



The Graduate Review

Volume 4

Article 12

2019

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Recommended Citation

Masotta, Rachel M. (2019) “My Brother’s Ghost”: Child Exploitation in Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*. *The Graduate Review*, 4, 59-64.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/grad_rev/vol4/iss1/12

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“My Brother’s Ghost”: Child Exploitation in Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*

RACHEL M. MASOTTA

T*he Gathering* by Anne Enright is a contemporary Irish novel that explores repression, trauma, and the burden of knowledge. Gracefully dancing between the past and the present, Veronica Hegarty, the middle of nine children, is the main protagonist and first-person perspective in this gripping account of loss. Veronica serves as the narrator and orator of the novel in the twisted account of the Hegarty family history of neglect and sexual abuse. The focus of *The Gathering* is the recent suicide of Liam Hegarty, Veronica’s older brother and lifelong confidante. Liam’s death has ignited Veronica’s subconscious and the horrific secret her mind has harbored for the years leading up to his death. Veronica struggles throughout the novel to address her version of what happened at their grandmother Ada’s home the winter she and Liam were sent away. Veronica’s fears are brought to the

surface when Liam returns to her in a ghostly form, serving as a constant reminder of the long-avoided truth she refuses to face. Liam’s ghost both haunts and drives the narrative and wordlessly achieves an admission from Veronica allowing Anne Enright to employ Liam’s fractured ghost as a representation. This essay is a jumping off point from Carol Dell’Amico’s statement “[Liam] a throwaway and an absence- a figure for all those missing and unacknowledged in Ireland’s past.” (70). I set to prove in two ways that Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* is a commentary on the long-term effects of unacknowledged sexual abuse from twentieth-century Ireland. The first being Liam Hegarty’s ghost as a metaphor for repressed memories. The second, the Hegarty family’s symbolization as the “invisible” or forgotten children of Ireland.

Liam as the Ghost

I wish to begin with the ghostly return of Liam Hegarty. One could read Liam Hegarty’s ghost as Anne Enright’s Shakespearean homage to the ghost of King Hamlet. The two intertwine in their motives for returning to the living world. Two spectral characters, whose untimely deaths and ghostly returns, burden the main protagonists with the truth they reveal. Authors use the ghost character for a multitude of reasons. For Shakespeare, King Hamlet reveals the truth of his death to his grieving son, which ignites Prince Hamlet’s inner

conflict. For Enright, however, Liam Hegarty's ghost silently propels Veronica's decision to speak her truth. It would be easy for the ghost version of Liam to appear to Veronica in times of anguish and pain. So, for the most part, he does. However, he also returns to her in moments of unconsciousness when her mind wanders with no real direction. It is through these moments that the truth of the ghost reveals itself. Liam's ghost is Veronica's memory. A memory that moves, acts and looks like her brother Liam. Haunting her until she can admit what happened to them the winter they spent at Ada's. Trauma, repression and guilt take the form of Liam's ghost. Ghosts are never indeed ghosts; they are symbols, or desires, or fears presented to the unsuspecting. "My emigrant brother makes an old-fashioned ghost, and when he died, I dressed him in worn-out wellington boots, as the Irish seventies dipped back into the fifties in my mind" (Enright 191). The physicality of her "dressing" him shows the control she has over his creation. She is the inventor, the one who dresses up the vision and gives him the power. Liam's ghost is much more than an old memory Veronica can dust off. The secret has buried itself into her mind like a tick latches on and embeds itself deeper and deeper into the skin. The tick has been cared for, tended to, dressed. Freeing herself from the insect means acknowledging how it got there. The problem is squishing the bug or flicking it off will not work. It will take drastic

measures to ensure its extermination. Burning it, drowning it. Eradicating it.

Liam is never far from Veronica's mind long before his death. She mentions worrying for him, wondering what he would do with his life and if he ever was sincerely happy. She carries this burden for him all of her life, just now beginning to register the immense weight that Liam has had on her heart. While Liam remained alive, the secret that harbored inside Veronica was able to lay dormant. The shared secret manifests as the ghost haunting Veronica's life and when she is finally able to give a voice to that secret, she frees herself and her brother's ghost. "The ghost becomes the metaphor for memory; it is also a metaphor for things hidden and buried for memories that haunt Irish life and culture today" (Kunz 107). When we break down the nature of the ghost, we find the root of the problem. Veronica is also a victim. Enright has this in mind in her characterization of her as the caregiving child. Veronica's role in her family is to care for the wayward Liam whose questionable decisions have led him to lead the life of a vagabond. Veronica knows this and she frequently comments on her need to look after Liam, to protect Liam, to save Liam. Saving Liam in his waking life was the penance for which she decided betrayal. Veronica has focused so long on betraying him that she cannot see herself as a victim as well.

The way I have alluded to the secret

throughout this essay is similar to the way Enright herself teases its reveal. It is purposefully drawn out and shocking. The peculiar part is that throughout my reading, long before I knew the secret, I felt its presence hovering above me. I knew what the secret was and not because I skipped ahead to read it. I knew because the sad reveal of ignored sexual abuse is a theme that dominates television, books and movies. There are entire television series dedicated to the horrific crimes of sex abusers and the victims who stay silent. With Veronica as the narrator and fellow victim, she becomes the voice for the dead and their painful secrets. Liam's secret is the secret of so many affected by sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect. "Now I know that the look in Liam's eye was the look of someone who knows they are alone. Because the world will never know what happened to you, and what you carry around as a result of it" (Enright 177). The secret reveals itself through the eyes of a child with the pervasive and cutting language of a cynical adult. Veronica reveals that she witnessed Liam's molestation by Lambert Nugent, the landlord and family friend to their grandmother, Ada, the winter of 1968 when they lived with her. Veronica admits that at eight years old, she was overwhelmed by the horrific act she saw and internalized it for many years. Only when she recounts the past does she allude to its poisoning effects on her memories and in specific choices she has made.

The Hegartys as the Invisible Children

In recent years, sexual and physical abuse allegations in Ireland's industrial schools have received extensive media attention. "Beginning in the 1990s, numerous individuals began to attest to childhood neglect and abuse in Irish industrial schools, in other institutions or within their own families or parishes" (Dell'Amico 63). Many believe that the abuse was well-known within the school and the church, shedding negative light to an issue already living under a microscope. The children who suffered in these industrial schools are just the tip of the iceberg. Systemic abuse has persisted much longer than the name for it was ever created. Michael Molino says it well. "These stories have caused many to question the unholy alliance between church and state in independent Ireland that allowed children of the poor and children of those deemed morally corrupt to be exploited and brutalized in institutional care run for profit by religious congregations like the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy" (40). *The Gathering* takes place in what appears to be early 2000s Ireland. The flashbacks to the past take place in 1968, right in the throes of the alleged abuse. Anne Enright is masterfully acknowledging the "invisible" children of Ireland (Dell'Amico). Children forgotten by their parents, teachers, friends, their government, their church. Exploited children in dire need of protection. The Hegarty children

represent this unprotected group. Enright suggests that “Mammy” and “Daddy” Hegarty gave the same amount of thought to their children as they would of ornaments on a Christmas tree; decorative and innumerable. The nine children in the family’s clan are discussed in length by Veronica. Some are troubled, some unscathed from the neglect and some like Liam are long deceased.

As the novel progresses, and the sad realities of the grown Hegarty children’s lives are revealed, Enright proves that ornaments are also delicate, sentimental and breakable. The Hegartys’ lack of supervision and protection led to their lifelong battle with depression, trauma, substance abuse and shame. Using Veronica’s memories, Anne Enright weaves the past and present together to give us the full scope of the Hegarty children’s history. Through this, we learn that as children, Liam and Veronica were sent away to live with their grandmother when their mother’s deteriorating mental health forced them out of their family home. Combining their mother’s underlying mental illness with their maternal grandmother’s unwillingness to speak of unpleasanties, we find the repressive seeds that have been planted years before Veronica and Liam were even born. Veronica tells us that she never knew why out of nine children, she and Liam were the ones to be sent away to Ada’s. “My feelings were not relevant- not just to that occasion, but to the whole business of being alive” (Enright

65). Veronica names each of the adults in her life at the time and in great length describes noteworthy moments of personal betrayal from them. Her mother had too many children to care for; her father died young and ignorant; her grandmother self destructed internally while violently washing dishes and staring out the kitchen window into oblivion. Veronica blames their ignorance and their pain for Liam’s death. Liam’s suicide is apparent to Veronica as if he had been marked by death a long time ago. Enright writes, “I don’t know when Liam’s fate was written in his bones. And although Nugent was the first man to put his name there, for some reason, I don’t think he was the last. Not because I saw anything else going on, but because this is the way these things work. Of course, no one knew how these things worked at the time” (163). No one knew how those things worked at the time because child abuse was prosecuted the same way that adult abuse was. The name itself was coined in the mid-1980s (Moiria J. Macguire). Veronica’s and Liam’s invisibility in their own family reflects the invisibility of victims of sex crimes and child exploitation. Veronica is the vessel for the acknowledgment as she attempts to justify why she never told the truth about what happened. Liam’s corpse is the more macabre vessel. Liam wore a “fluorescent yellow jacket” (141). He brought stones with him in his pockets and wore no underpants or socks. “Liam took off his underpants because they were

not clean. He took off his socks because they were not clean. He probably thought, as the cold flooded his shoes, cleansing thoughts” (Enright 142). Liam Hegarty tried to wash away the past with the cold rushing waters. Waters that he intended to end his life with, more importantly, his life of suffering at the hands of a menacing abuser. This vessel is essential to the narrative because it is hearing these disturbing facts that leads Veronica to her private confession. Liam needed a sterile, clean death; Veronica needs a clean start.

Conclusion

According to Enright, Ireland is haunted. Haunted by history, by systemic abuse, and most importantly, its mistreatment of children. Liam Hegarty’s ghost is Veronica’s repressed memory. The ghosts of the past are at the root for what haunts people, but a ghost is so much more than a ghost. A ghost is a memory, a vision, a feeling, or a place. For Veronica, Liam’s ghost represents her repressed memories, her inner despair, and her neglected inner child. The ghost instead becomes the embodiment of their trauma and their mistreatment. Once we determine the nature of the ghost, it becomes clear that the dead cannot haunt. It is the living who haunt themselves.

Veronica gives voice to those without. *The Gathering* is a feminist intervention into conflict, a historical bearing witness to other’s suffering and

an act of resistance against oppression” (Dell’Amico 72). Veronica may also be a forgotten child, but she uses her position as a voice for the dead to serve as an ally. Enright uses these literary devices to highlight the long-term effects of ignored sexual abuse on families and communities; specifically, those of the industrial schools in the twentieth century.

There is hope for Veronica, Liam, and the voiceless children their characters stand in for. Hope lies in acceptance; acceptance in the person’s moral character; acceptance in a cruel fate.

When we conclude *The Gathering*, there is a choice that Veronica must make. Her choice is open-ended and complicated, but the choice is to move on or to become the ghost she so fervently fears. If Liam’s ghost returns, which it may, Veronica can know that the real power lies within her admission of the truth. “But I do not want a different destiny from the one that has brought me here. I do not want a different life. I just want to be able to live it. That’s all” (Enright 260). Veronica realizes that her cross to bear, her brother’s secret is, in fact, an anchor. And it will not slow her; rather, it will keep her still. Because the cross adds weight to the wearer’s back; the anchor prevents them from moving forward.

In a poignant scene at the novel’s end, the Hegarty family has come together for Liam’s funeral. The tension is high and the despair

apparent. An old girlfriend of Liam's has appeared with her young son, a boy named Rowan, who has been exposed as the deceased Liam's biological son. Rowan brings light to this dark Dublin day. Kitty Hegarty, one of the younger siblings, has gotten her hands on a microphone and sings a song, Liam's favorite. "Though their voices are silent/ Their pleading looks will say/ Oh, hard times come again no more" (248). Rowan represents wistfulness, a new beginning for the Hegartys and the beautiful message for Liam and the rest of the exploited children. "Hard times come again no more" ends this tragic story with hope and a better tomorrow for all the "Liam's" across Ireland.

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Rachel Masotta is pursuing her Master of Arts in English degree. She completed this research paper in the fall of 2018 under the mentorship of Dr. Garrett Nichols. She plans to pursue her Ph.D.