

*“Where there is homosexuality, there is often backlash, sickness, chaos, imprisonment . . . Yet there is also intimacy, acceptance, health, and an abundance of love—aspects of homosexual identity that are often denied, or perhaps not yet realized, by Irish society.”*

# SEXUALITY, SICKNESS, SILENCE:

## *The Gay Man in Contemporary Irish Narrative*

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THIS PAPER INVESTIGATES REPRESENTATIONS OF MALE HOMOSEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH NARRATIVES, EXPLORING THE PROGRESSION OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN IRELAND AS IT HAS MOVED FROM A SUPPRESSED CRIME TO A CONFIDENTLY ASSERTED IDENTITY. DOES INCLUSION OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN NARRATIVE NEED TO SUBSCRIBE TO EXPLICIT, "IN-YOUR-FACE" FOREGROUNDING IN ORDER TO BE IMPORTANT TO THAT NARRATIVE? DOES A GAY VOICE IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH NARRATIVE HAVE TO BE THE LOUDEST IN ORDER TO SIGNIFY ASSERTION OF THE HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY? MUST GAY ARTISTS BEAR THE BURDEN OF THE OPPRESSIVE PAST IN ADDRESSING HOMOSEXUALITY IN THEIR WORK, OR IS IT UNFAIR TO PLACE SUCH CATEGORIZATIONS AND RESTRICTIONS ON ART? THESE QUESTIONS ARE ADDRESSED THROUGH THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN IRELAND, LOOKING AT THREE DIFFERENT CONTEMPORARY IRISH NARRATIVES THAT FEATURE HOMOSEXUALITY: COLM TÓIBÍN'S *THE BLACKWATER LIGHTSHIP*, KEITH RIDGWAY'S *THE LONG FALLING*, AND NEIL JORDAN'S FILM *THE CRYING GAME*.

## “How do artists depicting homosexuality situate themselves in a nation where, until 1993, gays were considered criminals?”

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How do artists depicting homosexuality situate themselves in a nation where, until 1993, gays were considered criminals? While this recent shift in the national definition of gay identity in Ireland might lead us to expect a dearth of representations of homosexuality in contemporary Irish narrative, a surprising number have been produced in the past 15 years. These narratives stand on shaky ground. On the one hand, they represent an identity historically suppressed and silenced in Ireland, and, thus, act as unmistakable assertions of this identity by their very existence. On the other hand, they run the ubiquitous risk of furthering societal stereotypes of male homosexuality, which often reduce gay men to mere instruments of sex acts. Contemporary Irish narratives that figure homosexuality cannot avoid critical labels such as “gay novel” or “gay film,” simply because gay identity is such a controversial battleground in Irish culture. But is it reductive to place such categorical titles on these narratives? Does society view such representations through too narrow a lens? In addressing these questions, we can look at three Irish narratives produced in the 1990s that figure male homosexuality: Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship*, Keith Ridgway’s *The Long Falling*, and Neil Jordan’s film *The Crying Game*. By examining these representations of homosexuality, we will be able to assess the ways in which each asserts gay identity while simultaneously subverting the reductive stereotypes commonly imposed on that identity by Irish society.

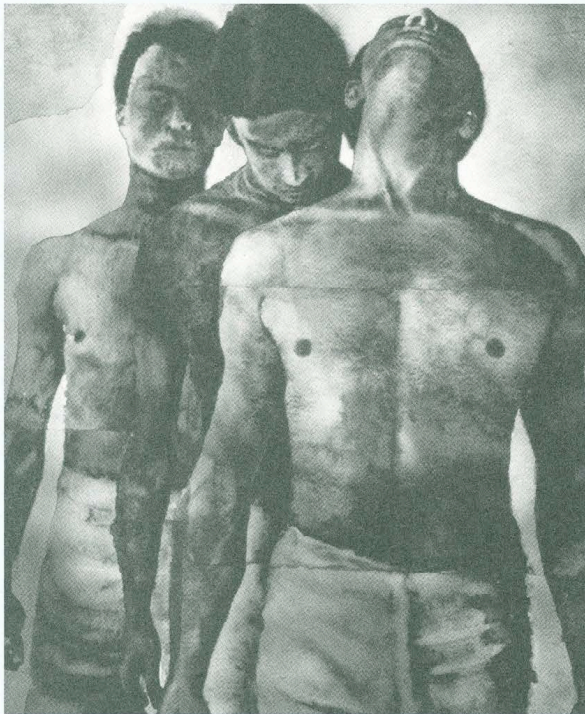
In order to fully examine these representations, we must examine the historical and sociopolitical background against which they are set. Ireland’s decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993 was the result of a widespread gay rights campaign that began in Dublin in the 1970s. Starting “from a position of almost total marginalisation

and powerlessness,”<sup>i</sup> the Irish Gay Rights Movement (IGRM) benefited from increasingly progressive, reform-based politics in Ireland and was able to grow and assert itself as a legitimate civil rights movement. The IGRM continually defended gay men being persecuted under anti-gay laws throughout the 1970s, effectively phasing out these laws before their official abolition.<sup>ii</sup> Gay rights organizations like the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) or the Dublin Lesbian and Gay Men’s Collectives focused on the social as well as the legal aspects of attaining equal rights as Irish citizens. The former participated in many forms of social protest, organizing defense campaigns against police harassment and hate crimes.<sup>iii</sup> GLEN, a pillar of Irish gay rights, pushed for legal inclusion in Irish society, issuing reports on civil rights issues for Irish communities and publishing books and pamphlets that went so far as to include model bills to be passed by the Irish government.<sup>iv</sup> Chris Robson summarizes the successful strategy of the IGRM:

*Lesbian and gay activists have tended (in crude summary) to veer between two well-known stances: ‘Please, please, be nice to us’, and ‘Give us our goddamned rights, and give them now’. The first tends to provoke contempt, the second to elicit the perfectly reasonable response, ‘What’s so bloody special about you?’ There is, however, a third approach: ‘You will agree that equality before the law is a basic principle. On the particular equality issue in question, your responsibility is to abolish Statute X, and to add “sexual orientation” to Clause Y, Statute Z. Please sign here. Thank you.’<sup>v</sup>*

Robson points to the binary nature of an elided identity fighting to assert itself: members of this marginalized group oscillate between childlike pleas for recognition and boldly militant demands for it. A balance is eventually found in a less extreme, more universalized request that characterizes the gay rights movement in purely human terms.

Humanizing homosexuals to the rest of society was not an easy task in patriarchal 1980s Ireland. As was written in a 1986 publication by the Dublin Lesbian and Gay Men's Collectives, "The media censors us, the churches condemn us, the law outlaws us, and all decent, right-thinking people know that we are perverts, child-molesters, genetically damaged, hormonally imbalanced and generally disgusting."<sup>vi</sup> While this is certainly a depiction of extremist societal opinions of Irish gays and lesbians during this time, it is echoed in much of the political language surrounding the gay rights movement. In praising the 1993 decriminalization of homosexuality, Senator David Norris said,



"Young people will no longer have to grow up in the shadow of the taint of criminality which had blighted the vulnerable youth of so many of our citizens with terror and shame."<sup>vii</sup> Both Norris and the contributors to *Out for Ourselves* cite the gay stereotypes caused by the prevalence of AIDS within the homosexual community: "The sensationalist coverage of AIDS is a telling example of the bigoted ignorance we face, best reflected in the common medical perception of our sexuality as an illness in itself."<sup>viii</sup> For a cultural identity so laden with the "shame" of such associations to achieve legal equality is remarkable in and of itself. The fact that so many Irish artists were inclined to figure homosexuality in their narratives speaks to an even higher level of acceptance and understanding in Irish culture, quite different from the condemnation referenced in 1986. Yet, some representations of homosexuality in contemporary Irish literature have been dissected and accused of a reductive brand of silence, one that suggests an unwillingness to fully confront this once-marginalized identity.

Colm Tóibín occupies this peculiar space in Irish culture—a gay author writing about gay characters only years after decriminalization, yet accused by some critics of writing novels that are not "gay enough." His 1999 novel, *The Blackwater Lightship*, set in that pivotal year of 1993, foregrounds the relationship between Helen, Lily, and Dora, women of three generations in a family dealing with the suffering of Declan, their gay brother, son, and grandson, respectively, with AIDS. Some critics have found Declan's representation troublesome due to its silence, as he is somewhat relegated to the background of *The Blackwater Lightship* while Tóibín focuses on the intricacies of the women's relationships, an authorial choice that Eibhear Walshe characterizes as reductive of Declan:

*As the central figure, Declan is represented in an oddly absent manner within the novel, existing only as a catalyst within these jarring familial relations. As the novel progresses, his subjectivity becomes eroded by this absence, rendering him as simply the body upon which death and disease has announced itself.<sup>ix</sup>*

Walshe alleges that through an effacement of Declan's homoeroticism, the character becomes a mere object, existing only to bring together three previously estranged women rather than to express his gay identity. Declan "has no gay subjectivity beyond his bodily frailty, no boyfriend, no lover, no named sexual partners, no erotic past—only a future clearly marked by death."<sup>x</sup> Jennifer Jeffers takes this reading of Declan even further, claiming that his sexual silence points to a moral lesson of Tóibín's: "The *Blackwater Lightship* sets up a kind of moral punishment for Declan's multiple-partner sex life that is particularly damaging in a time and place in which [AIDS] is still not fully understood."<sup>xi</sup> Walshe and Jeffers read the quietude of Declan's homosexuality as a problematic representation of gay identity within a contemporary Irish novel, empty of sexuality and full of fatalism.

While Declan's gay, adult voice is certainly not the loudest in *The Blackwater Lightship*, to characterize him as just a "body upon which death and disease has announced itself" is to miss a central thrust of the novel that is evident in many of its flashbacks. While Declan is indeed a gay man with a sexual identity, he is more importantly a child in desperate need of a mother. Declan's voice is figured most prominently in Helen's flashbacks to their childhood time spent in their grandmother's house:

*Declan was afraid. He was afraid of the black clocks which darted awkwardly across the floor, afraid that if you stepped on one of them all the bloody insides would be on your feet. He was afraid of the dark and the cold and of his grandparents' movements upstairs which seemed to echo in the rooms below. And Helen knew that there was another fear, which was never mentioned in all that time: the fear that their parents would never come back, that they would both be left here.<sup>xii</sup>*

From the outset Declan is a frightened figure, crying easily, getting sick easily, needing "someone to watch out for him."<sup>xiii</sup> In place of the failed biological family, the ones

who have watched over Declan are his gay friends, notably Larry and Paul, who care for him throughout his illness. Paul remembers Declan's visits to him and his longtime partner:

*He would come for long weekends and he'd make us hang out in bars and clubs with him, and he'd usually abandon us at a certain time and then come back home in the early hours like a half-drowned dog. My best memory of him was in the morning; he would crawl in the bottom of our bed. He was like a small boy, and he'd talk and doze and play with our feet.<sup>xiv</sup>*

Here Paul subtly embeds an assertion of Declan's recklessly promiscuous past into the "best" memory of him as a child at the end of his surrogate parents' bed. This memory is a microcosm of Declan's characterization throughout the novel; references to his sexuality are indirect and often overshadowed by his infantilization.

What are the broader implications of Declan's infantilization in *The Blackwater Lightship*? While it could initially be seen as an inability to accept a gay character as an adult (the neo-liberal, Celtic Tiger response to homosexuality), this implication is not commensurable with the author's own homosexuality. It is not just the heterosexual characters in the novel that infantilize Declan; he is a child through his own voice. When Declan calls out, "Mammy, Mammy," as his condition worsens,<sup>xv</sup> it is simply narrated rather than expressed through the viewpoint of another character. Terry Eagleton argues that the aim of the book is to express that "[r]evealing or not revealing what you are is a way of trying to make contact with a mother, not a condition in itself."<sup>xvi</sup> Indeed, mothers are unconventionally resistant to the homosexuality of their sons in this novel, a distinct contrast from Ridgway's *The Long Falling*, which adheres to the more conventional structure of overtly masculine, unaccepting fathers disowning their gay sons. During Larry's story of bringing home his partner to his family in *The Blackwater Lightship*, he says, "It was OK in the end, mainly because of my father, oddly enough," a statement which

characterizes his situation as different from the Irish norm.<sup>xvii</sup> Larry's story also posits the unconventional tolerance of the Catholic Church; a Catholic priest performs a marriage rite for the couple. "He changed into his vestments and said Mass and gave us Communion and then he married us . . . He said: 'Welcome to the Catholic Church!'"<sup>xviii</sup> The traditional Irish instruments of oppression, patriarchy and the Catholic Church, are surprisingly docile in this representation of homosexuality within Irish culture. The social discomfort with homosexuality referenced by gay rights groups is most often expressed by mothers in Tóibín's novel—for example, when Larry relates to Dora his story of sleeping with four brothers. After he tells the tale, Dora says, "I've heard everything now" in a voice that was "hard and . . . louder than it needed to be."<sup>xix</sup> Yet, acceptance shines through for many characters by the end of the novel. In a small victory, Larry teaches Dora how to drive,<sup>xx</sup> and in a much larger one, Lily cradles her son as he cries for her.<sup>xxi</sup> The fact that Tóibín includes a variety of gay characters in the novel with a variety of life stories indicates a more complex representation of gay identity that, while it indirectly references gay sexuality, is not as reductive and objectifying as Walshe alleges. At the end of *The Blackwater Lightship*, Declan is sick but still living, and the focus is on the reconciliation between his mother and sister. If Declan is merely an object upon which death announces itself, why then does the novel not end with his death?

A connection that Michael Cronin points out between *The Blackwater Lightship* and Keith Ridgway's novel *The Long Falling* is that both novels contextualize male homosexuality in the realm of the family trauma.<sup>xxii</sup> Indeed, there are even more similarities between the two representations, as

Cronin points out, largely based on the "metropolitan" nature of adult homosexual characters versus the "rural, traditional" setting of their childhoods.<sup>xxiii</sup> In *The Long Falling*, Grace, mother of the gay main character Martin, murders her brutally abusive husband in their rural town and flees to Dublin, where Martin lives. Rural Ireland is associated with abuse and oppression in this novel, further elicited by the backgrounded X case. In contrast, the modern, cosmopolitan Ireland in which the homosexuals in both books live is one associated with "emotional health, particularly in regard to family relationships."<sup>xxiv</sup> In *The Blackwater Lightship*, Dora's house in Cush is one full of memories of abandonment for Helen and Declan, while the adult gay men live in urban areas like Dublin (Declan) or Brussels (Paul). The modern, urban center is a space in which Irish homosexuals create new families composed of those who share their sexual identities and life experiences: Declan finds Larry and Paul, Martin finds kindred spirits like Sean, Philip, and his lover Henry. Cronin aptly points out that Tóibín's novel presents an optimistic marriage of these two conflicting worlds while Ridgway does not reconcile them.<sup>xxv</sup> In *The Blackwater Lightship*, the modern, metropolitan surrogate family merges with the initially failing traditional family, synthesizing the two seemingly oppositional worlds in a time of extreme need for the person who has inhabited both of them. In contrast, Martin cannot forgive his mother for the act she committed back in his hometown, "treating her coldly and finally betraying her."<sup>xxvi</sup> While Tóibín's view of a future Ireland is one of a synthesized group of supporters of homosexuals outweighing the traditional oppressors, Ridgway's is one of "dissatisfaction and alienation"<sup>xxvii</sup> that does not get resolved within the pages of *The Long Falling*.

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Eibhear Walshe's critique of *The Blackwater Lightship* focuses largely on its lack of homoeroticism and overt sexuality, elements of gay identity that are very present in *The Long Falling*. Displaying scenes of personal gratification, anonymous sexual promiscuity, and monogamous physical intimacy, Ridgway's approach to gay sexuality is far more bold and direct than Tóibín's. The first instance of sexuality in the novel involves Martin masturbating as he thinks of his lover, Henry (away on business in Paris):

*Martin, moving his hands, the skin of his arms brushing the skin of his thighs, closing his eyes again . . . just breathing, just skin . . . He held his balance and held it still a little longer, and held it still a moment more, and then felt it failing, stumbling, gone, and him falling, as if through water, as if the very skin of his body was the world entire . . . He laughed out loud at coming so quickly.*<sup>xxviii</sup>

Employing lyrically urgent prose, Ridgway goes beyond the realm of the indirect reference in asserting the sexuality of his homosexual characters. The editors of the Irish *Field Day* anthology characterize Ridgway as an employer of the "in-your-face gay aesthetic," largely due to his willingness to confront the physicality of homosexuality full-on in his writing.<sup>xxix</sup> The scene from *The Long Falling* included in *Field Day* is one in which a slightly intoxicated Martin visits a gay sauna in Dublin, which he thinks of as "a grey area . . . Leave your panic and your guilt and your fear at the door."<sup>xxx</sup> This sauna is presumably a place in which homosexual men can engage in anonymous sexual acts in a steamy room full of other naked gay men looking to participate as well. Cronin characterizes the sauna as representative of "a key freedom from the social, legal, and psychological taboos placed on homosexuality in the twentieth century."<sup>xxxi</sup> Indeed, the following scene would certainly be absent from a traditional, patriarchal canon of contemporary literature:

*Inside there were grey bodies piled in a corner . . . almost immediately his cock was in somebody's hand . . . The*

*man from the shower came in and stood beside him . . . He put his hand on Martin's balls, very gently, and leaned in close as if to kiss him. Martin stood, turned, faced the guy, pointed his cock at him, tried to hold his head.*<sup>xxxii</sup>

Martin's experience in the sauna is blatantly physical, but is also complicated by his love for the absent Henry: "[he] saw parts of Henry spin around in front of him like branches broken off in a storm."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Homosexuality in this section of the novel is not the exclusively promiscuous identity that exists in stereotype, nor is it empty of sexuality, be it promiscuous or monogamous, in the least. In this way, Ridgway achieves a simultaneous assertion of gay identity and subversion of the easily stereotyped, hypersexual gay man.

In contrast to Declan, Martin is certainly a much more sexual character but is also a very different kind of child. While Declan is a gay character in desperate need of a mother, Martin is a gay character who rejects his mother—a sort of non-child. While the novel includes references to Martin's childhood through the memories of his mother Grace, we see him largely from age 19 (the age at which he came out to his parents) onward. When Grace tells Philip about the walks she and Martin used to take, he tells her, "I can't imagine Martin as a little boy."<sup>xxxiv</sup> We can understand this as readers who are given much more evidence of Martin's adult identity and sexuality than of his childhood or child-like nature. And remarkably, even Grace sees Philip's point: "Grace nodded. She could understand that."<sup>xxxv</sup> For a mother to empathize with a person who cannot imagine her child as a little boy is telling of the fractured relationship between Martin and Grace. In his metropolitan, "out" life, Martin has become a different person, a person whose true life began the moment he left home after coming out:

*He walked down to the road, afraid to look back. He decided that he would wait until he reached the gate, and turn then and wave at his mother. But when he got there, he could not make himself stop. He felt that he had*

*already left, that he was already far away. He thought that if he stopped and looked back there would be nothing there.*<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Once Martin vocally asserted his homosexual identity, his childhood and his once-strong connection to his mother were virtually erased, echoing the inability of traditional, intolerant Ireland and modern, tolerant Ireland to reconcile in this novel. Whereas Declan did not lose his former identity in asserting his homosexual identity, thus synthesizing the traditional and the modern within himself, Martin saw it as one or the other, and ultimately chose the other.

What both of these novels undoubtedly accomplish is a humanistic representation of homosexuality in contemporary Ireland. While these characters have many differences, they are as complex and as “normal” as heterosexual characters, existing marginally in a society that, for years, has been “conservative, family-centred, monogamous, [and] heterosexual.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> Another contemporary Irish narrative that takes this humanistic approach to homosexuality is Neil Jordan’s 1992 film *The Crying Game*, famous for its sharp twist on this representation. Parts of the film can be viewed as a sort of allegory for homosexuality’s journey from a silenced, criminal identity to a boldly asserted one, despite the fact that it was released the year before homosexuality was decriminalized. Progressing from a largely political thematic structure to a full-on erotic thriller, *The Crying Game* questions the various guises of contemporary Irish (and British) society that obfuscate the fundamental humanity of different members of this society, including homosexuals. The central figure of the film, Fergus (played by Stephen Rea), is an IRA operative who forms a bond with the prisoner, Jody (played by Forest Whitaker), whom he is instructed to guard and eventually assassinate. As Kristin Handler notes, the homoeroticism of this bond is first signaled when Jody has to urinate and cannot do so without Fergus’s assistance, as his wrists are bound. Fergus hesitates to touch Jody’s penis, but ultimately does so, after chiding from Jody: “It’s only a piece of meat!”<sup>xxxviii</sup> After a series of events that lead to Jody’s death, Fergus trav-

els to England, forming a relationship with Dil (played by Jaye Davidson), the woman Jody had loved. As they become involved, Fergus perpetuates a sort of obsession with Jody, dreaming about him playing cricket and sustaining this dreamlike vision of Jody during his first orgasm with Dil, when she performs oral sex on him. Fergus’s flirtation with the homoerotic while still remaining outwardly “homosocial” is confronted with “in-your-face” homosexuality at Dil’s first disrobing: the person he thought was a woman has an unmistakable, blatantly exposed penis.

Fergus becomes violently ill at the sight of Dil’s penis, a reaction that Handler characterizes as “gut-level” and “homophobic,” and one with which the viewer initially sympathizes.<sup>xxxix</sup> Yet, Fergus is able to move beyond that homophobia and still care for Dil, albeit non-sexually—while he will not engage in sexual activity with Dil, he will still put a hand to her cheek. Handler writes of Jordan’s goal in representing homosexuality in this revelatory manner:

*By luring us into desiring what is supposed to seem like a heterosexual love story while never ceasing to signal the fundamentally homoerotic component of Fergus’s desire for Dil, the film forces us, with Fergus, to confront the continuity between male bonding (“normal,” valorized by patriarchal culture, especially in the military) and male homosexuality (stigmatized, feared, repudiated).<sup>xl</sup>*

Handler’s comments seem to suggest that a relationship characterized as homosexual from the start would not force viewers to question their stereotypes and valorizations of heterosexuality as effectively. The film asks: How much does Dil’s gender really matter in terms of Fergus’ caring for him? Handler alleges that “[w]hile ultimately, and importantly, Fergus does not explicitly experience homosexual desire, the film wants to show that he is a better man for overcoming violent homophobia.”<sup>xli</sup> And yet, while Fergus’ self-sacrifice in order to save Dil at the end of the film displays the care he has for him, it also eliminates Fergus’ need to confront the possibility of a homosexual re-



lationship with Dil. As Handler points out, “Fergus’ sacrifice puts him safely behind bars, beyond the imminent possibility of sexual consummation.”<sup>xlii</sup> By removing himself from the societal realm in which his relationship with Dil would not be tolerated, Fergus absolves himself from having to personally deny Dil and hurt his feelings. However, this does not imply a mere lack of hesitance on Fergus’ part; it is not likely that if Dil were in jail with him, he would willingly pursue a sexual relationship.

Fergus’ unwillingness to progress from the suggestively homoerotic (tension-riddled yet nonsexual situations, nonsexual dreams of Jody) to the barefaced homosexual (symbolized by Dil’s penis) echoes, to an extent, the nonsexual nature of Declan in *The Blackwater Lightship*. While the obvious difference is that Fergus is a heterosexual man with homoerotic thoughts and Declan is completely homosexual, their narratives exist in a society that would rather disguise homosexuality than deal with it. Eibhear Walshe writes in an essay about Oscar Wilde:

*Because the homosexual is assumed to be a transgendered ‘pretend’ woman . . . gay identity is acutely threatening and unsettling within a post-colonial culture like Ireland. The emergent post-colonial nation perceives the sexually different as destabilizing and enfeebling, and thus the lesbian and gay sensibility is edited out, silenced.*<sup>xliii</sup>

Dil exemplifies this in dressing as a woman, a guise that masks his homosexuality as the more socially acceptable female heterosexuality. Once that guise is removed as Dil disrobes, his true humanity is revealed. The “destabilization” to which Walshe refers is further exemplified by the chaos that ensues in the film as a result of the homoerotic bond between Fergus and Jody. While the other IRA operatives continually place a black hood over Jody’s face as he is tied

to the chair, Fergus continually unmasks him, exposing his humanity. Their “sexually different” kinship prevents the intended torture and assassination of Jody; Fergus’ attempt to kill him in militant IRA fashion is “enfeebled” and Jody escapes, only to be run over by a tank involved in a siege on the IRA base where his captivity took place. Fergus’ bonds with Jody and Dil cannot exist in this place—they are too complicated, too threatening, and simply too *different* to warrant societal and even personal acceptance.

*The Crying Game* differs from the *Tóibín* and *Ridgway* novels in that its context is political, and not familial, trauma. Mothers are absent here, and military organizations symbolize the patriarchal society that silences gay identity. Both the novels and the film, however, portray homosexuality as an identity fraught with associations and stereotypes that detract from its essence as a human identity, specifically the idea of “sexuality as an illness itself.” Each narrative depicts this struggle in a different way. In *The Blackwater Lightship*, Declan’s humanity is represented by his characterization as a needy child, a universal role with which all readers can presumably identify. And yet his physical deterioration, the presumed result of sexual promiscuity, is described with visceral bluntness throughout the novel: “He asked for the basin under the sink to be put near him, and soon, with each spasm, he vomited and retched into it.”<sup>xliv</sup> In *The Long Falling*, Martin has left his child identity behind in place of his adult, homosexual one, confidently assured of his sexuality and yet still sensing a certain grotesqueness in it. As he talks to his friend Sean about the sauna, Martin says, “And the smell and the eyes, everybody rotten in some way, rotting, as if we’re thrown here, dead.”<sup>xlv</sup> We cannot help but think of Declan’s eroding body and its connection to his sexuality. The most overt connection of sexuality and illness is that, in *The Crying Game*, Fergus instantly retches at the shocking sight of

“ . . . their narratives exist in a society that would rather disguise homosexuality than deal with it.”

Dil's penis. A revulsive tension is connected to sexuality in each of these narratives and is never fully resolved in any of them. While Handler describes it as "gut-level," it seems more likely that such a tension is the product of a society that for years has propagated the notion of the "generally disgusting" homosexual.

Contemporary artists that figure homosexuality into Irish narrative bear a manifold burden. Firstly, they must assert gay identity strongly enough, for a group so systematically marginalized in Irish culture demands a voice. Secondly, they must be sure not to include any societal stereotypes of homosexuals within their representations, for those have been propagated long enough. And while doing both of these things, they must keep a human perspective on the narrative. If every gay character in a novel were exactly the same, it would be reductive of the identity as a whole. Are such burdens fair to contemporary artists, especially artists who are gay themselves? Perhaps not from a formalist perspective; art should always be able to stand on its own, outside the confines of cultural and historical context. And yet a gay, Irish reader might protest that such requirements are fair. In his introduction to *Love in a Dark Time*, Tóibín explains his intentions in writing the book (a collection of essays on gay artists):

*I am interested in tracing the tension between the fearless imagination and the fearful self. I want to trace, in writing, the connection between the altar boy's half-understood sense of his own sexual difference, which would soon develop into strategies of concealment ... I want to imagine now the lone figure ... as he opens a book in solitude and secrecy to find there the story of his life, told to him by E.M. Forster or James Baldwin or Thomas Mann or Thom Gunn, or by one of the others who have broken the silence that has surrounded our lives for so long.<sup>xlvi</sup>*

Artists who choose to represent homosexuality in Ireland today, and the rest of the world, cannot avoid the fact that they are breaking the silence to which Tóibín refers. They cannot escape the fact that they are writing for that lone fig-

ure searching for himself within the pages of a novel or the scenes of a film. The narratives we have discussed show that lone figures can be very different characters, and do not gloss over some of the grim realities of the gay man today. Where there is homosexuality, there is often backlash, sickness, chaos, imprisonment. To deny this would be to deny reality. Yet there is also intimacy, acceptance, health, and an abundance of love—aspects of homosexual identity that are often denied, or perhaps not yet realized, by Irish society. In order to depict these aspects, artists do not necessarily have to adhere to the "in-your-face" aesthetic in terms of sexuality. Instead, they must present an "in-your-face" *humanity*—a purpose that Tóibín, Ridgway and Jordan all ultimately achieve.

#### ENDNOTES

- i. Rose (2)
- ii. Rose (11)
- iii. Rose (19)
- iv. Robson (51)
- v. Robson (51)
- vi. *Out for Ourselves* (7)
- vii. Norris (23)
- viii. *Out for Ourselves* (9)
- ix. Walshe 2004 (18)
- x. Walshe 2004 (18)
- xi. Jeffers (118)
- xii. Tóibín 1999 (56)
- xiii. Tóibín 1999 (203)
- xiv. Tóibín 1999 (174)
- xv. Tóibín 1999 (258)
- xvi. Eagleton  
([http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n20/print/eag101\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n20/print/eag101_.html))
- xvii. Tóibín 1999 (170)
- xviii. Tóibín 1999 (172-3)
- xix. Tóibín 1999 (147-8)
- xx. Tóibín 1999 (247-8)
- xxi. Tóibín 1999 (155)
- xxii. Cronin (258)
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- xxv. Cronin (261)
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 xlii. Handler (34)  
 xliii. Walshe 1995 (149)  
 xliv. Tóibín 1999 (253)  
 xlv. Ridgway (122)  
 xlvi. Toibin 2001 (8)

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