FACULDADE DE LETRAS
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MAKING THINGS PERFECTLY QUEER.

REPRESENTATION AND RECOGNITION IN MARY DORCEY

Dissertação de Mestrado em Estudos de Cultura, Literatura e Línguas Modernas, Ramo de Estudos Ingleses e Americanos, orientada pela Professora Doutora Adriana Bebiano, apresentada ao Departamento de Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra.

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“[It] was not in the light we lived, but in the spaces between – in the darkness.”

Mary Dorcey

Tornando Tudo Perfeitamente *Queer*: Representação e Reconhecimento em Mary Dorcey

Resumo:

Como a primeira escritora a discutir abertamente a homossexualidade na literatura irlandesa, Mary Dorcey criou inúmeros cenários de representação e reconhecimento para a comunidade LGBTQ+. Na sua coleção de contos de 1989 *A Noise from the Woodshed* – foco desta dissertação – a autora apresenta a sua aliança e o seu apoio a grupos sociais ostracizados pela sociedade irlandesa: mulheres, idosas/os, e, acima de tudo, lésbicas. Através de representações verosímeis do amor *queer*, Dorcey privilegia a experiência lésbica, apresentando personagens e relações lésbicas em tudo semelhantes às representações heterossexuais convencionais. Assim, a verisimilhança dos contos faz com que seja possível uma descrição de pessoas *queer* como pessoas comuns numa representação que tem como base o amor.

Às comunidades marginalizadas é frequentemente dado reconhecimento com a ajuda da literatura porque esta contribui para a educação das/os leitoras/es. A representação autoral das personagens principais como mulheres que, por casualidade, são lésbicas, mas que não se deixam ser exclusivamente definidas pela sua sexualidade é uma vitória de peso na luta contra as representações hegemónicas e os estereótipos associados a mulheres e a indivíduos LGBTQ+. Mais que isso, a criação de uma pletora de personagens femininas em situações e relacionamentos convencionais, aumenta a possibilidade da aceitação de uma naturalização do *queer*.

As questões de representação e reconhecimento não são apenas cruciais para pessoas *queer*: são ainda mais importantes para mulheres escritoras, também elas invisibilizadas ao longo da história da literatura. Tendo facultado a comunidade *queer* com uma representação positiva, Mary Dorcey merece o devido reconhecimento dentre os seus pares na ficção contemporânea irlandesa, algo que esta dissertação espera conseguir fazer. Os retratos verosímeis que Dorcey faz das pessoas *queer* e dos seus relacionamentos são um importante contributo em prol do reconhecimento do amor *queer* como amor humano convencional.

Palavras-chave: Queer, Representação, Reconhecimento, literatura irlandesa, Mary Dorcey

Making Things Perfectly Queer: Representation and Recognition in Mary Dorcey

Abstract:

As the first author to openly discuss homosexuality in Irish literature, Mary Dorcey has created numerous scenarios of representation and recognition for the LGBTQ+ community. In her 1989 short story collection *A Noise from the Woodshed* – the focus of this thesis – the author displays her alliance and support for those ostracized by the Irish society: women, the elderly, and above all, lesbians. Through verisimilar representations of queer love, Dorcey privileges the lesbian experience by presenting lesbian characters and relationships in the same way heterosexual relationships are conventionally represented. Hence, the verisimilitude of the short stories makes possible the description of queer people as regular and ordinary in a portrayal that comes out of love.

Marginalized communities are often granted recognition with the help of literature as the latter contributes to the education of its readers. The author's representation of the main characters as women who just happen to be lesbians, but who do not let themselves be solely defined by their sexuality is a huge achievement in the fight against the established roles and stereotypes associated with women and LGBTQ+ individuals. Furthermore, the creation of a plethora of women-characters in ordinary and familiar situations and relationships increases the possibilities of queer recognition.

Matters of representation and recognition are crucial for queer people, as well as for women writers, given their invisibility in the history of literature. Having gifted queers the chance to be positively represented, Mary Dorcey deserves proper appreciation amongst her peers in Irish contemporary fiction writing, something this thesis hopes to do. Dorcey's verisimilar portrayals of queer people and relationships are an important contribution towards the recognition of queer love as conventional human love.

Keywords: Queer, Representation, Recognition, Irish literature, Mary Dorcey

Table of Contents

Glossary **1**

Introduction: ***The silence is the loudest thing*** **2**

Chapter 1: ***Into the light of everyday pain*** **11**

1.1- A history of Queer 11

1.2 – Ireland and Queerness: Overcoming Oppression 18

Chapter 2: ***I am no ordinary woman*** **30**

2.1 – Mary Dorcey, the woman 30

2.2 – The fight for change 33

2.3 – A voice to the voiceless 35

Chapter 3: ***Reinvented, / rebirthed / a woman in love. / That ordinary thing*** **42**

3.1 – A Fertile Chaos in "A Noise from the Woodshed" 44

3.2 – The Heterosexual Outsider in "The Husband" 50

3.3 – Unreasonable Trepidations in "Introducing Nessa" 55

3.4 – A Joyous *Rendezvous* in "Sweet, Practised, Endings" 60

3.5 – The Noise that Broke the Silence: My Impressions 65

Chapter 4: ***Come without words / to give a voice to silence*****, An Interview with Mary Dorcey** **67**

4.1 – A Conversation with Mary Dorcey 67

4.2 – A Voice Echoed: My Afterthoughts 74

Conclusion: ***It seems / we were just getting started*** **80**

Bibliography **90**

Annexes **97**

Glossary

Aosdána: Derived from the Gaelic "People of the arts"; One of the most important organizations of Irish art.

Dáil Éireann: (Can also be referred as just "Dáil"); Lower House belonging to the Parliament of the Republic of Ireland.

Mo náire Thú: Gaelic for "Shame on you".

O céad mile Failte: Expression used to great people meaning "A hundred thousand welcomes".

Quidnunc: Person who knows all the latest gossip or news.

Seanad Éireann: The Senate of Ireland.

Tánaiste: The Deputy Prime Minister.

TD: Teachtaí Dála – a member of the Dáil Éireann; An equivalent position to that of an MP (Member of Parliament).

TDanna: Plural (abbreviated) form of Teachtaí Dála in Irish. Equivalent to "TDs" in English.

Taoiseach: Prime Minister; Head of the Irish Government.

Introduction: *The silence is the loudest thing*[1]

Matters of representation and visibility are crucial for LGBTQ+ communities everywhere as most members have, for decades, been degraded, misunderstood, and mistreated because of their sexuality and identity. For members of this community, being able to see their sexuality positively represented in literature, cinema, and in the media makes them feel recognized, understood, and appreciated. These representations epitomize not only the natural aspect of queer love, but, according to Páraic Kerrigan in the 2017 "Gay (in)visibility in Irish media" from the *Irish Research Council*, the "damaging and problematic depictions of minority groups." (Kerrigan, 2017). Being able to see represented what you are, who you are, and who you love, makes way for an open, unjudgmental way of facing and understanding real, nurturing human love in all its varieties.

Given Ireland's conservative politics and culture throughout the 20th century, the need for an encouraging representation of queer identity is crucial. The country's heteronormative and misogynistic ways have often made it hard for people to find their voices as most times these are discredited or disregarded when defending themselves. The nation's intolerance towards queer people has always been blatant, with news outlets such as *The Nationalist* and *Leinster Times* claiming, in June 1985 (during the peak of the HIV epidemic) that the real killer disease wasn't AIDS, but homosexuality.

It took years for the eventual decriminalization of homosexuality to happen in 1993, and, although that is now secure, the community remains alert. In the 2018 *Independent.ie* article "'I am living the future that people of the 80s fought for' – LGBT+ people share their experiences growing up gay in Ireland", author Rachel Farrell reported Taoiseach Leo Varadkar's tribute to the suffering of Irish queers before the decriminalization of homosexuality. Varadkar claimed that these lived in a society "where their identity was feared and despised (…) We cannot erase the wrong that was done to them. What we can say is that we have learned as a society from their suffering." (Farrell, 2017).

Before the positive changes the LGBTQ+ community would experience, the grip that the State and the Church had on people made sure there was no room for questioning what wasn't regarded as lawful, or an unequivocal part of "human nature". For men, this meant

[1] All titles from this thesis' chapters are excerpts of poems by Mary Dorcey – namely from *Moving into the Space Cleared by our Mothers* (1991) and *The River That Carries Me* (1995).

becoming the breadwinner; for women, it meant being expected to fit into the designed role of the loving mother, the obedient wife, a caregiver. The 1937 Irish Constitution asserted that women's "life within the home [gives] to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved", further addressing the employability of women by stating: "The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home" (Constitution of Ireland, art. 41, sec. 2). This would be Éamon de Valera's[2] "The Ireland That We Dreamed Of", one with: "the romping of sturdy children, (…) the laughter of happy maidens whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desired that men should live." ("The Ireland That We Dreamed Of – Éamon de Valera", 0:25-0:50).

During these times of compliance for women and indulgence for men, there was no room for thinking about homosexuality, let alone question Ireland's heteronormative ways. In Heather Ingman's *Twentieth-century Fiction by Irish Women*, the author describes the country's heteronormative mindset, arguing: "Irish men were supposed to, and did, lay down their lives for Ireland. Irish women, with the example of the Virgin Mary set before them, were to embody the purity of the Irish nation." (Ingman, 2007: 7). These expected behaviors, as Ingman argues, would be found in literary works "far into the twentieth century" (Ingman, 2007: 7).

The collusion between Church and State since independence, and the power of the Catholic Church over bodies and minds, made it so that Irish Catholics regarded homosexuality as nothing other than deviancy, a position supported by the Vatican in 2003 (*The Irish Times,* 2003), one which somewhat prevailed in 2021 with the continuous ban on the blessing of homosexual couples (McGarry, 2021), regardless of the liberal politics of the Vatican under Pope Francis (since 2013). In a society as Church driven as Ireland was up until the 1990's, the power of the Catholic Church as an institution was obvious: saying one's prayers at night was as natural and familiar as going to Mass every Sunday to connect with one's beliefs and with God they so entrusted. Starting in the 1990's, however, the gut-wrenching truth about the many cases of sexual abuse within the Irish Catholic Church created what is now a wave of shame of the times when the church was at its peak of oppression – controlling people, while extremely out of control.

[2] Éamon de Valera (1882-1975). One of the leaders of The Easter Rising (1916), Irish guerrilla leader during the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), and later statesman. Served as Ireland's Taoiseach three different times, and as President from 1959-1973. De Valera was so influential that one speaks of the period between the independence and the late 1960's as "de Valera's Ireland."

An apology from the Vatican would come in August 2018 when Pope Francis visited Dublin – a visit which counted with the appearance of a little more than a fourth of the expected crowd. On the 2020 YouTube video "Sins of the fathers: Ireland's sex abuse survivors" by *Euronews*, four survivors gave testimony about the abuse they suffered at the hands of members of the clergy. Colm O'Gorman, one of the more than fourteen thousand (known) survivors, and Director of Amnesty International Ireland, spoke about the abuse and the subsequent acknowledgment and apology by Pope Francis:

> The way that the Church conducted itself and the hypocrisy and the corruption at the heart of the Church was revealed, and that led to people in Ireland rejecting the moral authority of the Church (…) for decades the Vatican called us liars. (…) they said we were telling lies, that we were fantasists, that this was anti-Catholic agenda, that there was no cover-up. So now the Pope says there was a cover-up and we're meant to think he's great for acknowledging the truth? That's the minimum. ("Sins of the fathers: Ireland's sex abuse survivors": 14:27-15:00)

With people drifting away from the controlling hand of the State's patriarchal standards, and with the power of the Church being diminished and destabilized, authors such as Mary Dorcey could, and eventually would, be given proper recognition for their discussion of queer love, a change in narrative which would have been difficult had the Church remained at its most autocratic. Although the bridge to equality is yet to be fully crossed, the future seems brighter each day and the hardships that have preceded this moment are not only remembered but respected. It was because of the relentless work of members from Movements such as the Sexual Liberations Movement, the Irish Women United Movement, the Women for Radical Change Movement, and others, that change would come. Slowly, but surely, these made Ireland a nation more considerate of human rights and sexual citizenship.

In order to understand the revolutionary shift of the sociocultural scene in Ireland, it is imperative to understand the struggles, and subsequent victories, the LGBTQ+ community has experienced. It must be mentioned that these moments would not have happened without the people behind them – and that some people's activism, words, and actions, brought about unthinkable and revolutionary changes. People such as David Norris[3], and organizations such as the Irish Women's Liberation Movement made possible such things as the decriminalization of homosexuality and the right for abortion and contraceptives – all once desirable, yet unconceivable things.

[3] David Norris (b.1944). Irish author and scholar, human rights campaigner, and independent Senator (since 1987).

Irish author Mary Dorcey is another one of those people: through her life-long work and activism, Dorcey fought for sexuality and gender equality in Ireland. Through her writing – fiction as well as poetry – Mary Dorcey created a positive reference point for queer love and relationships. Dorcey's natural and loving representations of queer love created scenarios many LGBTQ+ people can relate to. It moreover made it possible for those outside the community to read and experience this aspect of human love which had, for so long, been hidden. As a female Irish author who lived through the oppression of the Irish Catholic Church, and the hardships women and the LGBTQ+ community experienced, Dorcey's portrayal of queer love is one of resilience. This resilience, and the author's life experience made me want to explore Dorcey's literature: she was a woman writer in a time when women writers experienced problems in publishing, being then invisible and forgotten; a lesbian in a time when Ireland was ferociously heteronormative. I believe that the author's resilience to write about queer love and relationships, and about women who battled the oppressive roles they were confined to, gives the author's work a sense of understanding and relatedness many can identify themselves with.

As a side note, I must mention that gathering up information about Mary Dorcey proved to be, at times, difficult as there is a lack of critical essays published about the author and her literary works. The access to books and poems from her authorship (be it online or offline) are equally limited. This invisibility of an author who did so much for the queer community by putting them on the literary map is another reason behind why I decided to write about her. Mary Dorcey's work deserves proper appreciation as it not only broke down the hetero-centered narrative in Ireland but did so in a way that gave proper recognition to queer love.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will be addressing the issues of sexuality and queerness firstly as a short survey, and then positioning the argument in Ireland. As to fully comprehend why Mary Dorcey and *A Noise from the Woodshed* represent an improved way of thinking about sexuality, we first need to understand the historical context of the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland. The first part of this chapter will focus on the various definitions of the concept "queer" – going over the word's etymology, its first time being used to mean "homosexual" in 1894 by John Sholto Douglas, the Marquess of Queensbury, and its eventual appearance in *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang* in 1914. Moreover, I will be discussing the presence of the word "queer" in several dictionaries *versus* its role in people's daily lives taking in consideration Eve Sedgwick's idea quoted in Joseph Valente's "Self-Queering Ireland?": "["queer" represents an] open mesh of possibility… lapses and excesses of

meaning when the… elements of sexuality… cannot be made to signify monolithically." (Valente, 2010: 25).

In the second part of the first chapter, I will be discussing what is means to be queer in Ireland in spite of the nation's heteronormative ways. I will begin by paying close attention to the issues of secrecy and fear that LGBTQ+ people constantly lived with. I will then be discussing the different issues that paved the way for emancipation within the community such as the 1974 Sexual Liberation Movement Conference which got people together to discuss homosexuality, creating a stir in the debate about queerness and sexual orientations. I will also be going over the historic cases of Declan Flynn, David Norris, and the first-ever Irish gay parade which took place in 1983.

Moving from all these victories from the past, the discussion will move on to present-day issues, going over the testimony of LGBTQ+ people from two articles: the first, the previously mentioned 2018 *Independet.ie* article "'I am living the future that people of the 80s fought for' – LGBT+ people share their experiences growing up gay in Ireland" by Rachel Farrell; the second, the 2019 *The Irish Times*' article "LGBT life in rural Ireland: 'You can feel like you're the only one'" by Patrick Kelleher. The goal of this analysis is to explore the feelings of Irish queers which are now growing and maturing in a more "homo-conforming" country, thus living "the future that the people of the 80s fought for." (Farrell, 2018).

In the second chapter, I will be discussing author Mary Dorcey, addressing her life, her activism, and her career. Dorcey's career spans over forty years of literary works (including poems, novels, and short-stories) which have awarded her recognition as one of the best Irish short-story writers. The author has also been recognized by John J. Han in *Irish Women Writers: An A-to-Z Guide* (edited by Alexander G. Gonzalez) as "a forerunner of the lesbian and gay rights movement and of lesbian writing in modern Ireland." (Han, 2006: 104). Dorcey is moreover recognized as the first author to openly discuss homosexuality in the Irish literary scene, having done so in many of her works. Most of the first part of this chapter will be focused on a biography of the author, going over her childhood, the influence of authors (at the time) banned in Ireland, her relationships, and her family's impact in her life and work.

As an activist, Dorcey is a founding member of groups such as Irishwomen United and Women for Radical Change – groups who fought for reproductive and health rights for women. As an author, Dorcey's eagerness and openness to write about lesbian love made room for judgmental comments, something the author discussed in Lauren Guy's 2016 "What's the Point

of LGBT Literature" from *The University Times*: "By identifying myself not only as lesbian but also writing about lesbian romance and eroticism, I broke the deepest taboo we had in our society and was viewed as a pariah by the majority of the culture." (Guy, 2016). As an Irish woman who has published ten books, as well as been featured in a number of anthologies, Mary Dorcey has always recognized the challenges of being both a female author, and a lesbian author.

In an interview with Nuala Archer in 1990, Mary Dorcey talked about being both a female and a lesbian author. In "The Spaces between the Words: Mary Dorcey Talks to Nuala Archer", the author spoke about the difficulty of "making the freedom to write openly about the subject in one's work, without it becoming one's whole identity. I would like to have a private life, but homosexual people are not allowed one – we either have a secret life or a notorious one." (Dorcey, 1990: 22). Additionally, the author discussed the differences between being a woman writer and a lesbian writer in Ireland, arguing that whereas "Women writers (…) seem to increase by the hour here" (Dorcey, 1990: 22), she only knew "of two lesbians living in Ireland who write but not as lesbians or about lesbians. I know of another who writes as a lesbian but has not yet had a book published." (Dorcey, 1990: 22).

Thirty-one years later, in her contribution to the 2021 anthology *Look! It's a Woman Writer* edited by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Dorcey spoke about the present-day difficulties of being a female writer: "It is still more difficult for a woman writer to be published, more difficult to be reviewed." (Dorcey, 2021: 246). Dorcey's goal as an author has been to give a voice to those marginalized: having lived in a world of "silence, repression, superstition, guilt and fear" (Dorcey, 2021: 240), giving a voice to marginalized women seems to be an act of activism, one which does not go unnoticed.

The third chapter will be focused on the groundbreaking short story collection *A Noise from the Woodshed* (1989) where the author shows her "unique gift for both irony and lyricism [making] her fiction at once universal, feminist, and especially Irish", as stated in the blurb of the collection's 1st edition. The pioneering book was published by the British Only Women Press, Radical Feminist & Lesbian Publishers when Mary Dorcey was in her late thirties. Despite being repeatedly reviewed in England, in Ireland the collection was written about in hushed tones, with the book's reviews being essentially focused on the author's sexuality. As to be concise with my work, this chapter will only include an analysis of the short stories which mention queer love. I will be paying close attention to the way the author portrays the

characters, from those who are experiencing their very own queer awakenings[4], to those closest to them – partners, friends, daughters, mothers. This analysis will include a short synopsis, a reference to the thematics from each story, and a short analysis of the most important characters. At the end of each analysis, each theme will be commented taking in consideration its importance to the LGBTQ+ community and to the understanding of queer identity.

Chapter four will include the edited transcript from an interview with author Mary Dorcey, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and a privilege. We met for an hour and fifteen minutes via Zoom on the 18th of October 2021. During the meeting, we discussed matters of sexuality, queer identity, and queer love. We moreover spoke about the role of the Church in Ireland, going over its peak of authority and its eventual fall from grace, touching as well on matters of secrecy and changes the LGBTQ+ community has gone through in the past decades. I was lucky enough to ask Mary Dorcey about *A Noise from the Woodshed*, wanting to know more about its precedents, its consequences, and its themes. I was furthermore enlightened on the author's fears and worries before and after publishing the revolutionary book. Effectively, this opportunity gave me insight impossible to gather elsewhere about the author's personal life: her childhood, her mother's and grandmother's aide and influence, and what driving force made her become the writer she is today.

By the end of the thesis, I will reflect on Mary Dorcey's literary work by looking into the importance of queer awakenings, queer identity, lesbianism and the hidden, yet ever-present role of bisexuality. The queer awakenings in Mary Dorcey's short stories aren't circumscribed to an established mold as these are portrayed in women-characters who have been married for decades, in women who have had children, in women who have either loved or despised men. These are found in women-characters who have conformed to the sociocultural requirements of what being an Irish woman was, in teenagers, and in young girls who are just now coming to terms with who they are, and who they love. Although incommensurably different, these women were sure about one thing: the love they felt for their women lovers.

The issue of bisexuality and of the need for a positive portrayal of this sexuality is important as bisexual people have often been mistreated by those both inside and outside the LGBTQ+ community. In fact, most bisexual people have been told, at least once in their lifetime, that they are either selfish or confused, being moreover unwilling victims of stereotypes and misconceptions. In "What People Get Wrong About Bisexuality", Nadia

[4] The romantic, erotic, and sexual feelings awaken and developed by women, men, and others, towards someone who identifies themselves as the same gender.

Nooreyezdan discusses some of these stereotypes, including the idea that "they'd be more likely to cheat on a partner, [as well as the] argument that bisexual people don't actually exist at all – they're either gay, straight, or lying." (Nooreyezdan, 2019). Given these thoughts, preconceptions and misconceptions, the way authors such as Mary Dorcey represent bisexuality is crucial to the community as the author describes women who were once with men but are now in love with women as people who simply moved on from one relationship to another – there is no persistent, dull reason; there are no stereotypes, no changes in appearances, actions, or mannerisms.

The naturality and verisimilitude of Dorcey's portrayal of queer relationships (particularly lesbian relationships) go against the grain of Ireland's heteronormative, misogynistic, and patriarchal culture. By representing women as unselfish people who want to break free of society's restraints by going against the norm of being a wife, a mother, a caregiver and a nurturer, the author represents the queer community as it is: people who want, more than anything, to love and be loved in their normality and variety. In Dorcey's work, the known and expected behaviors of lesbians and bisexuals are not used to demean queer women, but to exemplify the way people outside of the community regard these. Mary Dorcey's representation of queer identity is deserving of attention, of study, and investigation as the author struggled alongside other marginalized women, recognized the problem, and tried to create a world of representation and recognition.

By choosing to speak about these themes, Dorcey unwillingly signed up for a lifetime of both praise and judgment: the same thing some applauded the author for, others showed disapproval of. By choosing to portray women from different phases in life – from young pre-pubescent teens to divorced adult women, and women who had had long-term marriages and relationships with men, Dorcey became a victim of scrutiny by some inside of the community who deemed the presence of married women an insult to themselves. During our interview, the author commented on this issue, stating: "The fact that the character, (…) [in *Biography of Desire*] was married and had a child, a lot of gay women didn't like it for that reason. I mean, I'm used to getting attacked from all sides (…) I'm always being attacked for some reason." (See *infra* p. 72). Albeit some, such as myself, admire and praise Mary Dorcey for her brave choice to give a voice to those who were once considered outcasts. For giving a voice to the voiceless, and making this a voice that comes from love, and not traumatic representations of queerness, Dorcey's portrayal of queer identity is unmatched.

Above all, representation and visibility matter: being able to see yourself, people who look like you, act like you, people who love who love and how you love, being represented in a positive light is crucial. Seeing your sexuality being portrayed as a natural, loving phenomenon and not as something fetishized, used in a heteronormative world to sexually satisfy men, thus creating, according to Aoife Mallon in the 2013 "Colourful voices: the experience of young lesbians combating homophobia and heteronormativity", a "complete erasure of lesbian existence, except as a pornographic prelude" (Mallon, 2013: 27), shows just how important representation is for recognition of full humanity and citizenship. The author's lifework made room for a positive representation of queer identity as it represents people from the LGBTQ+ community as nothing more than just that: people. That is why Dorcey's portrayal of queer love is groundbreaking: its verisimilitude and simplicity are part of why the queer community in Ireland feels safe, loved, and, above all, encouragingly represented.

Chapter 1: *Into the light of everyday pain*

1.1- A history of Queer

In a world where labels have become a critical issue, the meaning of words is worthy of discussion as the way we consider concepts can negatively – or positively – influence people and, eventually, future generations. This issue is particularly important for the LGBTQ+ community as words which are associated with its members often have a negative connotation. Due to the significant role of sexuality in our society, trying to understand the power certain words hold in the way people think about themselves (or their peers) is very important. The concept "queer" falls in line with this discussion as matters of queerness and queer love are not only significant in order to understand the literary and academic work of various authors, but also to understand what the LGBTQ+ community represents. "Queer" further works as a perfect example of how reclaiming a word as your own makes possible the act of turning something insulting and degrading into something that positively represents multitudes around the world.

The label "queer" has not always been accepted by people from either inside or outside of the LGBTQ+ community as its definition hasn't always been positive. The eventual evolution of the concept from something derogatory into an emblem of pride was the result of the actions of many individuals. The shift of meaning of "queer" – indeed, its resignification – has additionally been made possible because of academic fields such as that of Queer Theory, which has served as an undeniable catalyst for change and legitimation. Despite the concept's unclear history, LGBTQ+ people have taken their power back, reclaiming "queer" as their own and using what was once an abusive remark as an umbrella-term[5].

The origin of the concept is ambiguous. Although some believe it originated in the early 16th century from the German word "quer" (meaning oblique, or perverse), William Sayers, author of the 2005 article "The Etymology of *Queer*" considers it to have come from the morpheme "*keu" which would become, in Middle Irish, the word "cúar", meaning something "curved, bent, crooked" (Sayers, 2005: 17). Sayers' theory would see "cúar" become "cuar", which fell under the same definitions as the first concept as something "awry, bowed, round,

[5] According to the online *Collins Dictionary*, an "umbrella-term" refers to a concept "used to cover a broad number of functions or items that all fall under a single common category".

circular, hollow" (Sayers, 20005: 17). Furthermore, Sayers argues that "cuar" would later become "quair", and eventually the Scottish "queer".

Contrary to its origin, the evolution of "queer" in the English language is not only known, but quite interesting. "Queer" was first used in the English language in the 16th century under the definitions of "Strange, odd, peculiar (…) of questioning character (…) dubious" (Sayers, 2005: 18), being often used to characterize something as abnormal, atypical. In fact, according to the 2019 *Columbia Journalism Review* article "How the world 'queer' was adopted by the LGBT community" by Merrill Perlman, for some time, things such as counterfeit money were considered "queer" in the same way that "someone who is sick might say they "feel queer" (Perlman, 2019). The definitions of the concept as something strange or odd would continue until the 19th century when, with the help of the notorious John Sholto Douglas, the first shift of meaning would happen.

As far as I could find in my research, it was John Sholto Douglas, 9th Marquess of Queensbury, who first used the word "queer" in a derogatory fashion aimed at homosexuals. Douglas' son, Lord Alfred Douglas, known as Bosie, was an English poet and journalist – and Irish author Oscar Wilde's secret lover. In 1894, having discovered the romance between the two men, the Marquess of Queensbury angrily denounced his son's affair with Wilde, calling the author a homosexual. In a now infamous card directed at Wilde, Douglas wrote: "For Oscar Wilde, posing somdomite [sic]" (History.com editors, 2018), famously misspelling the word "sodomite". This ordeal, which caused "queer" to be first used to mean homosexual, would furthermore open a dispute between Douglas and Wilde which resulted in Oscar Wilde's conviction for "gross indecency", being sentenced to "two years of hard labor, the maximum sentence allowed for the crime." (History.com editors, 2018).

The evolution of meaning of the concept "queer" can be understood by looking into various dictionaries. By 1914, almost a decade after the case of Queensbury vs Wilde, *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang* recognized "queer" to mean "homosexual", being the first dictionary to define the concept as such. This definition, as it is expected, was regarded as "derogatory from the outside, not from within" (Perlman, 2019). By 1949, the *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defined "queer" solely as "counterfeit money"; this definition, Merrill Perlman argues, might have been used as to not offend people as "dictionaries back then often shied away from words or definitions that could be offensive, so they could be shared with schoolchildren." (Perlman, 2019). With time, dictionaries' definitions of "queer" began relating to slang for homosexuality, now straying away from the definitions of "odd",

"perverse", or "weird", and, by the 1960's, the concept was listed in the *Webster's New World Dictionary, College Edition* as merely slang for homosexuality.

By the end of the 1980's and beginning of the 1990's, LGBTQ+ people began reclaiming "queer" as their own, having as a big fighter for this change the activist organization Queer Nation. Faced with the AIDS epidemic, Queer Nation was created in New York City in March 1990 with the slogan "Queers Bash Back" when ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) members and AIDS activists joined forces. In "What Is This Thing Called Queer?", Cherry Smith explains how Queer Nation "borrowed styles and tactics from popular culture, black liberation struggles, hippies, AIDS activists, feminists and the peace movement to build its confrontational identity." (Smith, 1996: 277). In the 2015 *MTV* article "What's up with the word 'Queer'?", Kristina Marusic explains how this group of "angry, militant gay people" (Marusic, 2015) got together to manifest against anti-gay violence and homophobia, crying for change in the streets of New York while chanting the famous "We're here. We're queer. Get used to it.". In a manifesto passed out to people during a march in 1990, the group spoke about, amongst other things, the word "queer". In the manifesto, entitled "Queers Read This", Queer Nation stated:

> Ah, do we really need to use that word? (…) It's trouble. Every gay person has his or her own take on it. For some it means strange and eccentric and kind of mysterious. That's okay, we like that. But some gay girls and boys don't. They think they're more normal than strange. (…) Queer. It's forcibly bittersweet and quaint at best – weakening and painful at worst. Couldn't we use 'gay' instead? (…) Well, yes, 'gay' is great (…) It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer. Using 'queer' is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world.

Queer Nation's activism and fight for change saw "queer" become something many identified themselves with, something many wanted to fight for. In "Playing with Butler and Foucault: Bisexuality and Queer Theory", author April S. Callis cites Joshua Gamson as to explain how groups such as Queer Nation decided to assert an "in-your-face difference, with an edge of defiant separatism" (Callis, 2009: 214), instead of settling for any sort of sort of assimilation to heterosexuality. The fact of the matter is that all those who fell under the non-heteronormative facet of society took Queer Nation's pioneering work as their own, starting to use "queer" as a term which identified all those who did not accept society's expected behaviors. Callis continues by speaking on the way "queer" became a synonym for inclusivity, stating:

> Rather than rolling out the "alphabet song" of g(ay) b(isexual) t(ransexual) (t(ransgendered) i(ntersex) a(sexual), *queer* allowed a pithy shorthand for authors and organizations concerned with inclusivity. Queer also became an identity category unto itself. Individuals who wanted to label themselves with a nonlabel, who wanted to be fluid or inclusive in their own stated desires or who wanted to challenge hegemonic assumptions of sexuality described themselves as queer (Callis, 2009: 214)

Women's choice to reclaim the concept "queer" was remarkably met with obstacles and criticism. In her 1980 "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) – an important figure in the defense of lesbians – explained how some women thought their decision to accept a non-hetero centered sexuality was an isolated act: "[women] have undertaken the task of independent, nonhetero-sexual, women-connected existence, to the extent made possible by their context, often in the belief they were the "only ones" ever to have done so." (Rich, 1980: 15). Rich further argued that these women were met with disbelief by men who took it upon themselves to use "the power of men" to "deny women [their own] sexuality (…) to confine them physically and prevent their movement, [or] to withhold from them large areas of society's knowledge and cultural attainments" (Rich, 1980: 18-19). In doing so (still according to Rich), many men chose to enforce heterosexuality upon women – sometimes through rape, chastity belts, "psychoanalytic doctrines of frigidity and vaginal orgasm; [or] pornographic depictions of women responding pleasurably to sexual violence and humiliation (a subliminal message being that sadistic heterosexuality is more "normal" than sensuality between women)" (Rich, 1980: 18).

In the PhD dissertation "Queer: A 25 Year History: A Blooming Identity", author Greer Klepacki discusses how the field of Queer Theory, parallel to the organization Queer Nation, is considered "necessary framework (…) as without it, a true understanding of queer history or the evolution of the term queer would be unattainable." (Klepacki, 2021: 5). Attention has also to be paid to the academic aspect of this evolution. "Queer Theory" is defined by the *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (2001) as:

> a body of criticism on issues of gender [and] sexuality, [which subjectively] came out of gay and lesbian scholarship in such fields as literary criticism, politics, sociology, and history. Queer theory rejects essentialism in favor of social construction; it breaks down binary oppositions such as 'gay' or 'straight'. (Tobin, 2001)

The concept is attributed to Teresa de Lauretis[6], and it first appeared in the 1990's in universities in the United States of America. The field would eventually play a significant role in the third-wave feminism which would emerge in the middle of the decade. Heavily influenced by Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Queer Theory recognized as essential framework Foucault's 1976 *A History of Sexuality* – which was published more than a decade before queer studies was recognized as such. Foucault presented sexuality "far from being a forbidden topic of speech/thought [being instead] the center of a veritable explosion of discourse in the West." (Callis, 2009: 221). Tasmin Spargo, author of *Foucault and Queer Theory* credits Michel Foucault as the forerunner of Queer Theory, stating:

> Although some critics have recently turned to these later studies in order to explore the possibilities of non-normalising sexual and ethical practices, it was Foucault's overall model of the discursive construction of sexualities that was the main initial catalyst for queer theory. (Spargo, 1999: 26)

In the article "Estudos *queer*: Identidade, contextos e acção colectiva", Ana Cristina Santos recognizes the impossibility of identifying queer studies' starting point due to its multiple origins, further mentioning the importance of the prior existence of the gay and lesbian studies which first emerged during the 1970's, and which were paramount for the area. These, as Henry Abelove explains in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, "[are] informed by the social struggle for the sexual liberation, the personal freedom, dignity, equality, and human rights of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men" (Abelove, 1993: 16). In the same article, Santos explains how "queer" has always been, above all, a political project which denounced heteronormativity in hopes of establishing the difference between what is normal and what is normative. Regarding queer theory, the author explains how the field is made out of what she calls "identity components": class, sexual orientation, gender, age, nationality, and ethnicity. (Santos, 2006: 8), further explaining how the field intends its significance to be open and fluid.

In the 2003 *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Nikki Sullivan argues that despite all its positive impact, Queer Theory can, at times, create a bigger gap between homosexuals and heterosexuals. This, Sullivan argues, happens because the latter are usually situated in a "dominant normative position, and all gays and lesbians simply aspire to be granted access to

[6] Teresa de Lauretis (b.1938). Italian author and Professor at the University of California. Her critical interest involves women's studies, queer studies, literary theory, and semiotics. The concept "Queer Theory" was attributed to Lauretis after the publishing of the article "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities" in 1991. In 1994, Lauretis renounced the concept.

this position, whereas all queers are marginalised and consciously and intentionally resist assimilation of any kind" (Sullivan, 2003: 48-49), further arguing that Queer Theory had been accused of being "male-centered, anti-feminist, and race-blind." (Sullivan, 2003: 48). The previously mentioned "What Is This Thing Called Queer?" by Cherry Smith includes testimony of various LGBTQ+ people who discussed the concept "queer". One of those, Isling Mack-Nataf, spoke about Queer Theory's male-centered and race-blind facet, arguing: "I'm more inclined to use the words 'black lesbian', because when I hear the word queer I think of white, gay men." (Smith, 1996: 280).

Judith Butler (b.1956), whose work in gender and sex theories is acclaimed, is another important figure in the field of Queer Theory as her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identify* is considered one of its founding texts. According to her *Britannica* biography, Butler's prominence in the field saw her become the victim of much criticism, being accused of "conception of politics as parody [which was] impoverished and self-indulgent amounting to a kind of moral quietism." (Duignan, 2021). April S. Callis argues that Butler's discussion of bisexuality became highly important for Queer Theory as she referred the sexuality by name, being found in "laundry list style, somewhere between gay, lesbian and heterosexuality." (Callis, 2009: 226). Still according to Callis, Butler's work is regarded as a pilar for feminist and sexual theory, as it "moved from a tight focus on sexuality (such as Foucault maintained) to a broader view of gender and sexuality and the ways in which these constructions can be read as mutually constitutive." (Callis, 2009: 226).

In comparison with what had been happening in the rest of the world, in the setting of Ireland in the 1980's and 1990's, the concept "queer" and the field of Queer Studies were not highly discussed due to the country's moral conservatism. As I will be mentioning throughout the thesis, Ireland has historically been regarded as less-than-accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, often making it hard for members of the community to live as their true selves. In Joseph Valente's 2010 "Self-Queering Ireland?", the author discusses Ireland's hostility towards the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, Valente discusses the numerous definitions of "queer", explaining how despite its ambiguity, the concept maintains its *leitmotif* – one which questions the norm as "To queer… is to bring out the difference that is compelled to pass under the sign of the same." (Valente, 2010: 26). The author continues his argument by speaking about the relevancy of Queer Theory in Ireland, stating that this field is: "not only (…) an analysis of sexual identity and regulation in Ireland, but (…) an analysis of Ireland itself" (Valente, 2010: 26).

Valente further discusses the bond between queerness and Irishness, touching on an "analogy between the heritage and marginalization by the LGBT and the Irish community" (Valente, 2010: 27). The author's discussion moves on to the central topic of this essay – the way people see, think of, or face queerness. Valente proceeds to quote Kieran Rose, author of *Diverse Communities* (1994) in order to explain the way that the country considered Irish gays and lesbians: "[there remains] a tradition of tolerance… fairness and justice arising from the struggle against colonialism and for civil, religious, and economic rights." (Valente, 2010: 28).

On the 18th of October 2021, I had the pleasure of interviewing Mary Dorcey, an opportunity which allowed me to ask the author about her very own definition of the word "queer" from the point of view of a woman and a lesbian. Dorcey's definition of "queer" touches on the idea that these are people who do not follow the norm, who are outcasts living life outside the realms of what seems to be accepted, being "people who are outside of the normal, the average, the everyday conception of "straight" or "normal". (See *infra* p. 67). As the interview moved on, Dorcey continued to speak about her life as a lesbian in Ireland, speaking first about her childhood during times when "queer" was used to insult homosexuals – being, she argues, one of the worst slurs one could direct at them. It wasn't until the 1970's, the author continued, that Irish homosexuals first began to reclaim the word, justifying it by saying: "If you could change the worst insult they can give you, it makes you stronger, it makes you immune in some way." (See *infra* p. 67).

In the following decade, somewhere between the 1980's, early 1990's, Dorcey explains how gay people stopped using "queer" only to have it come back in later years, now becoming "a useful word to cover a multitude [covering] transgender and all sorts of anybody who feels outside of the normal definition." (See *infra* p. 68). The continuous refusal to accept "queer" as a positive term is also mentioned by the author who stated: "there are still people who don't like and would never use it because it still has resonance for the most part." (See *infra* p. 68).

Despite the intolerance and hostility, "queer" now represents a world of possibilities as it has made clear the injustice those who embrace the concept have felt. "Queer", moreover "targets [the] binary systems of sexual classifications through which compulsory heterosexuality consolidates its privilege by reifying and devaluing its others." (Valente, 2010: 26). Although "queer" was once an insult, something used to degrade non-hetero conforming people, its changes of meaning have made it possible for the new and upcoming generations to find pride in the concept. In Alexander Cheves' 2019 *Them.us* article "9 LGBTQ+ People

Explain How They Love, Hate, and Understand the Word Queer", Steve Patton, a community activist and public speaker, stated:

> I know how empowering it feels to reclaim words that have been used to harm us, and I appreciate "queer" specifically because it has always carried a sense of undefined abstractness. Even as a slur, the word described those who exist outside of what society mandates, so it's fitting that the term now defies all restrictions of love and self that the world has placed on us. (Cheves, 2019)

The power of people and organizations and the way these fought for a new and renewed way of understanding "queer" made many want to fight for change in order to protect themselves and to fight for their families and relationships. Mary Dorcey, founding member of three Irish activist groups, was one of the many participants in this fight, being one of the many people who were enthusiastic about change and the acceptance of queerness.

1.2 – Ireland and Queerness: Overcoming Oppression

In a patriarchal, heteronormative society such as Ireland's, it seems vital to try to understand the obstacles and struggles, as well as the victories the LGBTQ+ community has experienced and achieved. In the 1960's, Irish gays and lesbians lived their lives in secrecy, often hiding their relationships from family, friends, or co-workers as being open about one's sexuality and relationships during these decades would be no easy option. In "Race, Sex and Nation", Gerardine Meaney blames this on the virtue of the Church and the State, arguing that "sexually active women [were seen] as a "danger to the state and 'the nation'"." (Meaney, 2007: 48). These fearful years for Irish queers are described by Mary Dorcey in Heather Ingman's *A History of the Irish Short Story* as times of:

> Silence. Repression. Censorship. Long dark winters. Poor food. Nuns and priests everywhere. Drab clothes. Censorship of books and films. Fear and suspicion surrounding anything to do with the body or the personal life. The near total repression of ideas and information. A Catholic state for Catholic people. (Ingman, 2009: 200-201)

More testimonies about the lack of freedom and constant fear during the 1960's in Ireland – for women in general – can be found in the 2021 book *Look! It's a Woman Writer*, edited by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne. The anthology counts with the participation of twenty-one Irish

women writers who explain what being a woman writer in Ireland is now, and what it has been in the recent past. As one of the participants, Mary Dorcey speaks about the 1950's and 1960's as "a period of profound social conservatism, silence, repression, superstition, guilt and fear (…) An almost entirely homogenous society where the only differences were those of class." (Dorcey, 2021: 240-241). Having grown up during these decades, Dorcey recognizes the conservative side of Ireland, an aspect also addressed by her in the interview included in this thesis, when recollecting her mother's and grandmother's thoughts about the queer community. The author curiously mentioned how both women had different ways of understanding the very existence of Irish lesbians:

> My mother, she had heard the word "lesbian" but she didn't really know what it meant, and there weren't any lesbians in Ireland, everybody was sure of that – there couldn't possibly be… and my grandmother had been very active politically in Republic politics at the time of the Irish independence and she knew all the forceful women and the eccentric women, famous women (…) she would've known there were at least two couples who actually were lesbian (See *infra* p. 69)

Dorcey's testimony I believe exemplifies the two sides of the Irish during these times: the author's mother, on one hand, represents all those who were unaware of the existence of gays or lesbians, often associating homosexual couples to friends who happened to live together in a "Boston Marriage";[7] she furthermore represents those who would, eventually, realize these were not "just friends", but partners, lovers. Dorcey's grandmother, on the other hand, represents all who recognized and acknowledged the possibility of sexuality between two women, or men. These two positions reflect, up to a point, the rather different atmospheres of the time of the fighting of the independence, lived by her grandmother, and characterized by a political and moral openness, and the time of the Republic – what later was to be called "de Valera's Ireland" – experienced by her mother and characterized by a deep moral conservatism which entailed the repression of all forms of sexuality.

For a good understanding of the history of queer sexuality in Ireland I believe it to be necessary to go back in time to 1895 and take a closer look into the case and trial of Oscar Wilde, as this is an undeniable mark in the history of the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland. As previously mentioned, Wilde's trial for "gross indecency" took place after the denouncing of the author's sexuality and gay affair by the 9th Marquess of Queensbury, John Sholto Douglas

[7] Term which referred to two women who would be in a committed relationship, living together under the same roof, who were always assumed to be asexual, or just friends.

and the father of Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde's lover. The trial took place in 1895 in London – happening when Ireland was still a part of the United Kingdom. The trial, which convicted the poet to two years of hard labor, destroyed Oscar Wilde's career. According to Eibhear Walsh in the 2015 *The Irish Times*' article "10 milestones in Irish gay rights", Wilde became "bankrupt, his plays [were] removed from the West End stage and his name erased from all public discussion except as a codename for "unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort – or gay men, as we would call them." (Walsh, 2015). During the trial, I must add, John Sholto Douglas would accuse Wilde of soliciting up to twelve young men with whom he would allegedly have had sex with. Wilde was furthermore accused of using homoerotic themes from his 1890 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to seduce Lord Alfred Douglas. (History.com editors, 2018).

By the 1920's, Ireland witnessed the ban of many authors whose books would not be sold (or read) in the country under the Irish Free State conservative regime and the autocratic role of the Church. According to Amy Conchie in *Melville House*'s "Ireland to consider ending censorship of books", the Censorship Board was created in 1926. Previously named the "Committee on Evil Literature", the Censorship Board was created with the goal of banning books for "indecency, obscenity, blasphemy, and works that promote "unnatural" birth control and abortion." (Conchie, 2013). In the 1995 article "Ferreting out Evil: the records of the Committee on Evil Literature', Tom Quinlan explained how the committee, appointed by Kevin O'Higgins, Minister for Justice, was made out "of three laymen and two clergymen" (Quinlan, 1995: 1). The committee would then "consider and report whether it is necessary or advisable in the interest of the public morality to extent the existing powers of the State to prohibit or restrict the sale and circulation of printed matter" (Quinlan, 1995: 1).

Kate O'Brien's (1897-1974) *The Land of the Spices*, published in 1941, for example, would join the list of banned authors which included the likes of Oscar Wilde, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940), and James Joyce (1882-1941) – whose book *Ulysses* "was never formally banned, however the threat of a ban meant that Irish publishers (…) refused to carry it for many years" (Conchie, 2013). In the case of Kate O'Brien, curiously, the nail in the coffin was none other than the sentence: "She saw her father with Etienne in the embrace of love.", describing the moment the protagonist, Helen, saw her father and a male student of his embracing. The presence of a whiff of homosexuality made sure the ban of the book would

happen – something that for Kate O'Brien wouldn't be exclusive to *The Land of the Spices* as her 1936 book *Mary Lavelle*, for example, also got banned[8].

In the article "Mary Dorcey's Woodshed and its Implications for Irish Society", Amy Finlay Jeffrey discusses the lack of lesbian representation in literature throughout the 1950's and upwards to the 1970's, arguing: "Any illusions to homosexuality, however slight, had been subject to extreme hostility. (…) It seemed that lesbian themes had been dropped, or better elided, from the Irish literary consensus." (Jeffrey, 2017: 7). Jeffrey furthermore speaks on this erasure of the Irish lesbian tradition by recalling Ireland's heteronormativity of the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's, stating: "The invisibility of lesbianism holds particular resonance in Ireland where (…) they were not included in the discourse of decriminalisation." (Jeffrey, 2017: 7). This is particularly worthy of attention: homosexuality was confined to men while lesbians were invisible also as women. Indeed, lesbian invisibility is part of the wider picture of the invisibility of the sexuality of all women.

After times of worries and censorship came times of activism. In 1974, a two-day conference about homosexuality took place at Trinity College Dublin. Organized by the Sexual Liberation Movement (SLM), the conference followed the New University of Ulster (NUU) symposium, one which, according to Patrick McDonagh in the 2019 article "'Homosexuality is not a problem – it doesn't do you any harm and can be lots of fun': Students and Gay Rights Activism in Irish Universities, 1970's-1980's", was "not exclusively a gay rights conference, but rather a conference which discussed more broadly the whole area of sexual oppression and alternative sexuality, [being] a critical juncture in Irish queer history." (McDonagh, 2019: 121). Influenced by the NUU conference's success, the Trinity College Dublin symposium discussed a "broad range of issues including the legal situation facing homosexuals in Ireland [and] the difficulties of being homosexual as a result of societal attitudes" (McDonagh, 2019: 124).

Present in the conference were, amongst others, author Mary Dorcey and Barbara (Babs) Todd of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. Todd was the voice behind a revolutionary speech that urged Irish homosexuals "to come out in the open and be honest about themselves, [having herself declared] unequivocally that 'I am gay and I'm proud of it'." (McDonagh, 2019: 125). Todd, who started a relationship with Maureen Colquhoun (Britain's first openly lesbian

[8] I must add that in the cases of authors such as Edna O'Brien (b.1930) and John McGahern (1934-2006), their literary ban would not be related to any references to homosexuality – but sexuality itself. During these most autocratic times, any reference to sexuality would almost certainly entail a ban.

MP), would stir all sorts of discussions within the community. Author Mary Dorcey spoke on Todd's speech, recalling it to be:

> [an] extraordinary day, it was the start of all the changes that have since happened in Ireland and it was the first time publicly in the South that questions of sexual orientation had ever been addressed. We came out of a society that was as repressed as Stalinist Russia and the kind of openness that we started then, the silence breaking, was so extraordinary that the repercussions are still being felt. ("Did Anyone Notice Us?" (RTE 2003), 3:46-4:20)

Thirty years after the ban of Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*, and almost a century after Wilde's trial and conviction, David Norris, at the time Lecturer of English at Trinity College Dublin, began his struggle for the decriminalization of homosexuality in Ireland in 1977. Two years later, in 1979, the activist group National Gay Federation (often referred to simply as NGF) was founded in the Hirschfeld Center in Temple Bar, Dublin. The group would organize Ireland's first Pride Week at the new headquarters that same year. According to Patrick McDonagh in the 2019 *RTE* article "How the Hirschfeld Centre transformed Ireland's gay scene", the Hirschfeld Center was named after sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld who fought for homosexual emancipation in Germany in the beginning of the 20th century and served as the center of a radical transformation of "Ireland's gay social scene, in the midst of both an economic downturn and rise of conservative forces." (McDonagh, 2019).

As far as chronology goes, it's important to mention 1982 and 1983. In 1982, Declan Flynn, a thirty-one-year-old gay man, was murdered in Fairview Park in Dublin by a gang of five self-proclaimed "queer bashing" teenagers. In the 2018 *The Irish Times* article "Declan Flynn 'queer-bashing' murder 'still very raw' 36 years on", Simon Carswell explains how the teenagers were looking to "clear our park of what we call queers" (Carswell, 2018). The murderers were given suspended sentences for manslaughter, which infuriated the community. A year after Declan Flynn's murder, in June 1983, Ireland's first Pride Parade took place in Dublin during Ireland's Gay Pride Week. Organized by the National LGBTQ Federation, the parade counted with around two hundred people whose main goal was to bring attention to the extreme levels of violence against LGBTQ+ individuals. The Parade was assessed as a "successful march to Fairview Park, involving large members of lesbians, gays, and many supportive mixed groups such as anti-amendment groups, trades unions, students unions, political groups etc." (See Annex 1).

However, the acts of violence against members of the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland would continue after Declan Flynn's murder and Ireland's first Pride Parade. These brutal

attacks wouldn't happen in isolated areas, but, according to Bill Foley in "Violence against Gays", in "cruising areas in daylight at gay centres and during marches or demonstrations." (See Annex 2). A case in point was the trampling of Charles Kerrigan, a gay man who got badly injured when run over by a car "at the Gay Pride March outside the GPO where lack of police, diverting traffic caused problems. One driver was so vexed at being delayed by "queers", he drove through the crowd." (Foley, 1984: 9). Writing in the *LGBT Federation News* in 1984, Foley paid close attention to the perceived increase of violence against queer people, calling attention for the need to speak up: "But being gay surely, even with our antiquated legal system, is no reason for violent attacks against us to be ignored." (See Annex 2).

By the 1980's, having come to terms with past defeats, David Norris continued his endless legal fights which had begun almost a decade before. Norris' goal was the decriminalization of male homosexuality (which, in the United Kingdom, took place in 1967). In 1983, David Norris took his case for the decriminalization of homosexuality to the High Court "where it was rejected, and then to the Supreme Court, where he was represented by Mary Robinson[9], and where it was also rejected" (Walsh, 2015). By 1988, and now as a member of the Seanad Éireann, Norris appealed his case to the European Court of Human Rights with the *Case of Norris v. Ireland* stating, according to Anna Charczun in "Can I Write About It Yet?: The Influence of Politics on Literary Representations of Lesbians in Irish Women's Writing" that "the Irish law violated his right to privacy under the European Convention on Human Rights." (Charczun, 2020: 44). Norris was granted victory on the 26th of October that same year. This would be a huge step for change in Ireland – especially for gay men which had, for so long, been referred to as pedophiles or "screaming queens". In the previously mentioned 2019 article "'Homosexuality is not a problem – it doesn't do you any harm and can be lots of fun'", Patrick McDonagh presents the testimony of two gay men who recalled their experiences of growing up and living in a straight, heteronormative, and morally conservative society:

> People saw stereotypes and most articles which appeared in the papers helped to reinforce these stereotyped images. Two of these that my family believed in were that all gays were either screaming queens or else they were child molesters. (McDonagh, 2019: 119)

> [I] was told gay people were paedophiles, they were effeminate, and they were camp. There was another gay man who lived on my street and he was particularly effeminate, and I was always told by my grandmother or my mother that that's the way I would grow up. I would be like him and that wouldn't have been acceptable. (McDonagh, 2019: 119)

[9] Mary Robinson would later famously become the first woman President of Ireland (1990-1997).

Gay man seemed to be the priority of the many actions taken while lesbians were set aside, forced to live in darkness. As to understand this lesbian invisibility, I must go back in time and make a reference to the 1970 "The Female Homosexual", published in *The Irish Times*. After presenting the testimony of the gay men, McDonagh makes a reference to the article which had been written after "they received a letter from a lesbian who wrote about the difficulties and loneliness of being a lesbian in Ireland." (McDonagh, 2019: 120). Though finding the original article myself proved to be fruitless, McDonagh explains how "The Female Homosexual" was divided into three parts in which the author described the two vague images of lesbians they acknowledged before beginning their investigation: "One was the butch caricature, a mannish female with cropped hair and harsh voice (...) The other was something more sinister, a pale creature with evil eyes loitering in women's cloakrooms to seduce whom and when she might." (McDonagh, 2019: 119).

Outside of real life, the presence of lesbians – or lack-there-of – in Irish literature has been discussed by Aoife Mallon in the previously-mentioned "Colourful Voices: The Experience of Young Lesbians Combating Homophobia and Heteronormativity": "Another argument for the lack of evidence of lesbian existence in Ireland is that female sexuality for many years was not recognized as anything more than an act of reproduction." (Mallon, 2013: 27).

In her 2020 article, Anna Charczun explains how "at the end of the 1980s lesbian fiction dealt predominantly with the subject of coming out, [while] the first decade of the twenty-first century experienced an over presence of lesbian desire on the pages of Irish lesbian fiction by Mary Dorcey and Emma Donoghue." (Charczun, 2020: 60). The relationship between lesbians and Ireland during the 1980's and 1990's is perfectly encapsulated in Mary Dorcey's words: "[It] was not in the light we lived, but in the spaces between – in the darkness" (Dorcey, 1989: 133). In this, Dorcey described the existence of lesbians somewhere between visibility and invisibility, something Amy Jeffrey supports in *Space and Irish Lesbian Fiction: Towards a Queer Liminality*: "In proposing that lesbians exist somewhere 'between' light and dark, on the borderline between visibility and invisibility, Dorcey's comment evokes what is traditionally understood (…) as liminal space." (Jeffrey, 2019: 1).

In 1989, one year after David Norris' extraordinary victory at the European Court of Human Rights, Mary Dorcey published *A Noise from the Woodshed*. This event may be

regarded as insignificant or out of place when compared to other occurrences, yet I believe it to be as important as any other victory for the LGBTQ+ community. The short-story collection is a crucial turning point in the Irish queer history not only because of the importance of literature for our society, but because of its thematics. Although published in London, the book made its way into the homes of the Irish, being read by many who had, for a long time, been faced with the continuous ban of books and authors and the invisibility of lesbians and women writers. The moment a female author who also happened to be lesbian, created and published a book which privileged the lesbian experience was a decisive one: Mary Dorcey was the first Irish author to openly discuss homosexuality, writing for and about those who had for so long been marginalized by a conservative and heteronormative Irish society. Changes were happening in social and political life and literature was part of these changes.

On the 23rd of June 1993, the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill, proposed by Máire Geoghegan-Quinn (at the time TD and minister of Justice for the Fianna Fáil party), was passed. In the 2021 *Irish Post* article "Homosexuality was decriminalised in Ireland 28 years ago today" by Harry Brent, Kieran Rose – head of GLEN (the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) claimed that the Bill which would decriminalize homosexuality, was a "watershed in the lives of gay and lesbian people in Ireland [as] No longer were Irish people to be treated as criminals, just because of who they were." (Brent, 2021). Following the decriminalization of homosexuality, reforms which included "domestic violence protections, funding for health and social services for gay and lesbian people, and civil partnership legislation" (Brent, 2021) were also put forward. On the day the Bill was passed, Eamon Gilmore (who would become, in 2011, Ireland's Tánaiste and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade) spoke on the Bill during the Dáil Éireann debate, stating:

> The sexual activities of consenting adults in the privacy of their home are a matter for the people concerned and should not be the business of the Dáil, the Garda or anybody else, including the peeping Toms of the self-appointed moral police from whom we hear a great deal nowadays. Whether one approves or disapproves of the particular sexual practices of people is not the issue. Disapproval is not a sufficient reason for criminalising those whose sexual orientation differs from that of the majority. (Dáil Éireann debate, 1993)

In November 1995, divorce was introduced in Ireland through a referendum which counted with 50.28% of voters in favor of divorce laws. The amendment would be passed into law in June 1996. Seven years later, in 1998, another monumental change for the LGBTQ+ community took place when the Employment Equality Act was introduced in Ireland. The Act

covered employees from private and public sectors of employment (alongside all those who applied for training) and forbade any employment discrimination based on, among other grounds, those of gender, race, disability, or sexual orientation. After the Act was implemented, it took Ireland twelve more years to take the next big step towards some sort of equality: in 2010, the Civil Partnership act was passed by the Dáil. This Act would give LGBTQ+ people more rights than ever as now these couples, seen as civil partners, would have almost the same rights and responsibilities as married heterosexual couples. Despite this achievement, the Act would not change matters relating to children such as adoption, custody, or guardianship.

In 2011, one year after the Civil Partnership Act, another milestone would ensue. As a part of the 2011 General Election, there were three gay elected candidates: TDanna Jerry Buttimer, John Lyons, and Dominic Hannigan from the Dáil constituencies Cork South-Central, Dublin Nort-West, and Meath East, respectively. Jerry Buttimer, in specific, was the only gay TD at the time, being someone who represented themselves as a TD who happened to be gay. In the 2012 *The Journal* article "Jerry Buttimer: 'Being gay is not all of what I am'", author Hugh O'Connell recalls the campaign launch of the Fine Gael Party where Buttimer spoke on his decision to come out: "I made a decision based upon what I thought was right for both the Fine Gael party and for the people that I represent. I am not just a politician who is gay. I am a person. It's part of me, it's not all of what I am." (O'Connell, 2012).

In August 2012, the fourth annual LGBT Noise March for Marriage took place counting with the presence of "5,000 supporters of equals rights [who] marched in support of the marriage equality campaign. This campaign argues for the right for same-sex civil marriage to be recognised by the Irish state." (Mallon, 2013: 33-34). In a survey conducted by Aoife Mallon, Irish lesbians were asked what they felt would improve the at-the-time situation in Ireland. The results of the survey pointed to 22% of women stating that equality, in general, would be the deciding factor for improvement, while 20% felt only marriage equality could make a significant change. I find this particularly interesting, sharing, with the author, the thought that "the option "equality" without a specific association or explanation was too broad a term." (Mallon, 2013: 34). Although this initially might have seemed like something that would cause less- than-accurate results, Mallon continued:

> this flaw in the survey in actuality illustrates how politicised younger lesbians are in terms of marriage equality. While respondents could have clearly chosen "equality" in a broader sense which could include marriage equality, younger lesbians wanted to make the explicit point that in their opinion marriage equality is what would most improve their situation in Irish society. (Mallon, 2013: 34)

The need for marriage equality in Ireland wouldn't be met until the 22nd of May 2015 when the same-sex marriage referendum took place, making Ireland the first country to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote. The referendum saw sixty-two percent of votes for, and thirty-eight percent against gay marriage, a surprising result in a country still perceived as living under the influence of Catholic mores. This critical moment was life-changing for both members of the LGBTQ+ community as well as Irish people in general. The impact of the same-sex marriage Bill was especially important for couples who had been together for years, or decades. In my interview with Mary Dorcey, the author reminisced about the same-sex marriage referendum and its impact in Irish society:

> [For a long time] there was a secrecy around [gay relationships] and several of [my friends] have told me that since marriage equality and, especially at the wedding, that their in-laws that either they had never met before over, sometimes, twenty years, or that they had met but had to pretend they were just a best friend – that those in-laws came out and congratulated them and hugged them and said "oh I'm so happy you're marrying my daughter", and that's an extraordinary thing. (See *infra* p.68)

This situation, Dorcey continued, "seems to be like a benediction – literally" (See *infra* p. 68) as quite a few people who had been embarrassed about having lesbian or gay family members were now happy and proud of them. Leo Varadkar, Taoiseach of Ireland between 2017 and 2020 (who would be the first gay person to hold this position), came out as gay just a few months before the same-sex referendum, in January of 2015. In the 2015 *Time* article "Irish Minister for Health Announced He's Gay", Megan Gibson recalls Varadkar's enthusiasm for a positive result, stating that he would "like to be an equal citizen in my own country, the country in which I happen to be a member of Government, and at the moment I'm not." (Gibson, 2015). When faced with the positive result of the referendum, Varadkar, who was in 2015 the Minister for Health stated "For me it wasn't just a referendum. It was more like a social revolution." (*The San Diego Union-Tribute*, 2015). It should be noted that in Northern Ireland same-sex marriage would only become legal five years later, in January 2020, being the last of the United Kingdom's Nations to legalize it.

Soon after the same-sex marriage referendum, on the 6th of April 2015, the Children and Family Relationships Act was enacted. Though passed in 2015, the Act would only go into effect in May 2020, five years after its enactment. Almost six years after the passing of the Act, a lesbian couple was at last able to have both women's names put on the birth certificate of their

newborn twins in March 2021. On the 2021 *The Irish Times* article "Cork women become first same-sex couple to both register as parents of newborn", author Barry Roche speaks on the legislation, stating:

> The new legislation means that the birth mother and the intending co-parent, be they spouse, civil partner or cohabitant, can now register with the registrar for the births, deaths and marriages as the parents of a child born as a result of a donor-assisted human reproduction procedure. (Roche, 2021)

In the same article, Niamh O'Sullivan, one of the mother's, declared: "It is monumental for us and a historic step towards LGBT+ equality, as many children with same-sex female parents can finally vindicate their rights to have their family recognised." (Roche, 2021).

Another important legal step for Irish queers was the lift of the ban on gay men donating blood. In January 2017, the ban was lifted when Tomás Heneghan, a Galway student, brought up a case against the IBTS (Irish Blood Transfusion Service). In the 2021 *Irish Examiner* article "Varadkar calls for change to blood donation rules for gay men", Aoife Moore explains how, despite the ban lift, the law retained a "one-year deferral for men who have sex with other men in order to donate blood." (Moore, 2021). As of 2021, five years after the blood donation ban lift, the Tánaiste exposed how Ireland has been importing blood from the United Kingdom instead of allowing gay Irish men to donate blood without restrictions. This situation was particularly infuriating because "Gay men can donate blood in the UK. Therefore, Ireland is importing blood from gay men while deferring men in Ireland for a year." (Moore, 2021). In Aoife Moore's article, Leo Varadkar expresses his annoyance, stating: "I'd support a change in rules moving towards an individual risk assessment, away from excluding any particular group, like LGBT people among others, but I would hold to the principle that this should be a scientific expert decision made by IBTS not a political one." (Moore, 2021).

Nearly forty years after Ireland's first Pride Parade, twenty-nine years after the decriminalization of homosexuality, and seven years after the same-sex marriage referendum, a lot of positive changes have made the lives of Irish queers significantly easier. Having celebrated, in 2019, the 40th anniversary of Ireland's first Pride Week, pride today has grown to be one of the biggest celebrations in Ireland, gathering thousands of people who celebrate all that the LGBTQ+ community has achieved throughout the years. The fear going forward is to

be met with more battles and more activism. When asked about the changes the Irish queer community has experienced, and whether enough has been done, Mary Dorcey argued:

> It changes in pockets, isn't it? You can never count with things being permanently progressive – it's always backwards/forwards, backwards/forwards; we go the left, we go to the right, we go to the left, we go to the right, and that's why you always have to maintain radicalism – if you become conventional, if you become too relaxed about things, they can go backwards very quickly, so we all have to be alert. (See *infra* p. 68)

It was Dorcey's activism and political awareness, so well encapsuled in this citation, that made me think of the author as a perfect example to illustrate how important a positive representation of LGBTQ+ people and relationships is in fiction, as well as everywhere else – this, because literature contributes to the education and instruction of readers, and, thus, the changing of mores and behaviors. As a lesbian author who lived through the many changes the community underwent in the last decades, the author understood how a queer person felt, how they were looked at, what they were regarded as. These experiences have then been translated into emotions and feelings which she used in her poetry and lyricism, in her short stories and novels. Being able to understand from the perspective of a queer person how essential it is to be regarded – and portrayed – as a full citizen, is a huge quality found in Mary Dorcey's literary works, works brought to life by an author who just happens to be a woman, and a lesbian.

Chapter 2: *I am no ordinary woman*

Mary Dorcey is widely known as a central character in the fight for women's equality and empowerment and for LGBTQ+ rights in Ireland, as well as being the first Irish author to openly discuss non-hetero centered love in Irish literature. In order to analyze Dorcey's literary works, I believe one needs to understand the author's life and mind as the personal often influences the professional – what an author sees, or experiences, and who an author knows, or loves, is often put into paper, though in a reconfigured way and with an aesthetical dimension. This is particularly true in Mary Dorcey's case since there's an obvious link between her life and work as much of her literary pieces are, indeed, rooted on the personal.

2.1 – Mary Dorcey, the woman

Critically acclaimed Irish poet, novelist, and short story writer Mary Dorcey was born in County Dublin in 1950 where she grew up and initiated her studies. The youngest of five children, Dorcey would later study at the Open University in the United Kingdom as the University's first Irish student majoring in sociology, before enrolling at Paris Diderot University. Dorcey is now a member of the Aosdána, as well as a Research Associate at Trinity College Dublin where she taught, for ten years, at the Center for Gender and Women's Studies.

Mary Dorcey's love for literature began at an early age. Her parents were both enthusiastic about reading, giving the author the privilege of growing up in a house filled with books. On the YouTube video "Past/Present/Pride #3: Mary Dorcey", the author discusses her interest in literature with psychologist Paul D'Alton, stating: "As a small child I wasn't interested in politics… whereas I was passionate from the earliest years I can remember about literature." ("Past/Present/Pride #3: Mary Dorcey", 3:16). During her early childhood, the author's father would read to the three younger children – always making sure to read what was appropriate for each child. As Dorcey recalls, "he read books suitable for each of us – so I had nursery rhymes (…) and my brother had Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson and all these wonderful writers" ("Past/Present/Pride #3: Mary Dorcey", 4:16). Having her father read to her originated in Dorcey a love for literature that continues to this very day. When the author was seven her father passed away, and so, as the author puts it: "life changed very much but the love

of literature and the love of reading went on." ("Past/Present/Pride #3: Mary Dorcey", 4:49-4:55).

Growing up in Ireland during the 1950's and 1960's, Mary Dorcey experienced first-hand the repressive moral codes of the country during this period of social conservatism, worries and even fear. Despite the long list of authors victims of censorship, Dorcey was lucky enough to read many books with the help of one of her older brothers, Donal. Donal Dorcey, who would eventually work as a journalist for *The Irish Times*, to keep his little sister quiet, would "hurl books at me. (…) He would literally throw books onto the bed and say 'read page 10, read page 50'… so I read Oscar Wilde, I read D. H. Lawrence, I read James Joyce, I read Steinbeck" ("Past/Present/Pride #3: Mary Dorcey", 7:22-7:46).

Beyond the influence of Dorcey's father and brother, grounded on her life's narrative, I believe that the author's relationships with her mother and grandmother are crucial for the understanding of her activism and writing. After the death of Dorcey's father, her mother began looking for work in order to support her five children. Having worked in the civil service before getting married, she hoped to return to the same line of work, only to be told she could not. This was the result of a ban of employment which would continue until 1973 that forbade "the employment of married women in the civil service and wider public and semi-state sectors" (Irish Congress of Trade Unions, 2019).

On the other hand, Dorcey's grandmother had been highly active in Republican politics during the time of the fight for Irish Independence. During our interview (see *infra*, Chapter 4), Mary Dorcey recalled her grandmother being a rather open-minded woman, well-aware of the existence of lesbians in Ireland – thus questioning the humorous idea that Ireland was a lesbian-free nation. When it came down to political commitment – which she herself qualifies, at some point, as "radicalism" – Dorcey's mother saw in the author her grandmother's influence, often telling her: "Granny will never be dead while you're alive." (See *infra* p. 69). In the 2015 interview with Maria Micaela Coppola and Carla de Petris entitled "A Conversation with Mary Dorcey", Dorcey spoke about these two powerful female presences in her life:

> through my mother and grandmother I learned of that generation of women activists and artists. Many Irish women of my age wouldn't even have heard of them because as soon as we achieved Independence, all the strong women who had been involved in the struggle, feminists, and Republicans, were forgotten, written out of history, and it seemed as if all the revolutionaries had been male. (Coppola and de Petris, 2015: 232)

In the same interview, Dorcey discussed the way that, in Ireland, many recognized her work strictly because of references to mother-daughter relationships, erasing the sexuality issue: "in some circles my sexuality was the only centre of interest. But now in my own country many more readers know me, some exclusively, as the woman who writes about the mother-daughter relationship." (Coppola and de Petris, 2015: 230). Twenty-five years earlier, the scenario was not the same. In her 1990 interview with Nuala Archer, Dorcey explained how "in the writing world I seem to be known as The Lesbian Writer, and regarded with fear because of that." (Archer, 1990: 21), before recognizing some changes after the publication of *A Noise from the Woodshed* and the subsequent awarding of the Rooney Prize. Notwithstanding, the references to parental relationships could have arguably been influenced by her mother and grandmother's lives and experiences. In our interview, for instance, Mary Dorcey acknowledged that some of her poems about mothers were about her actual mother.

In Dorcey's specific case, much of the personal is inherently put into her literary works – something the author admitted by stating that "[in your work] you put elements of yourself, you put elements of your friends, of your family" (See *infra* p. 74). The author continued by explaining how some of her short stories are vaguely based in real life, based in real places, real people. In her review of Mary Dorcey's poetry collection *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* (1991) entitled "Review: Deliberately Personal", Anne Fogarty claims that "[the] central theme of Dorcey's work is that everything is rooted in the personal." (Fogarty, 1992: 92), arguing furthermore: "This emphasis on what she terms the rawness of the personal is not a plea for endless introspection but a means of broaching those hidden connections, shared emotions, silences, and shrieked responsibilities which bind women together." (Fogarty, 1992: 92).

Having studied in Paris, the author fell in love and got into a relationship with a French man before falling in love with a French woman in Ireland, Carole – her partner for more than fifteen years, to whom *A Noise from the Woodshed* is dedicated. Carole du Pradal was part of why the author became so interested in speaking out about queer relationships as she did not want to publicly deny either her lover, or their relationship: "I was in love with a beautiful woman, she was a French woman… and I was crazy about her, and she was crazy about me… and I was determined not to deny her and she wouldn't dream of hiding me." (See *infra* p. 69).

It was Dorcey's mission to tell the truth about her life, something she achieved by being open about her relationships and all it entailed. For Mary Dorcey, it can be argued that familial and romantic relationships impacted the author's creative process: both her mother's and

grandmother's experiences gave her a broader view of the injustices Irish women experienced, and so, whether because of her mother's hardships, or because of her grandmother's activism, the author fought to put women in the limelight, gifting them a change to be heard and appreciated.

2.2 – The fight for change

It is Mary Dorcey's belief that one cannot separate activism from writing – something she explained in the previously mentioned interview with psychologist Paul D'Alton. As the author is asked whether she best identifies with the tags of poet, novelist, or activist, she retorted: "I don't think I can separate them… I often think about that, and I think, you know, if I hadn't been a writer, I would have been an activist too – and if I hadn't been an activist, I would have been a writer. They're really interwoven and they're very deep in me." (Past/Pride/Present #3: 2:34). I believe this inability to separate activism from literature developed from the scarce visibility of women and lesbians in literature and arguably elsewhere during Mary Dorcey's early life.

The author's involvement in activism began during the 1970's after "The student politics (…) in the UK and US laid the foundations for my politics." (Dorcey, 2021: 242), as the author states in her contribution to Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's collectanea (2021). While living in Paris, Dorcey got in contact with left wing groups, joining them in protests after learning about issues such as civil rights and the women's liberation movements. This is not surprising given that Paris (in the late sixties and early seventies) was one of the epicenters of what later came to be known as "the long sixties youth revolution". I must mention that during the 1970's the women's liberation struggle took the frontline of activism in Ireland and lesbian issues were not yet in the agenda. In the chapter "Lesbian Activism" included in the book *Documenting Irish Feminisms: The Second Wave*, Tina O'Toole explains why this was the case:

> Despite their active involvement as participants in the early days of the Irish women's movement, lesbian issues were not on the core feminist agenda. Solidarity between women was a feature of the early feminist years, and in order to present a unified front to the dominant culture differences between women, such as sexuality, were perceived as problematic elements with the power to distract from the main focus of the movement, or even to destroy it from within. (O'Toole, 2005: 172)

Upon returning to Ireland in 1973, Mary Dorcey and five other people founded the first Irish gay rights Movement, the Sexual Liberation Movement (often referred to as SLM). According to Michael Kerrigan in "Sexual Liberation Movement (SLM), 1973", the SLM was "diverse and inclusive. Topics for discussion were varied and included feminism, racism, colonialism, art, poetry, and literature. The message was 'Only Connect!'" (Kerrigan, 1974). In Tina O'Toole's previously mentioned text, when first faced with a poster publicizing the Sexual Liberation Movement, Dorcey is quoted as having said:

> Bewildering and ludicrous as it seems from this vantage point, that night twenty-two years ago was the first time I think the word "sexual" was written anywhere in public. The Women's Movement had been in action for one year, the Pill train had taken place, and I had seen some of the group on the *Late Late Show*, but while they demanded the right to legal contraception, I don't remember that anyone talked about sex. (O'Toole, 2005: 174)

By 1975, Dorcey became a founding member of another activist group: Irishwomen United, Ireland's second organized feminist group. Self-described as "a group of Women's liberationists who believe that the best perspective for struggle against women's oppression in Ireland lies in an ongoing fight around the charter of demands printed here" (Irish Women United, 1975), Irishwomen United was a "feminist and theoretical movement" (Dorcey, 2021: 242). The activist group "acted as an umbrella organisation for a range of different kinds of feminist groups and issues, and there were many lesbian feminist activists involved in it." (O'Toole, 2005: 174). Irishwomen United focused on the overbearing concerns Irish women had been experiencing: divorce was prohibited, abortions illegal; the pill was not available, women were denied the right for contraception (which had been illegal since 1935). The group was made up of around two hundred members to whom, according to Laura Kelly in "Irishwomen United, the Contraception Action Programme and the feminist campaign for free, safe and legal contraception in Ireland, c.1975-81" published by *Cambridge University Press*,

> the issue of class was paramount to their contraception campaigns while, in common with their counterparts in the United States, they were also concerned about the increasing medicalisation of women's bodies and the potential health risks of the contraceptive pill (…) In Ireland. Fundamentally, [the Irish Women United and Contraception Action Programme] members believed in a women's movement that allowed for the equal distribution of sexual knowledge and access to contraception. (Kelly, 2019: 269)

Dorcey would soon become a founding member of yet another activist group: Women for Radical Change, a group "committed to the equality of women, including lesbians, in Irish

life." (Jeffrey, 2019: 54). Having been highly influenced by American politics, in the late 1970's, Mary Dorcey gave a speech during the Women's Week in University College Dublin where she declared: "if feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice", quoting Ti-Grace Atkinson[10]. The speech would be front-page in the next day's edition of *The Irish Times* with the title "Self-Confessed lesbian denounces heterosexuality as sadomasochism." (Past/Pride/Present #3: 27:55-28:10).

In 2005, in Tina O'Toole's text, Mary Dorcey recognized the victories these activist groups brought about: "The Ireland I live in now is so far removed from the Ireland of twenty years ago it might be a different country. And the Ireland of my childhood remembered from this perspective seems like another planet." (O'Toole, 2005: 169). By recognizing the flaws in the lives of Irish women, Dorcey joined forces with others who realized that change had to be made. This act brought about changes that were once unthinkable, but which are now a part of the lives of Irish women, gays, lesbians, and all others.

2.3 – A voice to the voiceless

> Perhaps my journey as a writer might best be defined as a desire to explore otherness: the ways in which societies construct castes of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Many accounts of 'otherness', whether of gender, sexual orientation, race or age are correlated, I believe, in a kind of quarantine, separated from 'normal people.'" (Dorcey, 2021: 246)

In a career that spans over forty years, Mary Dorcey has published ten books, seven poetry collections, a novella, a novel, and a collection of short stories: *Kindling* (1982), *A Noise from the* Woodshed (1989), *Scarlett O'Hara* (1990), *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* (1991), *The River that Carries Me* (1995), *Biography of Desire* (1997), *Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow* (2001), *Perhaps the hear is Constant After All* (2012), *To Air the Soul, Throw all the Windows Wide* (2016). The most recent, a poetry book entitled *Life Holds its Breath*, was published by Salmon Poetry in February 2022. Partially written at the Tyrone Guthrie Center at Annaghmakerrig (a residential space used by creative artists), the book is divided into five sections: "Youth Come Again and Summer", "Life Holds Its Breath", "The Artist's Road", "Trial and Reclamation", and "Time It Was". Seán Hewitt's review of the book

[10] Ti-Grace Atkinson (b.1938). American writer, philosopher, and feminist activist.

in *The Irish Times* "Attuned to the sounds of the world" (See Annex 3) describes the collection as one which "moves through lyrics of desire and love, the pastoral and the pandemic, the radical life of the woman poet, and the history of LGBTQ+ rights" (See Annex 3). During the release of this collection, publisher Salmon Poetry recalled Mary Dorcey's writing as groundbreaking stating that it: "announced itself as revolutionary in subject matter and tone. It shattered the silence of Ireland on the suppressed reality of women's lives and most remarkably on the romantic / erotic love between women." (Salmon Poetry, 2022).

Mary Dorcey published her poetry book, *Kindling*, in 1982 through the publishing group Onlywomen Press. Released in London, the book was well received by British audiences who remained rather appreciative during multiple public readings. In Dublin, as expected, the scenario seemed to be different, the people not as amenable: "one or two mentions in the press alerted society to scandal. No one had ever seen the word lesbian on the cover of a book of any kind before this, or poems that celebrated love between women. (Dorcey, 2021: 243). In the author's home country, many refused to look beyond the presence of a lesbian experience in the book concerning "themselves with the shock of aberrant sexuality." (Dorcey, 2021: 243). This almost puritanical outlook caused suffering to Dorcey's mother who became an unwilling victim of public scrutiny, made worse because of Ireland's hypervigilance and subsequent need "to trace you, they always want to know where you came from, where you grew up and who your family is." (See *infra* p. 70).

It would take another seven years for Dorcey to publish again, and so, in 1989, the author released *A Noise from the Woodshed*. Just as it had happened with *Kindling*, the short-story collection would be repeatedly reviewed and appreciated in England, but barely talked about in Ireland apart from being referred as "Dark Nights of Underground Love" (Dorcey, 2021: 244) in a review in *The Irish Times*. The references to the lesbian experience, characteristic of the collection, was the ultimate reason behind the book's lack of acceptance. It was only after Mary Dorcey won the Rooney Prize in 1990 that "suddenly everybody wanted to talk to me." (Dorcey, 2021: 244).

Dorcey would publish eight more books in the following years: *Scarlet O'Hara*, a novella, was published in 1990; *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* and *The River that Carries Me*, both poetry books, would be published in 1991 and 1995, respectively. In the poetry books the author would focus mostly on loss and pain, on mothers, and, above all, women. Dorcey's portrayal of loss, pain and grief can be found in poems such as "My Grandmother's Voice" from *The River That Carries Me* (1995) in which the poetic voice speaks

about hearing her grandmother in her mother's voice. The poem, which is a definite testimony of grief, can also be read as a celebration of family, and women:

> Their voices reverberate in my head.
> They will die with me.
> I have put an end to inheritance -
> drawn a stroke across the page.
> Their grace,
> their humour,
> their way of walking in a room. (Dorcey, 1995: 112)

The poetic voice hears her grandmother in her mother's voice, but also her great-grandmother, and all other women who came before her. In the midst of a declaration of pain, the poetic I exudes pride and appreciation for women. In "A Conversation with Mary Dorcey", the author mentions to Maria Micaela Coppola and Carla de Petris that her mother never wanted her to dwell on negative situations, declaring: "you could talk of pain, but not wallow in it. So I hope I am doing that, I hope that when I write about sorrow, it moves the listener and opens their hearts." (Coppola and de Petris, 2015: 235-236).

In 1997, Dorcey would publish *Biography of Desire*, a novel in which, according to Maria Micaela Coppola in "Mary Dorcey: The Poet's Gaze and Scalpel" the two woman-protagonists "fill the space that separates them (physically more than emotionally) by writing and reading a diary, which establishes a connection between them and sharpens their understanding of loss and love." (Coppola, 2015: 227). The bestseller novel, which has been reprinted three times, has, according to Paula R. Pratt in "Bisexuality, Queer Theory and Mary Dorcey's *Biography of Desire*: An Outlaw Reading": "[reshaped] contemporary Irish literature [as well as made] a contribution to the shaping of the perceptions and understanding of bisexuality in all its richness and humanity." (Pratt, 2001: n/p). Pratt continues:

> Dorcey's novel contributes to the understanding of this hybridity and its resonance by constructing a biography, not of a "queer" love affair, but of the human experience of attraction and desire: desire awakened, diminished, and reawaken, with all the attendant vagaries involved. (Pratt, 2001: n/p)

The representation of the human experience above that of queer love is something Dorcey alluded to in her conversation with Coppola and de Petris, having proclaimed: "I wanted to explore the question of what is central to human love." (Coppola and de Petris, 2015: 234). This, I believe to be one of the best parts of Mary Dorcey's literature: although the relationships

portrayed by the author are often lesbian relationships, that is not the central issue of the storyline – but raw, human love.

Two other poetry books: *Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow* and *Perhaps the Heart is Constant After All*, would be published in 2001, and 2012, respectively. In 2016, Dorcey would publish *To Air the Soul, Throw All the Windows Wide*: *New and Selected Poetry*. Additionally, the author has been anthologized in over one hundred collections. From *A Noise from the Woodshed* alone, the short stories "Sweet, Practised, Endings" and "The Husband", were included in anthologies, both in 1989: the first, in *The Pied Piper: lesbian fiction*, edited by Lilian Mohin; the latter, in *Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing*, edited by Ailbhe Smyth. In December 2020, the short story "Diary of a School Girl" was published in *Queer Love: An Anthology of Irish Fiction*, edited by Paul McVeigh.

Although the focus of this thesis is queer love and relationships, the importance of the role of the woman and the mother in Dorcey's work deserves to be acknowledged. The poems "The Ordinary Woman" from *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* and "A Woman in Another War", from *The River That Carries Me* discuss both thematics. In the first poem, we find an homage to women as the poetic voice mentions almost two hundred women from different social classes and statuses, creating, according to Antoinette Quinn's reading in "Speaking the Unspoken: The Poetry of Mary Dorcey", a "good humoured *reduction ad absurdum* of the essentialist perception that there is a female norm [thus] celebrating the heterogeneity and diversity of women." (Quinn, 1992: 231). The latter poem, "A Woman in Another War", "depicts the brutalities committed against women in a war-torn country." (Han, 2006: 103). The poem mentions two characters: both women, both mothers. Whereas one is in the safety of a bus with her baby, the other is in another country being raped whilst her newborn baby cries to be fed. While the first woman can feed and care for her child, the other sees her newborn baby be decapitated by the rapist and she asks to feed them:

> There was a woman in another country,
> a woman in another war.
> (…)
> They raped them one after another,
> row after row;
> one soldier after another,
> one woman after another.
>
> The woman on the bus
> was helped by another
> to sit down. (Dorcey, 1995: 59

This contrast of events, of two women in different countries, under different circumstances yet connected by motherhood shows how different women's lives can be. It moreover shows how the author chooses to give a voice to marginalized, mistreated, and abused women who deserve respect and solidarity. The solidarity the author gives women and lesbians by portraying their different lives, needs, and problems in a positive light has granted her work some sort of recognition. In fact, *A Noise from the Woodshed*, for example, won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 1990, an award which according to Nuala Archer was made "to reward and encourage Irish writing talent." (Nuala, 1990: 21). In 1997, *Biography of Desire* was considered by Clodagh Corcoran in a review published in *The Irish Times* as "arguably the first erotic Irish novel (…) Full of courageous and challenging writing." (Corcoran, 1997). Additionally, Dorcey has won five awards from the Arts Council in Ireland in the years 1990, 1995, 2005, and 2009. The author's poetry is furthermore taught in the curriculums of the Irish Junior Certificate English and the British O Level English, and her work is "taught and researched in universities from North America to Europe, China and Africa.[11]" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 248).

Forty years after having started her career as an author, Mary Dorcey argues that women are still not given the same opportunities as men, while acknowledging how much harder the literary scene was when she began writing. In her contribution to *Look! It's a Woman Writer*, the author argues: "As almost every writer who is also a woman will tell, our gender still works against us in many ways, blatant or covert." (Dorcey, 2021: 246). Dorcey furthermore mentions knowing about perhaps only two famous women writers during her adolescence – stating that she first began writing in order to "break this deliberate silencing." (Dorcey, 2021: 246).

Additionally, the author explained how most of the books she read as a teenager had been written by men, stating that "It was only then that I stumbled upon the extraordinary fact that ninety percent of the books I was reading were written by men." (Dorcey, 2021: 242). This issue, of course, brings to the foreground the lack of visibility of Irish women writers up until the 1980's, as well as their absence in the Irish literary canon – an issue which was unraveled by *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, *vol. IV: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions*. The tome, published in 2002, was put together by a team of scholars who attempted to "bring together a substantial body of written documents produced by and about women since writing

[11] Mary Dorcey's prose is additionally taught in the Irish Women Writers' Seminar in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra.

began in Ireland." (Bourke et al, 2002: 32). *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* volumes IV and V gave, for the first time, recognition to Irish women writers. Contrary to the three previous volumes of the anthology in which only five women were included: "three women were admitted to the 'Contemporary Irish Poetry' section of Volume III, and two women were allowed in 'Irish Writing: Prose Fiction and Poetry 1900-1988'" (Bourke et al, 2002: 1291), in the "Contemporary Poetry" section from Volume V alone, there are forty women writers, "and there could have been twice as many, were it not for lack of space." (Bourke et al, 2002: 1291).

In *The Guardian*'s 2020 article "Irish women writing fiction were dismissed as 'quiet'. Ireland wasn't listening", Kathleen MacMahon speaks about the partial silence of Irish women writers, about her grandmother (Irish author Mary Lavin (1912-1996), and the differences between men and women: "All the men in my family had a study or office, and worked jobs with regular hours; unlike Grandmother, who would break off from her writing to dig the garden or peel the spuds for dinner" (MacMahon, 2020). MacMahon calls attention to the way many authors (such as Mary Lavin, Maeve Brennan, Kate O'Brien, Anne Enright) "struggled to be taken seriously by a high culture that, in Enright's words, "automatically tilts male" (MacMahon, 2020). The author further questions the label of "women's writing", stating that "its implication of being of no interest to readers other than women, is an insult that has not gone away." (MacMahon, 2020).

As an author, Mary Dorcey wants the reader to be drawn "into the heart of [the characters'] experience and jolted from the safe seat of detachment." (Dorcey, 2021: 246). Dorcey's easy-going and natural depiction of queer love makes this possible: the author never demonizes women, regardless of their at-times questionable decisions; moreover, she portrays lesbian love as if there are no social pressures towards the women and relationships. As a woman writer, Mary Dorcey has continuously proved to be an ally to women and to LGBTQ+ people, unceasingly breaking down the idea presented to her that "to be a female and to write and seek to publish books before the 1980's, was to be seen as eccentric if not actually an unfortunate, half-formed thing." (Dorcey, 2021: 245). Dorcey's goal of exploring human love regardless of the sex of the characters, she hopes, will become a reality as the author wishes that:

> perhaps (…) there will come a day when no one notices an author's gender or race but says only 'I have just read an astonishing, unforgettable book by a fantastic human writer.'
> I plan to live to see this. (Dorcey, 2021: 247)

It is Mary Dorcey's wish that we, as readers, students, professors, scholars – as a society – look beyond race, age, gender, and focus on the meaning of literary works. Literature, after all, exposes ugly truths, discusses social and political issues. It furthermore leads people into action, creates dystopic and utopic worlds to where one can escape to, or from. Moreover, literature educates readers, helping these with emotional and ethical reflection and development, instructing them on different social matters.

Mary Dorcey's message is one of hope – a hope based on the verisimilitude of her writings. The positive, non-traumatic representation of queer love in Mary Dorcey's work creates two worlds: the first, a safe haven of kinship where LGBTQ+ people can celebrate their identity and sexuality, feeling they are being appropriately represented and recognized; the second, an educational space for people outside the queer community.

Chapter 3: *Reinvented, / rebirthed / a woman in love. / That ordinary thing*

A Noise from the Woodshed, Mary Dorcey's second book, was published in 1989. Though the collection is composed of nine short stories, I will only be discussing and analyzing four: "A Noise from the Woodshed", "The Husband", "Introducing Nessa", and "Sweet, Practised, Endings". These four short stories tackle issues such as divorce and affairs, eroticism and passion between women, the vigilance over women's bodies and sexuality by Irish communities, and the issue of the outsider – one I refer to as the "outsider phenomenon". The outsider phenomenon is particularly important in the collection as it refers to the feelings of hypervigilance and scrutiny (by those outside of the relationship) experienced by many queer people.

As claimed in the back cover of the volume, the collection includes the likes of an "escape form an 'old-age asylum'; an exuberant confrontation with English racism; the last day of a marriage; [and] knowing and scrupulous lesbian romance.". The collection was intended to give a voice to the marginalized, something Heather Ingman endorses in *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women*, arguing: "[the collection was] designed to give a voice to [above all] lesbians." (Ingman, 2007: 61), before adding that the book "challenged the old rigid ways of thinking, (…) Her stories insist that, however muted their voices may be, lesbians, the elderly, battered women, are a part of the fabric of the Irish nation." (Ingman, 2007: 66).

As previously mentioned, the scarcity of critical essays about Mary Dorcey's work made the gathering of different analysis and literary critical approaches difficult. With some exceptions, the essays I came across are at least ten years old – some even thirty years old. Notwithstanding, many recognize Dorcey's importance in the Irish literary canon as both a woman writer and as a lesbian writer. In the 2017 "Mary Dorcey's Woodshed and its Implications for Irish Society", Amy Finlay Jeffrey discusses Dorcey's achievements with the short story collection claiming: "By detailing lesbianism in Irish literature, Dorcey reconfigures a tradition which had figuratively sought to deny such people a literary history." (Jeffrey, 2017: 6). Jeffrey additionally reflects on *A Noise from the Woodshed*'s significance, arguing that it "anticipates the integration of lesbians into Irish culture and reconfigures how Irish same sex relationships should be understood not as deviant and underground but as a positive and naturally evolving aspect of Irish society." (Jeffrey, 2017: 6).

In the previously mentioned "The spaces between the words" from *The Women's Review of Books*, Nuala Archer references a review of the short story collection by *Graph*'s (a Dublin literary magazine) Barra O'Seaghdha who "praised *A Noise from the Woodshed* as "a welcome intervention in the development of the Irish short story, as important to Irish writing as the publication of Joyce's *Dubliners*[12]" (Nuala, 1990: 21).

Dorcey's discussion of lesbian love and sexuality caused a reconfiguration of the literary tradition which saw the author be, back in 1989, considered by Ailbhe Smyth in *Wildish Things, An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writings*, a "rare voice from a deeply hidden pool" (Smyth, 1989: 10). This rare voice gave recognition to lesbians who, "In lieu of an official accessible literary history, (…) exist in a world that straddles visibly and invisibility. There are, or rather have been, [as queer theorist Terry Castle asserts], 'made to seem invisible by culture itself" (Jeffrey, 2017: 7). Mary Dorcey's decision to discuss issues such as the hypervigilance over women's bodies and sexuality, and to speak publicly about them in a time when Ireland was still very much a heteronormative nation, was undoubtably a political act. Were it published a few years earlier, Mary Dorcey could have easily seen the collection join the long list of books censored by the Irish Censorship of Publications Board.

In *A History of the Irish Short Story*, Heather Ingman speaks on the way Dorcey breaks boundaries by involving the reader in the lesbian experiences:

> The pulsing, hypnotic rhythms of Dorcey's prose in the title story, together with her use of the second person, break down boundaries between the self and the other, compelling the reader to become involved in this account of lesbian love. Rejecting objectivity, Dorcey's language aims to bring about a revolution in Irish attitudes. (Ingman, 2009: 235)

Dorcey's contributions to gay and lesbian literature in Ireland have been recognized by many academics. Namely, Ailbhe Smyth has recognized that "[there] is now a space which Irish lesbian and gay writers can inhabit with some dignity, if not yet absolute ease." (Han, 2006: 104). In spite of this recognition and appreciation, in the 2006 anthology *Irish Women Writers: An A-to-Z Guide,* John J. Han claims that Mary Dorcey's work has been continuously overlooked by mainstream critics:

> Although Dorcey is internationally known for her lesbian activism and writing, her works are rarely reviewed by scholarly journals. She has also been virtually ignored by such popular periodicals as the *Times Literary Supplement*, *New York Times*, and *Washington*

[12] First published in 1914, James Joyce's *Dubliners* is a collection of 15 short stories which portray the ordinary lives of Dublin's inhabitants.

> *Post*, among others. Few reference books on contemporary Irish writing cover Dorcey. As a lesbian activist and writer, her fame is firmly established, but it will take more time before her literary works are fully accepted by mainstream critics. (Han, 2006: 104-105)

My decision to study and analyze *A Noise from the Woodshed* above any other literary works from Mary Dorcey was based in its historical context and the importance of its thematics during the late 1980's and early 1990's. Dorcey's portrayal of lesbian relationships have a conventional feature which compares these to heterosexual relationships, making possible the portrayal of queer affairs in what is taken to be "the norm" in mainstream fiction.

3.1 – A Fertile Chaos in "A Noise from the Woodshed"

As the first short story of the collection, "A Noise from the Woodshed" seems to be an homage to women, a tale told from the point of view of a female narrator who loves another woman, and who is in awe of the strength and power of women. The story, which according to the author has autobiographical roots, was written in the Southwest of Ireland where Dorcey lived with her at-the-time partner. Dorcey's goal in writing the story, as she explained to Nuala Archer in the 1990 "The spaces between the words", was to create a happy story, wanting "to capture the quality of fertile chaos and the common experience of women who balance the practical, the emotional, the political, and the sensual all in the same day." (Dorcey, 1990: 23).

The short story includes five characters: the unnamed narrator – a woman who suffers from claustrophobia and whose constant thoughts express the love she has for women; her lover (also unnamed), "an artistic painter, let it be known" (Dorcey, 1989: 12), a fearless woman who came to the narrator "Like a warrior in white armour (…) gallant and fearless though double-breasted" (Dorcey, 1989: 1). Cleo, the owner of the unfinished loft at the house the lovers share, is portrayed as a woman who saw the loft become too claustrophobic for her, having then left for "Africa, or India, or Australia" (Dorcey, 1989: 5) as to find more space. The two other characters are Janette and Janelle, two American women, lovers, who were offered shelter by the narrator's lover. The characters are inspired in real-life women as can be seen in Dorcey's words when, during our interview, the author spoke on the autobiographical aspect of the short story: "We had a lovely cottage and quite a lot of land, and there was a little hut… two American

women came to visit, (…) they had their sleeping bags (…) then they got wet so they moved into the little hut" (See *infra* p. 73).

The narrator shifts the storytelling between two storylines: one which includes the relationship between her and her lover from the moment they cross the river and make love, to the point they start living together, sharing their lives, and the moment in which they hear a noise coming from the woodshed. The other storyline includes an homage to women who do small, everyday things "countless of times, so fast and so often anyone would lose count. It was men who started the whole business of counting: numbers and keeping a ledger." (Dorcey, 1989: 2). The storytelling in itself is, at times, nonsensical, as Heather Ingman argues: "'A Noise from the Woodshed' is narrated in a style which [threads] a line between sense and nonsense as the 'sense' of the world is wiped out through nonsense and laughter." (Ingman, 2007: 61).

Dorcey argues that this shift in time and narration is made out to represent balance in the sense that women were not allowed to separate work from pleasure, having to fit into their schedule (in between the everyday washing and cooking), relaxing or pleasurable moments as claimed in her interview with Nuala Archer: "we not only have to fit sex in somewhere between doing the laundry and fighting for abortion rights and putting the children to bed, but we have to do it without disturbing the neighbors." (Dorcey, 1990: 23). Not only were women to find time for leisure or activism in between their everyday obligations, but they were to do so in a way that would not disturb the working man or the conformist woman, as the vigilance of the outsider could make either scenario impossible. Additionally, the author argues that the vigilance over women's lives (particularly lesbians) led these to live their lives in silence in order to "not upset the prejudices of heterosexual people around us." (Dorcey, 1990: 23).

The main issue of the short story is that of women empowerment and appreciation, an appreciation which is found not only in references to the narrator's lover, but to women who were part of the community: even strangers who sat up tents and created a peace camp with "their bodies and lives" (Dorcey, 1989: 6), protesting against the power station, were valued by the narrator.

When it comes to the women-lovers, the narrator portrays the relationship as powerful, describing her lover as a strong woman, someone who became a safe place for her, who came to her in a time of need, siting her down "the way a woman does, not wanting for thanks, not noticing she's done you a favour" (Dorcey, 1989: 2); a woman willing to do the everyday

things: “making the breakfast, doing the shopping, scrubbing the bath, remembering to turn on the blanket, washing up when you’re too tired, and never being too tired.” (Dorcey, 1989: 1-2). Small, everyday chores, showing resilience and care, traditionally attributed to women in the sexual division of labor, and not recognized as work in a heterosexual context. Apart from valorizing women, the narrator criticizes men. In the midst of speaking about the relationship between men and women, the narrator often explains the differences between the two by characterizing women as people who do things without expecting anything in return, contrary to men.[13]

The spontaneous, passionate relationship between the women saw them spend a lot of time together, either avoiding all that (supposedly) should been done: leaving the books unread, the beaches uncleaned, the dishes unwashed, or doing it all: fixing up the loft or the gutters, passing each other the “hammers and nails and putty and saws and books and photographs and anything else you might need” (Dorcey, 1989: 12), finding romance in both scenarios. The relationship between the women is described as an “impromptu lying about in strange places, this loss of time and crockery, this surrender of senses, this wallowing in all flat surfaces” (Dorcey, 1989: 7). These situations, common in traditional representations of the state of being in love, are shared by the couple who is deep in a state of passion.

The lovers seem to avoid all home objects associated with women, instead choosing, according to Amy Finlay Jeffrey, to “reclaim the home as a site of the heterosexual matrix (…) They refute the tasks associated with women within the Irish home, such as cleaning and cooking, unwashed dishes pile up” (Jeffrey, 2017: 10). Still according to Jeffrey, Mary Dorcey creates, through the lovers, a “queer temporality within the heteronormative home. (…) In refashioning the ideal of home and thus the nation, Dorcey extends the sexual parameters of Irish identity.” (Jeffrey, 2017: 10). Femininity is thus redefined, now not anchored in domesticity.

Although the relationship between the women is positively portrayed: there are no comments that denigrate the relationship and all representations of it are passionate, the narrator is able to recognize that bad things can happen outside the safety of the relationship. As it happens with heterosexual relationships, a safe space is often created within a shared space (often a home) where all that is negative is set apart; with the narrator and her lover, the same

[13] This argument is based on the widespread traditional and hegemonic behaviors of men and women.

happens: there is a clear contrast between the passionate storytelling of the inside, where the couple share their lives, and the outside, where all of these worries and problems are happening:

> There is (…) love and the losing of it. There is all this death and dying, this destruction and hunger and torment. (…) There are soldiers and surgeons and scientists waiting to cure to death, waiting to kill for peace. There are men on the street just waiting for someone like you and men at home with the doors locked who found you already. (Dorcey, 1989: 7-8)

The contrast between the pain and sorrow of the outside, and the beauty of the inside is perfectly encapsuled in the previous citation. As the narrator enumerates the problems of the outside (such as hunger, death, sorrow, and destruction), she describes it as a problematic place in which all of these awful things are currently happening. On the inside, however, there are men and women with their doors locked who have already found someone with whom they can escape from all the sorrow, sharing their lives. Being able to recognize that there is more going on in the world other than the love they feel for each other naturalizes the characters, and their relationship. During her interview with Nuala Archer, Mary Dorcey spoke about the conflict between the public and private spaces when explaining her decision to write the short story, stating: "Women are not allowed to compartmentalize our lives as men do. We are not allowed separate spaces for our work (the office), our sex (brothels), our relaxation (sports stadiums) as men are." (Dorcey, 1990: 23). Amy Finlay Jeffrey argues that one could go further and see the relationship between the outside/inside as a male/female relationship as she discusses the private and public spheres:

> The private sphere has historically been located as a domain exclusively fit for women. This trope has particular resonance in Ireland where the 1937 Irish Constitution inscribed the home as the 'natural' place for women. In contrast the public sphere has historically been associated with men, a motif which has been well documented by both feminist and queer theorists. (Jeffrey, 2017: 9)

As a side note, Jeffrey states that some critics have questioned the role of queer relationships in this established site – the home. According to Emma Young, Jeffrey explains, the house has historically been regarded as "the pinnacle of heterosexual agency" (Jeffrey, 2017: 9), further stating that Mary Dorcey's lesbians "[Subvert] the domain of the home as a heterocentric platform, her work imagines an Ireland in which homosexuality is accepted and wherein the door of the house/nation is open to new sexual identities. (Jeffrey, 2017: 9). Amy Finlay Jeffrey continues:

> The small, unimpressive woodshed in contrast to the stately home can be read as a zone removed from the boundaries of the nation. The lesbians in the woodshed, as will be later detailed, represent the marginality of lesbians within the Irish nation. Taking the house as nation motif, I argue that Dorcey's *A Noise from the Woodshed* fashions a queer space in which lesbian identity is integrated into the Irish nation. (Jeffrey, 2017: 9)

The author proceeds to speak about the differences between a big house and a small house, arguing that if big houses are connected to nationality, so can small woodsheds. In that sense, if homes – who have historically been connected to heterosexuality – are considered a part of the Irish nation, Mary Dorcey's woodshed – who is connected to lesbianism – must too been seen as an unquestionable part of the Irish nation.

The liberation and empowerment of women (though not the focus of this thesis) deserve to be mentioned as it is something that should not be separated from the gay movement. The narrator promptly speaks on women's struggles and the focus on the body, stating how women would sit around and talk "about their women's problems, sitting in a ring about women's bodies and their departures from the norm: the suffering, treacherous, uncertain organs you were raised to abhor." (Dorcey, 1989: 10). The references to the female body are additionally found as the narrator mentions the various health issues associated with women – mastectomies, pap smears, "pre-natal and post natal exams, of tensions real and imagined; pre-menstrual and post menstrual, of menarche and its inevitable menopause (…) of having the right attitude or the wrong (oh mother heaven yes, you said)" (Dorcey, 1989: 11).

In this listing of things associated with women and the female body, the narrator mentions a cluster of health issues– some which are inevitable, others avoidable. The first, mastectomies, pap smears, menstruation, menopause. The latter, childbearing, and childbirth related issues. These struggles women suffered from, or with, made them wonder if that was all that life entailed, and if there was a chance of escaping such bodily surveillance. Women are imprisoned by their bodies in a biological determinism that makes escape difficult. While speaking on this, the narrator mentions how some women decided to escape bodily constraints, choosing to not confine their lives and bodies to all these problems. The narrator and her lover belong to this group of women who escaped, joining other women who then got to experience "days, weeks of self-indulgence and knowing pleasure, wallowing in blissful know-how, revelling in abandon, shared secrets and shames and delight." (Dorcey, 1989: 11).

"A Noise from the Woodshed" gets its name from a mysterious noise the lovers heard coming from a woodshed in the property. First heard five days after the narrator got to the

house, the noise would be heard multiple times before the women decided to investigate its source. Initially thought to be garbage, "or a goose or a dog or a seal making free with it" (Dorcey, 1989: 15), the noise turned out to come from two women: "one black, one white although brown skinned, young, of unidentifiable class and culture" (Dorcey, 1989: 16). The women, who bring into question the matters of race, age, and class, had been laying in a red sleeping bag. Janelle and Janette had been offered the woodshed by the narrator's lover as shelter, a place they could use to sleep in if it got too cold, or if it rained. The American women, who worked in "a woman's refuge for battered women and raped women and women who had been molested as children and children who had been molested before they ever got to be women." (Dorcey, 1989: 17), had been making love in the woodshed. It turned out that the noise the narrator and her lover had heard was nothing other than the orgasms of the two women.

In "Mary Dorcey's Woodshed and its Implications for Irish society", Amy Finlay Jeffrey brings into question a curious fact which could explain the presence of American women in the short story above all other nationalities: according to Jeffrey, homosexuality had been decriminalized in Massachusetts in 1989 and so, she argues, the presence of these American women could perhaps have signified "Dorcey's desire that Ireland would soon follow suit. The noise from the woodshed is a noise calling for radical change and toleration" (Jeffrey, 2017: 11).

The short story ends with the narrator mentioning a cuckoo "yes, it was, unmistakably from over the heather – a cuckoo calls" (Dorcey, 1989: 22), a bird commonly associated with nonsense – a genius way of finishing the short story due to its, at times, nonsensical storytelling caused by a stream of consciousness. Although there is a lot to be done on the outside, there is also love, passion, eroticism; there is an immense sense of pride and appreciation for women who decided to break from the norm when faced with the idea that "It was women doing it and getting no credit, women now allowed near it and still getting the blame, women doing it all, and then all over again, but having no power to halt or to change it" (Dorcey, 1989: 11-12).

Although at times difficult to understand with the lack of punctuation and quick change of time frame and storyline, the short story pays an homage to women – much like Dorcey's poem "The Ordinary Woman" from the 1995 poetry book *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers*. Just as in the short story, where the narrator's lover and all other ordinary women are celebrated, the poem is dedicated to the ordinary woman, praising:

> The who ever heard of her woman?

> The who the hell is she woman?
> The who the hell does she think she is woman?
> (…) The silent woman, the screaming woman
> (Dorcey, 1995: 57-58)

As Anne Owens Weeks puts it in her 1995 article "Ordinary Women: Themes in Contemporary Fiction by Irish Women", the "six-page list of varieties of ordinary woman follows Dorcey's question, debunking the comfortable notion that woman is an essential category" (Weeks: 1995: 1). This homage to ordinary women in their infinite multiplicity is one which privileges female experiences, taking women away from the established societal norms and combining women from different walks of life into one category: women who deserve to be appreciated. The short story talks about a lesbian relationship, about two women who are madly in love. Yet, that is not the central focus of the storyline: it is, above all, a token of appreciation for the ordinary woman – a woman who doesn't set aside her needs but who allows her every-day to be filled with pleasurable moments in the midst of all the fertile chaos.

3.2 – The Heterosexual Outsider in "The Husband"

The fourth short story from the collection, entitled "The Husband", tells the tale of the end of a marriage through the point of view of a husband who is faced with his wife's affair with another woman. According to Antoinette Quinn in "Speaking the Unspoken: The Poetry of Mary Dorcey", the short story "charts the progress of an urban wife's lesbian courtship from the viewpoint of her liberal husband, whose presuppositions and predictions about the course of this relationship are repeatedly proved wrong." (Quinn, 1992: 227). Quinn furthermore argues that "The Husband" is "a double-edged story in that the narrative is filtered through the consciousness of a heterosexual character, a straight reader surrogate, who is both educated about lesbianism and at the same time relegated to the status of permanent alien." (Quinn, 1992: 227-228). One of the novelties of the story is precisely the liberal character of the husband, who does not fit the stereotypical representations of bigot males.

The short story begins with a final sexual encounter between the married couple – a goodbye "gift" from the wife as she gathered herself to leave the marriage. This act, seen by the husband as a "last generous offering – handing over her body as she might a towel to someone bleeding." (Dorcey, 1989: 75), is an impression of self-pity and *pathos* by the husband,

portrayed as a mere favor coming from a "passive, magnanimous" (Dorcey, 1989: 64) woman. Throughout the story, the reader is given insight on both relationships: the ten-year-long marriage between the heterosexual couple which included a child, and the recent lesbian relationship. The marriage was lacking – she felt nothing other than indifference, pity, and a sense of loathing towards her husband as, after sex "The scent and taste of him would be all through her. She would wash meticulously every inch of her body to remove it" (Dorcey, 1989: 66). When it came to her female lover, however, the passion was alive: the one-year-long affair between the women was at an all-time high as all was new and exciting.

The short story counts with the presence of four main characters: Martina (the protagonist), Lisa (her daughter, who is spoken of but never present), Helen (the lover), and the unnamed husband. Martina, the wife, and mother of a child is portrayed as a free-thinking woman, not afraid to go after her newfound love for Helen even if that entails leaving her decade-long marriage behind; her point of view, as explained by Heather Ingman in *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Women Writers*, "remains to some extent elusive though, reflecting the elusiveness of the lesbian in a heterosexual world: Martina's story is perceived only through gaps and fractures in her husband's narrative." (Ingman, 2007: 63). Lisa, the couple's daughter is caught in the middle of the ordeal being seemingly ignored by a mother who at times prioritizes the affair over her daughter's wellbeing – leaving the husband to "clean the house, cook meals, and read his way through the bundles of books she brought home" (Dorcey, 1989: 76), all indicatives of a gender norm reversal – and a reconfiguration of both masculinity and femininity. Helen, the lover, is described as a woman who had no need to, according to the husband, "patronise or idolise, she did not need to conquer or submit, and her desire would never be exploitative because she was a woman dealing with a woman!" (Dorcey, 1989: 76). The verbs – patronize, idolize, conquer, and submit – are the inferred behaviors of males in their heterosexual relationships.

The husband, curiously, is the only unnamed character in the short story. His anonymity gives more importance to Martina's personality: he is, after all, Martina's husband, Lisa's father, being reduced to a function, not an identity. The husband, through whose point of view the story is told, is overly worried about what others might think about his life and about his marriage falling apart, acting as a possessive husband who wants to keep his wife, but is unable to do so.

The role of the outsider is found in the narration in two separate ways: in the way in which the husband fantasizes about the lesbian relationship, and in the imagined reactions from

family members (in the husband's perspective). The first is exemplified in the denial of the lesbian relationship, one which summarizes the mindset of the heterosexual outsider (when it comes to the relationship); the other, one which includes the imagined consequences of the lesbian affair when it comes to the child, Lisa. The husband imagines the moment his parents, or Martina's mother, find out about the affair and take the child away from Martina – connecting this to the legal and social conditions women were subjected to: "The instant they discovered the truth, who and what she had left him for, they would snatch Lisa from her as instinctively as they would from quicksand." (Dorcey, 1989: 67).

The reader is presented with many lesbian stereotypes embodied in the husband's male gaze and voyeurism. Throughout the duration of the relationship between Martina and Helen, the husband goes through difference phases: initially, the character considered the relationship between the women a joke: "How could any normal man have seen it as more than a joke? He had felt no jealousy at all at the start" (Dorcey, 1989: 70). Soon, this unwillingness to believe the seriousness of the relationship turned into curiosity and voyeurism: "Two women in bed together after all – there was something undeniably exciting about the idea." (Dorcey, 1989: 70), before ultimately turning into a fantasy:

> He began to have fantasies about Martina and Helen together. He allowed himself delicious images of their tentative, childish sensuality. When he and Martina were fucking he had fantasised lately that Helen was there too, both women exciting each other and then turning to him at the ultimate moment, competing for him." (Dorcey, 1989: 72-73)

The issue of male voyeurism regarding lesbian sexuality, particularly in pornography, was discussed by Adriene Rich in the 1980 "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". As the author discusses pornography and the use of women as sexual objects, she explains how "enforced submission and the use of cruelty, if played out in heterosexual pairing, is sexually "normal," while sensuality between women, including erotic mutuality and respect, is "queer," "sick," and either pornographic in itself or not very exciting" (Rich, 1980: 20). The existence of the lesbian sexuality merely as a sexual, pornographic prelude has also been commented by Aoife Mallon in "Colourful Voices: The Experience of Young Lesbians Combating Homophobia and Heteronormativity", as the author argues that in a heteronormative society such as Ireland's, "Lesbianism was regarded as merely "…a playful diversion… where the male would always emerge the victor" (Mallon, 2013: 27).

The way in which the husband thinks of the lesbian relationship illustrates the heteronormative imagination at work. By initially regarding the affair as a joke, wondering at times "if they were really lesbians at all" (Dorcey, 1989: 71), the husband erases the possibility of authentic lesbian love while having his wife under his supervision and surveillance. This erasure of the lesbian existence is furthermore supported by the way the heterosexual outsider calls the relationship between Martina and Helen a "tentative, childish sensuality" (Dorcey, 1989: 72), a relationship he initially considered "basically a schoolgirl crush, the sort of thing most girls worked out in their teens." (Dorcey, 1989: 72). Yet another heteronormative trait of the husband is the way he regards the lesbian relationship as either inexistent, or as a sexual prelude to heterosexual sex, reaching a point when the character thought the women excluded him out of the privacy of their relationship to "insist on their self-sufficiency and absorption." (Dorcey, 1989: 73).

In spite of the husband's expectations, the relationship between Martina and Helen proves to be strong and, as the story ends, Martina finishes packing her bags and goes away with Helen to the country. In references to the past, the reader is presented with situations which show the intensity of the lesbian affair – despite the husband's continuous denial. The first, Martina's reaction to Helen's decision to break off the relationship. When at home with her husband, after a falling-out with Helen, Martina mourned what seemed to be the end of the relationship, sobbing uncontrollably to the point of "[becoming] hysterical, [screaming] at him to leave her alone" (Dorcey, 1989: 72). In order to soothe his wife, and, in a way, continue denying the lesbian relationship, the husband had "told her not to be a fool, that she was far too beautiful to be cast aside by Helen, that she must be the best thing that ever happened to her. She was sobbing uncontrollably, but she stopped to abuse him when he said that." (Dorcey, 1989: 72).

The other moment worth mentioning is the day the husband arrived home and heard the women making love in the matrimonial bedroom. I believe this episode represents two things: the first, how serious the relationship between Martina and Helen was: they were, after all, shamelessly making love in the home Martina and the husband shared. The second, the unwillingness and refusal to accept the seriousness of the relationship by the husband who uttered: "Bitches – bloody, fucking bitches!" (Dorcey, 1989: 73). The noise from the women's sexual encounter (much like the one from the lesbians in "A Noise from the "Woodshed") was proof of the sexual side of the relationship, one which should have erased any doubt about the seriousness of the lesbian affair. Regardless, the husband was sure about one thing: "He was

not going to humiliate himself by fighting over a woman. He was still convinced that it was a temporary delirium, an infection that, left to run its course, would sweat itself out." (Dorcey, 1989: 73-74), thus prolonging the state of denial, as well as the depreciation of "the other" in the relationship because she was "simply" a woman.

When faced with Martina's decision to leave, the reader can again find denial coming from the husband as, despite seeing his wife pack and leave the house to go with her lover, he remains sure she will come back, depicting yet again the self-pithy and *pathos* associated with the character. He was sure that "She had gone to the country, she was visiting friends. He would not worry about her. He would not think about her at all, until she came back." (Dorcey, 1989: 80). Again, this fantasy of the return of the lover who leaves fits the common representation of heterosexual love stories.

Particularly interesting in "The Husband" is the deliberate gender inversion between wife and husband. The parent-child relationship in the short story, for once, is one which does not include the mother, but the father. It is the husband, after all, who stays at home caring for Lisa, the child. The husband is also the one who cooks and cleans while Martina goes out. Moreover, it is Martina who has the affair and who acts nonchalant about it, very much like the male in conventional mainstream representations:

> She had come home late on Lisa's birthday, and when she told him where she had been, flaunting it, he had struck her across the face, harder than he had intended so that a fleck of blood showed on her lip. She had wiped it off with the back of her hand, staring at him, a look of shock and covert satisfaction in her eyes. (Dorcey, 1989: 65)

Unlike the mainstream representations, it is the man who loses his temper, hitting the woman – a woman who looks down on her husband with gratification. This satisfaction, this magnanimous stance is additionally seen in the moment Martina tells her husband she's leaving him, at last. The husband had "wept in her arms, pleaded with her, vulnerable as any woman [while Martina] remained indifferent, patronizing even, seeing only the male he could not cease to be." (Dorcey, 1989: 65). It was the husband who wept, crying in his wife's arms, being portrayed as fragile and delicate while his wife remained apathetic. As readers, we are used to seeing these situations happen with the genders reversed: the roles of caregiver and housekeeper are, after all, given to women, these who are regarded as vulnerable and who read "sentimental novels" (Dorcey, 1989: 75), while men are the ones given liberties. The inversion of the

established gender roles gives the husband the task of the submissive caregiver, and to Martina, the dominant role.

I find "The Husband" particularly interesting for many reasons: namely, the gender role inversion. Being something so out of the ordinary, it catches the attention of the reader and empowers the female character. The fact that the husband is unnamed is also well-executed: seeing the female experience be privileged and the lesbian relationship placed in the foreground is crucial. The vigilance of the lesbian affair by a heterosexual outsider paints a very serious and realistic picture about the surveillance and the discredit of LGBTQ+ community members, while educating the reader on what happens, and what shouldn't be done.

3.3 – Unreasonable Trepidations in "Introducing Nessa"

"Introducing Nessa", the seventh short story from the collection, "details a Dublin teacher's subterfuges and evasions as she attempts to hide her lesbian *affaire* from her mother, colleagues, suburban neighbors, and old friends, compelled to deny her love for the sake of appearing respectable and normal" (Quinn, 1992: 227), as per Antoinette Quinn's description. The short story's narration switches from an omniscient narrator to a first-person narrator, beginning with the omniscient voice speaking about the aftermath of the relationship, letting the reader into the protagonist's feelings, ideas, and actions. The narration soon turns to Anna (who shares the role of protagonist and narrator), and who retells the story of her lesbian relationship from start to end.

Anna, also referred to as Mrs. Munro, is a divorced single mother and teacher in a Catholic school, a woman fearful of people's opinions reactions. The character is also the mother of an eleven-year-old girl named Sally, the result of a marriage with Harry, her ex-husband. Anna's lover, Nessa, described by the protagonist as "passionate, eloquent: inspiring, provoking." (Dorcey, 1989: 136), doesn't share Anna's worries as she has plenty of courage and self-confidence. A number of other characters outside the main plot are mentioned throughout the short story, such as Ben and Karen (Anna's old friends), Peggy Keogh, Anna's co-worked, and others.

The relationship between Anna and Nessa happens suddenly and is a rather passionate one. While Sally was staying in Canada with her father, Anna invited Nessa to move in with

her, something that ensued after the women spent a night together at Anna's home: "You stayed the night because I was too tired to drive you home; in my bed, because it was too late at that hour to make up another." (Dorcey, 1989: 134). That was also the night the women kissed for the first time: an act of courage "Or was it caprice; arrogant in its naivety" (Dorcey, 1989: 134). The kiss being regarded as a caprice or as an arrogant act is possibly based in Anna's unreasonable fears as she did not live her life as a lesbian, being, as Heather Ingman argues, "prevented by social convention from acknowledging Nessa as her lover." (Ingman, 2007: 63). In spite of Anna's questioning, that kiss would be the first of many and the first step in a path of no return: "I kissed your mouth. After that there was no turning back and no stopping place." (Dorcey, 1989: 137).

The short story includes numerous references to sexual desire and the body. When apart, Anna would crave Nessa's presence, missing her wherever she was. When together, the women would love each other intensely: "when I reached inside you and felt the push and suck of your womb, it was as if my own body was birthed again" (Dorcey, 1989: 137). As soon as Nessa moved in, life inside the home was seamless: the women fit into each other's lives easily, sharing an "extraordinary secret" (Dorcey, 1989: 137) – a lesbian relationship confined to the safety of the home. The relationship would soon become serious as Anna could not spend a moment away from Nessa, missing her anytime they were apart which put forth feelings of desire: "Away from you, my flesh hurt as though cut from your bone. Spasms of longing might grip me at any moment: (…) the thought of you – the smell, taste of you, would overpower me so that it seemed my heart would batter its way from my chest." (Dorcey, 1989: 140).

Despite missing her lover outside the home, Anna was still gripped by fear anytime she would be outside. Again, the contrast between the public and private spaces is highlighted. She began hiding the relationship, concealing her love for Nessa at work, with friends, and with her mother as she was "haunted by the fear of exposure. The more I concealed our relationship, the more I dreaded its discovery." (Dorcey, 1989: 144). The concealment of queer relationships (particularly in the workplace) is something observed by Adrienne Rich in her 1980 article:

> A lesbian, closeted on her job because of heterosexual prejudice, is not simply forced into denying the truth of her outside relationship or private life. Her job depends on her pretending to be not merely heterosexual, but a heterosexual woman in terms of dressing and playing the feminine, deferential role required of "real" women. (Rich, 1980: 21)

Anna would often try to justify the concealment of the relationship as someone else's fault: being a Catholic teacher, she was sure people would judge her, uttering she would "lose my job if anyone knew I had a female lover" (Dorcey, 1989: 144). Hiding the lesbian relationship in the workplace gave Anna the option of continuing to work and play the role of the heterosexual, "real" woman Rich mentions. Nonetheless, the workplace wasn't the only thing Anna blamed for the concealment of the lesbian relationship; as Heather Ingman argues, Anna was "fearful of losing custody to her ex husband (…) She fears her mother's reaction and indeed envisages that her mother might testify against her if Harry tries to get custody of Sally." (Ingman, 2007: 63). It was also because of her friends, who would eventually stray away, leaving her behind. It was them. It was undoubtably their fault: "They compelled me to lie, Nessa. They forced me to conceal my love for you as though it were something contaminating. Every name I had heard used against women like you – like us – came back to me." (Dorcey, 1989: 143).

The main issue of the short story is the role of the outsider and the fear of people's opinions in a heteronormative and vigilant society. While Nessa only once shows a glimpse of fear: "I saw your face lit for an instant; your eyes glittering like a cat's; wide with alarm. It was you Nessa, who first showed fear." (Dorcey, 1989: 134), it was Anna who was hyper-aware and constantly afraid of people's reactions to the relationship. It was this crippling fear that made Anna act irrationally at times: she was scared that her neighbors could find out about the relationship, wanting "curtains drawn in two bedrooms: making sure that we did not always leave the house together, that we had a record playing when we made love" (Dorcey, 1989: 145). It was equally this fear that made Anna take down Nessa's pictures, books, and clothes in order to scatter them in the spare bedroom when Ben and Karen (Anna's friends) came to visit – despite the women having made love just before the friends' arrival.

During the visit, Karen noticed Nessa's presence: "'You know in Canada' she continued, 'if two women of our age live together, everyone thinks they are queer. Isn't that absurd?'" (Dorcey, 1989: 151), to which Anna quickly replied: "In Dublin, if two single people live together it's only to halve the electricity bills!" (Dorcey, 1989: 151). The differences regarding sexual awareness between Canada and Ireland are present in the previous quotes: in Canada, lesbianism is not only visible, but recognized; in Ireland, however, it seems to be invisible and somewhat feared. This last denial of the relationship overheard by Nessa drove her away, leaving Anna, the house, and the relationship behind. The protagonist's denial could be argued to have come from years of being familiarized to homosexual prejudice, something

Amy Finlay Jeffrey argues by stating that Anna "begins to formulate an identity contingent upon the demands of heteronormative society." (Jeffrey, 2017: 13).

Mary Dorcey's poem "Come Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear" from the 1991 poetry book *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* can be easily compared with the short story. In the poem, the poetic I explains the difficulties of being both a woman and a lesbian as both have had to do (and learn) things in order to "spare the neighbours / landlady lord - / the embarrassment" (Dorcey, 1991: 65). The common denominator? Silence. Women have been taught to be silent: and so they were. For some, this silence meant keeping quiet when making love, hiding their sexual identity as to avoid any nuance of social ostracism: "Did you ever make love / with the t.v. on? / to spare the neighbours" (Dorcey, 1991: 70); for others, it meant suffering in silence until their noiseless, untimely death: "She was found (…) found with multiple stab wounds to / thighs breast and abdomen (…) / – the neighbours heard nothing - / she was always - / no one would have thought - / always a quiet girl." (Dorcey, 1991: 69). In the short story, for Anna and Nessa's relationship, it meant putting a record on, closing curtains, living in silence, never

> forgetting the uproar
> the outrage –
> (imagine
> the joy
> undisguised
> of two women
> – especially
> women –
> two women
> together
> at last alone
> night falling in the wet gardens
> with the t.v.
> off.
> (Dorcey, 1991: 70-71)

In Anna's denial, the reader can encounter other important issues: the role of the Church and of the mother-daughter relationship. Both issues are mentioned in Anna's recurrent dream, one which included her taking Sally, her daughter, to Catholic school; walking hand-in-hand, the mother and daughter were intercepted by Mother Ignatius who uttered: "I must ask you (…) to take yourself and your daughter away from here and not to return again. We have other children to consider" (Dorcey, 1989: 146). Also present in this scenario was Anna's mother, a

"pale stiff face under the while veil (…) staring in dull horror", who showed her displeasure by stating: "There is a word for your kind I will not sully my lips by repeating." (Dorcey, 1989: 146). The issue of the mother-daughter relationship in the story can be seen in two ways: first, by putting Anna in the role of the daughter, one who is being publicly reprimanded by her mother as she looks down on her with disapproval. The other, by putting Anna in the role of the mother as someone who, in her dream, caused such hurt and embarrassment to her daughter, that she would eventually let go of her hand.

As the story draws to a close, the omniscient narrator places Anna by a harbor, reliving the passionate relationship she had had with Nessa – a relationship she concealed, afraid of losing everything she had: her friends, her work, Sally. When considering how much she could lose as a result of the lesbian affair, Anna argues Nessa didn't have much to lose – unlike her. Faced with all the possible losses, and with the end of the secret relationship, Anna feels relief "then and again tonight, a shabby, reluctant dawning of it, but unmistakable nonetheless. Having lived for so long on the precipice: it was an immense release from pressure to have reached an end; to know one way or another, the struggle was over." (Dorcey, 1989: 154) as she no longer had to lie to her family, her friends, herself; she no longer had to hide who she was and who she had been in a relationship with.

Despite this relief, this release of worries which had crippled the protagonist for so long, Anna desired to be close to Nessa. The desire was stronger than the relief as she dreamed of laying next to her, longing for Nessa's body as she had while they were together, wishing she could now whisper "some of the old words – my darling, the most precious thing in my life, nothing I would not do for you – some soft loving lie to add to all the others." (Dorcey, 1989: 154). The reference to this "loving lie" is curious as it seems as if Anna had been lying about the feelings she had nurtured for Nessa. However, one could flip the coin and see this lie as something that is only a lie when in the presence of any outsider: Anna's family, her friends, and co-workers.

The short story ends with a phone call between the previous lovers: during the call, Nessa recalls Anna's friend's appreciation for her: "That one of your friends thinks we seem very happy together." (Dorcey, 1989: 157). This statement caught Anna by surprise, being received with annoyance as she realized someone has found out about the relationship, making her worry about everything all over again: what would people say, or do, now that they knew she had had a woman lover? It was only when Harry's name was mentioned that things changed.

After the divorce, it seemed Harry had taken a liking for healthy foods and jogging, picking up other activities along the way, as Nessa told Anna:

> there's something else Harry has taken up. But neither of them knew how to tell you. It's quite a crisis for him.'
> 'What, for Godsake?'
> 'Men.'
> 'Men?'
> 'Yes … men.' (Dorcey, 1989: 158)

This comical, ironic, and lighthearted ending brings the women together as they share a laugh through the phone. Seemingly, Anna's worries and fears were unsubstantiated, her actions exaggerated. While she spent a great part of the relationship worried about the possible repercussions of the lesbian *affaire*, her friends showed approval of the relationship and her ex-husband, who she feared would take their daughter away from her, was also involved in same-sex relationships.

"Introducing Nessa" is one of the most fascinating stories from the collection. In it, Mary Dorcey exemplifies the worries of many closeted LGTBQ+ individuals – people who, either by first-hand experience or knowledge, know what consequences living as one's true self can bring. By opening a discussion about this issue, and by making the ending rather humorous, I believe the author tried to make those who identify themselves with Anna and her situation feel empowered and proud of their choices, hoping they no longer are, as Adrienne Rich argues "[women] imprisoned in prescriptive ideas of the "normal" [who] share the pain of blocked options, broken connections, lost access to self-definition freely and powerfully assumed." (Rich, 1980: 35). The portrayal of the lesbian relationship is one that attempts to exemplify how, despite all the hurdles, and in spite of all the negative thoughts one might have, things may not be that bad – most people will accept and love you, regardless.

3.4 – A Joyous *Rendezvous* in "Sweet, Practised, Endings"

"Sweet, Practised, Endings", the eight story from the collection, tells the tale of a romantic *rendezvous* between two middle-aged women. The two were spending time together in Italy, drinking wine and reminiscing on past times, past lovers. The story is told through the perspective of the first woman and recounts the relationship between them since the moment

they first crossed paths. In *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women*, Heather Ingman states that the short story is "celebratory of lesbian love. (…) The story recounts the joyous few days the two women spend making love and sharing with each other details of their lives." (Ingman, 2007: 63).

The first moment the women were to spend together was marked by an accident as, on the way to meet one another, the protagonist was struck by her would-be-lover's car, hurting her leg. This incident, "An occurrence so absurd, so unaccountable as one lover (or would-be lover) driving into the other on the way to their first assignation, seemed to hold a significance and portent you were unwilling to decipher." (Dorcey, 1989: 167). This occurrence could have been regarded as prophecy for the ending of the relationship: having begun with an accident which saw one of the women hurt, and the other the culprit, it could be argued that the odds were seemingly against them from the start.

The short story counts with the presence of two main characters: the lovers. Both women, curiously unnamed, have been in relationships with men before. The first woman, from whose point of view the story is told, is a woman in love, someone who goes through numerous possible outcomes of the relationship as the story comes to a close. The other woman, her lover, seems to be as smitten as her. Throughout the story, other characters are referred to, namely: Ben, assumed to be the first woman's ex-husband, A., her previous lover, and Zelda and Zoe, the other women's previous lovers.

After the car incident, the women would go out for dinner before returning home to make love. The protagonist was then cared for as her lover cleaned her wounds: "Was it the prompting of contrition or the sight of your helplessness that lent such skill to her hands, (…) that bathed you in the caress of a sister, a mother, a lover." (Dorcey, 1989: 166). By caring for her, the protagonist's lover displayed the role of caregiver associated with women; by being compared to a mother or a sister's care, her lover's attention could exemplify how real – in the sense of it not being exclusively about sex – the love between the women was. Although the protagonist could not decipher what had brought the women together, having spoken of faith, or a simple act, she recognized that "At any rate you met, eyed and fell into lust." (Dorcey, 189: 163). Life between the women was natural, in everything similar to the everyday life of anyone – the definition of lovers being lovers, regardless of their sex:

> She made a pesto sauce, the best you had had. You returned to bed and ate it there, sharing plates, sucking the juice from each other's fingers; all the usual things – the small homely,

> familiar gestures of lovers being happy together: swopping stories and laughing, eyes searching the other's face; (Dorcey, 1989: 162)

The "usual things" the protagonist mentions are nothing more than the normal conventions of love: things every lover does regardless of gender, identity, or sexuality. At a restaurant, the women's conversation included a talk about lovers: "of the ones left and the ones who left, too late or too early" (Dorcey, 1989: 169). Throughout this conversation, bisexuality is mentioned: "how old were you when you first made love to a woman, a man, how was it?" (Dorcey, 1989: 164). Given the women's age, and more than twenty years of loving, this reference to bisexuality is all the more curious. During our interview, Mary Dorcey spoke about the way most women would wait until their middle age to be in relationships with women. Having for so long obeyed societal expectations, most women would get married to men and have children before ever dating women, being "heterosexual until their middle life. (…) almost all of these women would have slept with men and many, many women married who would've preferred women, but they probably would not have a relationship with women." (See *infra* p. 72).

Being in lesbian relationships later on in life is something both women share: the protagonist, for once, had been previously married to a man, while her lover had been married and given birth to three children. Looking back, both women speak about their experiences with men: the protagonist found them dull and monotonous, speaking on their mechanical ways and comparing them to a "cuckoo clock with its hours confused. Or dogs." (Dorcey, 1989: 169), before speaking about her experience with Ben's libido and just how hard pretending to be flattered by his constant sexual advances was:

> Ben at night turning to you when you had just fallen asleep. His penis prodding your back, waking you. Pushing (…) as though it were trying to escape from him. (…) Worst of all pretending to be complemented, the mutual game that it had something special to do with you, because he touched you, smelt, looked at you, and all the while knowing it would have happened if he had been walking along a street and knocked into a lamppost. (Dorcey, 1989: 169-170)

This representation of the male sexuality as a restless, exaggerated act seemingly separates women and men: with Ben, the protagonist was constantly bothered by his sexual advances; with her lover, however, things were done at a balanced pace. When it came to her lover's experience with men, that had been very different: married at twenty-three, her husband

was "impotent or something very like it (…) From the first night on, needed help. And when he did get it up it did not last. Not for long at any rate. Boring for her, frustrating." (Dorcey, 1989: 170). Just like with the protagonist, her lover's marriage ended, leaving room for new lovers – past and present.

The central issue of the short story is undoubtably that of lesbian love and eroticism. Despite this, the reader can easily encounter the previously discussed themes of the vigilance over women, divorce, bisexuality, the mother-daughter relationship, and the outsider phenomenon. Throughout the story the women display their feelings towards each other whether through romantic situations or through references to the body and their sexual attraction to each other:

> Ah well, it was a comfort then, to be in her arms: embraced in the heat of her soft, unknown, echoing flesh – different from all you were used to and so, comforting, yet familiar, plangent with memory. (…) Ah, it was nice to see the smile on her face, the way she bit her lip with the pleasure of you; of giving pleasure and you gave yourself up to it; (Dorcey, 1989: 160)

In specific moments, the reader is presented with references to the mother-daughter relationship. As the women share wine and food, "licking crumbs of blue cheese from her breasts, sipping wine from her mouth" (Dorcey, 1989: 164), they discuss their relationships with their mothers – which, just like their experiences with men, were different from one another. While the protagonist's mother insisted on the theory of "Love given not won" (Dorcey, 1989: 166), her lover's mother's religious background saw her daughter become someone who must "crave affection while rejecting it and must fret every evidence of it with a thousand small tests of constancy." (Dorcey, 1989: 166). This particular loveless relationship between a mother and daughter created feelings of abandonment, doubt, and fear for the protagonist's lover.

The issue of the outsider, here connected to the vigilance over women, would be brought up during a train ride. As the women were sitting together holding hands, they were stared at, "estimated, covert or blatant, before [the passengers'] eyes slid back reluctantly to the snarl of traffic, the oily, slow moving sky." (Dorcey, 1989: 167). The passenger's attention would stray away from the women when a lady began singing in the carriage – a performance so awful that seeing two women holding hands suddenly became the lesser evil.

The relationship between the women is described in a way which can be compared to representations of heterosexual relationships as nothing that happens in the relationship is exclusively associated with lesbians. Just as with heterosexual relationships, couples at times stray away from each other, a separation which, at times, results in affairs and subsequent relationships. In this story, the same happens – although the protagonist is now single, her lover isn't, meaning that when the *rendezvous* between the women would come to an end, they would return to their respective countries, alone.

In the protagonist's lover's case, she would return to Karen who would be meeting her at the airport "arms outstretched for her cases, for herself: welcoming her when she touched down into real life" (Dorcey, 1989: 173). This "real life" would be one which would not include the affair, or the protagonist – one who knew about Karen's existence, and about the relationship between the women: "Soon she would want to tell you about her lover." (Dorcey, 1989: 163). Regardless, she kept living her day-to-day with her lover, one, who wanted to "make clear, as though it needed making, that the complexity was not all of your doing: to shift the blame squarely where it belonged to those inescapable abstracts: time, life, circumstances, which can be relied on to make innocent of us all." (Dorcey, 1989: 173). This, to me, is nothing more than a distribution of blame: the protagonist's lover recognizes the unfairness of the affair (regarding Karen), yet acknowledges that it was not only her decision, but also the protagonist's.

The short story's title: "Sweet, Practised, Endings" in itself sounds innocent until the end – or rather put – the multiple possible endings. By the time the women were due to travel and return home, numerous scenarios of what could have happened to the couple are mentioned: maybe her lover convinced her to stay in Italy with her, where they rented an apartment and worked. Perhaps they returned home to their respective countries, houses, lives. Maybe they wrote to each other loving letters with loving promises. Maybe the letters stopped after a few times. Perchance her lover sent her a plane ticket from them to be together. Or perhaps, life simply moved so, as it so often does, and all that was left was the hope of eventually reuniting. Or maybe, just maybe, this "was not quite the end of it. Not the full finale. Perhaps it seemed so only to an imagination grown lazy, dispirited, skeptical." (Dorcey, 1989: 179-180).

Through the perspective of two lesbians, Mary Dorcey discusses the quick-paced aspect of relationships. The lovers are hands-on as the sexual element of the relationship is at its peak. As the relationship moves ahead, they speak and share their secrets, their family history, their past love lives – like all lovers do, everywhere. Despite the fervor and enthusiasm, the

relationship between the women seemed to have been doomed from the start: it, after all, had begun with an accident between the lovers. Moreso, the relationship was portrayed as an affair from the start, and so: “what other outcome could be at all probable? Liaisons – affairs – what you will (…) in countries foreign to both protagonists, (…) could scarcely be expected to progress otherwise.” (Dorcey, 1989: 179). Affairs aren’t socially “expected” to progress because of the representation of what an affair is: a secretive *rendezvous* between two (or more people). As a society, we think of affairs as something with a deadline, something that cannot evolve to anything other than what it is – a temporary engagement.

3.5 – The Noise that Broke the Silence: My Impressions

In *A Noise from the Woodshed*, Mary Dorcey created an overabundance of scenarios, women, and relationships many can identify themselves with. Great part of this has to do with the fact that the author refused to obey to the creation of one established mold which would involve making the characters act the same, look the same, think the same. Instead of sameness, we are presented with singularity, multiplicity, and complexity. Mary Dorcey’s lesbians come from different backgrounds, have different ages, different past lives; yet they are connected by the love they have for other women.

Beyond the contrast in storylines, the characters’ appearances and personalities are also quite different: in “The Husband”, Martina is described as a magnanimous woman unafraid of going after her newfound love for Helen, even it that entails leaving her marriage, and perhaps her daughter, behind. The protagonist of “A Noise from the Woodshed” is characterized as a woman who loves and supports women, someone who is mindful of the love she feels for her lover, while being aware of all the hurt and pain that the world experiences. In “Introducing Nessa”, Anna is fearful of what her lesbian relationship might bring – or take – to her life, being scared of the possibility of losing her job, her friends, her child. Yet, she remains, for the most part, conscious of the love and attraction she feels for Nessa – even once the relationship is over. Nessa, on the other hand, is a woman at peace with her sexuality, someone who is not afraid of loving, and being loved by Anna. The women in “Sweet, Practised, Endings” are completely smitten with each other; they are also well aware of the fast-approaching ending – being then able to focus all they can in the little time they have, making love and memories to

last a lifetime. Dorcey also escapes the trap of representing lesbian love as "better" – in the sense that it lasts forever: it can take the form of a short-time affair, like all kinds of love.

Mary Dorcey's lesbians don't fit into one standard box: their ages vary, their romantic and sexual experiences (both past and present) are not the same; their relationships with their mothers or daughters diverge from one another. These are also women whose personalities and lives are not constrained by their sexuality: they work, they teach, they fix gutters, they travel – while loving their partners. The way that the author describes these women and relationships goes above and beyond what is expected, giving queer women everywhere fictional characters they can look at and relate to. Furthermore, this plethora of relationships and women has impact in the real-world as it educates the reader by presenting to them un-traumatic and realistic scenarios.

Being able to learn about sexuality with the help of a constant verisimilar reconfiguration of representations is important as it puts queer people in the same level as everyone else, including possible heterosexual readers. The verisimilitude and (paradoxical) conventionality of Dorcey's portrayals of queer love are immeasurably important to the LGBTQ+ community and to the education of readers alike as these are not unattainable, unreachable portrayals of people and relationships, but real representations of human love.

Chapter 4: *Come without words / to give a voice to silence*, An Interview with Mary Dorcey

On the 18th of October 2021 I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of interviewing Irish author Mary Dorcey. Given the circumstances we have experienced living through a pandemic, the interview-turned-conversation took place on Zoom in the comfort of our homes. I started by asking Dorcey about her experiences as an Irish lesbian author who has lived the ups and downs the LGBTQ+ community has experienced in the last decades. It was Mary Dorcey's undeniable importance to the Irish LGBTQ+ community that grounded my decision to reach out to the author in an attempt to gather a firsthand testimony of someone who battled for gender equality and for same-sex equality.

The following transcript has been edited – maintaining the oral register – as well as shortened[14], always keeping in mind the important details for a good understanding of this thesis's arguments. I shall be commenting on the testimony at its end in order to articulate it with my arguments.

I will be referring to myself as "AS", and Mary Dorcey as "MD".

4.1 – A Conversation with Mary Dorcey

AS: Faced with all the changes the concept has experienced throughout the years, I want to start by asking you – what is your very own definition of the word "queer"?

MD: Just people who are outside the normal, the average, the everyday conception of "straight" or "normal" … it's kind of ironic because, of course, nobody is "normal". Everybody is queer in that sense, and most people are very queer in their own heads. It's a useful term to describe a loose gathering of people who have an outside identity in some way… in their love life or sexuality. When I was growing up, "queer" was the common word that was used about homosexuals, and it was really insulting. In the 70's, we began to reclaim it because if you could change the worst insult they could give you, it makes you stronger, it makes you immune in some way… Maybe in the late 80's, early 90's, gay people stopped using it, and then it came back in again and I think now because it covers transgender and all sorts of anybody who feels

[14] I was given permission by the author to include the following excerpt in the present thesis.

outside the normal definition, it's become a useful word again to cover a multitude. Of course, there are still people who don't like and would never use it because it still has resonance for the most part.

AS: Having grown up in Ireland as a lesbian, you witnessed first-hand the changes the community has felt (from the decriminalization of homosexuality to the same-sex marriage referendum). Do you feel the bridge to equality had been crossed or are there more obstacles on the road?

MD: Huge changes have been made, obviously, and they are wonderful. It's hard to believe the changes that we've created in Ireland. Obviously the most striking thing being marriage equality. To give you an example, I've been out since the 70's, but a great deal of my friends who would've been living with a woman, and totally involved with the gay community were never out to their family, and very often they weren't out to their lover's family, so there was a secrecy around it. Several of those have told me that since marriage equality and, especially at the wedding, that their in-laws that either they had never met before over, sometimes, twenty years, or that they had met but had to pretend they were just a best friend – that those in-laws came out and congratulated and hugged them and said "oh I'm so happy you're marrying my daughter", and that's an extraordinary thing. It was extraordinary to me, that this little ceremony – marriage, straight or gay – could make such difference to people, but it does. I suppose it's universal, but certainly in Ireland it makes a huge difference. It seems to be like a benediction – literally. People who used to be embarrassed about having family members who were gay, now were delighted to say: "oh my daughter is married to Catherine", and just because of marriage there is an ease to talk about it and to embrace it… however, it changes in pockets, doesn't it? There's so much more to do… You can never count with things being permanently progressive… it's always backwards/forwards, backwards/forwards, we go to the left, we go to the right, we go to the left, we go to the right, and that's why you always have to maintain radicalism – if you become conventional, if you become too relaxed about things, they can go backwards very quickly, so we all have to be alert.

AS: I recall you stating that when you were a child your mom told you some women weren't suited for marriage, choosing to live with a "companion" instead... by the time you

first got involved with the LGBTQ+ community, were women in relationships still thought of as "companions"?

MD: Well… that's very hard to describe. My mother, she had heard the word "lesbian", but she didn't really know what it meant, and there weren't any lesbians in Ireland, everybody was sure of that – there couldn't possibly be. My grandmother had been very active politically in Republic politics at the time of the Irish independence; she would've known there were at least two couples who actually were lesbian – I mean, they lived together, and everybody saw them as partners, but that word wouldn't have been used. I was talking about a neighbor of ours, and my mother said "well, you know Mary, there are some women who just aren't suited to marriage. They prefer the company of a woman". She then spoke of a "Boston Marriage" – a term, obviously from America, from the 30's or the 40's, used to describe two women who lived together, were committed to each other and lived in a partnership, but were always assumed to be asexual. My mother, she had no idea that I was going to end up as a lesbian. She just knew I would be a radical of some sort. So, when I got involved in the women's movement, that didn't surprise her at all. She had an expression, it's an expression that the Irish use, she said: "Granny will never be dead while you're alive.", because I was so like my grandmother.

But to answer the question, in the 70's and the 80's, no, unless you actually told people "This is my partner, this is my lover" – we used to say "lover" then, we didn't say "partner". Most people's relationships were usually very short at that time. It was very exciting, very dramatic, and most people wouldn't be with somebody… two years seemed a long time. Me, I was always determined to tell the truth, and the other night I was speaking about this at the launch of the book *Look! It's a Woman Writer*, edited by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, and I said that evening the reason I felt so passionate about it was that I was in love with a beautiful woman, she was a French woman, and I was crazy about her, and she was crazy about me… and I was determined to not deny her. She was very passionate, and she wouldn't dream of hiding me. So, we just said "oh this is my lover, this is Carole, I love her", and everybody just… because we were so open, they just had to accept it.

AS: You were the first author to openly discuss homosexuality within the Irish literary scene. Did this happen because of an act of rebellion against the system, an act of activism? And were you ever afraid of being banned? Of having your career essentially "destroyed" before it started?

MD: Well… the book came out when I was living in London, and I didn't care about what the English people thought about me, it was such a huge community there… it was completely different from Ireland. Ireland is so small, they want to trace you, they always want to know where you came from, where you grew up and who your family is… so that makes everything way more difficult, it makes having unorthodox revolutionary politics difficult because you have to be prepared to be really open, whereas in London nobody cares. In London, the gay thing didn't matter, at all. The Irish thing was more striking… so the simple – if there is a simple answer – I knew it would ruin a career. I knew that, and my mother, she said: "Oh Mary, if you want to write this, this will stay with you for the rest of your life, this will mark you, you will never escape this label…" and she was right. When she came to visit and I showed her the cover of the book, the first thing she saw was "lesbian" after my name, and she said: "Do you want that word after your name, Mary?", and she wasn't worried for herself, she was extremely worried for my future.

I just had this ruthless streak – I didn't care – I just wanted to tell the truth, I thought "If this is the only thing I do in my life, this is worth doing because somebody has to do it! Somebody has to be the first, somebody has to embrace this name and I can do it!". I had the courage to do it, I was reckless enough to do it and I thought "If I do nothing else that's worth while in life, I'll do this." So, it was in that sort of spirit… I wasn't sure if I would have another book… I didn't plan to be a writer, I think that if I had a dream, it would've been to just write one famous book, I would've thought "maybe one day I'll be able to write a book", but I couldn't imagine having a career because even as a straight, conventional Irish woman… at that time we only had about two Irish women who were writers… who were known writers – and they lived out of Ireland. It was an extraordinarily narrow society… like Spain under Franco, that's how bad it was, and women writers were considered weird people, and they couldn't exist really, they couldn't have lived a normal life in Ireland.

AS: Do you feel like a big part of the lack of acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community happened because of the Catholic Church? Do you believe that if the Church had accepted the queer community, the Irish people's stance would have changed too?

MD: The amazing thing about Ireland is that they really accept it ever since the marriage equality referendum. It was an extraordinary victory and most Irish people I think feel very proud of it – they did this big, liberal, radical thing. They're very proud of that because there's

a lot of shame in Ireland about all the terrible things that happened when the Church was at its most autocratic. The people of my mother's generation and younger, felt betrayed when all that became public, and so they started to separate themselves from Church… it was so gradual but the biggest thing that changed Irish people was when they realized the extent of the sexual abuse that had been going on, especially within the Church by priests and Brothers, and children. My mother was a very typical example… her shock… I think she felt really, really cheated. That totally shocked her because that was by far the worst thing anybody could imagine, and the idea that people had been calling women like me sinners while they were hiding this appalling secret made her generation feel cheated and made fools of. So, she just stopped going to Mass – she still listened to Mass on the radio – but she didn't want to go to the church, and thousands of women were like her… little by little people just began to separate themselves, and now nobody goes to church.

AS: Regarding A Noise from the Woodshed, do you recognize it as a paradigm shifter? Do you think it has educated people, made the community feel seen?

MD: I don't know… when it came out, I won this big prize – it's the most prestigious prize in Ireland – the Rooney Prize, and I had no idea that I'd been entered for it. Winning it seemed extraordinary because we went from complete silence on the subject, to this. Just a week before, the book had been reviewed in *The Irish Times* and the headline was "Dark Nights of Underground Love", and it was a very hostile review. A week later I won the prize, and it was all over the newspapers. There was a lot of fuss about it, but I don't think it went beyond that… people wouldn't have known in wider circles. There's always been this idea, maybe in most countries, but certainly in Ireland that literary people can say things that other people wouldn't say, so it was just this exceptional book by this exceptional person. It didn't describe normal life… But *Biography of Desire*, by the time I wrote that things had changed, and people really understood that this could be … that this could apply to a lot of people. However, the fact that one of the central characters was married and had a child… a lot of gay women didn't like it for that reason. I mean, I'm used to getting attacked from all sides, I'm always being attacked for some reason.

AS: While reading A Noise from the Woodshed and the short story "Diary of a Schoolgirl", I noticed the presence of bisexuality, and how positive this portrayal is. What do you feel is the importance of the presence of bisexuality in literature?

MD: In my experience quite a lot of women are bisexual… a lot of the women I've been close to have been heterosexual until their middle life. As much as there was a theory when I first came out, if we had only accepted life-long lesbians, there would've been nobody because almost all of these women would have slept with men and many, many married women who would've preferred women, probably would not have a relationship with women. So, I've always had the idea that you have to reach out… if you set this bar as many people do – the idea of the golden lesbian – that you have to be exclusively with women all your life or you're not a lesbian, and that's the only genuine or authentic kind of sexuality… to me, that's just another oppressive frame, another box to put people into, and I'm just so tired of all the boxes. I think at every level I try to escape those kinds of narrow categories in general in life, and I'm always trying to encourage people to see past categories, but sometimes when you're fighting for freedom for a particular group, you have to emphasize those categories. Yet, you have to simplify things, don't you? To make a political struggle, usually, it has to be simplified… but life is always complicated, and people always reach across and out of those categories and, if the only gay people in the world where the ones who knew they were gay from the moment they were five, there would just be a few thousands of us in the world… I think it's really important that sexuality should be seen as something flexible.

AS: Regarding your poetry… Although I will focus my thesis on A Noise from the Woodshed, I feel the need to pay an homage to some of your poems. Are there any connections between the poems and the short stories?

MD: That's very perceptive… I haven't thought of it before… I'm sure there is because I have some writing, both poetry and short stories, that would be very close to autobiography – none of it would be complete autobiography, but some of them would be very close. But, of course, all of them have elements of your own life… even if you set something in another century or in another country, a country you have never lived in, you put elements of yourself, you put elements of your friends, of your family… So, there must be, yes, a cross fertilization. There would be, for instance in the poems about my mother, those are directly about – not all of them – but most of them are about my mother, my actual mother.

AS: This idea of "The Noise from the Woodshed" existing as a metaphor for lesbianism came to me one night. In the same way that the women from the short story lived their day-to-day lives despite the noise, could lesbianism be that "noise" in the sense that it is something that exists in the every-day lives of society, and could be ignored, but, just like the noise from the woodshed, is not?

MD: Yes, yeah. That is a great question, very few people have asked me about that. I think yes. I have to tell you the reality of it… it actually is autobiographical, there actually was a noise in the woodshed. We were living in the Southwest of Ireland and people used to come to visit. We had a lovely cottage and quite a lot of land, and there was a little hut… two American women came to visit, young American women and they had their sleeping bags… anyways they slept first in a tent in the garden, and then they got wet and so they moved into the little hut, and of course we did hear them making love, making a lot of noise. I think it was a year later I was writing the story and I just put the "The Noise of the Woodshed" as one of them – a symbol because we were having visitors all the time. It was like a lesbian center because a lot of our friends were gay and I think the locals, they just liked the excitement of it… it's hard to describe it because the atmosphere in Dublin would've been quite different. If people knew we were gay, if they were conventional people, they wouldn't want to know, but in Kerry there was this excitement about difference or something more tolerant.

AS: I believe you were (and still are) an essential player in the fight against Ireland's heteronormative and misogynistic ways. How does it feel to have played such an important role in a positive representation of the queer community?

MD: I don't think of myself having done that… I feel myself very much part of a movement. Even when other people weren't around, they were always there behind me. There were so many of us that identified as gay even when people couldn't say publicly, but for a long time now a lot of people have been saying it. How do I feel about my part in it? I suppose yes, I'm proud of it. If I did one good thing in my life, I feel that was the good thing I did. I thought it was important… I still think that it was tremendously important to do, and it wasn't that it was the most important issue, but it had… it's hard to describe… it was like a crowbar, the strongest bar of steel, used to pry things apart… it was the best crowbar I could find… I couldn't have found a better issue to attack Irish society, to attack conservatism, to challenge it. This

made me feel absolutely overjoyed about being a lesbian because I've been very fortunate with the people I've loved and I'm very proud and happy that it was that issue because my main driver, apart from wanting to change Ireland – which was extremely strong, the other one was just being proud of the people I loved, being proud of the woman I loved and I wasn't going to hide it from anybody, so it had this organic drive behind it.

4.2 – A Voice Echoed: My Afterthoughts

Thus ends the partial transcript of the interview, with much food for thought.

Dorcey's testimony proved fruitful as the author questioned and problematized many issues which are central to various marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ community and women in Ireland and beyond – all which are central to my research, and which have been addressed in the previous chapters. The author begins by questioning the matter of normality and how many associate the act of being (or acting) "normal" with heteronormativity with the argument "it's kind of ironic because, of course, nobody is "normal" (See *supra* p. 67). This association is one which excludes all those who fall outside the socially created "norm", meaning that all LGBTQ+ people would be unable to be recognized as "normal" individuals. It also highlights the social construction of the norm, refuting its "natural" condition.

Throughout the interview, Dorcey addressed the cultural transformation Ireland underwent (since the 1960's up to the present) as exemplified in the same-sex marriage referendum in 2015, won with sixty-two percent of voters supporting the cause. This transformation saw people "who used to be embarrassed about having family members who were gay, now [be] delighted" (See *supra* p. 68). This comment alone ratifies my outsider's perception that this event was, indeed, the biggest change the country experienced – a change in discourse and practices. After the referendum, people who used to be ashamed of their LGBTQ+ family members began being proud of them – a change which cannot be limited to this event as many others, such as the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993, and the civil partnership act in 2010, made possible this momentous transformation.

The transnational issue of the invisibility of women's sexuality in general and of lesbian relationships in particular is further highlighted by the author when she mentions the idea that "there weren't any lesbians in Ireland – everybody was sure of that." (See *supra* p. 69). This

denial of the possibility of women being sexually active is furthermore complemented by the reference to the so-called "Boston Marriage". Lesbians seemed to live somewhere between visibility and invisibility, in between light and darkness as per Amy Jeffrey's previously mentioned description. Alas, the idea of two women sharing their lives and living space, and still be regarded as (asexual) "friends" is a contemporary issue as people still very much tend to assume that women who spend a lot of time together, or even share a household, are simply friends.

Being a woman at times seems to be unwillingly surveilled and judged as society tends to overanalyze and criticize what women do, wear, or say, with much of this scrutiny being focused on their bodies, and, it goes without saying, their sexuality. This issue, of the tracing and criticism towards women is furthermore touched on by Mary Dorcey as she shares some aspects of her life in Ireland during the 1960's, focusing on the vigilance of women's bodies in a small community and, indeed, what she calls a small country. Dorcey emphasizes the issues of the hypervigilance over women, and the small community vs urban space dichotomy. The hypervigilance of the female body is not restricted to Ireland, nor to small communities; it is an age-long issue that sees women being "traced", and indeed judged, for all they decide to do, or not do. The small community vs urban space dichotomy however is of particular interest as smaller communities, where everyone knows you and your family, tend to make it harder for women to live outside the "norms". In urban spaces, it seems women are given greater freedom to live and enjoy their lives which explains, up to a point, the number of writers who have chosen to migrate mostly to the United Kingdom, for reasons other than economic.

Surprisingly, it should be noted that (relying on Dorcey's testimonial) despite this hypervigilance specific to small communities, some people from small country towns seemed to not only accept but also to enjoy the presence of "different" people. This "excitement" may help us to understand the changes experienced in Ireland relating to these issues. The perceived knowledge that the countryside is more judgmental than metropolitan areas is erroneous – and indeed a prejudice – as many gays and lesbians who grew up in rural Ireland confirm. In *The Irish* Times article "LGBT life in rural Ireland: 'You can feel like you're the only one'" by Patrick Kelleher, for example, one can read the testimony of four LGBTQ+ people who state they do not feel any type of prejudice from the community they live in. The article, from 2019 (four years after the same-sex marriage referendum, and twenty-six years after the decriminalization of homosexuality) includes the testimony of four people, one of them being Will Keane. Keane, a gay man living in the village of Knockcroghery in County Roscommon

who argues: “I am gay; that’s a fact. People just move on and are so encompassing of me and my partner.” (Kelleher, 2019), further explaining that in the span of five years he’d only had one negative experience with another town’s inhabitant.

Also in Patrick Kelleher’s article, Aoife Martin, who lives in Faughart in County Louth, explains how being an openly trans woman living in a small town can be lonesome, arguing “Sometimes you can feel like you’re the only one” (Kelleher, 2019). Martin further explains how, despite this, the people from rural Ireland are more accepting than what is believed: ““We can be a bit snobby about rural Ireland sometimes, and we forget that these people are a lot more accepting than people give them credit for.” (Kelleher, 2019). Martin’s testimony is of the upmost interest as it shows that the acceptance of the Irish people goes beyond sexuality, into identity and transgender acceptance.

The issues of the vigilance and stigma of lesbians is moreover problematized by Mary Dorcey when she mentions her mother’s worries for the association of the word “lesbian” to her name. The stigma about the portrayal of a sexuality that is not hetero-centered could have seen Dorcey’s work follow other banned Irish authors who could join forces and sing Seamas Kelly’s (*The Irish* Times Quidnunc) 1953 satiric jingle – as mentioned by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne in the 2018 article “1954: A good year for an Irish woman writer to be born” for *The Irish Times*:

> Haven’t you been Censored Yet? Mo náie Thú.
> We’ve got a lovely lengthy list and we hope you’ll be thrilled
> To find your works appearing there with ‘Hotsy, you’ve been chilled!’
> The censor doesn’t trust you all, and so to save us sin He
> Sends your novel to cold storage with the Works of Doctor Kinsey.
> O, céad mile Faite and the wearing of the Green
> For we find the oddest novelists are generally obscene.
> Among your hosts you'll want to meet Ó Faoláin, Clarke, O Connor
> Who, we are told, attained (abroad) some literary honour
> They may not all be present at your feastings and your sport
> For they're apt to be on trial at our Literary court
> Cead Míle Fáilte, no xenophobes are we
> For we'll clear this land of writers from the centre to the sea.
> (Kelly, 1953)

Kelly’s satiric jingle criticizes the censorship of books and authors which was at its peak during the 1950’s. The jingle mentions the obscenity the censorship board would find in the “oddest novelists” (Kelly, 1953), further mentioning that the Irish were not xenophobes; the nationality of the author did not matter – but its content, and so “we’ll clear this land of writers from the centre to the sea.” (Kelly, 1953). Essentially, in those days when any reference to

sexuality would equal a ban, not being a part of the long list of censored books was a celebratory achievement.

The issue of bisexuality is one Mary Dorcey promptly mentions by questioning the idea of the "golden lesbian", referring to a woman who is exclusively (sexuality and romantically) involved with women. The author argues that this idea is "just another oppressive frame" (See *supra* p. 72), urging people to "see past categories" (See *supra* p. 72). She further claims that recognizing as lesbian only women who had never been intimate with men becomes another way of supervising women's bodies and undermining the female sexual experience by refusing to acknowledge its complexity and flexibility.

Arguably, *A Noise from the Woodshed*'s timing was perfect for the success of the book (and of the author) as by 1989 Ireland had been undergoing a continuous transformation relating to women, lesbians, and foremost, female writers. According to Éilís Ní Dhuibhne in 2018 *The Irish Times* article, great part of this transformation happened because of the "winds of change in the world in the 1950s and 1960s which began to influence Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s." (Ní Dhuibhne, 2018), a change which was influenced by "Cultural feminism and [and] literary feminism [which flourished] in the United States, in the UK and in Europe." (Ní Dhuibhne, 2018). These changes made Dorcey's success as an author possible given that, as the first Irish author to openly discuss homosexuality, the author had "this ruthless streak [thinking] "If this is the only thing I do in my life, this is worth doing because somebody has to do it!" (See *supra* p. 70). This "ruthless streak", as the author calls it, gave Dorcey an important role in the female Irish literary scene, one which includes the likes of Emma Donoghue, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Edna O'Brien, Kate O'Brien, Elizabeth Bowen, and others.

It isn't hard to imagine how the collection may not have been given a chance had it been published during the 1960's or 1970's. It moreover isn't hard to imagine how a positive representation of sexuality by a published author could make people pay closer attention to homosexuality. The idea that "literary people can say things that other people wouldn't say" (See *supra* pp. 61-62), is related to writers' important role in society as, by being granted a voice, they become an authority of sorts. Authors can write about what most people think because of this authority. Thus, by writing about these issues, their books give recognition to the subject at hand, educating and instructing the reader.

Mary Dorcey brings into question the dubious idea of "permanent progress" – the optimist idea that progress is always continuous, one which may make us blind to the dangers

or backlashes and consequent loss of rights previously taken for granted. By doing so, the author recognizes the victories Irish gays and lesbians have experienced while acknowledging the possibility of regression or step backs of all the positive changes made towards human rights. Being able to recognize the possibility of retrogressing is one shared by many LGBTQ+ people, by women, and other minority and marginalized groups from all around the globe.

The autocratic role of the Catholic Church was put into question as the author mentioned the sexual abuse by priests and the Christian Brothers of children – a series of scandals which disrupted the Irish Catholic Church in the 1990's and early 2000's. These scandals saw the number of people who recognized authority in the clergy abruptly diminish as people who grew up Catholic would no longer go to Mass for anything outside of weddings or funerals. The shame the sexual abuse brought to the Irish community made people question themselves, their faith, and priests and bishops they trusted. In the 2011 "Decline of the Irish Catholic Church" by *R&E, Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, Deborah Potter spoke to various Irish people about these scandals, stating that people questioned "their faith, they questioned the right of bishops to tell them how to live their lives. (…) The body blow, however, came from the clergy abuse scandals that hit harder and closer to home in Ireland than anywhere else." (Potter, 2011).

Having to face the heartbreaking truth about the sexual abuse[15] cases, the Irish community began to question the authority of the Catholic Church. These members of the clergy who used to call members of the LGBTQ+ community sinners, lost all credibility as Colm O'Gorman argues in Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura's 2018 article from *The New York Times* "Pope to visit Ireland, Where Scars of Sex Abuse Are 'Worse Than the I.R.A'": "[their] primary concern is not to protect vulnerable adults and children but to protect the authority and reputation and the wealth of the institution." (Freytas-Tamura, 2018). This abuse, albeit not restricted to Ireland[16], brought about major changes to society. In the 2015 *The Irish Times* article "How Irish gays became 'normal' – and why the Church was unable to do much about it", Anna Gryzmala-Busse discusses how the Catholic Church "held up rigorous moral

[15] As important as this issue is that of the Magdalene Laundries (also known as Magdalene Asylums). These, operated by (after 1922) four religious orders (The Sisters of Mercy, The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, The Sisters of Charity, and the Good Shepherd Sisters), would see imprisoned girls and women blamed for having sex outside of marriage, women with special needs, victims of rape, and psychiatric patients. These, who would be referred to as "fallen women", would be abused by the nuns (their hair cut, names changed), some raped by priests. At least 30,000 women are believed to have been in Magdalene Laundries and around 1,600 women died in the premises.

[16] In the Portuguese case, now visible, many have been able to denounce the abuse they suffered at the hands of members of the clergy. An Independent Commission ("Comissão Independente"), was created in January 2022 as to investigate sexual offences in the Catholic Church in Portugal. In the first month alone, 214 victims (aged between 15 and 88 years old) came forth.

standards for society – standards that it itself had failed to fulfil.” (Gryzmala-Busse, 2015), something that proved how hypocritical the Catholic Church was. This situation made many choose to separate themselves from the Church, and so, after “the revelations of what was often seen as church hypocrisy, the atmosphere became less suffocating.” (Gryzmala-Busse, 2015).

Throughout the interview, Mary Dorcey problematized many issues the Irish society has witnessed and experienced – from the hypervigilance of women’s bodies, the role of the Church, and the dubious idea of “permanent progress”. This represents the obstacles Irish gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and all those that fall in between, have surpassed. It additionally indicates that despite all the ups and downs, the walk is yet to be finished.

Mary Dorcey’s testimony is valuable in more than one sense: primarily, her statements give the reader valuable insights when reading and studying her work. The autobiographical dimension of the collection, confirmed by the author herself, brings forth the idea that most of her work is, indeed, rooted in the personal, and thus, much of what the author experiences is put into her work – creating insights and perspectives hard to attain elsewhere. Additionally, Dorcey’s “ruthless streak”, her determination to tell the truth and not to hide behind metaphorical boxes was a deliberate, personal decision – a choice the author made in order to not deny her lover and their relationship, regardless of the social norms set out for women and writers. The author instead chose to tell the truth about her life: “Me, I was always determined to tell the truth” (See *supra* p. 76).

Conclusion: *It seems / we were just getting started*

Thirty years after its publication, *A Noise from the Woodshed* seems to have resisted the test of time, and Mary Dorcey's name is established in the Irish literary scene. The magnitude of the collection, and of many other fiction and poetry works, written and published by lesbian writers have helped change the way the Irish look at and think about queer love. It must be mentioned that Mary Dorcey is just one of the many authors whose work helped open a path of discovery and acceptance towards the LGBTQ+ community as many before her, and many after her, made it their life goal to raise awareness to the stigmatization queer individuals suffered – at times seeing their life work be censored, discredited, or defamed.

The creation of a safe space for LGBTQ+ people in large and small communities is essential as it creates new ways of understanding queer love and relationships. As Dorcey mentioned during our interview, in larger, metropolitan communities such as London's, the acceptance of queers was generally easier, making it possible for these to openly live their lives. In smaller Irish communities, that would not have been the case as, for a long time, thinking positively about same-sex love was near impossible, the hypervigilance of sexuality not restricted to homosexuality.

Ireland's heteronormative and patriarchal ways during the 1950's and upwards to the 1990's created a world of censorship, fear, and silence. While Mary Dorcey grew and matured, she lived in a patriarchal Ireland, one which didn't acknowledge the existence of lesbians, and one in which women were confined to subaltern roles and oppressive lives. The expected behaviors of women and men as to create Éamon de Valera's "The Ireland That We Dreamed Of" made it hard for people "outside the norm" to live as their true selves. Many women (and men for that matter) would follow society's expectations, settling for the role of caregiver and obedient wife (or the breadwinner) in a hetero-normal family, instead of being in open relationships with people of the same sex.

The queer community in Ireland, like others worldwide, had a hard time being heard, understood, and accepted. It took them decades, and an undying will to fight, to see change happen. The change of meaning of the concept "queer" was, for once, an important moment. The multiple legal and political fights from David Norris and activist groups such as Irishwomen United and the Sexual Liberation Movement, referred to in this thesis, created once-unbelievable changes for queer people, such as the 1993 decriminalization of

homosexuality through the Criminal (Sexual Offences) Bill. In Harry Brent's 2021 article, published in the *Irish Post*, "Homosexuality was decriminalised in Ireland 27 years ago today", Kieran Rose, head of the GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network), claimed that the decriminalization of homosexuality was "one of the most important steps in the liberation of gay people (…) We have come a very long way since the State regarded gay people as criminals." (Brent, 2021).

The decriminalization of homosexuality, though the first significant step in the fight for any sort of equality, was but one of the many improvements in the lives of Irish gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and other community members. As discussed in Chapter 1, other major laws and events, such as The Criminal (Sexual Offences) Bill (2010), the Same-sex Marriage Referendum (2015), and the Children and Family Relationships Act (2015), were regarded as fortunate changes in the lives of the Irish queer community.

Apart from the sexuality issue, one must not forget the gender issue. Women in general can be as ostracized and marginalized as LGBTQ+ people. Assuredly, Irish women (for the sake of this argument, I will be focusing on Irish women writers) were partially silenced, not given the same chances as men to be published and read. In the introduction to the anthology *Irish Women Writers – an A-to-Z Guide*, Mary Fitzgerald Hoys calls attention to this issue, stating: "Women have long had such a shadowy half-life on the Irish map and in the Irish literary anthology." (Hoyt, 2006: 7). Were it not for a change of narrative which saw women writers be given proper opportunities, authors such as Mary Dorcey would not have had the opportunity to be known, studied, or have made a change in the representation of lesbian love. In "Mary Dorcey's Woodshed and its Implications for Irish Society", Amy Finlay Jeffrey claims that Hoyt's comments are "an interesting starting point with which to commence a discussion on Mary Dorcey, a writer, who it can be argued put women's and lesbian experience on to the literary map, so to speak." (Jeffrey, 2014: 7). The possibilities are seemingly endless when a marginalized group is given the chance to speak up, as seen by Mary Dorcey's work.

It is important to keep in mind that, in the decades before the publishing of Mary Dorcey's *A Noise from the* Woodshed, literary references to sexuality – be it hetero or homosexual – would be censored. Since its establishment in 1926, the Irish Censorship of Publications Board had the goal of banning works which included the likes of obscenity, indecency, and any reference to sexuality. Edna O'Brien's 1960 *The Country Girls* (which was followed by the controversial *The Lonely Girls* (1962) and *Girls in their Married Bliss* (1964), was one of the many books who fell victim to censorship. The reason, Kathleen MacMahon

explains in *The Irish Times* 2020 article "Irish women writing fiction were dismissed as 'quiet'. Ireland wasn't listening", was "the novel's scandalous theme – *sex* – that made all the noise." (MacMahon, 2020).

According to Eimear McBride's article published in 2017 in *The New Statesman* "Banned, burned and reviled: what was so radical about Edna O'Brien's The Country Girls?", the novel was banned "for sexually explicit content, publicly burned by a local parish priest in search of some post-rosary drama, and O'Brien herself subjected to a series of anonymous, malevolent letters." (McBride, 2017). The censorship wasn't restricted to female sexuality as John McGahern, for one, had 260 copies of this second novel, the 1965 *The Dark* "seized by Irish Customs and Excise officers. The Censorship of Publications Board would deem the novel posed a risk to public morality because of its "indecent or obscene" content.", as Eamon Maher explains in *The Irish Times* article published in 2015 "Remembering 'The Dark': Fifty years on from the 'McGahern affair'" (Maher, 2015).

Giving women the opportunity to write and publish made it possible for women writers to include homo-erotic themes in their literary works. As more women were given the chance to publish, themes which hadn't previously been successfully discussed – such as lesbian sexuality – started to be a part of different poetry and prose, creating a discussion which saw "the narrowly defined sexual boundaries that had embodied the Irish cultural milieu [start] expanding." (Jeffrey, 2014: 8). In "Can I Write About It Yet? The Influence of Politics on Literary Representations of Lesbians in Irish Women's Writing", Anna Charczun mentions the evolution of lesbian writers stating that they: "leave the confines of silence, (…) and shift, metaphorically speaking, towards the symbolic communication and open representations of lesbian sexuality and existence. (Charczun, 2020: 50). Charczun continues her argument:

> The narrative of Irish lesbian fiction has undergone an unrecognisable transformation; in the short space of just over twenty years, authors begun to not only discuss lesbian desire openly and fearlessly – they are celebrating newly found courage and aim to discuss lesbian lives from a different perspective (Charczun, 2020: 60)

The release from the constraints of covertness and silence led authors such as Mary Dorcey to openly discuss lesbian sexuality, creating a safe space of representation and recognition. As first discussed in Chapter 2, the love between the characters is described in a conventional and natural way, taking as example heterosexual love representations. This description is paradoxical in the sense that heterosexuality and homosexuality are thought as

being different, yet, the author uses the example of heterosexuality – the one which is socially accepted – to describe the conventionality of queer love, which for a long time was socially rejected. With this, and having gone from a place of partial silence to a place of opportunity, lesbian writers became able to create a catalog of characters, plots, relationships, and feelings many could related to.

As intertwined as the women liberation and the LGBTQ+ fights are, it seems fair to say that one cannot exist without the other, and each complement one another. Mary Dorcey is one of the many writers who privileges both the female experience, and the queer experience, being an author who, in December of 1992, was considered by Antoinette Quinn in "Speaking the Unspoken: The Poetry of Mary Dorcey", an "almost unimaginable phenomenon, an Irish lesbian whose fiction and poetry, though manifestly "out," are praised and published in Ireland." (Quinn, 1992: 227). One can agree that Mary Dorcey's literary works were "out" instead of "in" because of her choice of thematic: during the late 1980's, early 1990's, Ireland's heteronormativity would not have made mainstream books which described lesbian love.

Given that everything in the nation was hetero-centered: the house, the familiar roles, the sexual activities, Mary Dorcey's lesbians served as a rebuttal of the heteronormative and patriarchal mindset of the Irish given that the author's work

> [highlights] the presence of lesbians in the nation, her work reveals the embedded heteronormative status of Irish culture but also fashions new ways in which they can be accepted into heterosexist Irish society. In this sense, her work is (...) successful in opening the doors of the Irish closet into a larger, changing Irish society. (…) Ultimately (…) her work is successful in crafting a space which lesbianism can be located within the Irish tradition. (Jeffrey, 2014: 14)

The creation of a safe space in which lesbians could be an undeniable part of the Irish society and tradition made possible the creation of a space of recognition and full citizenship for LGBTQ+ people. Moreover, the portrayal of queer relationships not only gives visibility to lesbians, but also produces scenarios readers can identify themselves with. In summary, the creation of safe spaces in which queer people can exist, work, and function as active members of society educates the reader on the conventionality and verisimilitude of queer people and relationships.

The matters of representation, recognition, and visibility are greatly important for marginalized communities as many rely on representations of people such as themselves in the media, literature, or cinema, in order to feel visible and recognized as citizens. In the 2018 essay

"The Power of Visibility: Advances in LGBT Rights in the United States and Europe", Melissa R. Michelson speaks about the power of queer visibility, arguing that "LGBT people and their allies have been fighting for decades for public approval and legal recognition of their rights. As small, politically marginalized subsets of their communities, this recognition depends on garnering the support of other members of the public" (Michelson, 2018: 1). This gathering of support from the public can only be attained through positive contact with the subject at hand: in this particular case, an exposure to queer people – and to queer relationships. Only through an introduction to verisimilar reconfigurations of relationships, characters, or scenarios can the stereotypes some people associate with queerness change – and queer love become natural.

Though it might be obvious, I must mention that representations of queer love aren't always done in a positive way. In fact, at times, these representations portray the lesbian or gay character (or relationship) as stereotypical or cliché, hindering instead of normalizing queerness. In the 2021 article "An Analysis of LGBTQ+ Representation in Television and Film", Katelyn Thomson argues that sometimes people "accept stereotyped portrayals of gender and sexual differences as normal, which can have a regressive effect advancement of acceptance towards queer individuals." (Thomson, 2021: 2). This fact further explains the need for positive, realistic, and verisimilar portrayals of queer love and relationships.

As well as portraying the women as ordinary women, Dorcey places these in the role of the protagonists, instead of subaltern characters. In *A Noise from the Woodshed*, and other stories by the author, lesbians are the protagonists, and the storyline not only includes them, but often revolves around their whole existence. This, of course, hasn't always been the case. As readers, we have often seen the queer awakening of characters happen near the protagonist, but not necessarily including them, as John Goldsmith discusses in his 2016 thesis "The Evolution of Queer Representations in the Young Adult Genre":

> For the majority of the novels published throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the bulk of queer-identified characters could be found in supporting roles in the text. (…) In spite of their importance to the narrator's story, many of the characters were relatively superficial, following the traditions and stereotypes perpetuated by the early days of the genre. (Goldsmith, 2016: 39)

In the setting of Ireland in the late 1980's, early 1990's, and having experienced first-hand the pains, worries, and victories of the LGBTQ+ community, Mary Dorcey understood how important it was to see people who act like you, and who love like you do, be represented in a positive light. From the viewpoint of the present year, 2022, we frequently see LGBTQ+

characters positively represented in books, in movies, and in series. Back then, however, this was not frequent in Ireland, and arguably elsewhere. The changes in law, social practices, and mindsets have made the acceptance and education in and for diversity an easier process. Many now understand how crucial educating people is as this education creates a world where heterosexuals can better understand queerness, and a world in which LGBTQ+ people can, for the most part, feel safe and understood.

As mentioned quite often in this thesis, the character's sexuality was never the central issue of Dorcey's poetry or prose – what was important for the author was the representation of human love, making the sexuality of Mary Dorcey's characters just another one of their features. On Chapter 3, I went over four out of the nine short stories from the collection, analyzing, amongst other things, the features of the characters. Keeping in mind this analysis, anyone can agree that Martina and Helen in "The Husband", Anna and Nessa in "Introducing Nessa", and the unnamed women in "A Noise from the Woodshed" and "Sweet, Practised, Endings" are either lesbian or bisexual women. Yet, it can be argued that their sexuality was solely a characteristic of the women, not their whole existence: in other words, none of the women are exclusively defined by their sexuality.

In the realist convention, to which Dorcey's short stories belong, some authors take inspiration from real-life events in order to create stories and characters. Moreover, through literary works, authors are able to figure and discuss relatable events as literature offers the reader new insights and new perspectives on various thematics. *A Noise from the Woodshed* was a pioneer work in which Mary Dorcey discussed a "transition of Irish women from ordinary housewives to passionate lesbians." (Charczun, 2020: 48). This transition made it possible for Dorcey's lesbians to escape society's expected behaviors: in "The Husband", Martina decided to abandon her marriage, leaving behind the expected role of a caregiver, a mother, a wife. In "Sweet, Practised, Endings", we see two women who had previously been married to men, escape to another country to have a passionate lesbian relationship. The women from "A Noise from the Woodshed", in turn, ignore all home things associated with heteronormative femininity.

The short stories represent queer relationships as conventional representations of love which see women choose to leave the constraints of society, instead of settling and agreeing to fulfil the expected roles of a wife, a mother, a nurturer. The lesbians in the short stories described in this thesis are represented as women capable of choosing their own paths, willing

to fight against the patriarchy and misogyny that surrounds them in order to essentially love who they love.

The references to bisexuality in many of the characters makes it so that bisexual people, who have for far too long been disregarded and discredited, feel represented and visible. The issue with bisexuality is also discussed in the previously referred thesis by John Goldsmith who argues that bisexuality is often "depicted in promiscuous and/or sexually confused personas (…) this promiscuity and confusion will lead the character to be confused and unhappy, ultimately becoming the victim of internalized biphobia." (Goldsmith, 2016: 19). Although Dorcey didn't necessarily make a point to discuss bisexuality, she recognizes that many women would have been in relationships (perhaps even marriages) with men before becoming involved with women. The author further acknowledges the need to refuse the box sexuality is habitually constrained to, instead acknowledging as valid all aspects of sexuality.

As Goldsmith argues, many a times we have seen bisexual characters be portrayed as confused and selfish individuals. Nevertheless, in Dorcey's work, bisexual women aren't considered deviant or promiscuous – being simply portrayed as women who used to be in relationships with men, but who are now in relationships with women. Paula R. Pratt discusses the presence of bisexuality in Mary Dorcey's work, particularly in the 1997 novel *Biography of Desire* in "Bisexuality, Queer Theory and Mary Dorcey's *Biography of Desire*: An Outlaw Reading", stating that many bisexuals "have initially hesitated to identify themselves as such for fear of being seen as betraying or diluting the effectiveness of the gay/lesbian political agenda, because of that part (…) which encompasses the heterosexual attraction." (Pratt, 2001: n/p). Pratt continues by claiming that

> Dorcey's novel contributes to the understanding of this hybridity and its resonances by constructing a biography, not of a "queer" love affair, but of the human experience of attraction and desire: desire awakened, diminished, and reawakened, with all the attendant vagaries involved. (Pratt, 2001: n/p)

Dorcey's discussion of human love above all else makes her work all the more important. Frequently, depictions of queer characters are overly stereotyped, playing off the assumptions of effeminacy in gay men, masculinity in lesbians, selfishness in bisexuals, and so on and so forth. As readers and viewers, we have often seen queer character be given one personality trait: their sexuality. We have then experienced the perpetuation of stereotypes that these overly played roles of the "flamboyant" gay man, of the cheating bisexual, and of the

manly lesbian bring to the public, creating wrongful representations of LGBTQ+ people which reinforces malicious, hateful ideas.

In *A Noise from the Woodshed* none of the characters perpetuate any prejudiced ideas associated with lesbians: only in "The Husband" are stereotypes mentioned, but then through the perspective of the heterosexual outsider. I believe that Mary Dorcey's depiction of the husband as a man who associates the stereotypes of being "too pretty" (Dorcey, 1989: 269) or "too fundamentally healthy, too fond of the admiration of men" (Dorcey, 1989: 271) to lesbians doesn't discredit the lesbian relationship, but, rather, represents and discusses the male gaze regarding lesbianism and the denial of such sexuality outside of pornography and voyeurism.

The queer characters in the collection are thus depicted as normal women doing normal things in normal relationships – relationships which are depicted as partnerships that include two people who, like heterosexual couples do, share secrets, stories, their lives. As previously mentioned, the women are never solely defined by their sexual orientation: though their sexuality cannot be denied, it is but a part of their lives. Outside literature, many LGBTQ+ people agree that their sexuality (though important), should not be seen as their whole identity. In the 2020 article "How Much Does Your Sexuality Define You?" from the NCS blog (National Citizen Service Trust), six LGBTQ+ people gave their testimony regarding the matter. Maya, a NCS grad, for one, denied labels and pre-conceived social norms regarding queerness: "My sexuality plays a massive role in who I am, it influences my day-to-day actions and experiences, but it doesn't define me." (NCS, 2020).

Portraying queer characters as people who aren't defined by their sexuality, and who can be more and do more than settle for the expectations and stereotypes associated with being a queer person is hugely important. By the same token, portraying love as a non-traumatic experience makes sure there is a proper representation and recognition in life and in social practices. Many queer readers turn to literature, wanting to read about characters who share their interests, their sexuality. Often, these come in contact with queer trauma and suffering, encountering portrayals of discrimination and homophobia which can trigger personal experiences. In the 2017 *Book Riot*'s blog post "The Struggle with Stories of Queer Suffering", Jessica Woodbury gives her testimony about queer suffering in literature, arguing:

> As a queer person, it is hard to read queer suffering narratives. It takes more emotional energy than my usual reading. When it's over I feel spent. I want more than anything to read stories of queer people living bold and interesting lives, I want to hear their stories of love and success. But when I go back to find another queer book, I almost always find myself at a story of suffering. (Woodbury, 2017)

Queer trauma negatively affects readers as it furthers wrongful assumptions while creating, or perpetuating, traumatic scenarios. Most LGBTQ+ people turn to literature (and other art forms) in order to escape their at-times distressing realities: many times, these people aren't accepted by their family members, their friends, their peers; often, they are unwilling victims of discrimination and homophobia, being chased in real-life or in social media, to, at times, the point of no return. If all that is available for these people are further descriptions of their real-life trauma, the representation of these queer characters does more harm than good. Again I reiterate: to educate the public, and to create a safe-space for queers, there's got to be a truthful, positive portrayal of queer love and people – thus the crucial role played by literature.

The characters in *A Noise from the Woodshed* create an astonishing trifecta: they are the protagonists of the stories; they are women depicted and characterized as ordinary people; and above all, they are not constrained or controlled by queer trauma. Mary Dorcey has been giving a voice to the voiceless for more than forty years through her activism and literary works. Her depiction of relatable characters and portrayals of queer love are significant because they create a sense of identification and recognition many need. Tina O'Toole, for once, who has been mentioned before in this thesis, took to Twitter in 2019 to state:

> For those who, like me, came out in late 1980s/90s [Mary Dorcey] was essential reading, the first Irish lesbian fiction I encountered; that instant identification with her characters hugely important. Groundbreaking, culture-shaping, essential work. (O'Toole, 2019)

The simplicity and verisimilitude of Dorcey's work (be it her prose or poetry) is deserving of more attention, research, and dissemination. There is so much left to be read, so much left to be said. The dearth of critical essays, alongside the difficulty to access much of the author's work – both online and in print – is something that needs to be changed: her work deserves a broader access, be it through re-editions of her books, or greater research by scholars.

As epitomized in "The Breath of History", a poem from *The River That Carries Me* (1995), women who have shelter and food, who have been taught to read, and who do not have to worry about the safety of their loved ones' lives (or their own), are in fact, privileged, not ordinary. Thus, and whilst considering herself a privileged woman, Mary Dorcey gave a voice to the ordinary woman, to the voiceless, the marginalized, the mistreated. Mary Dorcey's positive and constructive portrayals of human love and womanhood are ingenious as,

ultimately, she is a woman who writes about human love, a love which breaks down all walls and boundaries, building in its place a safe haven.

> I am no ordinary woman.
> Everything I touch and see
> is astonishing and rare –
> privileged.
> (Dorcey, 1995: 9)

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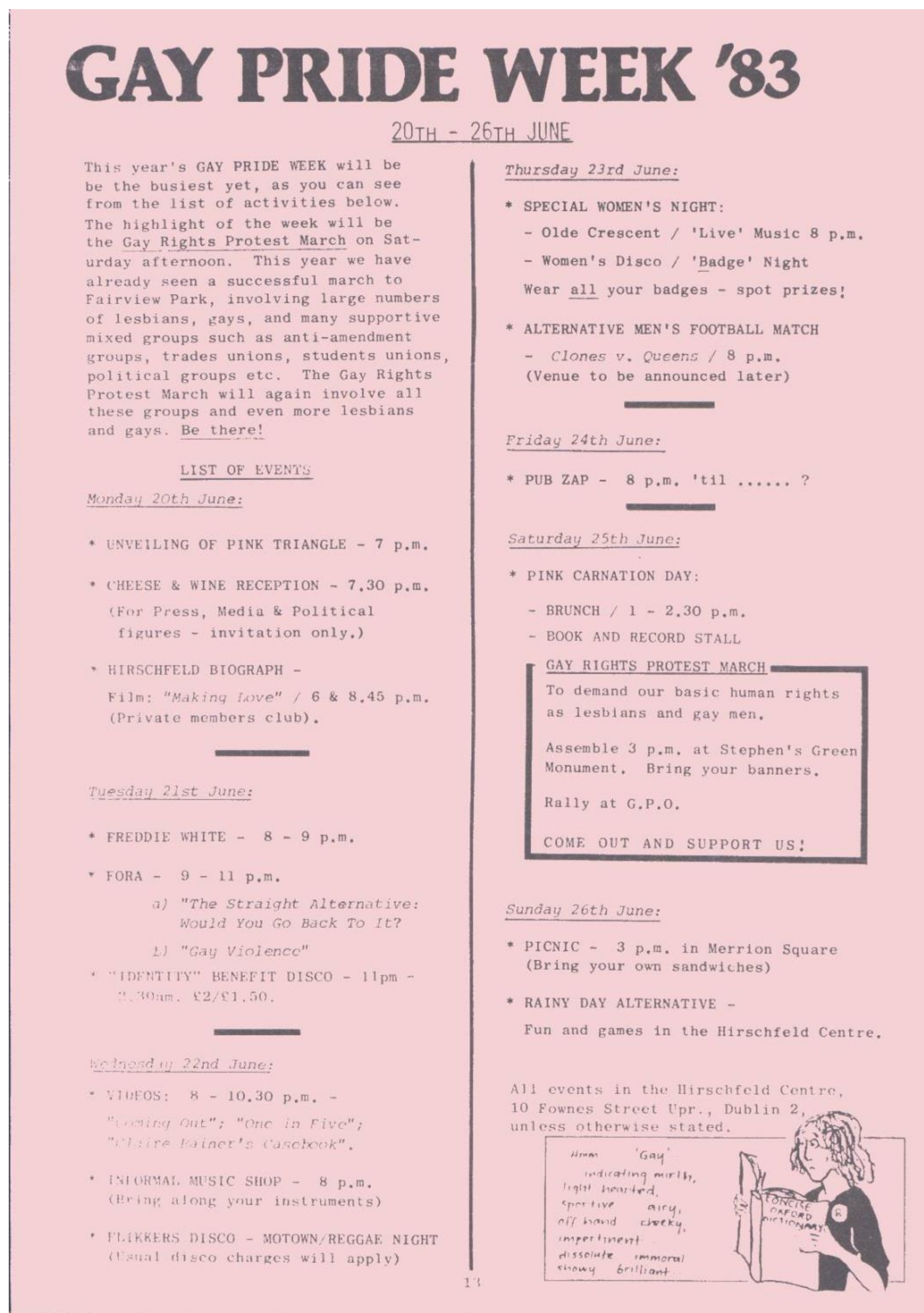
Annexes

Annex 1



GAY PRIDE WEEK '83

20TH - 26TH JUNE

This year's GAY PRIDE WEEK will be be the busiest yet, as you can see from the list of activities below. The highlight of the week will be the Gay Rights Protest March on Saturday afternoon. This year we have already seen a successful march to Fairview Park, involving large numbers of lesbians, gays, and many supportive mixed groups such as anti-amendment groups, trades unions, students unions, political groups etc. The Gay Rights Protest March will again involve all these groups and even more lesbians and gays. Be there!

LIST OF EVENTS

Monday 20th June:

* UNVEILING OF PINK TRIANGLE - 7 p.m.
* CHEESE & WINE RECEPTION - 7.30 p.m.
  (For Press, Media & Political figures - invitation only.)
* HIRSCHFELD BIOGRAPH -
  Film: *"Making Love"* / 6 & 8.45 p.m.
  (Private members club).

Tuesday 21st June:

* FREDDIE WHITE - 8 - 9 p.m.
* FORA - 9 - 11 p.m.
  a) *"The Straight Alternative: Would You Go Back To It?*
  b) *"Gay Violence"*
* "IDENTITY" BENEFIT DISCO - 11pm - 2.30am. £2/£1.50.

Wednesday 22nd June:

* VIDEOS: 8 - 10.30 p.m. -
  "Coming Out"; "One in Five"; "Claire Rainer's Casebook".
* INFORMAL MUSIC SHOP - 8 p.m.
  (Bring along your instruments)
* FLIKKERS DISCO - MOTOWN/REGGAE NIGHT
  (Usual disco charges will apply)

Thursday 23rd June:

* SPECIAL WOMEN'S NIGHT:
  - Olde Crescent / 'Live' Music 8 p.m.
  - Women's Disco / 'Badge' Night
  Wear all your badges - spot prizes!
* ALTERNATIVE MEN'S FOOTBALL MATCH
  - *Clones v. Queens* / 8 p.m.
  (Venue to be announced later)

Friday 24th June:

* PUB ZAP - 8 p.m. 'til ...... ?

Saturday 25th June:

* PINK CARNATION DAY:
  - BRUNCH / 1 - 2.30 p.m.
  - BOOK AND RECORD STALL

GAY RIGHTS PROTEST MARCH
To demand our basic human rights as lesbians and gay men.
Assemble 3 p.m. at Stephen's Green Monument. Bring your banners.
Rally at G.P.O.
COME OUT AND SUPPORT US!

Sunday 26th June:

* PICNIC - 3 p.m. in Merrion Square
  (Bring your own sandwiches)
* RAINY DAY ALTERNATIVE -
  Fun and games in the Hirschfeld Centre.

All events in the Hirschfeld Centre, 10 Fownes Street Upr., Dublin 2, unless otherwise stated.

13

Gay Pride Week 1983. A5 flyer, list of events.

[NLGF Collection, IQA/NLI]

Annex 2

POLITICS

Dublin recently has seen a marked increase in the number of violent attacks on lesbians and gay men. The attacks are increasingly spreading from cruising areas to streets in day ligh t at gay centres and during marches or demonstrations. These incidents are frequently passed over by the individuals themselves and the gardai, who show both lack of interest and support. But being gay surely, even with our antiquated legal system, is no reason for violent attacks against us to be ignored.

There have been two incidents of a particularly vicious kind recently, both of which occoured in broad daylight with many people (including gardai) watching. The first occoured at the Gay Pride March outside the GPO where lack of police, diverting traffic caused probelms. One driver was so vexed at being delayed by "queers", he dr ove through the crowd. He continued to do so despite the fact that people had stood in front of the car to prevent his disrupting the rally. Charles Kerrigan, who was the gay man involved, was thrown back on the bonnet of the car. The driver increased speed and attempted to knock Charles off the car by driving rapidly in a zig zag pattern down O'Connell Street. Charles was thrown from the car and badly bruised and shaken. The second incident also occoured at a demonstratio n. This time the it was • The Womens Post Amendment March. Again traffic was not being diverted around the march and vexed drivers left their cars to protest angrily to the women. One man was in a particular temper at the fact that his way was being blocked by a group of women. He headed for the speakers platfrom but on his way he caught sight of the Dublin Lesbian and Gay Mens Collective banner. This sent him into a rage and he ran back and attacked Joan McCarthy of Cork Lesbian Collective who happened to be holding the banner at the time. She too was badly bruised and shaken. She received unsympathetic treatment from the gardai who seemed to think the whole thing a joke, when she went to the station to make charges.

Both Charles and Joan Are now in • the first stages of taking legal action. This will not be easy but they are both so angry at how easily the way they they were treated could be ignored. If they decide to prosecute they may qualify for free legal aid, but taking a case to court always involves some expense, not to mention the cost to the individuals themselves in having their sexuality made public in this way. With both of the incidents it is is clear that Joan and Charles were attacked without provocation and solely on the basis of their sexuality. sexuality. The gay community has a clear obligation to support these cases should they come court. Indeed no lesbian or gay may should have to face court courts for such an action o n th eir own.

Violence against Gays

Other cities throughout the world have dealth with this by setting up a fund to meet any legal costs. Such a fund is clearly needed now in Ireland. The responsibility falls on gay groups already e stablished to set up such a fund. This responsibility should be taken up as soon as possible.

BILL FOLEY

9

NGF News, Dublin. Vol 3, Nr. 4 (July/August 1984), p.9: "Violence against Gays" by Bill Foley.

[Periodicals Collection, IQA/National Library of Ireland]

Annex 3

Attuned to the sounds of the world

Poetry

Seán Hewitt

Seán Lysaght's latest collection, **New Leaf** (Gallery Press, €12.95), opens with a song: "I walked the hills in spider line / to spin a web of me." Indeed, the poems in this beautiful collection are threaded with personal histories, but they are also sites of natural revelation. This is a book filled with the voices and sounds of the landscape. The rain "humming on the dormer roof at night", "the caress and argument of water", the old life that "still brays in the shed".

Certain characters repeat, such as the otter. It is traced across time in the poem Brockagh, which moves from the Ice Age, through the revolution, and on to the present moment with grace, close attention, and a sense of permanency giving way to uncertainty, of reality blurring into dream. Because Lysaght's ear is so attuned to the sounds of the world, some of the most striking moments in New Leaf call up the ghostly absence of voices and calls, a sort of untethering that comes from environmental loss, as when a Polish father speaks:

Yes, the nights are very quiet. No owls.
You know, my father had a summer house
in the Bialowieza Forest. You could hear wolves
in the evenings. That's another thing I miss.

In fact, as much as New Leaf is rich with lush, sensory reality, Lysaght's natural world also brims with immanence. A rhododendron is "a ghost of fire in May rain; / it burns a steady, pale green, / and will not heat"; a host of narcissus seems so intent on colour that it is almost mad, "a first bloom under the alders / beating its head in the gale". Through these musical, tightly formal poems, Lysaght prepares us for the numerous revelations of the world. Sitting down, "land-bound", seeing the furze, the rocks, the "mucky pass", we are met with moments of enchanting vision:

And there was the ghost of my mother
sitting in the shade of a thorn, nursing pain.

In her latest collection, **Life Holds Its Breath** (Salmon, €12), one of our most respected poets, Mary Dorcey, remains eminently moving, surprising, full of sun-dappled desire and refreshing, fluid evocation. Divided into five sections, Youth Come Again and Summer, Life Holds Its Breath, The Artist's Road, Trial and Reclamation and Time It Was, the collection moves through lyrics of desire and love, the pastoral and the pandemic, the radical life of the woman poet, and the history of LGBTQ+ rights in Ireland in the protesting, hope-filled final poem Banshee:

We marched through city streets, through the drunken
sprawl of its comedy, the shame tight-nosed, its
rank respectability, past the hissing
pulpit, its heavy gang, the twists
and turns of its psyche, in dank alley-ways of history.

This is a collection that demonstrates a broad range not only of thematic coverage, but also of sensibility. The voice, sometimes tender and longing, and always generous in its attention to "these old urgencies", still retains its capacity to shift into effective anger, as in Eden, a blistering poem about assault and misogyny that wings its way through a barrage of rhetorical questions.

What stands out in Life Holds Its Breath is a genuine emotional and romantic heart. If Our Paths Were To Cross manages to hold a detailed account of the passage of time, and missing an old lover, again using unanswered questions to build up a heart-wrenching silence beyond the page:

Would I know you at once, for certain, you
my last love, if our paths were to cross by
chance, after all, how many years can it be

since I filched even a trace of your features
in the crowd? [...]

What, at this stage, do
you believe about love? What terms
have you found to accommodate death?

Death and love appear in the accommodations and transformations of spirituality and enchantment in Grace Wells's latest collection, **The Church of the Love of the World** (Dedalus Press, €12.50). Here, Wells is a sort of poet-as-rewilder, poet-as-conjuror or magician. The first poem, Vestige, draws our attention to the provenance of the book itself: "Things being so urgent, when you / open a book its leaves should take you / back to the forest they came from".

Writing into this "deep entangling way", the poems here are self-reflexive, the speaker often making us aware of her role in salvation. "Like a woman pulling curtains against / the night", Wells writes, "I want to draw / a glade of trees around us". The speaker wants to unleash wildness into the artifice of the poems, taking part in the power of the imaginative world of the text to remake the real, if only momentarily: "I release the factory-farmed hens"; "I return them to the wild."

Sometimes, this shivers on the border of sanctimony ("I walked / through the last of the wood, / putting my hands to each trunk, / whispering *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*"), but in the more visceral poems, Wells allows a vulnerability that erupts in striking and arresting ways. Beach Clean, which opens on a scene of women cleaning a plastic-choked shore ("fishing-net, bottle tops, baling twine, gun cartridges"), striking into a vein of guilt. As the speaker goes about her task, she begins to cry, "not for the quantities of plastic we're collecting, / but because I've finally given up / on the man I've loved for more than a year." Here, that "deep entangling way" which is at the heart of the poems in this collection, manages to hold two griefs in one place, enmeshing the human and the non-human, the ecological and the emotional in one image:

And I carry on with my task, stooped in the river water,
human enough to weep for the oceans,

creature enough to howl for her mate.

The American poet Victoria Chang is well-known in the US for her 2020 collection, *OBIT*, which is now being published in the UK, alongside her latest book **The Trees Witness Everything** (Corsair, £10.99). In this brilliant new collection, Chang continues her exploration of memory and mourning. These are impeccable, precise poems, sometimes shocking and strange, but always startling in their ability to excise an utterance from the depths of grief and longing that is both painful and reverent: "I sit at my desk. / Desire is an anchor – / I lift it and words come up."

Chang's crystalline, controlled poems seem etched from deep experience, and move hauntingly between the living and the dead. Attuned to the passage of seasons, to the raw wanting instilled by loss and isolation, these are nevertheless poems that make one feel less alone by giving voice, and by recording, the strange flashes of light and odd perspective registered. The majority written in Japanese syllabic form called "wakas", their economy lends them both a sharp detail and a hallucinatory potential, traversing a staggering progress of thought and image across a small number of lines:

It is midwinter
and I cannot bear the minutes,
their procession as
they keep inching like snipers.
How can our purpose
be just to watch people die?
The peaches blooming
in the dark are saved for the
ground. I confess, I want them.

In Seán Lysaght's poem Brockagh, the otter is traced across time, from the Ice Age, through the revolution, and on to the present moment. PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK

Hewitt, Seán (2022), "Attuned to the sounds of the world".

[*The Irish Times*]