Sbrockey, he evinces pride in how his depictions of Paula Spencer (in the television series *Family* as well as in the novel) helped "[bring] domestic violence to the top of the political agenda" in Ireland (539). Paula's power—her compelling first-person narration—admits readers into a closer understanding of her life experiences and gives voice to the silenced realities of domestic abuse survivors. Nonetheless, Doyle's "ability to efface his (male) presence," as Henry puts it, leaves the impression that the authorial presence is immaterial. Consequently, the specter of ethically suspect gendered cultural appropriation lingers here. It is one thing to empower a woman's voice, but it is another altogether to suggest that the man's authorial presence is inherently neutral. Therefore, while Doyle invests his creative energies in crafting the nuanced, often ambivalent, perspective of Paula Spencer, other male Irish novelists opt not to erase their gendered presence but rather find ways to address it head on.

A decade later, Colum McCann's narratological framework in *Zoli* (2006) takes aim at precisely this ethical conundrum, that of the male authorial presence. McCann supplements the powerful voice of his female protagonist with a self-critical nod to his own position outside her narrative—outside her culture, and outside her gender. In telling the story of a Romani poet named Zoli, who is loosely based on Papusza, "the Polish-born Gypsy poet who became a poster girl for the Socialists back in the 50's," he, like Doyle, puts a woman's poetic voice center stage ("*Zoli* Interview"). However, McCann adds a male secondary character to stand in for himself within the novel. In this way, McCann signals his awareness of his complicated subject position in relation to the

narrative he writes. Zoli's psychological and emotional suffering stems from twinned problems: racial prejudice against the Slovakian Roma and the severity of Romani customs. She experiences the ruthless murder of her family by Hlinka guards in the 1930s, forceful attempts to settle the Roma by the "gadže," and banishment by the Romani (McCann, *Zoli* 13, 88-89, 119). Prior to representing these experiences, McCann conducts considerable research into his subject,[5] but he recognizes that he can do more to concretize the distance between the Romani poet's lived experience and his own.

Ruth Gilligan's essay on the "Narratology of Otherness" in McCann's novel skillfully unpacks the layered metatextual and self-critical elements of *Zoli* for us. Gilligan illustrates, for instance, how "McCann's invocation of Romani cultural strategies" highlights Zoli's role as a poet in both oral and written modes while "leav[ing] her thumbprints . . . all over this book" (119). As with Doyle's Paula Spencer, McCann's Zoli has a voice—and she uses it. Yet, McCann purposely interweaves traces of his own authorial self throughout the text as well. Most significantly, Gilligan identifies the unnamed journalist who visits a Roma camp at the start of *Zoli* as McCann's "doppelganger," pointing out that "just as this man has come to the camp to find out about Zoli, so too did McCann, during his own research, spend time on a Roma settlement" (117). Through this narratological device, Gilligan argues, McCann "anticipates potential ethical issues, directly pointing up the flawed procedure of a curious outsider coming in" and "subjects himself to the same kind of framing process to

[5] McCann spent two months in Slovakia meeting people and observing life in the settlements in preparation for writing *Zoli* ("*Zoli* Interview").

which he subjects his fictional characters" (117). In effect, McCann builds on Doyle's strategies for representing the life of a woman who experiences endless hardships. He emulates Doyle's efforts to give the female protagonist a compelling, authentic voice, but he subtly critiques the expunging of the male author's position. Instead, he marks himself as an outsider looking in on Zoli's experience from a place of relative privilege and safety. Thus, *Zoli* challenges an assumption still present in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*; it questions the assumption that the novelist's role is authoritative, benign, or above reproach. Indeed, McCann foregrounds the investigative process to such an extent that he registers its intrusive qualities as his journalist-doppelganger "wonders . . . how he will navigate [the Roma's] secrets" (7). By these methods, McCann disclaims the moral impunity traditionally granted to white male writers like himself.

Just two years later, Sebastian Barry's novel, *The Secret Scripture* (2008), borrows the literary strategies evident in both Doyle's and McCann's novels but disrupts an implicit expectation that underpins both—namely, the expectation that anyone can recover the historical reality of a woman's lifelong insidious vulnerability to grief and trauma with reliable accuracy. Even if gaps remain in Paula Spencer's and Zoli's narratives, the earlier novels suggest that all the characters need to make a full accounting of the past is more time. Barry, in contrast, disputes the possibility that a definitive, authoritative account of his protagonist's past could ever exist. From the start, the problem in *The Secret Scripture* is how to understand the life of Roseanne Clear McNulty, a centenarian confined in an Irish mental institution. In alternating chapters, Roseanne and her psychiatrist, Dr. Grene, try to recover her personal history. Following the precedents in Doyle's and McCann's work, Barry has Roseanne tell her own story,

lending strength to an underrepresented female voice. And he, like McCann, positions a male character as the embodiment of his authorial presence within the text. Dr. Grene focuses more on diagnosing Roseanne, in his capacity as a clinical psychiatrist, than on journalistic observations. Yet, he shares key identifying features with Barry: his earnest and sympathetic nature as he tries to understand Roseanne's trauma and grief, his propensity for writing down his findings, and his critical self-awareness, which repeatedly calls into question his methods and motives.

As Dr. Grene conducts research into the grounds for Roseanne's original admission to the Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital, where she has resided for several decades, and to the Sligo Mental Hospital years before that, he pieces together a historical map that counter-balances—and sometimes flatly contradicts—Roseanne's narrative. In his pursuit of his patient's official record, the psychiatrist unearths a harsh, even adversarial, description of Roseanne's early life in the deposition written by the local Catholic parish priest, Fr. Gaunt. Yet, through the course of the novel, Barry deliberately undermines each character's perspective—Roseanne's, Fr. Gaunt's, and Dr. Grene's—so that no single account of Roseanne's past outweighs the others. Readers cannot achieve an authoritative reckoning with Roseanne's history because the differing versions remain stubbornly irreconcilable and Barry renders all methods of retrieving historical facts suspect. Instead, *The Secret Scripture* suggests that Roseanne's testimony of her experience matters despite its incontrovertible inconsistencies, that official records can be skewed by individual biases and corrupted by decay due to careless handling, and that efforts like Dr. Grene's to understand victims of patriarchal oppression should be

undertaken—even when they cannot hope to discover the exact, accurate history of individual lives.

My reading of *The Secret Scripture* closely examines the character of Dr. Grene to understand how Sebastian Barry perceives his own relationship to his novel's subject—to Roseanne and the grief and trauma in her life. So far, Dr. Grene has escaped the in-depth analytical treatment that literary critics frequently subject Roseanne to. Robert F. Garratt and Beata Piątek succinctly describe Dr. Grene as a man who "reflect[s] self-critically" and "interrogat[es] the nature of history and its reliability," but this perception lulls readers into the false impression that Dr. Grene requires no further analytical examination (Garratt 140; Piątek 108). The underlying logic here repeats at the level of character what Anne Enright observes of male authors: readers attribute a similar "added sense of authority" to Dr. Grene as critics do to men who write novels about women. This critical shortsightedness exists despite Barry's concerted efforts within the text to characterize the psychiatrist as a man lax in his professional duties, distracted by his own emotional life, easily persuaded by the formal trappings of sociopolitical power, and susceptible to human error. Thus, I contend that attentive readers must be more evenhanded in their analysis of Barry's characters, applying their skepticism in equal measure to Roseanne and Dr. Grene. Along the way, I aim to correct a series of missteps in existing scholarship on *The Secret Scripture*.[6]

[6] Many readings of *The Secret Scripture* defer to the prevailing critical attitudes about Barry's relationship to history, historiography, and revisionism that took shape prior to this novel's publication. On the one hand, scholars like Nicholas Grene and Roy

Critics scrutinize Roseanne's chapters of the novel with far greater skepticism than they do Dr. Grene's—despite Roseanne's critical self-awareness, which matches her psychiatrist's. Barry positions Roseanne's voice as the first readers hear in *The Secret Scripture*, as she struggles to put words to the jumbled memories of life before her admission to the Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital. Like Roddy Doyle and Colum McCann before him, Sebastian Barry crafts a compelling voice for his main female character in order to reveal hidden stories of tragedy and trauma. Roseanne perseveres in the effort to write her "Testimony of Herself" in spite of her awareness of its fissures and discrepancies (Barry 3). Near the start of her account, Roseanne writes, "Oh, I must remind myself to be clear, and be sure I know what I am saying to you. There must be accuracy and rightness now" (Barry 31). Later, her certainty wanes, even as her resolve to tell the truth stays firm: "I am trying to be faithful to what is in my head. I hope it is trying also to be as faithful to me" (Barry 201). In both Roseanne's insistence on the truth and her doubts about being able to supply it, I detect an echo of Paula Spencer's self-admonishment, "Facts, Paula" (Doyle 91). Where Doyle's narrator struggles with the

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Foster advanced the idea that Barry's plays and novels challenge hegemonic nationalist narratives of Irish history by portraying marginalized figures. On the other hand, however, Elizabeth Cullingford issued a sharp critique of the politically polarized and "preposterously sanitized" form Barry's revisionism takes in works like *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (25). Subsequently, scholars accept the idea that Barry gives voice to underrepresented minorities as a basic premise, and most feel obligated to stake a claim in relation to Cullingford's charge of political bias.

insidious trauma of domestic violence, however, Barry's protagonist grapples with decades-old sources of psychic suffering—from her father's death to her harrowing experience of giving birth, and from the forced adoption of her baby to her institutionalization and the sexual assault she suffers within the walls of the Sligo mental asylum. Like Paula Spencer, Roseanne loses confidence as she contends with residual shame, that "dark dark shame" that assails her even "after all these years" (Barry 80). Yet, like both Paula and Zoli, Roseanne's self-articulation functions as her main source of power—perhaps the only power she has left to exert.

Readings rooted in trauma theory suggest, however, that Roseanne's memory cannot be trusted as a source of verifiable fact because the psychological impact of trauma distorts her memory. Her narrative contains evidence of gaps, repetitions, and modifications—all potential hallmarks of PTSD. Dr. Grene mentions the possibility of diagnosing Roseanne's "traumatic memory" as PTSD both in conversation with his patient and in his private musings about her case (Barry 101, 279). Essays by Garratt and Piątek pick up on this thread and convincingly argue that *The Secret Scripture* is structurally and thematically shaped by Roseanne's trauma. Troublingly, though, their interpretations leave readers with the impression that Roseanne deliberately manipulates her testimony, that she purposely distorts her memories of the past. Garratt tends to overemphasize the "instability of Roseanne's traumatized imagination" and describes her as "constant[ly] revising [her story's] details in various contradictions and denials," while Piątek states that "[i]t takes readers some time to see through her lies and false memories" (Garratt 139; Piątek 108). By interpreting the errors in Roseanne's account as willful revision or blatant lies, these critics misrepresent Roseanne as a deceitful

character. Their implicit accusation echoes a trend Brown observes regarding insidious trauma: she argues that women who experience interpersonal forms of trauma—such as "battered women or survivors of rape or incest"—are generally treated "very differently (and less well)" than survivors of chance accidents like natural disasters or car crashes (102). Brown writes that the "former is assumed to have contributed to her problem . . .; the latter is almost always seen as the innocent victim of random events" (102). Critics' heightened scrutiny of Roseanne bears out Brown's assessment, especially when they elide the difference between the psychological effects of PTSD and willful deception. I argue that the flaws in Roseanne's memory, those evidently caused by trauma, do not appear to be deliberate falsehoods. It is not that Roseanne tries to deceive readers; rather, I contend, her mind deceives her.

Insofar as Roseanne tells lies, she does so on a few rare occasions as a protective measure to buy herself time. Therefore, we should attribute these falsehoods to her survival instinct rather than to moral defects. In the face of Dr. Grene's direct questioning, for instance, she fibs in order to avoid being put on the spot about memories that cause her distress. When he asks about the circumstances surrounding her admission to the mental hospital, Roseanne at first claims not to remember, regarding "a foul and utter lie [to be] the best answer," yet subsequently she works toward that memory in her written testimony (Barry 26, 266). Her caginess with Dr. Grene does not appear to carry over into her testimony, where she aims to be forthright. In my reading of *The Secret Scripture*, it seems clear that Roseanne earnestly wants to believe her memory. She tries to write what she remembers as plainly as she can even as her mind fails her. She

observes the murky, cluttered nature of her traumatized, aged memories, and the possibility of their untruth disturbs her:

> I must admit there are 'memories' in my head that are curious even to me. I would not like to have to say this to Dr Grene. Memory, I must suppose, if it is neglected becomes like a box room, or a lumber room in an old house, the contents jumbled about, maybe not only from neglect but also from too much haphazard searching in them, and things to boot thrown in that don't belong there. I certainly suspect – well, I don't know what I certainly suspect. It makes me a little dizzy to contemplate the possibility that everything I remember may not be – may not be *real*, I suppose. There was so much turmoil at that time that – that what? I took refuge in other impossible histories, in fantasies? I don't know.
>
> But if I put my faith in certain memories, perhaps they will serve as stepping stones, and I will cross the torrent of 'times past', without being plunged entirely into it. (Barry 201)

Even as Roseanne tries to find sure footing in select memories, she suggests that there are some aspects of the past that she would rather evade altogether. There are also memories that she reports despite knowing they are far "beyond the bounds of possibility," such as her anecdote of being liberated from the Sligo asylum for a transcendent reunion with Eneas McNulty and their baby boy (267). Even though she knows it never could have happened, this episode presents itself to her not as a dream, not as a fantasy, but as a memory. In her written testimony—if not in her conversations with Dr. Grene—Roseanne tries to lay it all out, everything she remembers: true memories, false

memories, and memories she knows to be wholly invented. *The Secret Scripture* invites readers to bear witness to them all.

However, critics appear to prioritize determining historical facts over trying to bear witness to the more fundamental truths to be found in Roseanne's testimony of herself. Reading Barry's novel becomes for some readers a hunt for the most reliable account of Roseanne's personal history. Therefore, scholars who emphasize the cognitive effects of PTSD, the ways that psychic trauma might distort Roseanne's memory, too hastily dismiss her narrative in favor of Dr. Grene's more "analytical eye" (Garratt 139). Since Dr. Grene is, ostensibly, a man of science, literary scholars generally privilege his narrative as an objective, well-reasoned account standing in stark contrast to Roseanne's, which they view as darkened by trauma, dread, fear, shame, and reticence. Rudolf Freiburg, for one, claims, "The testimony of the traumatised old lady, a kind of unreliable autobiography, in which the limits between fact and fiction are permanently blurred, is contrasted with the analytical, scientific view of the professional psychiatrist who has done some research on Roseanne's life" (74). Similarly, Garratt postulates a dichotomy between "Roseanne's emotional and poetic language" and Dr. Grene's "academic style," pitting the patient's "traumatic narrative" against the psychiatrist's "critical analysis" (139-140).[7] The appeal of this divided interpretation is clear: the opposition establishes a

[7] Although Garratt concedes that we can observe "the same critical distancing" in Roseanne's narrative as in Dr. Grene's, he implies that it is surprising that the patient should exhibit this analytical self-awareness (140).

tidy gendered juxtaposition with woman, emotion, art, and fiction on one side and man, reason, science, and historical fact on the other.

Deliberately and repeatedly, Barry undermines this oversimplified reading as Dr. Grene fills his commonplace book with copious amounts of personal emotional content, poetic digressions, self-rebuke for uncritical thoughts, and forthright admissions that his methods and sources are imperfect. The dichotomous reading offered by Freiburg and Garratt, therefore, does not hold up under closer examination. My reading emphasizes instead just how much Roseanne and Dr. Grene have in common: both engage in acts of written self-examination, and both struggle with their shortcomings as they undertake the gargantuan tasks they set for themselves. Roseanne's memory may be significantly warped by trauma and old age, but Dr. Grene—who is himself nearing retirement age—shows us that mental lapses afflict us all, if in less severe ways. And his narrative suggests this is especially true when one grieves. Rather than simply laud Dr. Grene's analytical acuity as the corrective to Roseanne's fallible traumatic memory, readers should critically re-examine whether his character actually serves as a model witness. Only by acknowledging the psychiatrist's unreliability can readers begin to appreciate the essential truth value of Roseanne's testimony more fully. Like Barry's characters, we should "reflect self-critically" upon our own interpretive assumptions and biases (Garratt 140). Dr. Grene's effort to bear witness to his patient's life does not negate readers' ethical responsibility to try to come to terms with Roseanne's written testimony. When we do, we may find that—as Dr. Grene puts it—the patient's story contains "useful truths above and beyond the actual veracity of the 'facts,'" and that it speaks volumes about the sociopolitical realities women faced in twentieth-century Ireland (Barry 280).

I contend that Barry develops Dr. Grene's character in *The Secret Scripture* to showcase the author's own self-reflections as he attempts to represent the hidden suffering of women like Roseanne in a credible and conscientious manner. Throughout the novel, Barry lets Dr. Grene stand as his proxy as he delves into what can be learned about a woman institutionalized in Ireland in the middle of the twentieth century. In this way, he adopts McCann's narratological strategy for signaling the male author's questionable subject position in relation to his female protagonist. Here, Barry provides a psychiatrist in place of McCann's journalist, but the move nets similar results. The narrative framework positions Dr. Grene—and by extension the male author—outside of Roseanne Clear McNulty's experience and testimony, even as Barry deftly crafts a nuanced, evocative narrative about the traumatized woman's life. This strategy effectively acknowledges the male authorial presence in the novel—rather than effacing it as Doyle does in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*.

As a proxy, though, Dr. Grene displays profound ambivalence about his work. In this respect, he exceeds the example set by his predecessor, McCann's journalist-doppelganger in *Zoli*. Dr. Grene feels a keen sense of responsibility as he tries to establish authoritatively what brought about Roseanne's admission to the mental institution—to assess whether she was "sectioned for social rather than medical reasons" (Barry 16). But he also resists this task at times because it necessitates invading his patient's peace and privacy. Dr. Grene earnestly wishes to do right by Roseanne, for whom he harbors a great fondness, even if this means sheltering her from information he discovers during his investigation into her life history. At the same time, however, his self-critical nature causes him to regard his tendency toward compassion with suspicion,

especially when it leads to sentimentality; he considers such emotions counterproductive to his work as a psychiatrist (Barry 46-47).

The doctor's ambivalent posture, I argue, points to Barry's own mixed feelings about his literary project. Barry feels "almost duty-bound" to reclaim Roseanne's story, which he bases loosely on his great-aunt, a cryptic figure only remembered by his family as beautiful and "no good" (O'Hagan). But Barry evinces serious concerns about presuming to speak for a woman who was so effectively silenced. In *The Secret Scripture*, Dr. Grene expresses anxiety about perpetuating harm against such women, stating, "I must interrogate my own motives now in everything, because I fear there has not been much in the way of justice brought to her in the past, leaving aside the seriousness of the allegation, or perhaps rumour is a better word, against her" (Barry 184). One can easily imagine Sebastian Barry saying the same about his great-aunt as he tries to amend past injuries through his fiction. In short, Dr. Grene's character allows Barry to mark the limitations and ethical subtleties of his work even as he gives voice to forgotten and silenced women. Therefore, I believe we can, as Tara Harney-Mahajan tentatively suggests, "view *The Secret Scripture* as an effort to invite Irish society to come to terms with its own complicity in the institutionalization of menacing women," which makes it "less transgressive for Barry to have put words in the mouth of one who, in the real world, would never be allowed to speak" (61-62). As the novelist attempts to do justice to the untold story of wrongly incarcerated women, spotlighting an important aspect of recent Irish social history, Barry shows that he is aware that his work risks adding to the trauma of such women. He does not want to co-opt or overshadow the life experiences of survivors, and he constructs his narrative carefully to avoid that outcome.

It is worth underscoring Barry's feminist critique of the treatment of women in twentieth-century Ireland, especially the treatment of those subject to what James M. Smith calls Ireland's "architecture of containment" (xiii). Much as Smith's discussion of the Magdalen laundries "challenges the nation—including church, state, and society—to acknowledge its complicity," Barry's novel holds church, state, and society accountable for the wrongful judgement and incarceration of women like Roseanne in mental institutions (xiii).[8] When scholars let their analysis of *The Secret Scripture* be guided by established critical debates about Sebastian Barry's relationship to Irish political history, they are liable to miss this essential feminist feature of his text. Assiduously trying to parse Barry's views on historiography in relation to the founding of the Irish state, critics like Freiburg and Gülden Hatipoğlu read Roseanne as a symbol of Ireland—and her life history as an allegorical representation of the life of the nation. Freiburg, for instance, identifies Roseanne as "a personification of Ireland," an allegorical figure he calls the "errant Irish lady," who "haunts the history of the nation as an incarnation of the many traumas that Ireland has witnessed throughout the ages" (75). Working in a similar symbolic register, Hatipoğlu sees Roseanne's isolation from her community as a "deliberate parallel" to the Irish Free State's isolationist policies (156-157). However, the allegorical conflation of Roseanne's individual identity and experience with national

[8] That Roseanne, the daughter of Protestants, should be incarcerated in a mental institution on the word of a Catholic priest shows just how influential the clergy were in twentieth-century Ireland. However, as an "inmate" of the mental health system, she is a ward of the state, which implicates Irish political and legal structures in her suffering.

history problematically erases the line between victim and perpetrator. Personifying—and feminizing—Ireland only obscures the state's licensing of the architecture of containment. Furthermore, prioritizing concerns about nationalist or sectarian politics over the gendered sociopolitical issues that cause the bulk of Roseanne's suffering reinforces the political hegemony Barry seeks to undermine in *The Secret Scripture*. In this novel, the stakes have more to do with Roseanne's gender, sexuality, social ostracism, and institutionalization than with the republican or loyalist leanings of any character.[9] Most of Roseanne's hardships derive not from factional politics but from her society's repressive Catholic sexual morality: her marriage is annulled because Fr. Gaunt sees her in the company of another man, and her admission to the mental asylum occurs because she gives birth to a child outside of marriage.[10] As a continuation of Barry's literary interrogation of how history gets made, *The Secret Scripture* pivots from

[9] Roseanne's religious difference plays a significant role here, too, as her refusal to convert to Catholicism upon Fr. Gaunt's recommendation inflames the priest's hostility toward her and her family. Thus, while Barry turns toward women's social history, he also speaks to the experiences of a religious minority in Ireland.

[10] Both of these transgressions against Catholic morality also subvert the image the McNulty family tries to maintain for itself. Roseanne's marriage to Tom McNulty offends his parents because she is from a lower class and different religion. Her pregnancy redoubles their resentment toward her because—by their estimation—she has seduced and contaminated another of their sons, Eneas.

Ireland's political and military history to the nation's social history and the hidden, private lives of marginal individuals.

In keeping with this feminist shift, Barry divests himself of any claim of ultimate authority over the story he tells. Again, he achieves this through the development of his proxy, Dr. Grene. More than McCann's journalist-doppelganger, Dr. Grene abdicates the authority that readers invariably want to attribute to him. Rather than depict his stand-in as a clear-eyed chronicler and stoic diagnostician, Barry portrays Dr. Grene as emotionally conflicted and driven as much by personal motivations as by professional obligations. Although Dr. Grene intends to write "a professional, semi- at any rate, account" of the last days of the dilapidated Roscommon mental hospital, he uses his commonplace book for extended reflections on his own personal issues, including his discomfiting dependence on his patients; his moribund marriage; his grief after the death of his wife, Bet; his experience as an adopted child; and his adoptive family's tragic history (Barry 47). Although these thoughts have little direct bearing on Dr. Grene's work as a psychiatrist, his self-assessment does allow him to better understand how his emotional needs affect his professional performance at the mental hospital. For instance, Dr. Grene berates himself for "feeling fatherly towards [his] patients, even motherly," and he realizes that, because his relationship with Bet failed due to his own infidelity, his work at the institution bolsters his own mental and emotional well-being (Barry 44). His occupation allows him to be "sinless, unaccused, even, on a daily basis (wretched need), redeemed" (Barry 44). In such moments, I argue, we cannot justifiably read Dr. Grene simply as a neutral, dispassionate scientific type who hovers over his charges and documents efficient factual reports about them. Furthermore, with Dr. Grene as his

fictional proxy, Barry undercuts his own authority. Since readers cannot rely on Dr. Grene to be even-tempered and objective, neither should they assume that the novelist is wholly neutral, dispassionate, or authoritative.

Indeed, in the midst of his own miseries, Dr. Grene questions his basic capacity to carry out his professional duties and recalibrates his expectations of what he can do for his favorite patient, Roseanne. Dr. Grene's writing in his commonplace book, like Roseanne in her testimony, delves into the most emotionally burdensome corners of his memory. His ruminations over his adoptive mother's suicide are particularly affecting. Dr. Grene first recounts his accidental role in the demise of his younger brother, John. The death of his adoptive parents' only biological son devastated his mother's life. Too overwhelmed emotionally to give his mother's grief its full shape via complete sentences, Dr. Grene conveys the effects of his brother's death in fragmented phrases: "Great sorrow. Beyond imagining. Her deepest heart destroyed" (Barry 182). Dr. Grene probes such painful memories because he finds that the act of writing has inexplicably salubrious effects. He notes that "keeping this book has somehow helped me, but how I can't say. It is hardly a therapy. But it is at least a sign of ongoing inner life. Or so I hope and pray" (Barry 89). He returns to this balm in his darkest hour, following the death of his wife, Bet, as he begins to record the "many strange fruits in the cornucopia of grief" (Barry 113). He reminds himself, though, that he "did not mean to write anything about [himself] here" and that what he "meant to write about was Roseanne"—but the gravity of his own sorrow and regret draws him back into self-reflection, and self-pity, time and time again (Barry 117). This is, he admits, "the pattern of the recent weeks"; he focuses half-heartedly on Roseanne and figuring out the truth of her past but always lapses into

other, more personal musings (Barry 118). Sitting silently with Roseanne, in whose presence "the poison of grief is briefly lessened," Dr. Grene feels the folly of his position: "Assess her. It suddenly seemed so absurd I laughed out loud. The only person's sanity in doubt in that room was my own" (Barry 120, 169). Grief, ever powerful, inhibits Dr. Grene's ability to fulfill his duties as a psychiatrist. As a result, he adjusts his priorities in accordance with his own self-assessment, saying, "As I do not seem able much to heal, then maybe I can simply be a responsible witness to the miracle of the ordinary soul" (Barry 281).

However, in his efforts to bear witness to Roseanne's life and loss, Dr. Grene also registers the unreliability of his analytic methods. He questions Roseanne, examines disintegrating archival documents, assesses the relative merits of each source—and still arrives at skewed or inconclusive endpoints. Three major impediments block Dr. Grene's path toward his patient's "true history": Roseanne's reticence and faulty memory, the biased moralism of Fr. Gaunt's deposition, and Dr. Grene's susceptibility to unquestioningly accepting the veracity of official records (Barry 121). Although critics dwell on Roseanne's traumatic memory, I insist that readers must examine Fr. Gaunt's moral anxieties and Dr. Grene's lack of objectivity with the same level of critical scrutiny.

Indeed, I contend that too few interpretations of *The Secret Scripture* adequately acknowledge Dr. Grene's wavering postulations or assess his diagnostic judgement. Critics generally follow the psychiatrist's assessment of his patient in their readings of Roseanne's symptoms of trauma without questioning his reliability. At first, Dr. Grene hypothesizes that his patient "was not psychotic, but that her memory too [like the

hospital's records] had suffered the silverfish of age" and that "she was being cagey because she feared [him], or was even perhaps in dread of speaking in case it led her back to things she would rather forget" (Barry 121). Near the novel's conclusion, when Dr. Grene reads Roseanne's manuscript and compares it with Fr. Gaunt's deposition, he suggests either that she suffers from "post-traumatic stress" or, alternatively, that his "first inclination to identify her memory as a traumatic one, with details transposed and corrupted, and the ages changed, was even if unlikely, actually too simple" (Barry 279, 280). He proposes instead that perhaps "Roseanne's 'sins' as a self-historian are 'sins of omission'" (Barry 280). Despite his inconclusive assessment of Roseanne's psychological state, Dr. Grene knows he cannot expect to obtain a full factual account of the past from her.

Given how unforthcoming Roseanne is when Dr. Grene first interrogates her, the discovery of Fr. Gaunt's deposition in the official archive constitutes a welcome development in the psychiatrist's investigation. Dr. Grene latches onto the authoritative impress of bureaucratic documentation initially. However, Barry soon calls into question the advisability of trusting the official record in Roseanne's case, given the document's evident bias. He extends a word of warning to those who would look to formal records to rectify the logical inconsistencies and apparent elisions in Roseanne's account as Dr. Grene cautions, "The written word assumes authority but it may not have it. I must not necessarily let her silence be filled with this, although it is a great temptation, because it is a shortcut, or a way around" (Barry 135). Barry depicts the institutional archive as ill-managed and incomplete, but more importantly, he suggests that the records may be falsified from the start when drafted by someone as subjective and self-righteous as Fr.

Gaunt. Dr. Grene recognizes the deposition's author as a familiar, menacing public figure, "the man who became auxiliary bishop of Dublin in the fifties and sixties," and whom the psychiatrist recalls as a "man who in his every utterance seemed to long for the banishment of women behind the front doors of their homes, and the elevation of manhood into a condition of sublime chastity and sporting prowess" (Barry 136). As a young curate, Fr. Gaunt viewed Roseanne as a threat—for her unwillingness to convert to Catholicism, but even more so for her sexuality—and he vilifies her and her family as a result.[11] Moral indignation and fury fuel his account. In Dr. Grene's assessment, the deposition "betrays at every stroke an intense hatred if not of women, then of the sexuality of women, or sexuality in general" (Barry 230). And yet, despite the priest's decided prejudice against Roseanne, her family, her religion, and her sexuality, Dr. Grene generally accepts the man's word.

The authoritative voice and sophisticated style of Fr. Gaunt's writing works like a spell to enchant learned readers like Dr. Grene. The psychiatrist admits his own inclination to believe the priest's erudite prose, saying, "The more I look at Fr Gaunt's deposition, the more I seem to believe it. It is because he writes well in a sort of classical way, no doubt taking his syntax and his skills from his training in Maynooth. He has a

[11] Fr. Gaunt lays heavy charges against Roseanne, her mother, and her father at various points: he accuses Roseanne of "pernicious and chronic nymphomania," her mother of "madness," and her father of drinking irresponsibly (Barry 224, 151). Although Roseanne's testimony confirms that her mother, Cissy, suffers mental illness, the other two accusations bear little resemblance to the family's history as Roseanne recounts it.

very Latinate style it seems to me, of the kind I remember distantly from struggling with Cicero at school in Cornwall" (Barry 150-151). Refined but forceful, Fr. Gaunt's perspective carries behind it all the heft of the Irish Catholic Church and its educational system. Roseanne's account, on the other hand, cannot hope to compete with the curate's scholarly persuasive rhetoric; she was forced to leave school at the age of sixteen to provide for her household after her father's death (Barry 92-93). Caught betwixt the two versions of Roseanne's past as he tries to arrive at the actual history, Dr. Grene occasionally falls back uncritically on narrative details from Fr. Gaunt's account, and his affinity for the priest's linguistic style helps explain why.

When we examine Dr. Grene's explication of Fr. Gaunt's account, however, cracks appear in the priest's credibility despite his authoritative tone. As Dr. Grene studies the full deposition—even before he obtains Roseanne's testimony of her life as a point of comparison—he expresses doubts about the factual accuracy of certain aspects of the priest's narrative. For instance, when Dr. Grene reviews Fr. Gaunt's version of the events at the Sligo graveyard, in which the priest alleges that young Roseanne sees a stash of guns being buried and reports it to her father, he ponders: "How Fr Gaunt knew all these details is not clear, and indeed as I read it over now I am puzzled by his omniscience, but then that was the ambition of a priest in his time" (Barry 152). As Dr. Grene explains away the clergyman's apparent omniscience, he alludes to the magnitude of the clergy's largely unquestioned social clout in twentieth-century Ireland. The simple fact that a Catholic priest provides the chief evidence for the sectioning of a young woman who is not of his congregation—who indeed refuses to convert to Catholicism when he advises her to do so—demonstrates the far-reaching implications of that power

(Barry 94-96). And the priest's power of influence retains some of its force decades later as Dr. Grene writes in his commonplace book in Roscommon, nearly a decade into the twenty-first century.

Dr. Grene's response to the conflicting accounts of Roseanne's experiences in the Sligo cemetery shows how little the psychiatrist questions Fr. Gaunt's authority over the woman's life story, even when he identifies details of the deposition that strike him as suspicious. Fr. Gaunt's only reference to the Sligo graveyard describes an incident in which Roseanne, as a child, "witnessed a strange burial" (Barry 152). According to the priest, Roseanne sees some men burying a coffin "quite without priest or ceremony" and tells her father about this curious sight, which leads to the revelation that the coffin contains a stash of guns hidden by Irish republicans (Barry 152). As Dr. Grene summarizes Fr. Gaunt's account, he registers key details that puzzle him. For instance, he doubts that militants would be as careless as Fr. Gaunt's story suggests, noting: "Unbelievably, the men had also buried with the guns notes of secret meetings, including, by some foolish miracle, various names and addresses, including certain individuals wanted for murder" (Barry 152). Dr. Grene signals his skepticism with words like "Unbelievably" and "by some foolish miracle" but nevertheless accepts Fr. Gaunt's version of the event as factual and accurate.

In doing so, Dr. Grene fails to mention that references to the Sligo cemetery in Roseanne's account differ significantly from Fr. Gaunt's. Her testimony features the illicit burial of a young man killed by Free State soldiers during the Irish Civil War rather than the discovery of a stash of arms (Barry 50). She tells of Anti-Treaty combatants bringing the corpse of the young man to her father—in his capacity as the

"superintendent of the graveyard"—to bury in secret (Barry 5). Although Roseanne clearly describes Fr. Gaunt's participation in that night's events (because the dead man's brother requested a priest to perform Catholic funeral rites), Fr. Gaunt makes no reference to it in his deposition.[12] However, both accounts of the Sligo graveyard mention Willie Lavelle: Roseanne identifies the dead boy as Willie Lavelle and Fr. Gaunt names him as the man "killed 'evading capture'" during the police round-up of those named in the unearthed "notes of secret meetings" (Barry 38, 152-153). In this regard, too, Dr. Grene once again flags cause for doubt. He writes: "For some reason this man Willie Lavelle was buried in the very grave where the guns had been so futilely hidden" (Barry 153). Even though Dr. Grene reads both versions—Roseanne's testimony and Fr. Gaunt's deposition—he only remarks that the priest's description of Willie Lavelle's burial seems peculiarly convenient. He makes no effort to ascertain whether Roseanne's account might give the lie to this odd detail. Again and again, the psychiatrist suggests that the curate's narrative may be too tidy and all-knowing, but he continues to rely on the deposition as the official historical source of information justifying Roseanne's incarceration. Fr. Gaunt's deposition strikes Dr. Grene as "clerical, thorough, and convincing" overall

[12] The Irish Catholic Church prohibited clergy from performing full funeral rites for combatants who opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which established the Irish Free State. This edict makes Fr. Gaunt's absolution and the intended burial of Willie Lavelle transgressive in the eyes of Free State soldiers and the church hierarchy (Barry 51-52). Thus, Fr. Gaunt—not wanting to implicate himself—may omit or alter the story to his benefit.

(Barry 230). Despite his own warning that we "must not necessarily let [Roseanne's] silence be filled with this," Dr. Grene accedes to Fr. Gaunt's authority as he seeks the truth about his patient's early life (Barry 135).[13] As this close reading of the contradictory accounts shows, Dr. Grene consistently privileges the official record even when he has Roseanne's written testimony in hand.

The psychiatrist's deference toward Fr. Gaunt is most patently obvious in his and his colleague's response to the priest's most inflammatory accusation against Roseanne. The deposition falsely states that, having borne a child out of wedlock, Roseanne "kills it" (Barry 231). This claim is roundly disproved in the course of *The Secret Scripture*,

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[13] There are similar questions to be asked about who Joseph Brady really is in *The Secret Scripture*. Is he, as Roseanne attests, the man Fr. Gaunt encouraged Roseanne to marry when she was only sixteen, the man who—having been rejected by Roseanne—later tries to rape her (Barry 94, 105)? Or is he only, as Fr. Gaunt would have it, the "newly cut name on the gravestone" where the rebels buried guns, though "no one of that name had died in the town" (Barry 152)? Dr. Grene ponders this mystery late in the novel as he tries to reconcile the two accounts (Barry 279). However, Barry's narrative proposes yet another alternative when Dr. Grene's colleague, Percy Quinn, shares an internal report from the Sligo asylum. The report documents a complaint filed against a man named Brady, accusing him of "molesting [Roseanne] over quite a long period" (Barry 272). Dr. Grene fails to notice this potential connection to Joe Brady, and Barry leaves readers unable to parse who exactly Joe Brady is or what role he played in Roseanne's life.

which reveals that Roseanne's child was taken from her in a forced adoption. Yet, consultation between Dr. Grene and his colleague in Sligo, Percy Quinn, results in a very forgiving reading of the priest's lie. Quinn waves away the misogyny and virulent antagonism of Fr. Gaunt's allegation: "I am searching in my mind for an interpretation of his words. I can only conclude that he meant killed it spiritually. In those days of course the illegitimate child was thought to carry the sin of the mother. This may have been what our enterprising cleric meant. Let us be generous in retrospect" (Barry 271). Such generosity is rarely—if ever—accorded to Roseanne. Dr. Grene pays lip service toward equal treatment of Roseanne's testimony and Fr. Gaunt's deposition when he says, "Nevertheless I must conclude that to a large degree, both Roseanne and Fr Gaunt were being as truthful as they could be, given the vagaries and tricks of the human mind" (Barry 280). However, his fallback position is still to discount Roseanne's traumatic account as factually incorrect while believing Fr. Gaunt's flawed deposition to be generally accurate. Having quietly undermined Dr. Grene's analytical perspective in this way, Barry leaves it to readers to determine for themselves the relative merits and demerits of Roseanne's first-person testimony and Fr. Gaunt's archived deposition. He refuses to satisfy readers' desire for closure, forcing us to confront the flawed nature of both recorded history and traumatic memory. Roseanne's past remains largely unknowable.

Barry insists upon the fallibility of non-traumatic memory, too, in his portrayal of Dr. Grene. The psychiatrist deliberately notes an error he makes in his transcription of Fr. Gaunt's tale, where he includes a detail about feathers that he later discovers was not actually in the priest's story—though it does appear in Roseanne's. He realizes that,

"[f]or some reason, in the gap between reading his account and summarising, my brain must have supplied this detail, stealing it from Roseanne I would like to think, except at that point of course *I hadn't read her account*" (Barry 279-280). As Dr. Grene tries to rationalize his slip, Barry sketches the process by which false memories form. Dr. Grene speculates that perhaps "years and years ago [Roseanne] told me about the hammers and feathers as an anecdote, and I simply forgot all about it," but he immediately sees his own attempt to overcompensate for the error, adding, "And indeed, even as I posit this, even as I 'invent' it, I actually seem to have a vague memory of it. Disastrous!" (Barry 280). With this exclamation, Dr. Grene definitively shatters the image critics and readers apply to him. Simply put, he cannot stand as a simple paragon of scientific objectivity. The psychiatrist is too wrapped up in his own grief, too easily persuaded by the official record (and by Fr. Gaunt's erudition), and too prone to his own errors in memory to escape critical examination. Barry's depiction of Dr. Grene ultimately suggests that those to whom we attribute unerring mental acuity and detached rationality, such as this psychiatrist, will always have their own foibles to contend with. Such individuals are always already imbricated in the hegemonic power structure. By extrapolation, we can infer that Barry cannot—and will not—claim objectivity or expertise over his subject either. He crafts Dr. Grene in such a way that he exposes such a standpoint to be untenable.

What *The Secret Scripture* offers instead is a radical feminist reckoning with history. Barry undermines every potential historical source in the novel, requiring that readers accept that some details of Roseanne's past remain irretrievable or indecipherable. Although many critics seek to clarify the ambiguities that shroud the

woman's hidden history, I maintain that their conclusions misconstrue Barry's purpose. They assume *The Secret Scripture* contains an accurate rendering of Roseanne's past despite Barry's insistence that our knowledge of Roseanne's life can only ever be provisional and partial. To borrow Dr. Grene's words, readers should be aware that "[t]he one thing that is fatal in the reading of impromptu history is a wrongful desire for accuracy" (Barry 279). Too often, a "wrongful desire for accuracy" results in readers dismissing Roseanne's version due to her PTSD symptoms, blindly accepting Fr. Gaunt's version of the story, or placing undue faith in Dr. Grene's analytical abilities. Instead, Barry asks readers to learn to live with the ambiguity. He promotes the excavation of the past by Roseanne and Dr. Grene as they bear witness to the woman's silenced experiences, but he cautions that the characters' findings remain riddled with potential inaccuracies. Even as both narrators strive for factual precision, *The Secret Scripture* implies that the novel's real power lies in Roseanne's effort to narrate her story, in the psychiatrist's attempt to understand her, and in the reader's thoughtful engagement with social issues in need of redress.

A paradox at the heart of *The Secret Scripture* emerges if we return to the ethical complexities of a male author engaging with women's insidious vulnerability to trauma. Barry's skeptical view of official history and his doubts about whether he has the right to tell this disadvantaged woman's story converge in such a way that no one can claim authority, not even Roseanne. As she astutely observes, "Friend or enemy, no one has the monopoly on truth. Not even myself, and that is also a vexing and worrying thought" (Barry 127-128). On the one hand, Barry offers a realistic portrayal of how a patriarchal society denies women control over their own stories. But on the other hand, Roseanne's

sense of dispossession with regard to "truth" undermines my earlier hypothesis that Barry seeks to empower Roseanne by having her narrate her life experiences. Thus, my close reading of *The Secret Scripture* generates a new, more nuanced theory—that Barry's overarching mission may lie at cross-purposes with Roseanne's effort to "be the author [of herself]" (Barry 3). In keeping with my interpretation of Dr. Grene as the novelist's proxy, I posit that *The Secret Scripture*'s ending provides the key to unlocking Barry's principal goal for the work. In the novel's denouement, Dr. Grene's search for information regarding Roseanne's child leads to him viewing his own birth certificate and adoption papers, which reveal that Roseanne is his biological mother. As Harney-Mahajan reports, this surprise ending has been "widely criticized as melodramatic and implausible" (55).[14] But Harney-Mahajan notes, too, that "Barry himself has consistently defended the plot twist" (55). I want to propose here in closing that the relationship between Dr. Grene and Sebastian Barry I have outlined in this discussion of *The Secret Scripture* provides a compelling explanation for the novel's seemingly far-fetched

[14] When Barry's *The Secret Scripture* won the Costa Prize in 2009, the judges made their dissatisfaction with the novel's ending abundantly clear. The panel's chair, Matthew Parris, stated that the judges "agreed that [*The Secret Scripture*] was flawed, and almost no one liked the ending, which was almost fatal to its success" (Higgins). Additionally, Parris disclosed the heated debate and internal division amongst the panelists, noting that only "seven or eight" of the nine judges were content with their final selection; as Charlotte Higgins reported for *The Guardian* at the time, "It is almost unheard of for a literary judging panel to acknowledge a split of this kind."

conclusion. If Dr. Grene stands as the author's proxy and Roseanne loosely represents Barry's great-aunt, then the characters' mother-son relationship establishes a connection between Barry and his great-aunt. The decision to link Roseanne and Dr. Grene so closely in the novel's conclusion signals Barry's symbolic reclamation of Roseanne and women like her, including his great-aunt. Thus, Barry asserts kinship, affiliation with the lost women of Irish social history. In the end, then, *The Secret Scripture* might be more about Barry's relationship to Roseanne's story than it is about Roseanne's female voice, which falls quiet after she finishes writing her testimony.[15] This possibility returns us to Anne Enright's contention that we should not assume that "women are somehow present when men . . . have them as characters in their books." Like Doyle and McCann before him, Barry constructs a moving imaginative representation of women's grief and trauma, but he does not share Roseanne's gendered insidious vulnerability. He acknowledges—but cannot escape—his implication in the patriarchal hegemony.

3.2 EIMEAR MCBRIDE'S *A GIRL IS A HALF-FORMED THING* (2013)

So, what happens when women speak for women? What do women have to say about gendered vulnerability to trauma and grief? Or, as Enright puts it, "what disaster awaits when you let in women's actual voices (screaming through the sky, lunatic)"?

[15] After Dr. Grene obtains Roseanne's written testimony, her narrative effectively ends. From then on, readers only learn of her ongoing life through Dr. Grene's reports of his interactions with her.

What you get—as Enright argues and as this chapter shows—is a litany of exceptional literary works, in which Irish women writers "aren't shy and unassuming (unless they are), nor are they screaming through the air, lunatic (unless they want to be)." Novelists like Eimear McBride—as well as Emma Donoghue and Edna O'Brien before her—disrupt heteronormative and patriarchal narratives with their representations of women's insidious vulnerability to trauma and grief. In Donoghue's *Hood* (1995), O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1996), and McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), female characters' lives run up against the limits of language, revealing where language renders certain forms of female trauma and grief literally unspeakable. However, by deconstructing language in their fiction, Donoghue, O'Brien, and McBride test and invent new ways of articulating women's experiences.

Their protagonists struggle to break the silence to communicate the pain they suffer, with varying degrees of success. In *Hood*, Pen uses conventional, heteronormative terminology for bereavement when her same-sex partner dies, despite her sense that words like "widow" do not perfectly suit her circumstances. She expresses frustration, too, at the paucity of language, which cannot adequately convey the depth and complexity of her loss. Young Mary McNamara in *Down by the River*, on the other hand, lacks the self-possession displayed by Pen; as a girl of fourteen and victim of incest, Mary has fewer defenses against the determinate nature of the language used against her. Unlike Pen, who tries to fit her experiences within the diction of the dominant ideology, Mary finds its language forced upon her as she is labeled a "slut" in public discourse (O'Brien 186). Thus, while Donoghue's Pen uses language as a private salve for her grief, O'Brien's Mary reveals how little control women in Ireland have over what parts of

their life are private or public. Furthermore, O'Brien shows that women's experiences of suffering and transgression make their potential use of language a double-edged sword: Mary wants her story of incestuous rape to be known, but she fears having to articulate it publicly. Mary can find no listener who is willing and sympathetic enough for her to speak of her experiences directly, but she suffers the humiliating distress of hearing others pontificate about her unwanted pregnancy in vicious terms on the radio (O'Brien 186). In Ireland in the 1990s, O'Brien suggests, society wields language as a weapon to contain or punish those who disrupt the prevailing patriarchal, Catholic, and nationalist ideology (Conrad 4). Subsequently, McBride fuses Donoghue's ambivalent reworking of patriarchal language with O'Brien's perspective of language as a persistent threat to women. In its modernist narrative style, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* registers the violence language inflicts on the unnamed protagonist even as it fractures language and remakes it in the image of the half-formed girl, who is herself broken by grief and traumatic events. However, McBride's novel exhibits rawer grief and fiercer fury than its predecessors. Indeed, I argue that her character's fragmented language reveals as much about the girl's anticipation of her brother's death as it does about her sexuality. In each of these works, women's insidious vulnerability to grief and trauma is always already entangled with their alienation from language. However, while Donoghue and O'Brien register this insight primarily through the content of their novels, McBride represents it formally in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* through her narrator's stream of consciousness.

In Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1995), language features as a fundamental problem for those who grieve, especially for women like Pen O'Grady, who mourns for her

partner, Cara Wall. The two had been involved romantically for thirteen years, since they became "sort-of-girlfriends" in their schoolgirl days (Donoghue 41). After Cara dies suddenly in a car crash, Pen spends the ensuing week struggling with the lack of vocabulary available to her as a gay woman in Dublin in 1992.[16] Where *The Secret Scripture* establishes a tension between the unknowability of Roseanne's past and the still-commendable efforts of those who try to come to grips with the reality of her life experiences, Pen experiences a tension between the ill-fitting nature of conventional terms of bereavement and her desire for the comfort that comes from having one's loss recognized and named. While Antoinette Quinn is right to say that *Hood* "places lesbian mourning in a continuum of human suffering without ever denying the particular stresses of being homosexual in a heterosexually dominated society," I would extend her claim by emphasizing that Donoghue spotlights the specifically linguistic difficulties associated with Pen's mourning and her sexuality—and the intersection of the two (154). Pen scoffs at the euphemistic inanities that circulate following a death, such as her own trite phrase, "Something's come up"; she notes how "alien" Cara's gay and feminist diction is to her straight sister, Kate; and she wonders what language society would permit her if she were to commission a memorial for her deceased girlfriend, thinking, "What would the plaque say – best wishes to my beloved housemate, friend, schoolmate, pal? Which words would I be allowed?" (Donoghue 38, 56, 134). Pen's closeted lifestyle gives her many occasions

[16] Male homosexuality was not decriminalized in Ireland until 1993. Neither Irish society nor its laws recognized the existence of women's same-sex relationships at the time of Pen's loss.

to consider how to describe her partner covertly, but in the wake of Cara's death, these terms feel too shallow, too trivializing, to define the depth of her love. Language proves inadequate to the overwhelming grief Pen experiences, and the relative invisibility of gay women in Ireland in the early 1990s renders her loss indecipherable to most of her family and friends. Pen considers, for instance, the cards that Cara's relatives send to the Wall household and finds that they do not appropriately commemorate the woman she knew: "What would a non-religious lesbian sympathy card be like, I wondered?" (Donoghue 171) The cards' familiar words of solace strike Pen as "rather official" and fail to address the nature of her own particular form of bereavement (Donoghue 171).

In part, Pen recognizes that her society does not have language sufficient to the task of articulating loss of this magnitude. Death is too big a concept for polite conversation to countenance. Language tries to confine the immense, wild emotions of grief into narrow parameters, but the paucity of the vocabulary of mourning cannot match the complicated nature of lived experience. Still, certain terms, especially the word "widow," give Pen a way to orient herself, a way to understand the role she now occupies. At first, the term startles Pen, perhaps because she never imagined applying it to herself: "That's me, I thought, disconcerted: the grieving widow" (Donoghue 53). When Cara's sister, Kate, describes Pen as seeming "widowed," and Pen's work friend, Robbie, guesses that "it must be like when a husband or wife dies. Only less… official," the concept begins to take on a different, more comforting, shape (Donoghue 150, 182). And yet, even this traditional terminology falls far short of Pen's experience—as does the conventional wisdom to be found in the book Robbie gives Pen, titled, *Finding Yourself on Your Own: A Guide for the Widowed*. When Pen reviews the stages of grief outlined

in the self-help book, she berates herself for "getting the stages all wrong," but she insists on the validity of her response to tragic loss, saying, "Damn the experts and their stages and their emotional clocks; this thing was such a mess, no one could impose order on it" (Donoghue 223-224). For Pen, the mess is only partly caused by the anomalous nature of her love; much of the mess comes from the nature of grief itself—and the way that society suppresses discussion of grief in our everyday lives. Pen marvels at the universal nature of this overwhelming, inescapable life experience while standing on Grafton Street in Dublin's city center: "It came into my head that everyone on this street had either gone through a loss more or less equivalent to mine, or would do by the end of their life. Some would have it easier, some worse, some over and over"; she imagines what it would be like to get everyone to sit down to discuss how death affects them personally, and muses that "[i]t made no sense for us to be talking about anything else" (Donoghue 287-288). In her bereavement, Pen feels that language should be solely dedicated to the communication of grief, but she understands that death looms so large that it intimidates people from speaking at all. Conversations about loss prove to be both necessary and inordinately difficult. Consequently grief remains largely unspoken and invisible, unrecognized in its full capacity.

Hemmed in by language and its limited ability to account for her sexuality or her grief, Pen begins to find new means of articulation to suit her own lived experience of love and loss. This linguistic campaign is something of an amalgam, deriving partly from her own inventiveness and partly from the words chosen by people she respects. Pen begins with the phrasing she chooses for Cara's obituary, which concludes, "*Deeply regretted… by her family circle*" (Donoghue 45). Pen glosses this wording, saying, "That

was my phrase, one that could include me by some stretch of the imagination; 'circle' sounded too symmetrical, but it would have to do" (Donoghue 45). Thus, the published death notice surreptitiously alludes to Pen's relationship with Cara, but the words still seem too tidy to contain the jumbled, asymmetrical nature of Cara's world. Additionally, the coded phrasing, "family circle," remains legible only to Pen.

Yet, oblique language like this acquires new meaning when it comes from Cara's father, Mr. Wall, who finally reveals that he knows the nature of Pen and Cara's relationship. All three lived in the same household for years, but Mr. Wall only alludes to the intimacy of the women's relationship after his daughter's death. Late in the novel, he invites Pen to remain in the house because he considers her to be "[l]ike a daughter," his "daughter's friend" (Donoghue 278, 282). At first, Pen does not catch Mr. Wall's meaning, but upon reflection, she deciphers his phrasing and captures the veiled message it contains: "*My daughter's friend*. He had practically capitalized it. He didn't mean palsy-walsy friend, schoolfriend, housemate. He meant friend – in the way his generation used it, as a polite euphemism for all the subtle non-marital relationships they didn't want to pry into. He knew. The little bastard knew all along!" (Donoghue 282). Pen's delayed realization that her lover's father quietly—almost tacitly—acknowledges the gay relationship she shared with Cara brings her joy. By accepting Pen and Cara's love, Mr. Wall recognizes and validates Pen's grief. His diction is, to her, antiquated and indirect, but it suffices to articulate his approval of their relationship. He affirms a familial kinship between himself and Pen in words that are as coded and discreet as her own euphemistic, closeted terms for her relationship—but she understands him nonetheless. In small moments like these, Pen manages to communicate with a rare interlocutor who

understands her romantic attachment and her loss. Pen and Mr. Wall strain language so as not to embarrass or cause tension. Yet, their dialogue conveys more than the meager words traditionally signify because their long-established rapport with each other allows them to decode the underlying sentiment of what is said. This form of communication works most effectively between those who share mutual trust, mutual regard, and mutual respect, as Pen and Mr. Wall do. Thus, in Emma Donoghue's *Hood*, language is only redeemed when individuals subvert conventional meanings of words or wrest greater depth and meaning from superficial, euphemistic terms.

If Pen in *Hood* concedes that her heteronormative society only affords her coded phrasing and the terminology of straight, monogamous relationships and nuclear family ties to describe her gay relationship and her grief, Mary McNamara in Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1996) uses similarly cryptic language in private modes of communication to reveal the darkest detail of her teenage pregnancy—that the pregnancy is the result of incestuous rape.[17] Having been assaulted and impregnated by her father, James, the fourteen-year-old girl confides the truth in modes of writing that are meant to be private but end up being disclosed without her permission.[18] The letter she writes to

[17] *Down by the River* is famously based on the 1992 X Case in Ireland, although O'Brien alters some details in the fictionalization.

[18] The exposure of private writing—letters, diaries, etc.—resonates with my reading of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*, in which Portia Quayne's diary is read without her permission. We might also see a connection to Roseanne in Sebastian

Luke, a young man who gives her shelter when she runs away to Galway, admits not only that she is "going to be a mother" but also states, "The person whose it is is the last person's it should be. I would rather not say, ever" (O'Brien 98). Yet, once she writes the letter, she relinquishes control over its contents. As Mary leaves the note with Luke's friend, O'Brien suggests how casually it may be handled: Mary-Lou "takes it, looks at it, then tosses it onto a nearby chair" (101). When the guards interrogate Luke, suspecting him of getting Mary "in the family way," he clears his name by leading the police to Mary's letter (O'Brien 176). On the one hand, this breach of the implied confidentiality of personal correspondence haunts Luke as he sheds tears over "what he did by letting them read the girl's letter, and in the doing sullied himself" (O'Brien 177). Yet, on the other hand, Luke's exoneration compels the guards to continue their search for the actual culprit. Without definitively saying whose baby it is, Mary's letter leads the investigators closer to the truth—and closer to her father's door.

However, it is Mary's interaction with her neighbor, Betty Crowe, that eventually confirms for local officials and state representatives that James McNamara is indeed to blame. When Mary seeks assistance in traveling to England for an abortion,[19] she alludes

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Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, who manages to articulate in writing what she cannot communicate in speech.

[19] The Irish Constitution prohibits abortion in Ireland. In the 1992 X Case, the state used the constitutional ban to prevent a fourteen-year-old girl from traveling to England to obtain an abortion. In response to the X Case, however, Irish voters approved two constitutional amendments by referendum: to allow women to travel to states where

to the fetus's incestuous parentage in order to steel Betty's resolve. Mary cannot bring herself to articulate this secret explicitly, though, so she says, "It wouldn't be a right baby anyway… It would be a freak" (O'Brien 125). She also hints that her home is the scene of the crime, confessing, "I didn't go to the disco that night… Tara is a witness… I was sick, I had bruises" (O'Brien 126). Despite Mary's indirect admissions, Betty deciphers the girl's words—"I think I know what you're saying"—and agrees to help her (O'Brien 126). Yet, when the call comes to them in London to warn them to return home before the procedure can take place, Betty quails under the crushing pressure of Irish laws and mores. Facing criminal repercussions, she forces Mary back onto the plane, feeling (like Luke) that she has failed the girl. Betty is so defeated by the social rebuke she receives for assisting Mary's flight that she is slow to produce the evidence that clinches James McNamara's fate. Whether by design or by happenstance, Mary's diary falls into Betty's hands following their return to Irish soil, but only after a delay does Betty share the revealing text with Mary's legal team (O'Brien 221). As with her letter to Luke, Mary's private writing becomes a public document without her consent; yet, once again, her coded words increase others' suspicion that her father is responsible for her pregnancy. The diary states, "my father gone to bed early, drugged himself with tablets because of his loneliness and trying, I think, trying I think, not to harm me but the harm is done" (O'Brien 220-221). When tallied up with the other evidence incriminating McNamara,

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abortions are legally obtainable and to ensure women's right to information about services available outside of Ireland.

Mary's words tip the scales of justice against her father, and her diary transforms into a public exhibition of his guilt.

In a sense, then, Mary—like Pen in Donoghue's *Hood*—participates in the subversion of language as her letter and diary, two forms of writing society regards as private, erupt into the public sphere. Yet, Mary's agency in this disruption of social norms is far from certain; *Down by the River* never suggests that Mary intends for these documents to become public. Indeed, O'Brien's implies instead that Mary is lucky that her written words have the power they do in the patriarchal, moralistic society of Ireland at the time. Otherwise, Mary generally experiences language as oppressive as it excludes her or condemns her to narrow stereotypes. After her father rapes her, language fails to signify for Mary; it does not function for her as it does for others. Instead, when Mary's pregnancy becomes known amongst her neighbors, her community, and the Irish nation at large, these constituencies project their own terminology and preconceptions onto the fourteen-year-old girl without her consent or control. She is, by turns, judged to be "a slut," "a human football," "the wee Magdalene," and "the little mite, this little girl" (O'Brien 186-188). O'Brien characterizes Mary as powerless to slough off the weight of the overdetermined words others ascribe to her. Jane Elizabeth Dougherty reinforces this reading with her intertextual analysis of *Down by the River*. Dougherty shows that the novel references a range of ancient and modern texts—including the story of Philomela, the legend of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, Yeats's poems, Joyce's fiction, and O'Brien's own *The Country Girls*—in order to show that "collective ways of knowing… preclude a true understanding of the female experience of sexual assault, an experience that remains 'unspeakable' in O'Brien's novel, in Irish culture, and in the Western literary tradition"

(78). For O'Brien, language is always already the site of transgression against women; as Dougherty argues, "the novel consistently posits that language is *itself* a vehicle of gendered violation" (85). Gendered stereotypes and established, conventional narratives clutter Ireland's discursive space, making it difficult—if not impossible—for victims like Mary to articulate their experiences. In short, *Down by the River* confirms that language is a major contributing cause of women's insidious vulnerability.

Dougherty's argument also helps unpack why giving disempowered women a voice is not sufficient. As I will show, Mary cannot communicate her life's hardships adequately because she lacks a receptive, sympathetic listener. O'Brien's novel concludes with Mary standing onstage in a crowded nightclub, singing to a captivated audience (265). The scene is set for Mary to find her voice and finally purge her dark history through the cathartic medium of music. Yet, Dougherty's reading of the ending reveals that Mary—having miscarried the pregnancy she was not allowed to abort—remains trapped by the oppressive logic of her patriarchal society. Dougherty contends that Mary's song is neither the "transcendent convergence of sundered signifier and signified" nor "an epiphany for Mary" (89-90). Thus, she rejects Ann Norton's interpretation of the lush description of Mary's voice, which "was low and tremulous at first, then it rose and caught, it soared and dipped and soared, a great crimson quiver of sound going up, up to the skies," as a moment of transcendence (O'Brien 265). As the girl's song lifts and soars, bird-like, readers assume Mary's spirits and outlook do likewise. Yet, Dougherty's reassessment of the scene argues that the avian imagery suggests very different power dynamics. Dougherty reads Mary as the Joycean figure of the "bird-girl" and claims that this means that Mary "remains language's object, not its subject, art's cause rather than

its agent" (91). Additionally, examining the last lines of the novel, in which O'Brien writes that Mary's voice serves as an "answer to [the listeners'] own souls' innermost cries," Dougherty convincingly reasons that "the epiphany isn't Mary's, but her audience's" (O'Brien 265; Dougherty 90). The listeners project their own preoccupations onto Mary; they regard the song not as the girl's self-expression but as a balm for their own unarticulated anguish. I would add that as the final paragraph of *Down by the River* shifts its focus from Mary to the crowd it repeats in miniature the pattern of O'Brien's novel as a whole—in which Mary's thoughts and experiences, which are more prevalent in early chapters, get submerged under the overwhelming tide of social and legal opinions approximately halfway through the book.

There is an irony at play here. Mary has little access to determining language's meaning or its power in *Down by the River*, but O'Brien—also a woman—serves as her storyteller, crafting through artistry and language the powerful, meaningful narrative Mary cannot express. However, as Dougherty points out, "O'Brien's tapestry must be woven from the language of patriarchy, including the words of canonical male authors, a discursive vocabulary that represents experiences both produced and silenced by patriarchy" (95-96). Language offers no transcendent escape for Mary. Within the novel, the more that strangers and adversaries fill the space around the girl with the "language of patriarchy," the less readers see of Mary herself. When the protagonist reemerges briefly in the novel's final pages, O'Brien identifies a persistent feature of the girl's difficulty with language, which is the lack of an ideal interlocutor: "She closes her eyes for an instant, thinking how it might be, how unimaginably beautiful it might be, that there would be a someone to whom she could tell it all, all of it, down to the last shred, but that

there would be no need to tell it because it would already be known and that would be love, that is what love is . . .” (261). Mary’s paradoxical wish for someone who would listen to every detail of her experience—but who would comprehend her story without her having to speak a word—reinforces her double burden; she wants desperately for someone to understand her trauma but fears having to utter its truth. Before the girl starts singing, O’Brien describes her as still watching for that someone and writes that Mary “is waiting for the face to materialise, the face that she will sing the words to, sing regardless, a paean of expectancy into the gaudy void” (265). As the novel ends, Mary is still waiting, expectant. For her, the crowded nightclub, “the gaudy void,” cannot serve as adequate witness to the story she has to share. In a sense, then, O’Brien leaves Mary suspended and challenges readers to determine what sort of audience they will be. Will they be part of that “gaudy void,” hearing the girl only as an “answer to their own souls’ innermost cries,” or will they endeavor instead to understand what cannot be articulated in plain language, the pain expressed indirectly in that “great crimson quiver of sound” (265)?

While O’Brien’s *Down by the River* depicts Mary as being cut off from the power of language and in need of a listener, Eimear McBride’s much more recent *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) breaks open language in an effort to articulate female experience from the inside and mandates that readers heed what the unnamed narrator has

to say by positioning them deep within her mind.[20] In many ways, McBride's novel contains several plot elements reminiscent of O'Brien's novel: A Girl is raped by her uncle at the age of thirteen and suffers blistering condemnation for her promiscuous sexuality thereafter. A Girl does not get pregnant like Mary McNamara, but she slips into a self-destructive vortex as she "internalizes the degradation at the hands of her uncle and seeks out numerous casual sexual encounters in which she both takes charge of her sexuality and perversely seeks out the role of victim" (Fogarty 23). This downward cycle, paralleled by the decline and death of A Girl's brother, leads relentlessly to A Girl's inevitable suicide at the end of the novel, cutting short her life and narrative in a jarring rebuttal to O'Brien's more open-ended conclusion. Both texts critique the same target, Ireland's patriarchy, which sexualizes and objectifies adolescent girls at the same time as it punishes them for transgressing against repressive sexual mores—even when the girl is forced into the sexual act, as in the case of rape. However, as Susan Cahill's description of McBride's novel suggests, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* responds to contemporary forms of gendered oppression with more palpable fury than its predecessors:

> [T]he narrative of A Girl remains at a fragmented pre-articulate state, mirroring the ways in which the 'I' of the novel is damaged by the patriarchal and stifling climate she grows up in. . . . [T]he novel reveals the ways in which patriarchal

[20] McBride provides no names for characters or places in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. Therefore, for ease of reference, I follow Susan Cahill in calling the narrator "A Girl."

> religious Ireland refuses the girl expression, so much so that the only revenge is a destruction of language and self. . . . (160)

McBride's fractured language functions both as a representation of how formal modes of language elude the protagonist and as a violent reaction against gendered power structures.

Existing critical work on McBride's debut novel by Cahill, Anne Fogarty, Paige Reynolds, and Gina Wisker already offers significant insights into A Girl's sexual trauma and its aftershocks—identifying, for instance, the causal relationship between her uncle raping her when she is thirteen and her ensuing preference for detached, violent sexual experiences. Cahill argues that *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* offers a radical "intervention against the writing away of the adolescent woman, for the novel forces us to occupy her consciousness and embodied experience in immediate and immersive ways" (161). Fogarty, Reynolds, and Wisker all emphasize the novel's nuanced representation of a victim of sexual abuse, with particular reference to the narrative's innovative linguistic form. Fogarty states that "McBride has invented a wrenching, inventive and darkly compelling language whereby to excavate the affective dimensions of abuse and of female powerlessness," while Reynold's review of *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* explicitly links the work to the formal techniques of high modernism: "McBride cannily resurrects the legacy of modernism to condemn childhood sexual abuse and does so in part by drawing attention to the complexity of that abuse for

victims" (Fogarty 24).[21] Wisker writes about the novel in similar terms but underscores A Girl's liminality; she detects a "parallel between the liminality of the girl's identity, her uncharted life, buffeted between versions of self, and the liminality of language and form, the words and narrative expressed in her head, and the moments before thought and expression" (61). Each of these critics, however, focuses primarily on the intersection of sexuality, language, and female adolescence—with little acknowledgment of how A Girl's anticipatory grief for her brother affects these issues.

I argue that one must consider A Girl's experience of her older brother's precarious health, mental decline, and eventual death in order to understand her relationship to language and sexuality. Therefore, I turn to A Girl's insidious vulnerability to grief as I conclude this chapter—and my dissertation as a whole. This discussion brings us back to issues first raised in my chapter on Elizabeth Bowen, about girls who grieve and the near invisibility—or in this case near unspeakability—of their emotional burden, but it also resonates with Doyle's portrayal of Paula Spencer and Barry's of Roseanne as it explores the complicating factors that exacerbate insidious trauma. In part, I seek to rebalance the critical discourse around *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* to contribute to a fuller reflection of A Girl's complex psychology. Her thoughts and emotions are significantly affected by her relationship to her brother and his brain cancer, which shape her world from before her birth,[22] and not solely by the abuse and

[21] Reynolds's review draws on her 2014 ACIS-CAIS plenary address, and it informs her forthcoming contribution to *Modernism and Close Reading*.

[22] A Girl narrates the first chapter in utero.

rape she suffers. Thus far, however, critical discussions of the brother tend to be severed from A Girl's experience of sexuality, language, and trauma. Claire Lynch, for instance, sets aside the novel's protagonist in order to examine how videogames offer the brother "solace, distraction and even digital immortality" to mitigate his awareness of his body's vulnerability (126). Meanwhile, Cahill mentions in passing that "the love felt for [A Girl's] brother is one of the (perhaps the only) positive emotional affects of the novel" (159). When we consider A Girl and her brother together, the sibling relationship does indeed feature as the one redeeming aspect of A Girl's life—even though they come into conflict over her sexual pursuits in school. Yet, the brother's death also serves as the catalyst for A Girl's suicide. Fogarty, too, touches briefly on the sibling relationship to read the brother as an extension of A Girl, noting the tight intertwining of the two young lives. The brother is, according to Fogarty, "a lost twin and an alter ego" for A Girl; she is the "Mary Magdalene to his Jesus" until he dies, at which time he becomes "a kind of succubus luring her to her death" (23-24). My reading builds on this understanding of the siblings' close-knit relationship, but it delves deeper into the ways that the anticipation of losing her brother haunts A Girl from early childhood, rupturing family dynamics, infecting social relationships, and troubling her mental and emotional development. This close examination of the brother's role emphasizes that A Girl's fear of losing her sibling feeds into her engagement in sexual acts, which she uses to ward off the full emotional truth of her brother's disabilities and deterioration, and it shows that McBride is as candid about illness and dying as she is about sexuality and violence. In *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, grief and sexuality remain closely linked, and I aim to shed light on the former, the unexamined half of that equation.

In a late modernist form akin to stream of consciousness, McBride's novel traces the unnamed narrator's life, from the prenatal state to her death by drowning, but alongside this central narrative, readers also learn of A Girl's brother. We observe through A Girl's eyes—and through her first-person narration—as the brother's health slowly but steadily declines. She narrates his first surgery as a toddler to excise a brain tumor ("Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day."), through years of developmental handicaps ("Always in the house, drifting round the stairs or sitting by our puddles little beast in your head. Sleeping happy homed up your brain stem now and fingers only strumming on your bad left side.), to the inexorable relapse of his cancer, which kills him ("It woke. It woke. And it. Came. Split open your veins. Bleeding now into your brain.") (McBride 3, 11, 136). Thus, in heart-wrenching detail, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* documents the cruel realities of the brother's chronic tumor, which runs "all through his brain like the roots of trees" (McBride 4). After the initial operation and subsequent chemotherapy—"Feel fat juicy poison poison young boy skin"—his illness manifests mainly as cognitive impairments during his childhood and adolescence (McBride 4). Try as he might, the brother cannot earn better grades than "Ds and Es," and the damage affects his motor skills, leaving him with a "little limp" and a noticeable hitch in the "way [he] shakes his head" (McBride 49). By the time A Girl and her brother are in their early teens—"Thirteen me fifteen sixteen you"—his physical and mental deficiencies are too obvious to ignore, especially amongst their adolescent peers (McBride 39). Teachers "think he's a bit subnormal," and their mother concedes that the "tumor could've done more harm" than they realized (McBride 47-48). A Girl struggles to come to terms with her sibling's disabilities, but she discovers a potential escape from

her family's bleak reality in her emerging sexuality. Specifically, she seeks refuge in the flirtatious attention she begins to receive from her uncle.

Critics have not yet addressed the close relationship between A Girl's anxieties for her brother and her sexuality. However, I contend that one cannot be extricated from the other. The entanglement of A Girl's fears regarding her brother's health with her sexuality begins when she uses her girlish crush on her uncle as a distraction from her brother's social ostracism. While her sibling suffers hurt and humiliation as the butt of their peers' jokes, A Girl casts him out of her mind and focuses her thoughts on their uncle instead. During a lunch break at school, a classmate imitates the brother's speech and mannerisms on the soccer field for a cheap laugh. When the boy mocks A Girl's brother and calls him "brain damaged" and "[h]andicapped," she watches without intervening (McBride 55). Afterward, an overwhelming sense of shame makes A Girl decide to close herself off from her brother and his embarrassment. She vows inwardly, "And I will not think of your feelings anymore. For it's a bit too much to know" (McBride 56). But A Girl needs to think of something else—someone else—to divert her attention from her brother's humiliation. Thus, on the bus ride home later that day, she daydreams about her uncle:

> I think. I will not think of you. I think. Uncle. What would you think of me sit thinking of you? My head at work and turned away from everything happening here. . . .
>
> Turn from that and turn away. The eye go in. What? How much secret pleasure to stare at uncle in my mind's eye. Think of him come across the room. I have him. Scrutinize. I am smiling. (McBride 56-57)

Although it is A Girl's custom to address her brother as "you" throughout most of the novel, she shifts the referent of "you" from her brother to her uncle in this passage. As she does so, she displaces her sibling and discovers a new "secret pleasure" in sexual fantasies of her uncle, the same uncle who would rape her for the first time within days. This episode establishes a coping mechanism that A Girl will carry with her throughout her short life. At the worst moments in her brother's illness, she uses her sexuality as a distraction from harsh social and medical realities.

In seeking distraction, A Girl also finds a potential source of power and control. This allows her to turn her sexuality into a form of retribution against those classmates who mock her brother. Having been initiated into sex by her uncle, A Girl discovers that she has an edge over her peers and begins to use her sexuality to exercise dominance over them. She first attempts this power play after her friend tells her the rumors circulating about her brother, her family, and herself—that her brother "should be in some mental school for retards," that her family members are "[b]low-ins weirdo's born-agains or something bad as that," and that she is "weird and really up [herself]" but could "be something if [she] tried" (McBride 73). While these slights are fresh in A Girl's mind, some boys approach. When one of them identifies A Girl as the sister of the "fella with the head thing," he ignites her pent-up anger: "I'm sick with churning round the things ever said of you" (McBride 76). She is so livid on her brother's behalf that she seeks revenge, initially by being "dumbfounding" and letting loose a curse-laden tirade against the boy but then by provoking him sexually, taunting the teenager into having sex with her secluded amongst the trees and treating him with derision for his lack of experience (McBride 77-78). Afterwards, in a brief stand-alone paragraph, A Girl explicitly links her

infantilizing treatment of this schoolmate to her relationship with her brother: “He [the classmate] was the first off. Worst off. I begin. Now I know full well what I can do. For me and for you” (McBride 79). Empowered by this encounter with a boy near her age, A Girl uses her sexuality to dominate and emasculate her peers. She continues this pattern off and on for the remainder of her life with numerous sexual partners, though her purpose shifts from wreaking vengeance on gossiping schoolmates to deadening her emotions, supplanting the fear and anticipatory grief she feels for her brother with physical sensations—and, increasingly, with physical pain.

Although A Girl has countless, often violent, liaisons with anonymous men, especially after she leaves home for college, her rekindled relationship with her uncle best illustrates her use of sex and physical pain to suppress emotional distress over her brother’s failing health. When A Girl is nineteen, she and her uncle are thrown together again at the family gathering for her grandfather’s funeral. After a charged conversation about their past, during which A Girl and her uncle discuss the question of whether he “abused” her in their first sexual encounter, they decide to pick up where they left off (McBride 120). Although, A Girl expresses misgivings, knowing that “this is a long dark thing to do and cannot be undone,” she gives him her phone number anyway (McBride 124). He holds sway over her still, but their dialogue about the inciting rape proves that A Girl has learned how to retaliate. She asks her uncle questions that strike at the heart of his mingled pleasure and shame: “And did you enjoy it? Yes. Why am I asking this? And this? Why did you if you knew it was so wrong? Squirm him” (McBride 120).

Thereafter, A Girl seeks her uncle out when she is most vulnerable. After she learns that her brother is dying, for instance, A Girl calls her uncle, desperate for rescue.

She begs him, "Please come and save me please pull me from. . . . Please save me" (McBride 143). For A Girl, the renewed sexual relationship with her uncle beckons as an antidote to her fresh emotional wound. "I want us to sin so I may survive this, so I may hold onto my bandage of self if I can if I need," she thinks. "I think by keeping very still I'll stop time in its tracks. He can draw the poison out. He is talisman in that" (McBride 144). Thus, emboldened by his niece's phone call, the uncle arranges an assignation with her when he next visits the city where she attends college. A Girl consents because sex enables escape from reality; for her, "[t]he answer to every single question is Fuck" (McBride 148). Back with the man who warped her sense of sexuality as a child, A Girl finds that his brutal forcefulness calms her and thinks to herself after they have intercourse, "I am evened" (McBride 149). As they continue their affair, A Girl challenges her uncle to be even more violent. When he hurts her, it "relieves [her] for a while" (McBride 153). This particular meeting—when A Girl provokes her uncle into causing her pain and then expresses relief—confirms that her uncle's physical abuse momentarily eases the emotional distress she associates with her brother's now terminal cancer.[23] McBride positions this scene as a brief interlude between A Girl's pleading

[23] Violence also becomes a way for A Girl to reverse the power dynamic between her uncle and herself temporarily. On a later occasion, she orders him to hit her face. He beats her even as he tells her "I don't want this." By making him feel even more depraved, A Girl manipulates him for her own purposes and claims the upper hand—even as her nose bleeds and her face begins to bruise: "He thinks he's bad when he fucks me now. And so he is. I'm better though. In fact I am almost best" (McBride 161).

prayer for her brother ("Father up above. I don't want my brother to die.") and her mother's phone call bearing the news that the tumor is "like fingers through his brain" (152-153). In doing so, the novelist shows how closely linked A Girl's anticipatory grief is with her sexuality. Indeed, when A Girl resumes her relationship with her uncle, she also reverts to the coping mechanism she established in her adolescence, using sexual fantasies of her uncle to distract from the immediate horrors of her brother's illness. When chemotherapy causes her brother to vomit uncontrollably, for instance, A Girl soothes him as best she can, but her attention oscillates between her desire for her uncle (and the form of rescue he represents) and her words of comfort to her brother:

> The pool of it the force of it til I thought blood would come out. Your nose or out your mouth. Come out with organs swimming in it pool of sick I held your head oh help me over it. Across the toilet kneeling stroke your head go on go on I thought of him. Uncle. What. Want him to do it. Stop. Pierce me. There there. Lance the. And again. Take me save me from this as if. It's alright it's alright. (McBride 155)

Again, A Girl's narrative stresses the inextricability of her fears for her brother and her sexuality, but this time, McBride emphasizes the ghastly side effects of cancer and chemotherapy, which A Girl cannot ignore.

These faithful renderings of the brother's illness, which appear alongside the depictions of A Girl's masochistic sexuality, prove that the graphic immediacy of A Girl's narration of her sexual experiences carries over into her narration of the time she spends at her brother's side. Although the brother had learned to live a fairly quiet, undemanding existence after failing the Leaving Cert and being rejected by the Irish

Defence Forces, his cancer reasserts its hold on him in his early twenties (McBride 85). At that point, cognitive lapses signal the start of a much more rapid deterioration of his mental faculties. A Girl observes an unprecedented form of lethargy in her brother while home from college on a visit: "So much slackness. Sittingness. Sitting still. Sitting down. You always doing. Sitting driving me. Jesus. Spare. Something like. Are you there are you there? Is anything happening in your life?" (McBride 133). Again addressing her brother as "you," A Girl questions what remains of the active, alert sibling she used to know. He is still the beloved counterpart to whom she directs much of her speech and thought—the second-person addressee to her first-person narration—but his stationary, blank demeanor appears to her as something new, something that foreshadows even darker times ahead. When A Girl learns from her mother that her brother "forgot to go to work today just forgot," she senses the impending catastrophe of his death like a premonition that flutters over her physically before landing and rooting itself in her thoughts (McBride 134). She narrates that feeling, as she comes to realize that her brother's mind could be slipping away, saying, "Creeping over my eyelids. Something awful in that. There's more than. Something not quite. Wrong" (McBride 135). And, indeed, shortly after these warning signs, the brother catapults back into the world of medical care as the cancer makes its aggressive, and final, return.

When doctors confirm that the tumor has resumed its incursion into the depths of the brother's brain—"It woke. It woke."—A Girl recognizes that her brother's life is coming to its close, that the doctor's "little chart is saying you exit now" (McBride 141-142). In several moments like this, McBride vividly captures the experience of the grim,

heart-breaking process of losing a loved one to cancer.[24] She writes, for instance, of A Girl's initial defensive reflex in response to the doctor's warning that she and her mother "must prepare" for the brother's death (McBride 138). A Girl at first denies this new reality and refuses to believe it could happen to her family: "Zzzing in my ears. This I don't know how to hear. Must be for someone else. Not for him. Not for she or me. Yes no he doesn't mean" (McBride 138). She hears a buzzing, as though her body tries to block out the unbearable words, and she attempts to imagine a different meaning for the words the doctor speaks, as though the phrase, "I feel you must prepare," might refer to something other than death (McBride 138). Denial does not last long, though, because she sees the truth in her brother, lying "simple as you have ever lived" in his hospital bed (McBride 139).

If McBride does not pull her punches when it comes to the emotional impact of loss, nor does she shy away from the physical indignities of chemotherapy's side effects and the patient's eventual powerlessness to attend to his own body. However, readers gain a modicum of distance as we view the brother's suffering only through A Girl. She watches helplessly as her brother gets violently sick after treatments, she clips his toenails

[24] It is worth noting that McBride writes of the traumatizing experience of the brother's cancer at a remove. Much as McCann and Barry establish critical distance between themselves and their suffering female characters, McBride only addresses the brother's experience through her narrator's perspective. I would posit that McBride regards the brother's disabilities as a category of experience akin to gender: men are wary of speaking for women, and the able-bodied are wary of speaking for the sick and dying.

when he no longer remembers to, and she learns to change his adult diapers when he reaches the state of needing hospice-style care (McBride 155, 182, 199). McBride's modernist narrative style governs how A Girl describes these experiences, immersing the reader in "a space of language formation that seems to exist before articulation" (Cahill 159). Therefore, the work's stream of consciousness—or, as McBride puts it, the "stream of pre-consciousness" or "stream of existence"—forces readers into an intimate experience of every raw detail as the narrator watches her brother die (McBride, "Stream" and "How I Wrote"). This narrative technique renders A Girl's vigil at her brother's deathbed in excruciating specificity. Initially, her descriptions are sad but almost tranquil: "Your hand is getting colder mine. I see. You are going white" (McBride 210). But soon death's approach turns swift and ruthless, and A Girl narrates the mortal changes in her brother's visage as well as her own mixed incomprehension, denial, and sorrow in short, quick fragments that race to keep pace with the speed of his demise:

> And all your. Sudden body. Where's the. It. Comes for you. Come blistered breath.
>
> You. Strain. I see. Your heart I see your chest is move is moving is time to. You are. Struggle. Where the air in. Let the air come in it won't it soughing out. Gushing like water. Where's the. Your face that eyes are open wide. See the land and all above mine. Your eyes are where are. They look. When and a tinge purple on your cheeks choke the purple blue. Across your mouth. Across your lips. I see your suffocated eye. Please don't go no. Not. Go. I. Please don't leave. There's the. Air flying out. Your eyes on me. They. You are.
>
> Silent.

Breath.

Lungs go out. See the world out.

You finish that breath. Song breath.

You are gone out tide. And you close. Drift. Silent eyes. Good-bye.

My. lllllllllllllllll. Love my. Brother no. (McBride 210-211)

As this startling, fragmented passage reveals, McBride's late modernist style vividly renders the incomprehensibility of death, the narrator's keen attention to physical details, the emotional turmoil of loss, and the particular potency of A Girl's grief as her brother takes his final breaths. The clipped phrases in the longer paragraph rush to mark physiological changes as they occur. "Sudden body," A Girl thinks as outward signs of internal failure force her into awareness of her brother's physical form—its fragility, its deficiencies, and its final breakdown. Her particular focus on respiration, especially her comparison of the brother's struggle for breath to the flow of water, foreshadows her own death by drowning. For the brother, the air comes "soughing out," "[g]ushing like water," while the reverse will be true for A Girl when she commits suicide: "And under water lungs grow. Flowing in. Like fire torch. Like air is" (McBride 210, 229). Likewise, the blue tinge and "suffocated eye" she observes on her brother's face will find an echo in her own "[b]lue tinge lips" and "[a]ir-famished eyes" (McBride 210-211, 229). In this sense, McBride links A Girl's suicidal drowning linguistically—and physiologically—to the brother's last moments.[25] These connections between the two deaths imply that A Girl

[25] The parallels in the death scenes for A Girl and her brother also suggest a way of understanding one of A Girl's dreams. When her dream of a safe underground burrow

kills herself not only as an act of despair following her brother's demise but also in an effort to reunite with him, to reenact what he suffered and thereby return to their childhood realm of shared experiences.

Stylistically, McBride draws additional parallels between the two death scenes with her use of short lines and white space. As the brother's life comes to an end, A Girl's narration shifts from lengthier paragraphs to a series of concise lines that appear almost like poetry on the page:

> Silent.
>
> Breath.
>
> Lungs go out. See the world out.
>
> You finish that breath. Song breath.
>
> You are gone out tide. And you close. Drift. Silent eyes. Good-bye.
>
> My. lllllllllllllllll. Love my. Brother no.
>
> Silent.

---

for the two siblings gives way to a nightmare of roots "growing in the bursting through our skulls," A Girl not only signals the creeping incursion of her brother's brain tumor but also hints at her own advancing mental illness. The negative psychological impacts of her life-long anticipation of her brother's death—which are, of course, aggravated by her experiences of sexual violence—push her closer to death, too. Furthermore, the dream predicts the suffocation of both characters: "Roots growing in the bursting through our skull. Through in through our brains. Seeking out our noses. Seeking out our eyes for. Strangle. Choking out the air" (McBride 196-197).

He's gone. He's gone. Good-bye.

No. Oh please. My.

Done. And. Quiet.

And.

Gone. (McBride 211)

Not only does this passage resonate with A Girl's own final lines—" . . . That just was life. And now. / What? / My name is gone."—but it also reflects A Girl's experience of watching her brother's breathing slow (McBride 229). Each line break represents a pregnant pause as A Girl waits in silent anticipation for her brother's next breath. Will it come? Or was that one the last? Even after A Girl indicates her awareness that her sibling has died ("He's gone. Goodbye."), this pattern continues for several more shortened lines. This brief continuation signals A Girl's resistance to accepting the truth she already knows. Although she registers her brother's last breath, she still watches for another, with the blank spaces representing that vigil even as her thoughts barrel onward through sorrow ("Goodbye"), denial ("No."), and bargaining ("Oh please."). These sentiments come in quick succession, overlapping and showing the complex tangle of emotions A Girl feels during this small stretch of time. Overall, then, this passage rivals those in which McBride depicts A Girl's sexual experiences in terms of its formal inventiveness. It uses "stream of pre-consciousness" to different—but equally dark and moving—ends as it articulates A Girl's broken reaction to her brother's death rather than her sexuality.

Thus, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* documents its narrator's insidious vulnerability to grief from start to finish. Even before A Girl's birth, from the time when the doctors report the results of the first round of surgery and chemotherapy, the brother's

life is circumscribed by the cancer's likely return: "It's shrunk. He's saved. He's not. He'll never be" (McBride 4). In her prenatal state, the narrator sums up this inevitability, addressing her thoughts to her brother, "So like it lump it a short breath's what you've got" (McBride 4). In other words, A Girl is born into circumstances that make her always at risk of losing her brother; she remains perpetually aware that his remission is not likely to last. This anticipatory grief exposes A Girl to other forms of vulnerability, too—as the linkage between her childhood anxieties for her brother and her emergent sexuality shows. To summarize, then, McBride's novel speaks to the entanglement of A Girl's experiences of gendered forms of insidious trauma and abuse with the more fundamental vulnerability of all humankind to loss, grief, and death.

To return to Laura S. Brown's terms, A Girl's "secret, private, hidden experiences of everyday pain" manifest both in her fear that her brother's cancer will relapse (as it does) and in her inability to form healthy relationships (110). Yet, McBride's "feminist perspective" does more than "draw our attention to" this daily suffering (Brown 110). Through her late modernist style and its frank depiction of A Girl's relationship to her brother, his cancer, and his death, McBride forces readers to experience the narrator's emotional and psychological anguish. The "stream of existence" style McBride crafts allows readers no distance from A Girl's pain as she anticipates loss and seeks temporary relief in sexual outlets. In this sense, then, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* repudiates the critical distancing that male writers like Colum McCann and Sebastian Barry establish between the author—and audience—and the suffering female protagonist. Like Roddy Doyle's *A Woman Who Walked into Doors*, McBride's novel offers a compelling first-person narrative that shows the complex, conflicted psychology of an abuse victim, but it

delves even deeper, embedding readers within the innermost core of A Girl's "half-formed" psyche. McBride achieves this by eschewing the conventional realism of the other contemporary novels discussed in this chapter for a modernist form. She articulates A Girl's vulnerability in a style that communicates the character's experiences before they have a chance to form into fully conscious thoughts or coherent language. Her work, therefore, builds on Emma Donoghue's and Edna O'Brien's as it conveys the inadequacy of traditional language; however, McBride's formal innovations go further, updating modernism's stream of consciousness in order to find new means of expressing her narrator's insidious vulnerability to grief and trauma.

In closing, I want to speak briefly to how contemporary Irish fiction responds to the "pain competition" Anne Enright describes in her assessment of Irish culture circa 2013 (the year McBride's debut novel was published). Enright writes:

> It's hard to remember what it was like back in 2013, but I seem to recall that you couldn't complain then without being told that other people had it worse. What women put up with was nothing compared to what happened to children in Catholic institutions. The wound can't be about gender, while Northern Ireland still bleeds. It was a pain competition, one that women couldn't win.

Enright correctly diagnoses Ireland's history of suppressing women's issues by characterizing them as petty in comparison to public historical events (like the Northern Irish 'Troubles') and sensational revelations (like those about child abuse). At the same time, though, this chapter proves that literature does important cultural work to reclaim women's pain. The novels I discuss here—by Doyle, McCann, Barry, Donoghue, O'Brien, and McBride—center women's insidious vulnerability to grief and trauma,

letting women "win" (so to speak) this pain competition. In doing so, the writers raise awareness of gendered forms of loss and violence and illustrate the connections among various forms of psychological and emotional distress. McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* in particular insists that addressing one form of vulnerability need not exclude others: while A Girl's traumatic sexual experiences anchor the novel, McBride interweaves that facet of the narrator's life with her anticipatory grief for her brother—and with her awareness of her brother's suffering as cancer strips away his mental and physical capabilities. In summation, this dissertation endeavors to pay heed to the full range of individually experienced losses portrayed in modern and contemporary Irish fiction. And I call on attentive, ethical readers to give the same consideration to the insidious vulnerabilities depicted in each novel—lest we participate in the erasure of grief, rendering it invisible once more.

CODA – A LIVING PROJECT

I consider this dissertation a living project. In one sense, it exists now as a static document, but it also represents an ongoing endeavor—personally, politically, and academically—to recognize and support those who suffer private forms of grief and trauma. Thus, the work of this dissertation requires not only analyzing literary fiction but also empathizing in real life and encouraging others to do the same. As a living project, this dissertation will continue to inform my ethical engagement with insidious vulnerability, in my scholarship and my everyday life. For the purposes of this coda, I will focus on the academic component, reiterating my rationale for my analytical methodology, reassessing my early hypothesis that accurate representations of grief require innovative narrative forms, and proposing ways forward to build on this project's work.

Writing this dissertation reinforced my conviction in the power of empathy and the power of fiction. Literature can reveal hidden experiences, giving attentive readers insight that prepares them to understand and respond ethically to the difficult realities that marginalized populations face. For that to happen, though, critics and readers must be willing to unsettle established analytical frames. My dissertation offers a case study in Irish literature that demonstrates this strategy of resistant reading. Over three chapters, I

examine the literary theme of women's insidious vulnerability to grief and trauma in modern and contemporary Irish fiction. Novels by Elizabeth Bowen, Samuel Beckett, Sebastian Barry, and Eimear McBride contain purposeful depictions of everyday forms of loss and violence that tend to be overlooked—by characters within the novels, but also by historians and literary critics. To identify and reclaim these experiences, I argue, we must read against the grain: against the narrative cues that suppress characters' emotional distress; against the prioritization of public, collective concerns (e.g., history, nation, politics, and religion) in Irish Studies; against the preoccupation with psychoanalysis in Beckett Studies; and against the emerging interpretive orthodoxies in criticism of contemporary literature. Therefore, I read resistantly to foreground representations of individual grief and trauma. In doing so, I lay bare biases in literary criticism and reveal the depth and complexity of women's losses.

My analysis reveals that both modernist and realist modes of fiction allow authors to interrogate the precarious position of commonplace forms of grief in society. On the one hand, Bowen and McBride reject the idea that the incomprehensibility of grief can be articulated in traditional, well-mannered realistic fiction. For instance, Bowen disrupts the narrative logic of *The Death of the Heart* in terms of its chronology and its point of view in order to grant Portia a brief respite from the oppressive atmosphere of the Quayne household; Tom and Anna Quayne do not pause for any length of time to address Portia's grief for her mother, but Bowen's modernist intervention does. Likewise, McBride seeks new modernist modes of representation in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* for heretofore unspeakable experiences, including sexual trauma and anticipatory grief. Yet, on the other hand, Emma Donoghue's *Hood* adheres closely to a traditional realist

narrative form, but she does so to make her protagonist's non-normative grief visible. Just as Pen adopts conventional labels like "widow" as she mourns for her same-sex partner, Cara, the novel adopts conventional realism to argue implicitly that stories of gay grief can be told in the same terms as stories of straight grief. Laying claim to a normative form for non-normative experiences is, in this sense, a political act. Similarly, Beckett—though writing in an innovative narrative form and style—crafts Lousse as a relatively traditional realist character in order to interrogate the cathartic recovery narrative so often associated with bereavement. He traps Lousse instead in a repetitious coping mechanism to show that conventional mourning rituals do not inevitably lead to effective grieving. Indeed, in almost every case, these fictional representations of women's grief and trauma emphasize the impediments that prevent individuals from performing the emotional and psychological work that might allow them to come to terms with their experiences of loss and violence.

While I focus primarily on the insidious vulnerability of women in this dissertation, my analysis suggests two routes for further study. First, the girls and women of these novels appear alongside boys and men who also suffer significant losses: Leopold in Bowen's *The House in Paris* and Thomas in *The Death of the Heart*, Molloy and Moran in Beckett's *Molloy*, Dr. Grene in Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, and the brother in McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. Therefore, a fuller discussion could include more in-depth analysis of their experiences as well. One question I would pose for consideration in this regard is whether a relationship exists between men's experiences of grief and the violence they sometimes inflict on others. For instance, when Moran loses his son (temporarily, as it turns out), he attacks and kills a stranger, and in

Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River*, James McNamara's incestuous abuse of his daughter, Mary, escalates after his wife dies. Secondly, the intersectional implications of my analytical approach could be explored in greater detail. Already, my dissertation demonstrates that reading Irish fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries requires that critics go beyond any monolithic definition of Irishness. Irish literature deliberately crosses national and ethnic boundaries and represents individuals marginalized for their race, class, religion, sexuality, or disabilities. Many modern and contemporary Irish authors travel extensively or spend time living abroad (like Bowen and Beckett), and they often set their novels outside of Ireland. Within the selection of works I examine in this dissertation, for instance, we see Bowen's London and Paris as well as Colum McCann's portrayal of Slovakia in *Zoli*. Additionally, I begin to examine how class affects Paula Spencer in Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, how religion affects Roseanne in Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, how sexuality affects Pen in Donoghue's *Hood*, and how physical and mental disabilities affect the brother in McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*—but I only scrape the surface. My hope is that my concept, "insidious vulnerability," will help focus critical attention on these intersectional experiences of oppression, particularly with regard to individual forms of grief and trauma.

As I pursue my own path forward with this project, I intend to fill in the chronology of Irish writing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with other examples of representations of insidious vulnerability. Not only do I aim to flesh out a denser, richer sense of the literary landscape, but I also want to provide a more complete account of individual forms of loss that typically elude readers' attention. I gesture

toward some of these in this study. As a case-in-point, infertility affects Karen and Ray in *The House in Paris*, Anna and Thomas in *The Death of the Heart*, and Dr. Grene and Bet in *The Secret Scripture*—but the emotional effects of this experience hardly register in existing scholarship on the novels. Additionally, I can make productive connections with works like Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* (1941) and Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007). In both these novels, for example, sisters grieve for brothers, a trope they share with Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. Sexuality, sexual abuse, and institutionalization crop up as themes in these works as well, which puts them in conversation with Donoghue's *Hood* and Barry's *The Secret Scripture*. Critically, I also plan to delve into the intervening decades, 1955-1995, to address the gap between my first two chapters and my third. I anticipate this endeavor will require a certain amount of recovery work, especially since a large portion of women's writing from that period has been forgotten—or out of print. However, thanks to the work of publishers like Sarah Davis-Goff and Lisa Coen of Tramp Press as well as critics like Paige Reynolds and Sinéad Gleeson, the reclamation of Irish women writers is already underway. Thus, important novelists like Norah Hoult, Mary Lavin, Dorothy Macardle, and Molly Keane—amongst others—are starting to reappear in print. I anticipate that further reading and research will uncover additional voices speaking for the marginalized and the oppressed, for those whose insidious vulnerability puts them perpetually at risk of grief and trauma.

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