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At the Intersection of Gender Studies and Narratology

Contemporary Irish Women Writing Men

The chapter reacts to this special issue's leading question "Why narratology?" by reflecting on a narrative phenomenon that has been neglected by literary and cultural criticism: that of 'women writing men.' A number of reasons for the seeming reluctance to approach this question, which suggests itself as a fruitful object of study for both narratologists and gender-oriented literary critics, are discussed. Arguing for an integration of narratological and gender-oriented approaches in the context of the 'new formalist' turn, the chapter charts narrative constructions of masculinity in recent novels by Irish women writers. This corpus is approached through a discourse- (rather than story-)oriented lens. Using the two currently dominant ways of 'perspectivising' fictional worlds, the chapter first concentrates on women writers' novels that feature male first-person narrators and in doing so deconstruct and reconstruct prevalent masculinities (Sara Baume's *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, Claire Kilroy's *The Devil I Know*, and Caoilinn Hughes' *The Wild Laughter*). It then goes on to analyse heterodiegetic novels that integrate male and female perspectives via multiple focalisation and mark their male protagonists' views, emotions, and actions as decisive for any renegotiation of the concept of the Irish family (Anne Enright's *The Green Road*, Helen Cullen's *The Dazzling Truth*, and Ruth Gilligan's *The Butchers*).

1. Women Writing Men: A Phenomenon Neglected by (Narrative) Research

One may assume that there is a new trend in contemporary Irish writing as female novelists seem to be increasingly interested in 'writing men.' A male character is the eponymous hero of Anna Burns' internationally acclaimed, Booker prize-winning *Milkman* (2018); male characters feature as first-person narrator-protagonists in bestselling novels of various genres, such as Claire Kilroy's *All Names Have Been Changed* (2009), Tana French's *Broken Harbour* (2012), Jan Carson's *The Fire Starters* (2019), or Fiona Scarlett's *Boys Don't Cry* (2021); and the experiences, actions, thoughts, and emotions of the male protagonists are at least as central to the plots and perspective structure as those of the female characters in Belinda McKeon's *Solace* (2011), Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018), Mary Costello's *The River Capture* (2019) or Jan Carson's *The Last Resort* (2021), to name just four more examples. There are, indeed, so many more that none of the novels mentioned in this list will be touched upon again within the confines of this article. The energy that Irish women writers currently invest in imagining men seems unprecedented.

Still, one must be careful not to make the common mistake of believing that our contemporaries are introducing an entirely new phenomenon or renegotiate longstanding conventions of narrative fiction.[1] Virginia Woolf's claim that "[w]omen do not write books about men" (1989, 27) has, after all, long been disproven.[2] The history of Irish narrative fiction, in particular, sees two female authors at the very centre of the rise of the Irish novel around 1800, when Sydney Owenson (later Lady Morgan) and Maria Edgeworth vitally contributed to reimagining Irish masculinities with novels and tales such as *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), *O'Donnel* (1814), and *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (1827), or with *Castle Rackrent* (1800), *Ennui* (1809), *Harrington*, and *Ormond* (both 1817), respectively. So, if critics are still surprised that Woolf's assessment of the gendering of women's writing is incorrect, if they are astonished to see so many contemporary Irish women writers concentrating on the narrative construction of masculinities, this is not due to a lack of tradition in this area but to certain blind spots in literary and cultural criticism.

Ever since Janet Todd's groundbreaking collection *Men by Women* (1981), followed five years later by Jane Miller's *Women Writing about Men* (1986), the narrative phenomenon of 'women writing men' has resurfaced repeatedly in critical discourse.[3] Most recently, Joanne Ella Parsons and Ruth Heholt have edited a special issue of *Women's Writing* entitled *Women Writing Men*, which undertakes a "reassessment of women's depictions of masculinity" from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. They argue "that the close observation and sharp-eyed critique of masculinity has formed an important under-examined and central feature of women's writing throughout history" (2021, 157) and wonder, too, why the phenomenon of 'women writing men' has remained a marginalised subject in literary criticism. As Parsons and Heholt (2021) observe, "to date, there has been much less scholarly attention paid to women's textual construction of men, with the vast majority of work looking at men's representations of women" (155),[4] and conclude that the subject certainly deserves "a much more detailed examination" (158).

Having participated in the endeavour to raise awareness of this interesting phenomenon for more than a decade, and noting the only ever fleeting results, I find it vital at this stage, first, to explicitly address possible reasons for the lacuna. In doing so, I will suggest that a post-classical narratological perspective may help invigorate the discussion because – ironically, some sceptics may think – such an approach can help initiate a dialogue between different theoretical camps. In the main body of this article, I will then sketch what such a post-classical narratological approach may contribute to assessing the constructions of masculinity in contemporary fiction by Irish women writers.

From my perspective as a gender-oriented narrative theorist, I see the phenomenon of 'women writing men' disappear into gaps that continue to open for various (often ideological) reasons within and between literary gender studies and narratology. The relationship between literary feminism and gender studies, on the one hand, and narratology, on the other, is notoriously complicated. A powerful and influential group of scholars have certainly followed Susan S.

Lanser (1986) on her way "Toward a Feminist Narratology," to cite the title of her pioneering article. Lanser's interventions in the 1980s not only inaugurated the field of feminist narratology, which is "now recognized as a significant subdomain within narrative theory" (Page 2007, 190), but also provided the decisive impetus for the post-classical turn that narratology has taken towards context-oriented narrative theories in the last three decades.[5]

Still, the scholarly community which practises feminist narratology under that label remains rather small (Lanser 1999, 168). Marion Gymnich (2013, 712) assumes that "this is largely due to the fact that feminist narratology has always had to face considerable opposition within academic discussions." On the one hand, the work of feminist narratologists is still met with considerable scepticism by more traditionally-minded classical narratologists. The latter, Gymnich explains (2013, 712), are hesitant to acknowledge the relevance of "feminist narratology in particular and context-oriented approaches to the study of narrative texts in general" for their own narratological research, which seeks to avoid any entanglements with cultural and historical contingencies and follows Gérard Genette (1980, 23) in his endeavour to identify and describe structural elements "that are universal, or at least transindividual." While almost a decade after Gymnich's assessment, contextual narratologists are clearly in the majority and few classical narratologists would still deny the relevance of contextual narrative research, "narratology" is still perceived by many scholars who are involved in narrative research without calling themselves 'narratologists' as being stuck in its structuralist phase. The "widespread reluctance to draw upon narratological approaches in the field of cultural studies" in general and in feminist literary studies in particular, which Gymnich (2013, 217) observed in 2013, is still prevalent.

However, with New Formalism, a "movement" has emerged in the last two decades "from the entire repertoire of literary and cultural studies" (Levinson 2007, 558) which may help to integrate formal narratological analyses and the thematic interests of gender studies more fully and more successfully than under the label of *feminist narratology*. Generally speaking, the resurgence of formalism in early 21st-century criticism seeks to restore literary criticism's "original focus on form" and an interest in aesthetics to what is perceived as "a reductive re-inscription of historical reading" in the work of many new historicists (Levinson 2007, 559). New formalist interventions have been initiated from within diverse critical camps. For example, in her research on Romantic poetry, Susan J. Wolfson stresses the importance of poetry's "formal resources [that are] not reducible to the information of socio-historical context" (2016, n.p.) or ideological positionings (e.g. Wolfson 2000). Approaching the significance of formal criticism from a Marxist perspective, Anna Kornbluh (2017, 403) is equally dissatisfied with "the positivist reification of difference and quarantining of the past" that she finds in much contemporary literary criticism. She propagates a theory of the novel that "involve[s] both a temporal surpassing of narrow historicism and a formal appreciation of the novel's specific illumination of the conjuncture of aesthetics and politics" (2017, 403). Alex Woloch's study of the ideological valence of character-systems established in narrative fiction, *The One vs. the Many:*

Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel (2003), whose argument clearly builds on narratological insights, has also been hailed as an "outstanding example of New Formalism" (Olson / Copland 2016, 209). In her influential study *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Caroline Levine presents the most systematic and extensive discussion of the theoretical assumptions and critical practices of the new formalist movement to date. Not only does Levine join other critics in "modifying existing formalisms so as to underscore neither the intrinsic unity of a work nor its unredeemable disunity, but rather the friction within and between forms [and] the way a work calls attention to the under- and overlap between itself and the social world" (Kornbluh 2013, 14); she also, more clearly and unambiguously than others, aligns literary and social forms by

> mak[ing] a case for expanding our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience […]. Broadening our definition of form to include social arrangements has […] immediate methodological consequences. The traditionally troubling gap between the form of the literary text and its content and context dissolves. Formalist analysis turns out to be as valuable to understanding sociopolitical institutions as it is to reading literature. Forms are at work everywhere. (Levine 2015, 2)

Such new formalist frames of reference can help to close the (ideological) gap between literary gender studies and narratology – a gap that has certainly contributed to the continued scholarly neglect of 'women writing men.'

Still, another – probably even more significant – gap has caused the invisibility of the long-lived and widespread phenomenon of women writing men: a gap that opens up within the larger field of literary gender studies (including feminist narratology). The main focus of feminist-oriented gender studies has traditionally lain on "female plots" (e.g., Miller 1988, 44) and "plotting women" (Case 1999), on "Female Reading, and Feminine Writing" (Ferris 1991, 19), or on the "female voice [… as] a site of ideological tension made visible in textual practices" (Lanser 1992, 6).[6] But around 2000 the observation that "[w]omen writing about women dominate contemporary work on gender" (Murphy 1994, 3) led to a significant readjustment by critics who began "to redress the balance by asking what the [purportedly] 'empty' category of masculinity can reveal about gender relations, sexuality and men's social roles" (Liggins et al. 1998, 4). As a consequence, around twenty years after the advent of women's studies, men's studies were firmly established as a separate branch of research (e.g., Steffen 2002, 273).

Even though most scholars active within either women's or men's studies have certainly embraced the turn from feminist and anti-patriarchal theories to gender studies – as emphatically and influentially advocated by Judith Butler – still, the ensuing focus on the performativity of sex, gender and sexuality has not as yet fostered research on the construction of masculinity in women's writing. Masculinity and men's studies have concentrated mostly on literature by men about men, just as women's studies continue to focus on female author-narrator-protagonist constellations in narrative fiction (Rennhak 2013, 6–8). Moreover, the turn towards concepts of gender performativity and the ensuing – very important – work on cross-gender narrative phenomena in the context of LGBTQ research has probably further contributed to the neglect of the construction of masculinities in female-authored narratives.[7] Such constructs, it may seem at first sight, are too firmly embedded in exactly those heteronormative structures that gender and sexuality studies seek to abolish.

However, as I have shown elsewhere (Rennhak 2013) and will seek to demonstrate in a different context here, women whose novels are told by male narrators and/or whose plots revolve around male protagonists may contribute to reimagining heterosocial and heterosexual relationships but often, and in contemporary fiction mostly, do so without propagating or even re-establishing heteronormative structures. And even if some do, it seems to me that the corpus assembled by scholars interested in 'women writing men' is anything but monolithic in its formal and ideological implications. In fact, this neglected corpus offers numerous different narrative constructions of and perspectives on the intersection of gender, sex, and sexuality (and of those identity categories with others).

So, why narratology? In what follows, I will use the example of recent Irish fiction by female novelists who write men to make a case for narratology as an approach which is particularly helpful when it comes to chart a neglected corpus of narrative texts. Like other, by now well-established projects in the field of contextual narratology (such as postcolonial and intercultural narratology), an undertaking of this kind invites one to "work inductively to build an inclusive corpus of texts" (Lanser 2014, 212). My hope is that this endeavour will (1) invite further theorisation from classical narratologists more interested than I am in making "systematic contribution[s] to foundational narrative research rather than a better understanding of the recurrent features" of novels by women who write men (Sommer 2007, 69); and (2) serve as a springboard for colleagues who may not think of themselves as (cultural) narratologists but are interested in "the friction within and between forms" and the way these "work[s] call attention to the under- and overlap between [themselves] and the social world" (Kornbluh 2013, 14).

More specifically, I will chart the territory by approaching my corpus through a discourse- (rather than story-)oriented lens. Using the two, currently dominant ways of 'perspectivising' fictional worlds, I will first concentrate on women writers' novels that feature male first-person narrators and in doing so deconstruct and reconstruct prevalent masculinities. Second, I will analyse heterodiegetic novels which integrate male and female perspectives via multiple focalisation and clearly mark their male protagonists' views, emotions, and actions as decisive for any attempt to renegotiate concepts of the Irish family.

2. Reconstructions of Irish Masculinities in Cross-Gendered Self-Narratives

Sara Baume's *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* (2015), Claire Kilroy's *The Devil I Know* (2012), and Caoilinn Hughes' *The Wild Laughter* (2020) are only three examples of many contemporary Irish novels that fall into the category which I have elsewhere called 'cross-gendered self-narratives' (Rennhak 2013). Arguably, homodiegetic narrations provide the most radical and most effective means of imagining (masculine) identities, in so far as they depict the very process of identity construction. Traditionally, the realist novel (such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*) builds such self-narrations on the model of non-fictional autobiographies, featuring a narrator-protagonist who has reached a certain point in life and position in society which allows him to present his memoirs to a general public for which such memoirs may serve as a (positive or negative) example. In such fictional autobiographies an experienced, mature subject, who has reached his goals or at least some state of stability, can narrate the story of his life as a linear, coherent tale. Writing towards a clear endpoint, he selects only those incidents from the contingent mass of his experiences that seem to lead to his present situation (Gergen 2006, 100–101). Suggesting stable and powerful masculine identities, such quasi-autobiographical self-narratives vitally contribute to propagating and naturalizing the masculinities they construct.

Contemporary Irish women who 'write men' problematise such suggestions of a self-centred, stable identity by changing the narrator-protagonist's relationship to his own story. Baume's, Kilroy's, and Hughes' first-person narrators do not tell their tales with the authority of men who have reached their aims and now fully grasp the life-journey that brought them to their current position. These narrator-protagonists are in far more precarious positions.

Exclusively concentrating on its protagonist's relationship with One Eye, an aggressive mongrel that Ray rescues from a dog shelter, Sara Baume's *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* (2015) is the story of an utterly lonely man. In the course of a story that offers an innovative variation on the plotline familiar from road-movies, Baume's novel constructs its male first-person narrator's identity almost solely by renegotiating this utterly isolated outsider's self through a dialogue with the carnal other. Significantly, *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* is not a retrospective self-narrative but is communicated by its self-narrator in the present tense.[8] Baume thus directly presents her protagonist's process of identity construction in its very performance, perfectly aligning Ricœur's concepts of a 'narrative identity' with Judith Butler's theory of the performance of identity.

Carmen-Veronica Borbély (2018, 110) has commented on how in *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* the outsider Ray, who due to his father's neglect and his permanent seclusion in the family home never attended school or got any other chance to build a social network, only starts to reflect on his position in life and verbalise it when he begins to see his dog as a partner. As others have noted, Ray thus delivers "a life narrative that can be voiced neither in the proximity of other humans, nor in the intimate space of selfhood, but in 'conversation' with the animal that 'becomes a projection of the narrator's desires, losses and thwarted longings' [O'Connor 2015]" (Borbély 2018, 114–115). As Baume's description of her novel as "[m]onologue to dog, with birds, trees and sea junk" (qtd. in Borbély 2018, 110) suggests, the construction of a listening other ('monologue *to dog*') is vital for any self-narrative. Still, in the absence of any human interlocutors, Ray must remain an utterly solitary human being ('*monologue* to dog'). Reviewers and critics have, rightly, hailed Baume's *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* as a post-anthropocentric novel (Bobély 2018; Szűcs 2021) that deconstructs the human/animal dichotomy in a way that thoroughly reconceptualises man's position towards the natural realm. "I don't want to turn you into one of those battery-powered toys that yap and flip when you slide their switch," Ray apologises to One Eye at one point. "I was wrong to tell you you're bold. I was wrong to try and impose something of my humanness upon you, when being human never did me any good" (Baume 2015, 42–43).

Read in the present context of 'women writing men' it also becomes obvious, however, that the novel does not wholeheartedly celebrate the fascinating trans-species relationship that it depicts. If one focuses on the representation of masculinity that the novel's character-system constructs, Ray's self-narrative must be read as the story of a grotesquely dark world of male loners who are utterly unable to support and sustain each other in the absence of any female influence. The motivation for Ray's father's cruelty towards his son remains unexplained, but the passages in Ray's self-narrative that deal with his father clearly suggest that after the death of his wife, the widower can only simulate a 'normal' life. He goes to work conscientiously, cooks dinner for himself and his son, but otherwise reverts to a grotesque and egotistic childishness (signified by his obsessive passion for inventing and crafting board games [Baume 2015, 99–102]), which makes him useless as a parent. In such an exclusively male household, Ray, the representative of the next generation, must degenerate further from male child to a being whose self-narrative conversation with the canine other logically ends in suicide.

In contrast to Baume's performative monologic self-narrative, Claire Kilroy's *The Devil I Know* and Caoilinn Hughes' *The Wild Laughter* present male narrator-protagonists whose accounts of their lives can be read in the tradition of the confessional self-narrative (Rennhak 2013, 113–122). Narrating their stories retrospectively, confessional protagonists know that their lives have led them into a precarious situation but cannot quite make sense of their experiences and their present predicament and thus offer their stories up to a communicative partner who may interpret their narratives for them, ideally providing social, moral and/or religious guidance. Such narratives tend to depict fundamentally unstable (masculine) identities. Whether a confessional self-narrator does or does not gain stability in the end depends on the reaction and interpretation of their (usually more powerful) listeners.

The Devil I Know and *The Wild Laughter* both belong to the emerging genre of the "Celtic Tiger boom and bust" novel (Mianowski 2017, 83), depicting an Ireland firmly in the grip of global finance and neo-liberal capitalism and peopled by individuals who have completely lost their social bearings and moral orientation. In this context, the narrative reconfigurations of Kilroy's and Hughes' confessional male self-narratives serve to criticise existing models of masculinity and can be read as calls for new social, legal, and/or moral benchmarks. While belonging to the same genre and thus sharing many characteristics in terms of content, form, and context, *The Devil I Know* and *The Wild Laughter* are, however, dissimilar in narrative style and in their choice of protagonists.

Kilroy's *The Devil I Know* is an allegorical satire, peopled with stock figures (such as "the deluded, naive investor; the jack-the-lad […] property developer; the social climbing wife; the crooked politician; the greedy corporate financiers; and the faceless European backers" [Kitchin 2013]) as well as a highly elaborate intertextual novel, which squarely situates itself and the moment of Irish austerity that it depicts in a cultural realm of enduring myths and narrative templates from Faust's pact with the devil through Lawrence Sterne's metanarrative disruption of the enlightened self-narrative to James Joyce's socially critical, self-reflective modernism. Its main protagonist and narrator, Tristram St Lawrence, the thirteenth Earl of Howth, is a central player in a corrupt property investment scheme that funnels the money of an international consortium through the shell-company "Castle Holdings", which he sets up at the request of the mysterious Monsieur Deauville, who is only ever heard on the phone but never seen (and transforms into the devil at the end of the novel). In comparison, Hughes' *The Wild Laughter*, while "function[ing] as a biblical parable *à la* Cain and Abel" (Matthews 2020) with some satirical overtones, is much more clearly situated in the tradition of the realist novel. Doharty ("Hart") Black, very much in social and moral contrast to Kilroy's Tristram, supports his terminally ill father in keeping up their small family farm, which "the Chief" (as Hart and his brother Cormac reverently call their father) has bankrupted through a failed business venture during the bust years.

Still, even though Kilroy's satirical novel provides the self-narrative of a wholly unsympathetic criminal without any moral compass whatsoever and Hughes' novel unfolds the tale of a loving son, the self-narratives of the corrupt business man and that of the loyal farmer both represent the same (post-)Celtic Tiger generation of men; men whose lives are orchestrated by others and who fail to find happiness in a society driven by greedy egotisms.

In both novels, the confessional self-narrative is structurally related (in different ways) to a court trial which – in the socially-critical fictional worlds imagined by Kilroy and Hughes – fail to restore (any sense of) justice, and thus do not serve to bring closure to the confessional self-narratives of the novel's narrator-protagonists. As others have shown (Flannery 2020; Mianowski 2017), Tristram's self-narrative is framed on the discourse level by a court trial, with each chapter of *The Devil I Know* corresponding to a day of evidence. The courtroom framing as such serves to demonstrate that the judicial system, like all other institutions in the Irish world of global capitalism, fails to provide any moral orientation. Justice Fergus O'Reilly and Tristram are old buddies, sentence is never passed, and it remains unclear throughout whether Tristram appears in court as (one of) the accused or as a witness. As a consequence and "reveal[ing] the futility of insight without meaningful breakthrough or change, […] the format in which Tristram merely offers testimony acts as a recording of history as though it is unchangeable" (McGlynn 2017, 50), an unchangeable history that even Tristram himself cannot make head or tail of. Dubious as this trial is even when read realistically, it is further undermined by the narrative time structure, which sets it in 2016 and hence, from the perspective of the novel's year of publication in 2012, in the future. Eventually, the ontology of the trial and its participants is utterly deconstructed when it becomes more and more plausible that the former emigrant Tristram has not only been wrongly considered dead by his friends and family in Ireland until he returns during the bust years, but "that he may be already/still dead during the novel's events" (McGlynn 2017, 47) and, hence, that the readers are 'listening' to a voice that reaches them from beyond the grave.

Kilroy's confessional male self-narrative constructs a corrupt masculine world where everybody participates playfully in a lethal game for power and where nobody is accountable for their misconduct (Flannery 2021, 844). Tristram, the modern heir of Sterne's Shandy and Joyce's Sir Tristram of *Finnegan's Wake* (first evoked in the prologue of *The Devil I Know*), is no more than a ghostly presence, a man who talks well and a lot but never quite materialises. When his testimony turns out to be the unnatural self-narrative of a dead man, it fails to fulfil the genre's conventional function, which is to stabilise its narrator's identity after a long life of sin and suffering. Instead, Kilroy constructs a male protagonist adrift in an immoral universe that shares its precarious ontology with the contemporary financial market and where all the reckless men who vie for power and riches seem ultimately to lack real agency.

Caoilinn Hughes' narrator-protagonist Doharty Black must also appear in court. Unlike Kilroy's Tristram, however, he is not involved in dodgy property schemes and dubious financial transactions, but must defend himself for what Hughes imagines as an act of filial kindness. At the wish of his terminally ill father, he rereads the Bible "for [him to] find the bits that reference suicide" (Hughes 2020, 40). In *The Wild Laughter* it is "the ethical quandary of assisted suicide [that] prompts a thoughtful engagement with Ireland's shifting social mores" (Barekat 2020, n.p.). Putting aside their many lifelong differences, Hart and his better educated and more successful brother Cormac, a clever businessman, find a way to mix a cocktail of pills which Doharty hands to his father. As the candid narrator-protagonist confesses when giving testimony to the police, the Chief then took the lethal drugs himself, but unable to watch him suffer, Hart put an end to it by strangling the dying man with his own hands. With the support of Cormac's lawyers, his mother and brother turn against Doharty during the trial and make him the scapegoat for what the whole family had planned and seen through together.

A significant difference to Kilroy's *The Devil I Know* – and one which very effectively signals the absolute lack of any social institution of moral guidance in the world envisioned by *The Wild Laughter* – lies in the different narrative representations of the protagonists' testimonies. While Kilroy's novel is framed by the communicative situation of the trial so that Tristram's self-narrative is identical with his testimony at court, Hughes' self-narrator Doharty presents his testimony directly to the reader (after the trial at court that constructed a narrative in which Doharty is the sole culprit). The beginning of *The Wild Laughter* is clearly an invitation to the reader to act as jury to Doharty's confessional tale:

> When is a confession an absolution and when is it a sentencing, I'd like to find out. I suppose there's only one outcome for souls like us – heavy-going souls the like of mine and the long-lost Chief's – and not a good one. But I'll lay it on the line, if only to remind the People of who they are: a far cry from neutral judicial equipment. Determining the depth of rot that's blackening the surface can't always be left to deities or legislators – sometimes what's needed is to tie a string around the tooth and shut the door lively. (Hughes 2020, 1)

Interestingly, this personal confession addressed to "the People" – or whoever may listen – discloses much more than the mean plot of the businessman Cormac and the legal system's failure to administer justice. In *The Wild Laughter*, the agents of global capitalism and the neo-liberal state are just one side of the coin. As the self-narration reveals at the intersection of discourse and story, there are other factors that lead to the Black family's demise and Doharty Black's wrongful imprisonment. By fashioning Doharty as a narrator-protagonist whose judgment must not be fully trusted, Hughes's novel demonstrates that any nostalgia for the old Irish way and the traditional Irish family unit is beside the point. Certainly, Doharty's genuine admiration for his father and his life's work turns him into the only character in the book who desperately strives to do the right thing. After all, he dedicates his youth to working on a lost farm and to supporting the Chief even though he has no real interest in leading the life of a farmer and has other, if only vague plans, for the future. Also, he, rather than his brother Cormack or his mother, lovingly takes upon himself all the hard care in the months leading to his father's final day. Yet his father's paternal rule and Doharty's admiration for it prepare the very ground for the tragic plot and the downfall of this loving son. Admirable as his sacrifices are, especially when compared with the egotisms of the other characters, to contemporary readers Doharty's adulation of the old patriarch seems misplaced. After all, his betrayal by his brother and mother is also shown to be a fairly direct consequence of the misalliances that the Chief's paternal rule generated, or at least enabled.

In comparison then, *The Wild Laughter* offers a self-narrative of a man who is as unmoored in a (post-)Celtic Tiger Ireland devoid of moral bearings as the ghostly Tristram of Kilroy's *The Devil I Know*. The plot level also shows him to be a man who has no control over the consequences of his actions. Ultimately, Doharty's self-narrative confession, however, also imagines a man who is still very much alive and kicking after his wrongful conviction at the hands of an Irish court. Hughes' hero has not yet given up hope that there may be somebody somewhere out there who will hear his full confession, appreciate his efforts to swim against the tide and help him find his way. Thus, while the self-narrative of Kilroy's Tristram performs the disappearance of the Celtic Tiger male, Doharty's confession to the reader opens up a communicative situation where it is possible to critically discuss and reflect traditional – and still prevalent – processes of male identity construction. Hughes' novel thus posits that while narrative fiction may not provide easy answers, literature is (the one and only) social institution (in Celtic Tiger Ireland?), where pressing moral issues can be rigorously and disinterestedly pursued and where, as a consequence, renegotiations of masculine identity are possible.

3. Male Focalisers and the Reconfiguration of the Irish Family

As new variants of the family saga, Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015), Hellen Cullen's *The Truth Must Dazzle Gradually* (2020) and Ruth Gilligan's *The Butchers* (2020) imagine worlds which allow (almost) equal narrative space to a number of male and female character-focalisers. In the tradition of the 19th century realist novel, but with decisive structural and ideological differences, these novels generate complex models of contemporary family lives (which sometimes more, sometimes less obviously invite allegorical readings of the family as a microstructure of the national macrostructure). These new family sagas written by women do so mainly by reimagining masculinities and reconstructing male plots. All three novels decentralise the heterosexual romance and marriage plot, and thus renegotiate male (and female) gender roles and relations. By expertly combining covert heterodiegetic narrations with multiple focalisation, they also perfectly integrate what Fredric Jameson has called *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013): a plot driven by action or "storytelling" and its "dissolution in the literary representation of affect" (10).

Anne Enright's *The Green Road* reconstructs familial relations and breaks with the neo-liberal gender implications of the realist novel through a fascinating integration of story and discourse, character-system and narrative mediation which foregrounds a concept of masculinity that the author depicts in a chapter dedicated to the gay community in New York at the height of the 1990s AIDS crisis. Enright's novel about the Irish Madigan family is divided into two parts. The first section, entitled "Leaving" consists of five individual and largely disconnected narratives, each of which focuses on one of the family members, none of whom are content with their lives or, indeed, have found their place in the world: Hanna, Dan, Constance, Emmet and the four siblings' mother, Rosaleen. In several vignettes, the second section, entitled "Coming Home" narrates the reunion of the four adult Madigan children with their mother for Christmas 2005, when they must deal with Rosaleen's decision to sell the family home. The individual vignette-like narratives of both parts of *The Green Road* are presented in different variations on the third-person figural narration which experiments with different adjustments of narrative distance and approximation and which provides (in the case of Hanna's story, for example) less or (in the case of Emmet's) more direct access to the individual character's minds and feelings.

There is one significant exception, however. The short story dedicated to the eldest son, Dan Madigan, is told in the "we"-form (or as Anne Enright called it during a discussion at the Nijmegen IASIL conference in July 2018, in the form of the "choral I"), by a voice which speaks for the New York gay community of which Dan becomes a member after his emigration to the United States in the early 1990s. Dan's story, as it unfolds in the first part of the novel, is significantly, and unlike the other characters' stories, not really about Dan as an individual but about a closeted gay Irishman, who is not quite a member of the homosexual 'we'-community, which Enright depicts as having liberated itself from the taboos of Western bourgeois morality and as practising an exemplary ethics of care at the climax of the raging AIDS epidemic. Dan is drawn into this community because it is driven by the spirit of a liberal, but inclusive and caring 'we'-approach to the joys and pains of life, a communal spirit that the Madigan family had never been able to create among themselves, but which each individual family member continues to yearn for.

Significantly, the Madigans do experience a brief moment in which they become an affective union during the Christmas season of 2005. After their mother had gone lost on the Green Road but was found again and rescued by her sons and daughters, she is visited by her children in hospital.

> [Rosaleen] looked on her children as though *we* were a wonder to her, and indeed *we* were a bit of a wonder to ourselves. *We* had been, for those hours on the dark mountainside, a force. A family.
>
> There followed a time of great kindness and generosity, not just from neighbours and from strangers, but among the Madigans. (Enright 2016, 292; my emphasis)

New York's (mostly male) queer community, as imagined by Enright in the chapter "Dan," thus provides a model for the modern Irish family. For a fleeting moment, at least, the Madigans' story can also be told by a "choral I" which represents a harmonious community. Whether and how this communal family spirit can be transported into the future, remains open, as the novel quickly reverts again to its narrative focus on the individual characters. However, while Hanna and Constance rapidly withdraw into their own private lives, dealing with pressing health and family issues, the male characters continue to concentrate on building and rebuilding networks of friends and family. Regretting the egotisms of the closeted homosexual he had been during his early years in New York, "[Dan's] heart was busy with the cohort of the dead: men he should have loved and had not loved. Men he had hated for being sexy, beautiful, out, dying, free. It was not his fault. He had forgiven himself [...]" (Enright 2016, 294). Real relief only comes for Dan, however, when he discovers that Greg, one of the central figures of his years in New York, is still alive and when he musters the strength to write to him.

In the end, Emmet's way of life provides the most inclusive model of a modern family, with him sharing a house with his Dutch girl-friend Saar and Denholm, an immigrant from Nigeria, who has found shelter in Emmet's spare room and is now a student of International Development (Enright 2016, 211). In an important paragraph towards the end of the novel, Enright thoroughly redefines male strength and familial concepts of love:

> [Emmet] meditated for an hour each morning and, when he was done, stretched his hands out, giving thanks for the people sleeping in the rooms on either side of him, Saar on the one hand and Denholm on the other. This was the way relationships went for him now. The sex with Saar was important, of course it was, the sex with Saar was an intimate thing. But he also knew it was something other than sex that moved him along his life's course. It was a kind of tension and it was here, in this configuration.

> Emmet would never fall in love. He would 'love', he would, that is to say 'tend'. He would cure and guide, but he did not have the helplessness in him that love required. (Enright 2016, 296)

It is in Emmet's home, eventually, that even Rosaleen, the all-devouring mother, "who was so needy, was always telling you to go away" (Enright 2016, 304), might find a place where she is welcome and invited to stay.

While Enright's *The Green Road* comes close to avoiding any linear emplotment of her male (and female) characters' lives by way of breaking up the storyline into a kaleidoscopic assembly of integrated narrative vignettes, Helen Cullen unfolds a staggeringly intelligent and gentle heterosexual romance plot in *The Truth Must Dazzle Gradually* (2020). The narration accompanies Maeve and Murtagh from their first encounter at the centre of Trinity College to Inis Óg, a little island off the west coast of Ireland, where Murtagh takes over the studio of a retiring potter and where the couple build a home for what will soon be a family of six. The love story between Maeve and Murtagh, whose experiences, thoughts and feelings are mostly presented by a covert heterodiegetic narrator (as are those of their children, who remain minor characters), is, however, firmly distanced as a story of the past. After all, the novel opens with Maeve's suicide 27 years after the lovers first meet.

The first two thirds of the novel configure Murtagh, the male main protagonist, as a loving husband and father who fights a hopeless battle against the darkness which Maeve's life-long depressions throw over their family life. The last third of *The Truth Must Dazzle Gradually* then charts how Murtagh and his four children deal with the trauma of Maeve's suicide. In an unexpected turn of events that is as surprising as it is convincingly constructed, the widowed Murtagh discovers that he has developed a deep and reciprocated love for Fionn, a close friend of the family in the early years of his marriage and parenthood with whom they lost touch in the years leading up to Maeve's death. Firmly establishing Murtagh as the single main character, this double love plot imagines a modern man who remains true to himself, his convictions and his love throughout. Against the pull of this unexpected twist in the plot, Murtagh is conceptualised not as a dynamic but as a static character, not as a man who must 'develop' in order to acknowledge his homosexuality, but as an utterly reliable man who loves his partners as the individuals they are and dedicates his life to keeping his family and the island community together by adapting traditional Irish ways of life to modern circumstances. As such, his life's work is publicly appreciated even by the island's priest, who scolds his parishioners for having vandalised Murtagh's pottery in an act of homophobic violence (Cullen 2020, 313–314).[9]

Like *The Green Road* and *The Truth Must Dazzle Gradually,* Ruth Gilligan's *The Butchers* is a family saga with multiple focalisers, which offers yet another narrative design that contributes to reimagining the Irish family through its character-system, as well as through a restructuring of the love and marriage plot. Set in the Irish borderland during the height of the BSE crisis, *The Butchers* revolves around two families involved in cattle farming. Two of the four main protagonists and focalisers, Grá and her daughter Úna, are members of the Butchers, a small group of families who follow an old Irish tradition: their adult males travel the land, slaughtering cattle for farmers who believe an ancient curse that warns that eight men must touch a cow in the moment of its death, otherwise a plague will sweep across the land. The other two protagonists (and focalisers), Fionn and his son Davey, together with their wife and mother Eileen, live on a modern Irish cattle farm. This character-system as such dislodges conventional heteronormative structures, as Gilligan's critique of old and new, traditional and modern family models is mirrored in the refusal to give centre stage to characters that represent lovers or married couples. Rather, it emphasises the relationship between and across generations, telling the story of the Butchers by focusing on the female characters and that of the modern family by focusing on the father and his son.

Fionn's storyline imagines a man who desperately and haplessly tries to atone for the spells of drunkenness and violence that have estranged him from his wife and son. Tragically, however, the only way that he sees to achieve this aim is to get involved in the smuggling activities of a capitalist mafia organisation that illegally imports banned British beef into Ireland. Creating a perfect "symbiosis […] of [a] pure form of storytelling with impulses of scenic elaboration" (Jameson 2013, 11) that represent the affects aligned with such traditional trajectories of male agency, Gilligan's novel demonstrates that Fionn cannot but enact the outdated male plot. Instead of spending the last days with his terminally ill wife and attempting to re-establish a bond with his son before Davey leaves school and moves to Dublin, he sets out to 'earn' the money for an expensive operation that will very probably not even save his wife from dying of a brain tumour. Thus, *The Butchers* contributes to the exploration "of the fragmented nature of [male] agency that is produced in concert with [the dominant social] structure" (Waling 2019, 101), as outlined in recent sociological studies. By giving ample space to Fionn's suffering and pain, the novel also emphasises that "to examine changing social conditions and ideas about gender and sexuality" (Waling 2019, 101) it is important to avoid "a rational/emotional dualism" (Waling 2019, 102). Narratively representing Fionn's plot as "an emotional, embodied and cognitive process in which social actors have feelings about and try to understand and alter their lives in relation to their social and natural environment and to others," the novel points to the severe difficulties encountered by individuals who feel that they cannot meet traditional gender expectations (Holmes 2010, 140; also qtd. in Waling 2019, 101).

Fionn's son Davey, in contrast, finds an alternative context for his own path towards manhood in the heroic classical tradition of Greek and Roman mythology. Its appreciation of androgynous gender concepts and its openness for homosexual relationships allows him to self-confidently enjoy his erotic encounters with the youngest of the Butchers and eventually to escape the narrow world of the Irish border region and become a journalist who "liv[es] with his partner [in] upstate [New York]" (Gilligan 2020, 285).

Significantly, the most 'masculine' plot-line in *The Butchers* is, however, reserved for Úna, a teenage girl who sets out to follow and, thus, break the tradition of her community by claiming, as a female, the right to be a Butcher. The difficulties of redefining gender roles and engendering processes of identity construction that enable individuals to lead a happy life as ethically and morally upright persons are foregrounded when this young girl's immersive story of emancipation turns into a dark, 'masculine' revenge plot featuring her as the avenging murderer of the photographer who not only had an illicit affair with her mother but whose egotistic obsession with his artwork led to the Butchers' dissolution.

4. Conclusion: Why Narratology?

To establish a new literary corpus one needs ample space: space to assemble and analyse a large number of individual texts, and then (at least from a new formalist's or cultural narratologist's perspective) to interpret and compare them by situating each text in its cultural and historical context. Concentrating on (only a few of the) 'cross-gender' novels written by Irish women writers in the 21st century, the present article is restricted to a small section of a vast textual corpus; and can only make a small contribution to mapping the field of 'women writing men' since the rise of the novel around 1700. What I nevertheless hope to have demonstrated in my overview is that the analytical tools provided by narratology are effective instruments for charting a newly opening field.

In the first place they help to make visible the correlation of certain structural features with dominant thematic issues. In the field at issue here, questions of (male) agency on the one hand and the relationship between the sexes and generations on the other are certainly relevant for all the novels discussed. These fall broadly into two groups: cross-gender self-narratives, and novels with (multiple and) male focalisers; of these, the novels which feature first-person male narrators are predominantly occupied with the difficulty experienced by men in finding their social and moral bearings in (post-)Celtic Tiger Ireland. At the heart of these novels, which minutely trace narrative performances of identity, lies the question whether and how Irish men can act and interact with others so as to lead a morally upright life and find happiness as individuals. Novels more interested in renegotiating traditional family concepts trace the inner and outer emotional and social conflicts of male character-focalisers by integrating those characters' thoughts and actions into a larger tableau of multiple perspectives, and show how the different co-protagonists' actions and desires reflect and deflect each other. A systematic focus on other aspects of narrative fiction situated at the interface of story and discourse, such as narrative 'time' or 'space,' lies beyond the confines of this paper, however useful these categories may be in further structuring the corpus of novels in question here.[10]

Secondly, a narratological approach also helps to tease out differences and to contrast and compare different narrative solutions to questions addressed by novels of the same sub-type. Any simplistic form-to-function-mapping is easily avoided in new formalist analyses that apply a whole set of narratological tools to each novel and sub-section of the field, and interpret the structural observations thus gained in relevant socio-historical contexts. As the comparison of Kilroy's and Hughes' confessional self-narratives in *The Devil I Know* and *The Wild Laughter* has demonstrated, even cross-gender novels which construct almost identical communicative situations on the level of discourse may provide very different perspectives on the same dominant issue, in this case the loss of male agency in contemporary neo-liberal Ireland.

Thirdly and finally, I would claim that a contextualising narratological approach as practised in this article can also be useful in tracing diachronic developments and highlighting similarities and differences on a wider canvas: namely in the narrative construction of masculinity in women writers' novels from the 18th to the 21st century. This hypothesis must, however, be proven elsewhere.

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[1] Caroline Magennis (2021, 2–3) has also warned her readers recently that "each generation wishes to believe they have created the world anew."
[2] See, for example, Sarah Frantz's and my analysis of Woolf's hypothesis in our "Introduction" to Frantz / Rennhak (2010), 1–2.
[3] In *Disciplining Love. Austen and the Modern Man* (2007), Michael Kramp analyses how "[Jane] Austen's novels […] present a modernizing nation that attempts to regulate how its men stylize and fashion themselves as sexualized subjects" (1). The volume, *Women Constructing Men* (2010), that I co-edited with Sarah Frantz, tentatively charts the history of female novelists and their male characters from 1740-2000 and my monograph *Narratives* cross-gendering *und die Konstruktion männlicher Identitäten* (2013) studies the phenomenon of first-person male narration in novels by female writers around 1800.
[4] For an earlier assessment of the scholarly field see the "Introduction" to Frantz / Rennhak (2010, 1–3).
[5] "As Sommer (2007) has noted, feminist narratology remains the 'most established strand' of the contextual turn [in narratology]" (Lanser 2014, 210).
[6] See Rennhak (2013, 3–8) for a more detailed discussion of the argument developed in this paragraph.
[7] Lanser (2014, 211), for example, has accepted Ruth Page's critique that her early work "rests on a 'binary model of gender that emphasize[s] difference' and tends 'to construct the category of 'women' as if it were a universal group' [2006: 46–47]." As a consequence, Lanser herself set out to "queer(ing) narratology" (2014, 213–214) and developed reading strategies that avoid the rewriting of heteronormative patterns by focusing on the intersection of gender and queer sexualities.
[8] According to the typology suggested in Carolin Gebauer's *Making Time: World Construction in the Present-Tense Novel* (2021), Baume's novel very well fits into the category which attributes a "thematic function" to present-tense narration.
[9] As Claire Lynch has convincingly argued in her lecture "The 'art of precious scars': Making, Breaking, and Repairing the Irish Family in Helen Cullen's *The Dazzling Truth*" (University of Wuppertal, Germany, 28 April 2021; University of Siegen, Germany, 18 May 2021), Murtagh's work as a potter in general, and in particular the fact that he takes over and modernises his predecessor's pottery on the island, are emblematic of this general logic.
[10] How men must adjust when they move from an Irish small town or the countryside to the Irish capital or vice versa, for example, is narratively unfolded in novels which juxtapose different semantic spaces such as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* (2007), Belinda McKeon's *Solace* (2011), Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018), and Mary Costello's *The River Capture* (2019).