

Ireland's New Losers: Contemporary Irish Fiction and the Ethos of Failure

by

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*To Mom, Dad, Danielle, and Luc*

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## Abstract

The figure of the “loser” has become something of a staple in recent Irish fiction, especially fiction dealing with the major sociocultural transformations and crises that have taken place in Ireland in the last quarter century—namely, the Celtic Tiger, the economic crash, the clerical abuse crisis, and the end of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This dissertation examines why. In reading recent novels by Donal Ryan, Peter Cunningham, Paul Murray, Claire Kilroy, Roddy Doyle, John Boyne, Paul McVeigh, and Garbhan Downey, I contend that the loser figure proves particularly valuable in assessing the difficulties of self-evaluation and self-definition within the transitioning social matrix of contemporary Ireland.

Following an introduction in which I define “loserdom” and establish the social, national, and gendered contexts in which the loser figure typically operates, I offer four chapters, each examining a specific sociocultural transformation. In the first two chapters, I analyse the economic boom and bust, respectively, and consider the ways in which Irish novelists use the loser to respond to Irish society’s problematic embrace of neoliberal ideologies as well as to challenge the narratives of blame that circulated after the economic downturn. In the later chapters, I explore Ireland’s clerical abuse crisis and the post-conflict period in Northern Ireland, respectively. In the first case, I argue that novelists deploy loser characters as a way of emphasizing the degradation of Irish society resulting from the abuse scandal and as a means of indicting the nation’s culture of inaction and uncritical deference to the Church. Finally, I contend that novelists dealing with the post-conflict North deploy the loser figure as a means of representing productive dissidence. The losers in these texts, I suggest, embody a potential alternative to identities rooted in those tribal narratives of ethnic pride that perpetually threaten to undermine an already tentative peace in Northern Ireland. Taken together, these chapters explore the various ways in which Irish fiction imagines contemporary Ireland as defined by an ethos of failure.

## List of Abbreviations Used

<i>AI</i>	<i>After Ireland</i>
AISC	All-Ireland Soccer Cup
<i>AL</i>	<i>Across the Line</i>
<i>AS</i>	<i>Anomalous States</i>
BOT	Bank of Torabundo
CAC	Clerical abuse crisis
CBI	Central Bank of Ireland
CBS	Christian Brothers' School
<i>CS</i>	<i>Capital Sins</i>
<i>DIK</i>	<i>The Devil I Know</i>
GFA	Good Friday Agreement
<i>GS</i>	<i>The Good Son</i>
<i>HL</i>	<i>A History of Loneliness</i>
HUBBI	Hibernian Universal Business Bank Ireland
IFSC	International Financial Services Centre
<i>II</i>	<i>Inventing Ireland</i>
IT	Information Technology
<i>IT</i>	<i>Irish Times</i>
<i>IWW</i>	<i>The Irish Writer and the World</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Moral Monopoly</i>
<i>MV</i>	<i>The Mark and the Void</i>
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
Royal	Royal Irish Bank
RTÉ	Raidió Teilifís Éireann
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
<i>S</i>	<i>Smile</i>
<i>TAD</i>	<i>The Thing About December</i>
UDA	Ulster Defence Association
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

#### 1.1. A Time of Crisis

“Irishness is not primarily a question of birth or blood or language: it is the condition of being involved in the Irish situation, and usually of being mauled by it.”  
(O’Donnell 78)

“There is both hot anger and cold fury, but these emotions are almost crowded out by a host of other feelings. There is despair—a sense of futility and fatalism. There is self-contempt—what could you expect from this bloody country? There is fear . . . And above all there is shock and disorientation, the feeling of being caught in an exposed place in a blinding snowstorm of woes, under the command of clueless leaders, without a map.”  
(O’Toole *Enough* 6)

There is little doubt that between the early-1990s and the early-2010s, the island of Ireland had, to use Yeats’s familiar words, “changed utterly” (15). As Michael O’Connell notes in his work from the mid-point of that period, though “change was painfully slow and gradual” in the preceding decades, “Ireland in the 1990s changed qualitatively, remorselessly, hungrily” (2), and this rapid transformation continued, unabated, until well into the current decade. During this period of “general modernisation” (Michael O’Connell 7), the pillars of traditional Irish society—staunch Catholicism, political conflict, and widespread poverty—were overturned and replaced, albeit in some cases only temporarily, by increasing secularization, intercommunal peace in Northern Ireland, and remarkable economic prosperity. 1994 saw the beginning of the period that would come to be known as the Celtic Tiger, a time during which the Republic of Ireland’s GDP grew exponentially, and the country’s unemployment dropped drastically (Donovan and Murphy 19). For effectively the first time in their history, the

Irish had money to spend, and they did not have to leave home to earn it. The same year, the North's various paramilitary groups declared the first significant ceasefire of the Troubles period. Despite failing, this initial ceasefire helped set the stage for the peace process that ultimately led to the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement (GFA) and the formal end, in 1998, of the conflict. A few years earlier, in 1992, scandals that involved the Catholic Church in Ireland and highlighted its underlying culture of hypocrisy and secrecy began to surface: by the first years of the twenty-first century, early revelations about Catholic priests fathering children in secret had already been overshadowed by more shocking allegations of physical, psychological, and sexual child abuse perpetrated by Irish clerics. Though it was not solely responsible, the "clerical abuse crisis" and the damage it caused to what Tom Inglis describes as the Church's "monopoly over morality" exacerbated the secularization taking place alongside Ireland's economic upswing (*MM 2*).<sup>1</sup> Finally, by the end of this period, in the late-2000s, Ireland again fell into a recession (and, later, a depression) when its Celtic Tiger economy collapsed partly as a result of a national banking crisis and a significant downturn in the real estate market. These economic woes largely nullified the progress made during the boom years, and they forced the Irish government to accept a bailout from the European troika and to implement harsh austerity measures.

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<sup>1</sup> Donnelly and Inglis explain that though "it is not possible to make direct causal links between, on the one hand, [the clerical abuse scandal] and, on the other hand, secularization" (10), there was an identifiable pattern of increasing "secularization" and growing distrust of the Church as reports of clerical abuse emerged, something which perhaps suggests that media reporting of the clerical abuse scandal and the consequent broader public awareness of these crimes were "important catalyst[s] in the demise of church practice and loyalty to the institution" (13).

Obviously, each of these transformations had a significant effect on society and culture in Ireland, and although they were not all necessarily harmful—there are few, for instance, who would argue that the de-escalation of sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland or that attempts at protecting young people from degenerate clergy were detrimental to life on either side of the border—the cumulative sociocultural effects of these shifts have led many to imagine this period in Ireland as one of crisis, especially with respect to issues of identity. For example, Berbéri and Pelletier’s recent collection gathers essays that examine the ways in which, together, “the advent of the Celtic Tiger and the ensuing recession,” the “declining influence of [Ireland’s] traditional political parties,” the “challenge to the authority of the Catholic Church,” and the “new authorities endowed with legislative and executive powers [in Northern Ireland]” are indicative of a “crisis of the mainstays of [modern Ireland]” (3). The collection, the editors explain, evaluates the ways Ireland’s crises “challenge and transform various forms of authority whose efficacy and legitimacy thus [become] liable to rejection or renewal” and, as such, explore the ways these crises alter the relationships between “specific types of social, cultural and political authority” and “particular definitions of ‘identity’” (3). Similarly, Declan Kiberd has noted that, although “there have been various crises” since the early days of Irish independence, “the Troubles in the North, and . . . the widespread fear at the end of the century that ‘the most globalized country in Europe’ had lost its identity” represent “very different existential crises” (11). These existential crises are suggestive, he claims, of “the final failure of the national project” established centuries earlier (11). Michael O’Connell, too, describes this era in Ireland as one undergirded by a kind of existential crisis or uncertainty. He claims that “it’s hard to put your finger on it,” but in spite of the

occasionally positive sociocultural developments of this period, “the perception is of a lingering sense of ambiguity and a vague sense of unease . . . It is as though we’re enjoying the pithivier of pigeon with fondant of kumquat but wonder . . . maybe the bacon and cabbage tasted better” (7). Though he does not use the term “crisis,” his description of a “belief, widely felt if less often explicitly stated, that the cost of modernisation[,] economic success [and] hegemonic bland liberal consensus is the loss of identity and character, and a sense of who we are” points to the collective ambivalence regarding these transformations and this decisive turning point in Irish society (7).

The critic arguably most vocal about the crises of Ireland’s recent history is Fintan O’Toole. In *Enough is Enough*, his polemical assessment of the state of the Irish Republic in the years since the economic crash, O’Toole suggests that “contemporary Ireland” is “beset by a blizzard of woes,” and he claims that “no developed society since the Second World War has faced to quite the same extent Ireland’s combination of an internally generated crisis in which financial, environmental, economic and political uncertainties run so deep” (2-3). For O’Toole, contemporary Ireland’s crisis is compounded by the fact that “so many of the old landmarks have disappeared” (3). By the time the economic stability offered by the Celtic Tiger was undone, he explains, the “twin towers of . . . Irish identity—Catholicism and nationalism[—]” had already been razed by the combined forces of secularization and the Church’s own internal scandals, by the abhorrent violence of the Troubles, and by “the effects of membership of the European Union [and] cultural globalisation” (3). Together, these factors produced, in O’Toole’s view, a situation in which it is “not just money that has been lost” since the crash, “it is a sense of what, for better and worse, it meant to be ‘us’” (4). According to

O'Toole, Ireland has existed in a state of “shock and disorientation” since the 1990s, and despite the seemingly productive transformations of the last twenty-five years—or, perhaps, because of them—it continues to trudge through its “blinding snowstorm of woes . . . without a map” (6).

To be clear, the contemporary “crisis” in Ireland that I have been describing consists of more than those substantial sociocultural transformations that have taken place over the last two-and-a-half decades—the Celtic Tiger, the economic crash, the clerical abuse scandal and concurrent secularization, and the end of the Troubles. Indeed, the “crisis,” as I see it, consists of a broader and subtler contemporary Irish experience of being “at once animated by, and ambivalent towards, modernisation” (Brewster 18). It is a kind of existential crisis or crisis of identity that, although triggered by the uncertainty surrounding these individual crises or transformations, exists apart from them. It is in the experience of the broader existential crisis provoked by each sociocultural transformation that I am interested here, and it is in an attempt to explore Irish perceptions of this crisis and its effects that I turn to a central figure of contemporary Irish fiction: the loser.

As will become apparent in subsequent chapters, the figure of the “loser” has become something of a staple in Irish fiction from the post-crash period, especially fiction dealing with Ireland’s sociocultural transformations. My goal in this work is to examine why. Though the loser might seem a surprising object of inquiry in a study broadly interested in both the crisis of identity and its roots in Ireland’s recent sociocultural shifts, this figure proves useful, I will argue, in thinking about these issues and assessing their significance particularly in the context of contemporary Irish fiction. For one, insofar as this crisis concerns the “loss of . . . a sense of who we are” (Michael

O’Connell 7), or involves questions of what it “mean[s] to be ‘us’” (O’Toole *Enough* 4), it is a crisis closely aligned with issues of leadership, or lack thereof, and the weakening of sociocultural forms of authority. Again, Irish cultural critics have often drawn links between Ireland’s sociocultural transformations and matters of authority.<sup>2</sup> As such, given that the loser is, as I will show, by virtue of his social positioning, a figure effectively without authority, or one whose authority remains elusive, he is a fitting symbol of contemporary Ireland’s political, economic, cultural, and existential crises. Likewise, if the loser is, at least in part, the epitome of failure, and if being a “failure,” as Judith Halberstam puts it, “implies [having] a plan and then fail[ing] to execute it” (94), there is arguably no figure better suited to represent the recent “failed execution” of Irish socioeconomic modernization, and therefore no figure more worthy of critical attention in a project exploring cultural perceptions of the crises produced by these failures. Given the loser’s personification of failure, uncertainty, vulnerability, submissiveness, incompetence, and powerlessness, it is, I am proposing, logical that this figure has gained traction in contemporary Irish fiction as a model of the island’s recent struggles. More to

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<sup>2</sup> Berbéri and Pelletier claim, for instance, that the transformations and crises Ireland underwent between 1990 and 2010—exemplified, for them, most clearly by the financial crisis—served “as a catalyst” revealing the “various structures of authority giving way under pressure” (3). Likewise, Zamorano Llena and Gray claim that Ireland’s contemporary crises—again, typified for the pair by the most significant: the economic crash—revealed the need for “a fundamentally different political discourse,” one that “consciously avoided the temptation of falling back into self-delusional and self-congratulatory political and cultural narratives that prevented individuals in authority from recognising Ireland’s dangerous trajectory” (3). Recall, too, O’Toole’s description of Ireland’s crises: the “blinding snowstorm of woes” is not simply a product of sociocultural shifts (6); it is, he claims, equally a result of being at the “command of clueless leaders,” at the mercy of a “ruling elite” whose “frantic shovelling . . . is not the digging of an escape tunnel” but, rather, “is merely the widening of the hole” (*Enough* 6-7).

the point though, it is the loser's qualities that make this figure particularly useful in a critical discussion of how contemporary Irish writers have addressed the island's contemporary struggles and crises.

In reading a number of Irish novels that make heavy use of "loser" characters to explore the sociocultural shifts that have taken place on the island, I contend that contemporary fiction's apparent fascination with losers can be explained by the ease with which this figure illuminates how these shifts have affected Ireland's sense of itself. Looking at recent works by Donal Ryan, Peter Cunningham, Paul Murray, Claire Kilroy, Roddy Doyle, John Boyne, Paul McVeigh, and Garbhan Downey, I claim that the loser proves invaluable in fictional attempts to "come to terms with the political and economic crises of [the contemporary period]," something that, in his searing assessment of Irish literature's "enfeebled . . . response" to recent social changes, Joe Cleary claims "Irish writing finds it difficult to [do]" (138-9).<sup>3</sup> I argue that each of these sociocultural shifts provoked both a sort of existential crisis in Ireland, as mentioned above, and also a crisis of representation. In addition to broader existential anxieties about "what it mean[s] to be 'us'" (O'Toole *Enough* 4), these transformations raised questions about how precisely to represent contemporary Ireland and contemporary Irishness in view of the sociocultural failures and crises to which these shifts gave rise. In this way, this work is Janus-faced. It considers, on the one hand, what fiction's fixation with loser figures tells us about the Irish experience of the island's recent transformations. At the same time, it asks what the

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<sup>3</sup> Cleary's critique of Irish writers' "tendency . . . to tiptoe quietly around" the island's sociocultural transformations and their difficulty in producing work that engages "directly with the new Northern and Southern Irish situation" and offers "a penetrating work of social commentary" centres mainly on the issue of the economic collapse and its ties to neoliberalism, an issue I address more fully in Chapter Three (140).

tendency in recent fiction to interpret the effects of these transformations using the figure of the loser tells us about how the Irish view themselves and contemporary forms of Irishness. Overall, in my work here on Irish novelists' dependence on loser figures in their analyses of recent sociocultural transformations and their effects, I attempt to show how contemporary Irish fiction confronts and imagines what Zamorano Llena and Gray describe as the overwhelmingly "self-delusional [or] self-congratulatory political and cultural narratives" of progress, liberalization, and modernization that, at least outwardly, defined Ireland at the turn of the century (3). I show, in short, how these writers envision and portray the difficulties of self-evaluation and self-definition within the transitioning social matrix of the island's contemporary period.

\* \* \*

Given the complex and generally fraught nature of place names in the Irish context, I want to very briefly clarify here a few points related to my terminology in this chapter and those that follow. First of all, though I use "Ireland" and "the Republic of Ireland" (and its variants) roughly interchangeably in Chapters Two through Four, I use the term "Ireland" and "Irish" here in a much more general way. I use the terms, that is, primarily in reference to the island of Ireland—"Irish fiction," for instance, refers to fiction by writers from the island of Ireland broadly.<sup>4</sup> I reserve "Republic of Ireland,"

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<sup>4</sup> Though I recognize the potentially questionable or problematic nature of my conflation, here, of "Ireland"/"Irish" with the whole of the island, especially given that the sociocultural transformations that I am investigating are frequently analyzed within a specific sociocultural or sociopolitical context, I justify my use of these all-island designations by pointing to the degree to which all of these transformations were significant in one way or another for the entirety of the island. Though largely contained in the streets of Belfast and Derry, for instance, the violence of the Troubles often spilled over into the Republic. Likewise, though the most damning reports regarding abuse in the Catholic Church involved priests and institutions located in the Republic, there were also

“Northern Ireland,” and occasionally “the North” in this chapter to refer to the states established following the partition of Ireland. I use the latter two terms as neutral designations of the territory which, though home to a community that imagines itself as culturally distinct, is largely coterminous with the boundaries of the state. In instances in which I mean to refer to groups or material related to the sociocultural specificity of the region that essentially corresponds with Northern Ireland but do so without isolating these things from the broader Irish context with which they are fundamentally intertwined, I use the uncapitalized “northern Irish.” In this way, I follow critics including Fiona McCann who highlight the importance of acknowledging that certain terms imply an “acceptance of the constitutionalised partition,” something that a substantial portion of the population of Northern Ireland continues to resist (12).<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2. What is a Loser?: Situating Loserdom

As is probably obvious, the terms “loser” and “loserdom” are closely related; the “loser,” of course, experiences “loserdom.”<sup>6</sup> What this state of “loserdom” is, and what being a “loser” consists of, however, is perhaps not immediately evinced by the terms themselves. Given the centrality of these concepts to my discussion of contemporary Irish

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noteworthy investigations into Protestant institutions (e.g. the Manor House in Lisburn) and individuals (e.g. Brendan Smyth) who abused children and were convicted in Northern Ireland (“Profile”).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the issue of place names in Ireland, see Hawes-Bilger’s *War Zone Language*, Morris’s “‘H’ is for History: Uses of the Past in Place Name Debates in New Zealand and Northern Ireland,” Murray’s “From Shibboleths to Shared Terminology?: The Divisive Place Names of Northern Ireland,” and Nash’s “Irish Place Names: Post-colonial Locations.”

<sup>6</sup> Of this latter term, I want to emphasize that, unless otherwise noted, I do not use the suffix “-dom” in “loserdom” to mean “realm of” (as in “kingdom”). Rather, “-dom” in “loserdom” refers to “the state or quality of being a loser” (as in “boredom”).

fiction, and given that there is, to my knowledge, no single comprehensive or precise definition of either term dictating how or when they actually get deployed (both in Ireland and elsewhere), it is worth establishing how I define these words as well as laying out some of the conceptual parameters guiding their application in later chapters.

What is beyond question when it comes to the ideas of losers and loserdom is that they inherently consist of a “negative” identity and quality, respectively. In other words, being a loser or being in a state of loserdom means, in my figuration, occupying an unfavourable social position. It is, as such, a “relational” concept, an identity largely defined in relation (i.e. opposition) to others.<sup>7</sup> Whether a character’s loserdom is, as I will later show, manifest as or through failure, powerlessness, inadequacy, vulnerability, incompetence, shame, regret—all, arguably, negative characteristics—it is always a powerlessness, inadequacy, and so on relative to the ostensible power, capability, and strength of others. In other words, the losers I examine in subsequent chapters typically exist in opposition to characters who occupy a more “normalized” or “accepted” form of being in the world or relating to others. Their difference, in turn, serves to scrutinize the ways in which Irish society navigates the seismic sociocultural changes of the last three decades and articulate the problems therein. Though I fully resist the idea that loser figures are necessarily unhappy—as I show in Chapter Five, Mickey Donnelly of McVeigh’s *The Good Son* is quite optimistic and content despite his loserdom—loserdom, in this way, has much in common with, and in fact might even be a form of,

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<sup>7</sup> For the sake of brevity and to avoid redundancy, I will primarily define the concept of the “loser” as an identity in this section. The qualities I describe and assign to this identity, however, remain applicable to the concept of “loserdom.” To be in a state of loserdom is simply to demonstrate or experience these qualities.

Sara Ahmed's conception of (un)happiness. Like happiness which, as Ahmed explains, "is a form of being directed or oriented, of following 'the right way'," and like happiness which is therefore "a quality of a person . . . a kind of trait" as much as it is a "reward," loserdom arises as a (negative) "quality" out of one's "orientation" or adherence to "wrong" or, at the very least, different things (*Promise* 9). In that losers embody a deviation from the "norm," they share with Ahmed's "affect alien" a tendency to experience both "the same [or a similar] affect [as others] but in relation to different objects, which are judged by others as 'the wrong objects'," and an undeniable difference from those "others" (*Promise* 171). Notably, both these "others" and the losers themselves perceive this difference as "negative" (*Promise* 171). Although Sandage roots it less in issues of "abnormal" deviation and ties it more explicitly to the issue mentioned above regarding the failed execution of a plan, especially an economic one, he too alludes to the negative "relationality" of loserdom. In *Born Losers*—a text which is, to my knowledge, the most sustained and detailed critical examination of the idea of the "loser"—Sandage notes that "to a nation [i.e. the United States] on the verge of anointing individualism as its creed, the loser was simultaneously intolerable and indispensable," confirmation that "the republican fathers had replaced destiny with merit" (27). In his "intolerability," the loser is indispensable, according to Sandage: the loser embodies failure and so ensures socioeconomic progress by normalizing, if not insisting on, economic ambition, and therefore effectively prompting people to "orient" themselves, as Ahmed might put it, away from this figure and his qualities. Perhaps more to the point, Sandage explains that "to know a 'great loser' . . . is to glimpse our own worst future," to see what we are not and what we want to avoid becoming (18). The loser not only fits

into what Sandage calls ‘the language of exclusion,’ but is indeed “the epithet of choice” within this language (275). Relative to other labels of failure, “nerd, dork, dweeb, geek, wimp, freak, jerk, slacker, weirdo, and even fag,” that of “loser” most effectively captures the state of being “a misfit or outcast” and the implicit threat such social positioning poses (275). Loserdom is an unfavourable state, but it is one whose “unfavourable-ness” emerges from its position within a specific network of normative identities and desires.

Even when it comes to a more popular usage and understanding of “the loser” and “loserdom,” the concepts retain their inherently negative attributes. In the few articles that address the cultural status of the figure of the loser, this figure is almost uniformly defined as having characteristics that are somehow unbecoming or otherwise undesirable. In much—though not all—of this scholarship, the figure of the loser gets used, in particular, to express a failure to conform to heteronormative codes of masculinity, an issue I discuss in more detail below. Nevertheless, whether explicitly gendered or not, the concept of the loser in this “popular,” if informal, application consistently signifies a social aberration, a deviation from “standard” identities but always in an adverse way. For example, in an important article on the “radical inadequacy of the male protagonist[s]” of Canadian film—something he sees as “an expression of national sense of self” (241)—Robert Fothergill describes the loser as an “unappealing person, trapped in his own limitations” (235-6). He characterizes the figure as one who is “blocked or stunted” and one whose humiliations do not constitute a “painful-step-towards-maturity” but rather make up the “pattern of his fate” (236).<sup>8</sup> Likewise, in a more recent article on

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<sup>8</sup> For more on this critically significant discussion of Canada’s cinematic “losers,” see Ramsay’s “Canadian Narrative Cinema from the Margins: ‘The Nation’ and Masculinity

the proliferation of loser figures in beer advertisements, Messner and Montez de Oca describe these figures as “chumps,” individuals “always on the cusp of being publicly humiliated, either by their own stupidity, by other men, or worse, by a beautiful woman” (1887). More significantly, they claim that through their obvious failings, relational humiliations, and resulting social exclusions, these losers help to “clarify the bounds of [white] masculine normality” and demonstrate the way in which those who “transgress these boundaries . . . are suspect” (1894).<sup>9</sup> In an updated response to Messner and Montez de Oca’s article, Green and Van Oort also claim that the loser is not only “a delusional dope—pitiful, stupid, and downright disgusting,” but also a “frighteningly pathetic victim of collective delusions” (696). Like their critical predecessors, they acknowledge that the loser, in his “pathetic-ness,” functions in ads primarily to foreground “general expectations of normative masculinity concerning physical prowess and economic security” (696). In Corbett’s discussion of the “projectile force and projective work” of the typically homophobic term “faggot”—a term he sees as closely linked to ideas of

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in *Goin’ Down the Road*,” and Parpart’s “Cowards, Bullies, and Cadavers: Feminist Re-Mappings of the Passive Male Body in English-Canadian and Québécois Cinema.”

<sup>9</sup> Although all of the Irish losers I examine in subsequent chapters are white, it is worth noting that much of the scholarship on loserdom also points to the fact that cultural depictions of loserdom broadly present a white male loser. Indeed, critics such as Messner and Montez de Oca read loserdom as partly born out of the challenge “to white male supremacy by people of color and by immigrants” (1882). In one of the very few discussions of “racialized” loserdom, the pair suggests that “if white-guy losers risk punishment or humiliation . . . the level of punishment faced by black [losers] can be even more severe” (1894). Though the critics note that there are few examples of such black losers in advertising—and even fewer examples of mixed-race, Latino, or Asian losers—they claim that race exacerbates losers’ “negative” attributes and humiliations (1894). Whereas “the screwups that white-guy losers make [can be] forgivable,” they assert, “a black [loser’s] transgressions” exist in the “cultural and institutional contexts of suspicion and punishment for African American boys and men” and thus deserve harsher punishment (1895).

loserdom—he similarly identifies both the derogatory nature of the term “loser” and its links to social variance from forms of heteronormative masculinity (3). Describing how the Columbine shooters were viewed by their classmates as “alienated losers,” Corbett suggests that the boys’ “alienation was perceived . . . as a consequence of their manifest rejection of popular codes/ideals and the manner in which they repeatedly failed to adopt cultural standards of distinction and value” (5). Although he does not expand on the specific ways in which the shooters exhibited their loserdom, Corbett again uses the notion of loserdom to not only characterize a state of “difference” from more normative cultural modes of being, but also to define failures to either adopt these modes or to accept their ostensible merit. Making a similar point about losers’ deviation from cultural standards—albeit in the context of female losers and in relation to a much less serious situation than the Columbine shooting—Sharp and Ganong suggest that unmarried women’s sense of “loserdom” arises from their perceived inadequacies in living up to social expectations and their resulting rejection on the basis of this inadequacy. In one of the only articles dealing with female losers, Sharp and Ganong analyze one woman’s description of her experiences participating in the bouquet-toss at weddings. They probe the woman’s account of feeling as though “I’m a loser, I’m not married, let’s all just look at me” (974), and emphasize the “heightened visibility” of losers as well as the “vulnerability” that comes with the impression that there is something “wrong with them” (974). For each of these critics, then, loserdom exemplifies an “unhappy,” inherently vulnerable state; it is the product of an inadequacy with respect to some social expectation and the shame or embarrassment that accompanies this inadequacy. And though the examples of losers these critics provide are rooted in an American context, we

will see, in subsequent chapters, how contemporary Irish fiction's losers operate in much the same way. More to the point, we will see how writers have taken up loser figures—again, as embodiments of social marginality or deviance—to mock, problematize, or challenge normative social codes established or entrenched by different sociocultural forces and situations in Ireland.

Though it is often only implied in these critics' various descriptions of loser figures, I want to briefly emphasize the degree to which loserdom is not a temporary state of being that results from a single failure or momentary deviation from the norm. Rather, as Elaine Blair notes, a loser's "loserdom is total: it extends to his stunted career, his squalid living quarters," and most importantly, "his deep unease in the world" (Blair). The loser is an embodiment of a *perpetual* inability to fully overcome some kind of failure or inadequacy. The loser, to use Sandage's formulation, is "the most damning incarnation of the connection between achievement and personal identity" (4-5), and so essentially represents the confluence of a person's undesirable behaviour and his abiding selfhood. In the fiction that I consider later, loserdom is a stable state insofar as it lingers internally as an anxiety if not an innate shortcoming waiting to be exposed, even when characters such as Albert Barr from *Capital Sins* manage to temporarily conceal its specific manifestations. Loserdom is, thus, an embodied state, not simply the negative affect that follows from aberrant behaviours, orientations, or desires. Although a loser might mask his failures or inadequacies, his loserdom is constant as it is encoded into his way of being in the world and of relating to others. Characters do not become losers simply by failing in one respect or another, but rather, as Green and Van Oort succinctly put it, by failing to properly "situate themselves" in the world: losers are not just failures,

they are “pathetically lost in everyday life” and remain so despite any attempt to find their way (715).

Despite their apparent consensus regarding the “negativity” and obvious relationality of the loser’s identity, few of the aforementioned critics offer much by way of a description of how loserdom is actually manifest. These critics are much more interested in sociocultural understandings and perceptions of “loserdom” than they are in specific examples of how losers actually exhibit their loserdom. And though some of these critics allude to the qualities that render individuals losers, given the importance of the various manifestations of loserdom to my readings of contemporary Irish novels, I want to quickly elaborate on some of the specific “symptoms” of loserdom and explicitly raise some of the loser’s defining characteristics.

First of all, as some of the critics I mentioned above imply, the loser is closely aligned with issues of failure, and it is in terms of the loser’s failures that he most frequently “loses.” As such, my use of the term generally assumes a clear connection, if not a causal relationship, between a loser character’s actions, affects, and “losses” (both figurative and literal) and his various failures. For instance, a loser character can fail to succeed in the typical Western socioeconomic sense—or, of course, fail to either maintain or desire socioeconomic success—therefore “losing” money or prestige, and representing what Sandage calls, a “fallen . . . angel in a land of rising liberal entrepreneurs” (52). This kind of loser who fails to effectively fit into the neoliberal model of *homo oeconomicus*—which, as Wendy Brown explains, is the “intensely governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all

of its endeavours and venues” (10)—is arguably the kind of loser most parents fear their children will become. Stereotypical examples of this loser are the lazy “freeloader” or the deadbeat employee—the trio from Comedy Central’s *Workaholics* are good examples of this kind of loser. In Chapters Two and Three, we will see how Irish writers deploy variations of this kind of loserdom to critique the problematic effects of the neoliberal marketization of Irish subjectivity during and after the boom and, more broadly, to comment on and challenge the value of Ireland’s years of prosperity. Losers’ failures, however, extend beyond the economic sphere. In fact, a typical indicator of a loser’s loserdom is the figure’s failure in navigating social situations and personal interactions, the figure’s tendency, that is, to “lose face.” It is mainly this loser that critics such as Messner and Montez de Oca and Elaine Blair have in mind. This is the loser whose failures and “screwups” sink his romantic prospects (Messner and Montez de Oca 1895), the loser who is—as George Costanza, perhaps the epitome of this type of loser, delicately describes one of Jerry Seinfeld’s girlfriend—“socially awkward” and seemingly incapable of properly negotiating the conventional “rules” of social interaction (“The Van Buren Boys” 0:49-0:50).<sup>10</sup> This, in short, is the loser whose failures are most

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<sup>10</sup> “The Van Buren Boys” episode of *Seinfeld* partly centres around Jerry’s inability to understand why everyone around him perceives the woman he is dating, Ellen, as a loser. And, although it neither fully articulates a definition of “loserdom” nor offers any examples of the woman’s loserdom, the episode frames the concept as one related to an inherent personal flaw that cannot be overcome. Given the centrality of George Costanza’s loserdom to the series overall, the episode is notable as it provides the series’ only explicit examination of the idea of the loser but does so by fixating on the loserdom of a minor character. The episode’s meditation on the question of loserdom is, in other words, explicitly self-reflexive. By considering Ellen’s loser qualities, the main characters articulate much of what drives the series’ humour. In a particularly notable scene, George ironically notes that Jerry’s girlfriend is “the loser of the group. Every group has someone that they all make fun of—like us with Elaine” (5:17-5:24).

directly tied to his relationships and whose loserdom is inherently linked with a “social” incompetence or ineptness. It is this kind of loser that we will mainly see in Chapter Two, Four, and Five, and who, I will argue, gets used in Irish fiction to poke holes in typical Irish modes of relating to and propping up hegemonic institutions (e.g. the Church), political ideologies (e.g. nationalism), and cultural values (e.g. land ownership).

In addition to being closely intertwined with different forms of failure and “loss,” losers, in my formulation, are also defined by their powerlessness, vulnerability, shame, and resignation. It is worth noting, however, that although many of these characteristics and affects derive from and intersect with the kinds of failures mentioned above, they do still represent distinctive features or symptoms of loserdom. Powerlessness, for instance, is a standard feature of loserdom in that by failing in economic or social networks, losers effectively “lose” (or have confiscated) their power or authority over and within these networks.<sup>11</sup> In his comments on debt, for example, Sandage equates financial failure or economic loserdom with powerlessness: debt is, for him, a kind of slavery in that it symbolizes a “dependency,” a “surrender of autonomy,” and, therefore, a relationship based on submission in which one has “power over [an other]” (193). I will touch on this kind of loss of power and lack of authority particularly in Chapter Three in my discussion of Kilroy’s *The Devil I Know* and in Chapter Four in my analysis of Boyne’s *A History of Loneliness*.

Closely related to the issues of powerlessness and submission are those of vulnerability and shame. First of all, in failing to situate themselves according to

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<sup>11</sup> For the sake of clarity, I want to note that when it comes to the issue of powerlessness, I do not mean to suggest that all powerless people are losers, but rather that loser figures often display a lack of social power.

prescribed socioeconomic norms and thereby largely surrendering their authority in these socioeconomic contexts, losers inevitably become vulnerable, open to criticism, humiliation, embarrassment, and ridicule. Messner and Montez de Oca point to the loser's vulnerability by claiming that this figure, in his inability to exert power over female subjects or "powerful" men, is necessarily open to rejection and public humiliation (1894). Though I certainly allude to them in several chapters, the ways in which vulnerability, embarrassment, and humiliation emerge out of the loser's various failures play a particularly important role in my discussion of loserdom in Northern Ireland in Chapter Five. Unsurprisingly, in situations in which humiliation or vulnerability becomes possible, if not probable, issues of shame and regret come into play. One must think only of the aforementioned unmarried female "loser's" feelings of vulnerability during the bouquet toss or the sense of shame she experiences with respect to her marital status to see the links between failure, disappointment, ineffectualness, and ignominy. The loser's shame is, as I will show in Chapter Four, indicative of the experience of failure as failure, and is, as such, indicative of the loser's capacity for resisting the redemptive narratives that Mundy identifies in such things as "pro-failure" works of "self-help and leadership literature," works that emphasize "forgiveness and rebirth[,] prevailing over obstacles both external and internal," and "bounc[ing] back" (Mundy). The last major hallmark or expression of loserdom worth emphasizing is that of resignation or passivity. It is these qualities, I argue, that effectively differentiate losers from typical tragic heroes. Though losers are, like tragic heroes, occasionally victims of circumstance or of some misfortune rooted in an error of judgement (or tragic flaw), they are almost always resigned to their fate. Losers, in other words, do nothing to actively

remedy their downfalls or redeem themselves, and so their loserdom effectively fails to arouse pity from the reader in the same way that a tragic hero's "victimized" position might. Certainly, this resignation is tied into the "stability" of the loser identity that I mentioned earlier, but it is, more generally and more importantly, the quality that dictates how and why losers continue to lose, how and why failures become losers.

Obviously, the various interrelated sources and expressions of loserdom that I have outlined all highlight the clearly unfortunate or negative status of the loser figure. However, as will become clear in later chapters, the loser's "negativity" does not always entail his inability to be "productive" or "generative" in some way. As Ahmed, again, recognizes, certain affects of loserdom can help produce ostensibly positive changes for both individuals and society. Shame and embarrassment, for instance, can enable "nation building" insofar as they expose "the failure of the nation to live up to its ideals" and therefore establish "the ground[s] for a narrative of national recovery" (*Cultural* 109). Although I would emphasize that the loser's shame does not always produce the kind of generative results Ahmed claims are possible, the loser's attributes are not uniformly destructive. This position is convincingly taken up in Judith Halberstam's important work on failure, *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). As Halberstam demonstrates, losers and everything they represent not only help "poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (3), but, crucial to my later discussion of losers in contemporary Irish fiction, also "offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2-3), especially a world such as Ireland, marked (as it is) by a number of social crises. Embodying loserdom, Halberstam explains, is potentially remedial in that it is "a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline," and is, as such,

“a form of critique” (88). Losers, in their exemplification, embodiment, or “practice” of failure, inadequacy, and resignation, help reveal the “alternatives [that] are embedded already in the dominant,” and they are particularly well-suited to “exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities” (88). Though I do not want to overstate the importance of the “productivity” of the fictional loserdom I consider in later chapters, I raise the issue here as a means of nuancing the overwhelmingly “negative” characterization of loserdom that I have so far given. More importantly, I raise this question of the possible “productiveness” of loserdom because of what it stands to teach us about how northern Irish novelists, in particular, view the failures of post-conflict northern society. That loserdom enables a kind of “alternative” mode of being is crucial, as I will later argue, to northern writers’ vision of contemporary northern identities that have broken away from rigid (sectarian) ideologies that produced the conflict.

There remains only one key attribute relating to the figure of the loser that I have not yet addressed, though I have certainly hinted at it. This is, of course, the issue of gender and, more precisely, the ostensibly typical masculinity of the loser figure. Although there is arguably no innate gender dimension to the concepts of failure, inadequacy, vulnerability, shame, or loss as I have attempted to articulate them, and although a very small number of critics—such as Sharp and Ganong—have articulated models of female loserdom, the figure of the loser is almost always imagined or treated as a man.<sup>12</sup> Green and Van Oort, for example, imagine the loser as the embodiment of “[failed] attempts to properly perform masculinity” (696), an idea they share with Quail

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<sup>12</sup> For this reason, and because the fictional losers I later focus on are, indeed, male characters, I have used masculine pronouns to refer to the loser figure.

and Shifman.<sup>13</sup> The pair argues that insofar as the television advertisements they analyze “abandon the happy loser,” they do so as a means of “calling out failing heteronormative masculinity as a social problem” (715). Likewise, in their exploration of earlier alcohol advertisements, Messner and Montez de Oca suggest that the cultural resonance of loser figures in the early twenty-first century can be traced back to the “basic insecurities” of the contemporary man, insecurities “grounded in . . . deindustrialization, the declining real value of wages and the male breadwinner role, [and] significant cultural shifts brought about by more than three decades of struggle by feminists and sexual minorities” (1882). The idea of the loser, they succinctly claim, is not only fundamentally tied into the “cluster of social changes [that] has destabilized hegemonic masculinity” (1882), but, as a cultural phenomenon, it also effectively epitomizes a response to the “discredited and caricatured” excesses of “hyper masculinity” and “the increasing empowerment of women” (1905). Even in his focus on economic or market-driven loserdom, Sandage characterizes losers as existing largely on a spectrum of masculine identities. He claims

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<sup>13</sup> Quail suggests specifically that the popularity of “loser celebrities,” figures both produced and exploited by American reality television, is not only rooted in the appeal of the “spectacle of losing” but often has “racialized and sexualized” dimensions (472-3). William Hung—whose unsuccessful *American Idol* audition led to his subsequent infamy—is, for Quail, a case in point (473). With regard to both Hung’s infamous performance of Ricky Martin’s “She Bangs” and his subsequent “loser-success,” Quail claims that the “inability to personify the Latin lover role marks [Hung’s] failed masculinity” and fundamentally ties his loserdom to this failure to “conform to [the] standard of sexualized masculinity” required to “win a pop contest” and, arguably, to succeed in general (473-4). In an article on internet “meme” culture, Shifman, too, identifies a link between loserdom and failed gender performances. She claims that the tremendous popularity of figures such as “Numa Numa Guy” and “Star Wars Kid”—figures whose popularity is largely based on their humiliating, if humorous, on-camera performances—can be attributed to the fact that they “fail to meet current masculine expectations either in appearance or behaviour” and, like contemporary sitcoms that respond to the “crisis of masculinity,” present “far-from-perfect men who fail to fulfill basic functions in their personal and professional lives” (194-5).

that in relation to the “ideal of self-made manhood” and the “male arena” of success, the loser and the “winner”—in this case, the “self-made man”—delineate “the poles of an ideology of manhood based on an achieved identity [and] the conviction that all men earned their fates and thus deserved whatever credit or disgrace they accrued” (236-7). Put simply, Sandage’s point is that if success or socioeconomic power are “gendered ideal[s]” (236), so too are their opposites: failure and loserdom. In Chapter Two and Three in particular, we will see how Irish novelists have used loserdom to explore similar anxieties about the destabilization of typical masculine roles (e.g. breadwinner, entrepreneur) within the context of the Celtic Tiger and the economic crash. We will see, more specifically, how these writers have used losers to critique both the nefarious demands of neoliberalism on Irish men and the effects of the marketization of Irish identity and particularly masculinity on the whole of Irish society.

Despite this emphasis on the typical masculinity of the loser, however, there is something of a tension underlying the concept of the loser as inherently masculine. Namely, though the loser is ostensibly always a man, his failures and/as violations of hegemonic masculinity necessarily align him with women and femininity. That is, though losers are, for all intents and purposes, generally men, their failures, weaknesses, vulnerabilities, submissiveness, and shame, equate them with patriarchal ideals of femininity. Losers are, by their very nature, both always and never fully men, and so though they get used by Irish novelists to explore broader social issues (e.g. neoliberalism, sectarianism), they also epitomize one aspect of the so-called “crisis of masculinity” so frequently cited in examinations of contemporary culture and, notably, in Irish literary/cultural criticism.

Although it represents only one aspect of my discussion of contemporary Irish novels, and although, as I will suggest later, the character of the loser fits within a broader historical conception of Irishness than might first be apparent, this idea that the loser personifies the crisis of masculinity—by way of his failures, passivity, and weaknesses—certainly plays into recent critical debates about masculinity in Irish culture. Despite the fact that few, if any, Irish critics have closely examined the loser figure, the intersections between the state of loserdom, the crisis of masculinity, and changing sociocultural conditions, demonstrates both the relevance of this figure to recent debates around what Magennis and Mullen describe as “the contingent nature of masculine identity and identifications” amidst the island’s significant sociocultural shifts (3), and the new avenues of critical analysis the loser’s embodiment of failed (and, arguably, alternative) masculinity makes possible. Again, I will shortly offer ways in which the figure of the loser conforms to or reflects other, more general aspects of Irish identity—in particular, aspects involving questions of (post)colonial or national identity—and how he fits within the longstanding critical debates surrounding issues of Irishness. Before doing so, however, I want to briefly consider the ways in which contemporary scholarship on Irish masculinity might supplement the largely American work I have been using to define “losers” by positing that identities rooted in failure and powerlessness (i.e. loserdom) are not only gendered but indeed bound up with forms of masculinity “in crisis.” More importantly, I want to raise this material as a way of beginning to situate the loser figure in a more specific Irish critical context and show how he might benefit from or fit into scholarly readings of both Irish culture and Irish masculinity. I want to emphasize again, however, that I raise the issue of masculinity in relation to loserdom mainly because of

the ways in which, in popular conceptualizations, the loser is an inherently masculine figure and not because my discussion of contemporary Irish fiction always hinges on this intersection. This gender issue will come into play in my analyses of recent novels—especially in Chapters Two, Three, and Five—but to suggest that it is totalizing in explaining what these texts do with loserdom and/as Irishness is to overstate its importance.

Whether in the context of the economic boom/bust, the clerical abuse scandal, or the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, several critics have recently examined the connections between Ireland’s sociocultural crises and failures—or their representations in culture—and those of hegemonic forms of Irish masculinity.<sup>14</sup> In many cases, these discussions call to mind the characterization of losers as either sociocultural examples of or responses to the transformation or deterioration of typical forms or expectations of masculinity by critics such as Sandage, Messner, Montez de Oca, Green, and Van Oort. Moreover, these discussions hint at loserdom’s potential value as a way of analyzing Ireland’s recent sociocultural circumstances. For example, in suggesting that the need to “re-evaluate the representation [and definition] of masculinity in the Irish context” is rooted in both the country’s myriad sociopolitical and economic crises and the fact that, as they claim, “Ireland is still a country with men at the helm”—men whose leadership or

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Debbie Ging’s *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema* (2013), Fintan Walsh’s *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (2010), Caroline Magennis and Raymond Mullen’s *Irish Masculinities: Reflections and Literature and Culture* (2011), Brian Singleton’s *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* (2015), Conn Holohan and Tony Tracy’s *Masculinity and Irish Popular Culture: Tiger’s Tales* (2014), Caroline Magennis’s *Sons of Ulster: Masculinities in the Contemporary Irish Novel* (2010), Paddy Lyons and Alison O’Malley-Younger’s *No Country for Old Men: Fresh Perspectives on Irish Literature* (2009).

lack thereof has “shaped recent history”—Magennis and Mullen implicitly raise the prospect that powerlessness and failure (both hallmarks of loserdom) are actually hallmarks of masculinity in contemporary Ireland (1-2).<sup>15</sup> If, as Magennis and Mullen imply, feckless men and the failures of normative or patriarchal forms of masculinity are responsible for these sociocultural crises and are, therefore, the force behind Irish culture’s attempts to re-evaluate contemporary notions of masculinity, then, the loser offers an ideal vehicle through which to perform such an evaluation. As the embodiment of all the “negative” qualities I describe above, loserdom represents a useful state for thinking, as Magennis and Mullen do, about literary attempts to find “spaces of articulation of difference and subversion within hegemonic and non-hegemonic constructions of Irish masculinities” (5). Not only do losers frequently embody this “difference” or “subversion,” they exemplify the state against which hegemonic masculinities can be assessed (5). Moreover, the loser figure might also prove valuable to readings, such as Cormac O’Brien’s, of “abject, troubled masculinity” in Irish theatre (130), or what Karen Fricker calls Irish drama’s “ongoing chronicle of male weakness,

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<sup>15</sup> The idea that men remain “at the helm” of the Irish state risks omitting the sociocultural contributions of former presidents Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese. As many critics and historians have rightly noted, the elections of both Robinson and McAleese proved “seismic cultural shift[s]” in Ireland (Parker 6), not least for the fact that the two helped put to rest “the ghosts of an Ireland of the past, facilitat[ed] the emergence of a modern, diverse society and renew[ed] links between Northern Ireland and the Republic” (Galligan 107). However, for all that these women represented for Irish society in the 1990s and 2000s, and without understating the value of their success in “changing the tone of Irish public life,” it remains the case that, as presidents, their roles were largely ceremonial, and their work was largely performed, as Kilfeather puts it, “with symbols and gestures” (112). In this way, Robinson and McAleese are fundamentally different than, say, Bertie Ahern, Brian Lenihan, Martin McGuinness, or Ian Paisley, and it is with this difference in mind that I—building on Magennis and Mullen’s claim—characterize Ireland as a country “with men at the helm” (2).

frailty, failure” (85). Namely, in his inherent personification of the negative affects that prop-up (and threaten) normative contemporary masculine subjectivity, the loser proves another example of what Cormac O’Brien describes as the clear “ideological links” between “the emergence . . . of isolated, crisis-ridden males” and “the rise of Celtic Tiger neoliberalism in Ireland” with its “emphasis on individual competitiveness, and commercialized hyper-masculinity” (132). The loser, that is, offers new and helpful ways of imagining the relationship between recent revelations of the “corrupt and immoral,” if not ineffective and inept, qualities of the Irish “male-run institutions of church, state and big business” and the increasing cultural emphasis on “introspective, insecure and immobile” men, men who Fricker claims “are consumed by self-examination and self-doubt” (84). The loser, in short, can help reveal the apparent male-centered perception of Ireland’s sociocultural crises, while also shedding light on the effects of these crises on artistic or cultural representations of Irish masculine identities, as well as on the “extensive and ongoing period of soul searching” taking place, according to Holohan and Tracy, in the “post-Catholic, postmodern, neoliberal island nation” broadly speaking (2).

In addition to lying at the margins of this contemporary critical interest in what Ging calls Irish culture’s proclivity for “eschew[ing] heroic, patriotic and successful male figures in favour of male subjects who are socially marginalized, criminal and underclass, depressed, suicidal, abused, forced into exile . . . violent and variously conflicted or in crisis” (16), the idea of the loser figure as an emblem of sociocultural transformations and crises also fits in to the significant scholarly conversation dealing with issues of male suicide on both sides of the Irish border. For one, the very fact that Irish men are five times more likely to kill themselves than Irish women, and that, as several scholars have

noted, this disparity stems largely from a “depreciation of . . . certain forms of masculinity in [contemporary] Irish society” (Garcia xii), points to the sociocultural pertinence of the masculine anxieties and inadequacies to which the loser figure gives shape. However, the loser’s relevance to this critical interest in masculinity and suicide in Ireland has to do with more than the “depreciation” of masculinity within contemporary Ireland: indeed, critics such as Magennis suggest that the fact that Irish men are disproportionately prone to suicide has as much to do with the loss of any clear sense of belonging or purpose as it does with a “devaluing” or “feminizing” of their social status. Male suicides, in other words, are the products of a perceived or experienced sense of negative “relationality” within Ireland’s changing social conditions. This deviation from or inconsistency with social norms is, as I have mentioned, a crucial feature of loserdom.<sup>16</sup> For example, with regard to Northern Ireland specifically, Magennis claims that “in 1999 there were six times more male than female deaths from suicide” partly because, in spite of “the disparity of men’s experiences in a changing Northern Ireland,”

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, just as it emphasizes the idea that men’s perceived deviations from or violations of social norms are a significant cause for male suicides in Ireland, the critical discourse surrounding the issue of male suicides in Ireland also highlights the relevance of the issue of failure—another obvious loser characteristic. In fact, as Smyth, MacLachlan, and Clare note, the concept of masculine failure is indeed fundamental to understandings of suicide in Ireland. Adding to Canetto’s claims about the gendering of suicide, they explain that “there is a certain ‘draw’ towards lethal suicidal behaviours given [Western] cultural depictions of what it means ‘to be a man’. Thus, men do not ‘attempt’ [to kill themselves], they ‘succeed’” in doing so (86). To attempt to commit suicide, these scholars explain, is to fail to kill oneself, and this failure, they go on, constitutes a violation “of the stereotypical ‘male’ role expectations that include the attributes of strength, decisiveness, success, and inexpressiveness,” and is therefore “less masculine” (86). In short, the intersection between failure and masculinity within the growing Irish discourse on suicide points, again, to the significant ways in which loserdom underpins ideologies shaping normative modes of being and proper social orientations in Ireland.

many men “feel they have no part in the changing province” (12). Likewise, as McAlister, Scraton, and Haydon note, sociocultural shifts including the end of the conflict in the North have led many men to “tak[e] their own lives” in response to their experiences of a sense of uncertainty, vulnerability, and even shame about the perceived “loss or dissolution of [their] cultural identity” (306-7). For these critics, the contemporary trend of male suicides in the North is directly tied to the peace process’s neutralization of a (largely sectarian sense of) masculinity rooted in conventional male strength and power, and it is as such a crisis clearly in line with the sociocultural experience of powerlessness, vulnerability, and loserdom. Similarly, critics have pointed to the ways in which, in the Republic, the male suicide epidemic emerges out of experiences of uncertainty, vulnerability, and shame, but, in this case, primarily in the context of Ireland’s sharp economic rise and fall. The Irish economy’s effects on employment rates in particular have, according to Felicia Garcia, had tremendous implications for men’s sense of worth. Referring to and building on Mac Giolla Bhain’s discussion of suicide, Garcia points to the way in which the precarity of employment has resulted in the untethering of Irish masculinity from older categories of normative masculinity and contributed to the rise in suicides: she claims that within Irish society, Irish men are often perceived or perceive themselves as “useless with little to nothing to offer as financial contributors, or as carers, to their partners or to their children” (xiv). And though their “useless” roles in society do not necessarily stem from their own failures, these men, as Garcia’s analysis seems to suggest, are effectively losers. As products of their country’s contemporary economic stagnation, they embody a kind of powerlessness and inadequacy relative to typical ideas of the male provider and protector.

If, as Mac Giolla Bhain suggests, male suicide is often a result of being “a complete and total failure as a husband, as a father, [and] *as a man*” (250 emphasis mine), then it is a self-destructive action equally born out of the (gendered) experience of deviation, inadequacy, and shame that loserdom epitomizes. Overall, the degree to which the critical discourse surrounding male suicide in Ireland is bound up with questions of individuals’ (i.e. men’s) relationships with changing sociocultural contexts indicates the loser figure’s applicability to this discourse, and indeed highlights the loser’s suitability to discussions of the effects of Ireland’s shifting social climate in general.

### **1.3. Losers, Irish Fiction, and the Question of Postcolonial Irishness**

Although the figure of the loser fits into critical debates regarding Irish masculinity and also helps illuminate some of the ways the “crisis” of masculinity manifests itself in a changing Ireland, I want to suggest that there is a second, and, given my purposes, equally important critical context in which this figure fits: the national(ist) or (post)colonial context. I want to propose that the loser figure is particularly valuable in terms of understanding Ireland’s national sense of self. That is, though he certainly sheds light on some of the ways in which gender roles and expectations have shifted along with contemporary Irish society, the loser also embodies less specifically “gendered” and more distinctly *Irish* forms of identity, or, at the very least, raises important questions about the embodiment of this identity. As a quintessential figure of failure, the loser offers some interesting insights not only about how contemporary Irish identity has been marked by the country’s various crises but also about how this identity fits into the broader context of Ireland’s fraught national/colonial history. In a short analysis of the “Irishness” of Irish

verse, Conor Cruise O'Brien, writing as Donat O'Donnell, suggests that "Irishness is not primarily a question of birth or blood or language," but is instead "the condition of being involved in the Irish situation, and usually of being mauled by it" (O'Donnell 78): like Irishness, loserdom, I contend, is precisely the effect or embodiment of this sociocultural "mauling." As such, I want to turn here to Ireland's broader sociopolitical context and the cultural history of the loser in Ireland and suggest that insofar as the loser provides something of an answer to O'Toole's question about "what it mean[s] to be 'us'" in a contemporary, crisis-plagued Ireland (*Enough* 4)—a complex issue I explore at length in later chapters—he does so while emphasizing the degree to which these contemporary approaches to or understandings of Irish identity reflect a much older and more extensive national project: that of self-definition and sociopolitical independence. I want to suggest, in short, that contemporary Irish novelists and contemporary Irish society turn to losers to both make sense of the series of crises marking the country's recent history and establish how these crises have altered (or sustained) ideas of Irish identity.

Though I do not want to dwell on the ways in which the loser figure closely mirrors the typical, if "mythical" (to use Memmi's designation [145]), figure of the colonized subject, it is worth noting that these figures are structurally similar.<sup>17</sup> For example, despite his variegated characteristics, as a "portrait of wretchedness," the loser is, like the colonized subject, cast as the inferior half of the binary that structures social

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<sup>17</sup> By "mythical," I am referring here to Memmi's description of the false "image of the colonized" that becomes "myth" and that, in turn, becomes useful in vindicating the "presence and conduct of [the] colonizer" and "exalting the colonizer and humbling the colonized" (145).

power relations and justifies socioeconomic realities (148).<sup>18</sup> In this way, though specific individuals might be identified as “losers,” the loser figure effectively becomes, like the colonized, both a product and instrument of ruling class ideologies. This conceptual similarity between the loser and the colonized subject is largely based, again, in the issue of “orientation.” Whereas the colonial subject’s ostensible barbarism or savageness underpins what Loomba calls “a discourse of primitivism” which not only “feed[s] into colonial stereotyping” (94), but also helps shore up a colonial power which “never really possessed an ideology” and was “seldom altogether sure of itself or its cause” (J. Morris 2), the loser, again, compels social subjects to align themselves towards conventional ways of operating in the world. Although this is obviously an incomplete account of the parallels between the loser figure and the colonized subject, the point I want to emphasize is simply that, as organizing principles within hegemonic social systems, these figures whose legitimacy as subjects is tied to their readiness to be degraded in some way, serve very similar functions.

Where the structural similarities between the loser figure and the colonized subject become particularly significant, however, is in the context of Ireland’s long colonial history. As Kiberd explains in *Inventing Ireland*, “colonialism took various forms” in Ireland: “political rule from London[,] economic expropriation by planters who

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<sup>18</sup> This idea of “wretchedness” or the “wretch” is particularly useful in connecting both the loser and the colonial subject. In addition to characterizing the titular group of Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, those colonized people “too long accustomed to physiological wretchedness, humiliation, and irresponsibility” (137), this concept brings together ideas of geopolitical vulnerability and social vilification. On the etymological history of “unhappiness” and its denotation of “wretched in mind,” Ahmed explains, for one, that the “wretch” is “not only the one driven out of his or her native country but is also defined as . . . ‘a miserable, unhappy, or unfortunate person,’ . . . and even ‘a vile, sorry, or despicable person’” (*Promise* 17).

came in various waves of settlement,” and most importantly, the “psychology of self-doubt and dependency among the Irish [resulting from] the loss of economic and political power but also the decline of the native language and culture” (*II* 6). In this last manifestation of British colonialism, we can already see the roots of loserdom as a distinct form of Irishness, a form that, as I will argue in later chapters, contemporary transformations and crises helped calcify in the contemporary Irish psyche. To be clear, British colonialism in Ireland, according to Kiberd, produced an Irish subject whose characteristics and identity bear a distinct resemblance to those of the figure of the loser. It was a subject wracked by existential doubt and defined by powerlessness and vulnerability. Again, in its attempt to “define an English national character” by establishing “a countervailing Irish one,” the British colonial project in Ireland, Kiberd explains, hinged on setting up or finding an Irish “foil” to the “controlled, refined and rooted” ideal of Englishness (*II* 9), and in the formation of this Irish foil—the “fey, feckless, fighting Irish” (Kiberd *IWW* 22)—the English essentially created a kind of a proto-loser figure. Insofar as “Paddy was held to be indolent and contrary . . . unstable and emotional . . . childish and feminine” (*II* 30), Irishness came to be equated with inadequacy, a lack of success, irresponsibility, and general haplessness. Though the Irish might not have exemplified a kind of failure in the eyes of their English overlords, they embodied, in a way, a failed Englishness. Moreover, in view of later British attempts to “quell [Irish] dissent” and to have Ireland “‘normalized’ and pacified through the application of British economic norms” (Pašeta 17)—attempts that were actualized by the Act of Union 1800—Irishness, under colonialism, came to signify powerlessness and vulnerability. As a result of their colonial relationship with Britain, the Irish were

inevitably cast as the submissive loser to England's aspirational winner. And though Ireland's colonial subjugation and the consequent moulding of Irish identity by and for the English colonizer would produce decades of violent resistance on the part of the Irish, these realities would shape ideas of Irishness for decades following Ireland's colonial era.

Now, there is little question as to whether loserdom and its symptoms were (or are) intrinsic or atavistic Irish traits—they are not. However, accounting for the apparent Irish adoption of the loser role generated as a result of the country's colonial relationship with England is a more complex problem. In other words, the fact that Irish loserdom would ultimately prove to be a serviceable identity not only for an English society that feared its "Celtic 'Other'" but also for Irish colonial subjects bent on reshaping colonial stereotypes to fit their own ends makes it more difficult to assess the significance and function of Irish loserdom under British colonialism (*II* 29). Part of the difficulty in assessing the function of the "loserdom" of Irishness under British colonialism is due to the simple fact that, as Kiberd explains, there are many instances in which the Irish willingly adopted and simultaneously subverted this loser role. For example, he suggests that with respect to Irish emigrants to England's commercial centres, "many found it easier to don the mask of the Paddy than reshape a complex identity of their own" as this stereotype enabled them, for instance, to ingratiate themselves to "English workers who might otherwise have deeply resented their willingness to take jobs at very low rates of pay" (*II* 29).<sup>19</sup> Likewise, adopting the loser role and, therefore, an ostensibly innocuous

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<sup>19</sup> Kiberd's point about the Irish tendency to "don the mask of the Paddy" and its subversive (or productive) potential corresponds to Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial "mimicry," especially in that it produces "conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity effects' in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself'" (90). For more, see "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse."

social position offered the Irish a means of “making shrewd deals” with their unsuspecting English counterparts and generally keeping their “rivals unawares” (*II* 30). In simple terms, “acting the buffoon” and performing this colonial variant of loserdom had “certain short-term advantages” for the Irish (*II* 29): it enabled them to “control and regulate [their relationship with the English] at will” (*II* 29-30), and, in this way, “conformed as much to Irish needs as English prejudices” (*IWW* 24). However, though they helped the Irish wrest power from the English, embodiments of the colonial caricature of the Irish loser by Irish subjects, however subversive, also inevitably shored-up idea that Irishness was, by its very nature, powerless or ineffectual: it essentially “left the English with the power of description and the Irish succumbing to the pictures which they had constructed” (*II* 32). This dilemma would prove especially significant in the context of Irish arts and culture—especially during the Revival period—as novelists, poets, and playwrights were forced to work out how to depict Irishness in ways that neither relied on “the braggadocio and feckless Stage Irishman,” nor exemplified “excessive reaction[s] against such caricature” (*IWW* 28-9). This subtle, if widespread, Irish acquiescence to colonial ideas of Irish inferiority—and, as such, loserdom—and the general “intractability of the Irish situation” constituted, as Seamus Deane explains in relation to Maria Edgeworth’s fiction, an implicit acceptance that “Ireland was backward, unenlightened, poor, ill led, even romantic, not because it was a colonial culture, but because it was Ireland” (32). By taking advantage of the subversive potential of loserdom within the colonial dynamic between Ireland and England, the Irish essentially encoded

loserdom and its social expressions into their very conceptualizations of what it meant to be Irish.<sup>20</sup>

By the time Ireland gained its independence from Britain in the early 1920s, the idea that Irish difference was essentially rooted in its loserdom—a loserdom which was, again, a mirror image of British power, confidence, assertiveness, and ambition—was fully formed. As such, for the first several decades of Ireland’s “postcolonial” modernity, the Irish faced the problem of how best to overcome or re-orient the loserdom that had arguably provided the basis for national(ist) narratives of Irish sovereignty, and this task would prove difficult not only because of the inevitable complexities of “decoloniz[ing] the mind” (*II* 6), but also because of the seemingly perpetual stagnancy of the Irish economy, the resulting waves of emigration, the cultural and moral repressiveness of the Catholic Church, and the colonially-tinged political violence in Northern Ireland.<sup>21</sup> In short, the psychological scars of colonialism would prove equal in effect to the country’s sociocultural deficiencies and failures in hindering Irish abilities to successfully move past loser identities. In his compelling analysis of idleness—a state or practice that is, conceivably, yet another part of loserdom—in Irish modernism, Gregory Dobbins recognizes Ireland’s postcolonial difficulty and suggests that this issue of reorientation or

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<sup>20</sup> Said and Gilroy have made similar arguments about both the internalization of colonial stereotypes and the cultural acceptance of colonial ideals that have “a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that [give them] reality” (Said 5). See, for instance, Said’s *Orientalism*, and Gilroy’s *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* and *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.

<sup>21</sup> Though I touch on them in subsequent chapters, for a more comprehensive examination of these sociopolitical developments, see J.J Lee’s *Ireland, 1912-1985: Politics and Society*; Dermot Keogh, Finbarr O’Shea, and Carmel Quinlan’s *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s*; Terence Brown’s *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1979*; and R.F. Foster’s *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972*.

reclamation was one of the most challenging tasks the new Irish state and its writers faced. He claims, specifically, that insofar as idleness, and by extension loserdom, “marks the difference of the colonized Irish from the colonizer, and bears traces of an otherness that resists assimilation to conventional forms of bourgeois nationalism derived from colonial models” (26), it proved particularly difficult for Irish modernism to engage “with matters having to do with nationality and decolonization” without also risking reaffirming “the colonial stereotype of the Irish as lazy, indolent, sentimental, undisciplined, and incapable of self-rule” (25).<sup>22</sup> This, of course, echoes David Lloyd’s point about the ongoing postcolonial challenge in creating spaces or narratives that are “constitutive of subjects rather than merely restorative of subjectivities that have been destroyed by colonialism and are no longer practically retrievable,” the difficulty, that is, in producing “not recovery in the sense of a retrieval of a lost self or a lost culture,” but in eliciting “out of an apprehended loss and its perpetuated damage a subject whose very condition is a transformation” (*IT* 25). This difficulty in reimagining Irish subjectivity will be particularly important in my exploration of the crisis of self-definition provoked by the economic boom and bust in Chapters Two and Three. Nevertheless, my overall point here is that, as a result of the degree to which it became implanted in the Irish psyche, as well as the overwhelming lack of propitious sociocultural developments following British withdrawal from (the majority of) Ireland, the colonial notion of Irish loserdom continued to define Irish subjectivity long into the “postcolonial” period.

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<sup>22</sup> This problem is something Dobbins himself is forced to reckon with in placing “an interpretive emphasis upon the practice of idleness in the Irish modernist novel” (25).

In his important work on the sociocultural shift that attended the Celtic Tiger, David McWilliams begins by claiming that “Ireland has arrived” (*Pope* 3). Indeed, as I have already mentioned, from the early 1990s, Ireland was largely thought to have entered into a globalized neoliberal modernity and to have finally achieved its postcolonial destiny. Again, the rapidity of Ireland’s economic expansion, the progress of peace talks in the North, and the slow but steady abandonment of “rule-bound Catholicism” were all, at least on the surface, illustrative of the island’s increasing economic self-sufficiency and sociopolitical confidence (Kiberd *AI* 491). However, as I noted at the outset, the underlying existential crises that arose alongside these shifts clearly belied Ireland’s seemingly triumphant social climate. In fact, the discursive emphasis on questions of crisis and authority—a discursive shift that gained traction especially following the 2008 financial collapse and the release of various reports detailing the magnitude of clerical abuse in Ireland—tends to also highlight the possibility that these contemporary social developments served to restore the challenges Ireland faced in developing a truly postcolonial Irishness, if not re-inscribe or calcify colonial ideas of Irish inadequacy, fecklessness, and loserdom.<sup>23</sup> In view of common political explications of Irish crises including the economic crash and the clerical abuse scandal, Geraldine Moane suggests, for instance, that contemporary Ireland remains plagued by “a postcolonial mentality” that “echo[es] colonial stereotypes” in its

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<sup>23</sup> O’Toole characterizes the colonially-inflected sense of Irish inferiority and inadequacy reignited by the financial collapse as a “return of the repressed” (*Enough* 5). The shock of this “return,” he claims, can be accounted for by the fact that the Celtic Tiger was thought to have “banished the underlying Irish sense of doom, the bitter spectre of self-contempt that was always whispering in our ears that we would screw it all up. And then we screwed it all up” (*Enough* 5).

acceptance of “a dominator discourse of madness” and its references to “the passivity and compliance of ‘the Irish’” (121). She unambiguously claims, moreover, that “postcolonial legacies continue to influence the Irish economy, culture, politics and society” (122), and implies that these legacies are experienced, in part, as “patterns of constriction” which include “superficial compliance[,] limited self-revelation[,] helplessness, passivity, shame, self-hatred and sense of worthlessness” (126).<sup>24</sup> Likewise, given that Ireland went from “consider[ing] itself in the centre” as a result of the “vision of progress encapsulated by the Celtic Tiger” to becoming “an economy on Europe’s periphery” following the crash, O’Callaghan notes that in the contemporary period “the nation’s postcolonial heritage no longer seem[s] so culturally distant” (8). In another article co-written with Boyle and Kitchin, O’Callaghan elaborates on this point, suggesting that both the economic crash and the narrative of excess frequently deployed as a means of explaining how it occurred were “married to assumed pathologies of the Irish, which had [their] roots in latent postcolonial anxieties” (129). “At its core,” these critics explain, Irish interpretations of the crash are “haunted by the perception that the boom was always ‘too good to be true,’ and that the crash [itself] was inevitable because the Irish were unfit to manage their own affairs independently” (129). The economic downfall produced, they claim, a sort of return of “post-colonial anxieties” about Irishness: as a result of the crash, the Irish again “became the hapless avatars of dumb luck who had let their ‘economic miracle’ slip through their fingers due to incompetence,” a nation, in short, marked by “a

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<sup>24</sup> This list of “patterns of constriction” are based on those Vincent Kenny identifies in “The Post-Colonial Mind.”

sense of shame and frustration” born from its failures “to live up to the promise of its political and economic freedom” (129).

Clearly, these references to Ireland’s contemporary regression to colonial ideals of Irish haplessness, incompetence, and failure all call to mind the characteristics of the loser. More importantly though, they demonstrate the degree to which the colonial stereotype of Irish loserdom—again, a stereotype the Irish arguably internalized—both undergirded and threatened to compromise the island’s contemporary sociocultural transformations. The idea that contemporary social, cultural, and economic shifts served to inflame underlying anxieties about an innate Irish fecklessness or loserdom, anxieties obviously produced by the island’s colonial experiences, shows the chimerical quality of this moment of national and ostensibly postcolonial “arrival.” It shows, that is, that rather than symbolizing an emergence from “older notions of . . . Irishness” and an adoption of a “postmodern Irishness [fit] for the new millennium” (Negra “Urban” 836-8), these shifts (and the crises that accompanied them) constituted a new chapter in the nation’s complex and incomplete postcolonial self-fashioning. That colonial ideas of Irish loserdom continue to inflect contemporary conceptions of Irishness in spite of the country’s sociocultural successes (e.g. the Celtic Tiger, the Peace Process) and transformations (e.g. secularization, cultural globalization)—developments which were, like its failures, largely “home grown” (O’Callaghan, Boyle, and Kitchin 129)—illustrates, in simple terms, the fundamental delusion underlying the apparent zenith of Ireland’s postcolonial project, and shows, as Kiberd claims, that the “available forms of the [independent Irish] state” established in the twentieth century were ultimately “unable to contain or embody the very idealistic ambitions of the [postcolonial] nation” (*AI* ix).

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Regarding the idea that “no one had warned” the Irish that the self-congratulatory narrative of their “arrival” into a sociocultural modernity effectively masked the “dire underlying abuses”—economic, political, religious—that would not only ultimately plunge the island back into economic servitude and sociocultural depression, but also awaken colonial anxieties of Irish ineptness, inadequacy, and loserdom, Kiberd notes that “in every decade after independence, writers and artists had given warnings about these things” (*AI* 3). “Even during the birth-pangs of the Free State,” he explains, it was Ireland’s writers who suggested “that [independent Ireland] might have been stillborn” (*AI* 3). As Susan Cahill notes, Irish fiction from the late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first centuries continued, however implicitly, to call attention to the potential limitations or the precarity of the contemporary era, this in spite of the chorus of voices including those of Julian Gough, O’Toole, John Banville, and Kiberd himself, suggesting that recent Irish fiction “[did] not engage sufficiently with its . . . present and [was] instead [overly] obsessed with the past” (*Irish* 6).<sup>25</sup> And though I am not interested here in texts—like

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<sup>25</sup> The obvious exception to this, I would argue, has to do with novelistic engagements with the financial crash. Though I agree with Cahill about the apparent reductiveness of claims regarding contemporary fiction’s engagement, or lack thereof, with the Irish present—indeed, Cahill’s readings of novels by Colum McCann, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, and Anne Enright attest to the degree to which Irish writers were attuned to underlying questions about Ireland’s rapid modernization—I would suggest that there are few, if any, Irish novels from before 2010 that adequately anticipated or captured the magnitude of the financial meltdown. Clearly, this absence of fiction explicitly dealing with the roots of the crash is due, in part, to the fact that Ireland’s economic downfall occurred only a decade ago. My point, however, is that for all of Irish fiction’s concerns with and critiques of recent sociocultural shifts, its failures in anticipating or accounting for what would prove to be a national economic calamity arguably demonstrate the validity of comments by Kiberd, Maher and O’Brien, or Cleary about Irish writers’ failures in developing “literary forms for coping with affluence” (Kiberd *AI* 482) or in alerting “the public in an adequate manner to the dangers associated with the Celtic Tiger” (Maher and

those Cahill examines—which necessarily anticipate or contemporaneously engage with the substantial transformations of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first century Ireland, and am instead concerned with novels responding to questions of Irish life in the wake of these shifts, it is worth noting the extent to which recent Irish literary and cultural criticism approaches such texts, and contemporary Irish fiction generally, with similar aims. In other words, though I am focused entirely on novels whose interrogations of contemporary Irishness and its ties to the island’s recent sociocultural transformations are clearly inflected by the respective novelists’ grasp of the effects of these shifts, I want to emphasize that similar questions of contemporary Irishness and its relationship with recent social, cultural, and political developments dominate recent Irish literary and cultural criticism, broadly speaking.

For all of the ways in which contemporary Irish cultural criticism shares with my work a focus on the intersections between both contemporary perceptions and fictional representations of Irish subjectivity and the drastic social transformations that have occurred in recent years, this scholarship also proves inadequate or incomplete in its conceptualization of this dynamic. This critical deficiency is two-fold. On the one hand, despite their interest in the crisis of self-definition at the heart of contemporary Ireland, critics including Villar-Argaíz, Brisset and Doody, Altuna-García de Salazar, González-Arias, Holohan and Tracy, and Cahill, among others have largely failed to account for the

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O’Brien *Prosperity* 6). I do not, in short, mean to dismiss Cahill’s point about overly simplistic critical appraisals of the state of Irish fiction during the Celtic Tiger years. Rather, I mean to suggest that some of these comments about fiction’s representative limitations are justified in light of the crash.

variegated ways in which this crisis is embodied or manifest in fiction.<sup>26</sup> Although much of this contemporary scholarship points to the apparent anxieties, uncertainties, or losses (both literal and figurative) underlying or shaping cultural depictions of contemporary Irishness, it does not adequately address the significance of similar attributes or experiences—those of, say, failure, fecklessness, resignation, and submissiveness—to these depictions or understandings of Irish identity. Put simply, though these critics have clearly recognized Irish fiction’s portrayal of an Irishness in crisis, and though many have even gestured towards some of the ways this crisis is represented, they have, by and large, overlooked other crucial (and common) “symptoms” of this identity crisis, at least as it is imagined in fiction. It is in this respect that my exploration of the figure of the loser differs. Specifically, in analyzing the ways the loser essentially personifies the existential crises that these scholars have (rightly) identified at the heart of contemporary Ireland, my work explores the more diverse, if less obviously favourable, ways in which contemporary fiction imagines and represents the experience and nature of Irishness amidst the island’s changing sociocultural context in recent years. More importantly, it

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<sup>26</sup> For focused and insightful examinations of minority cultures and dissenting voices in contemporary Irish society, see Villar-Argaiz’s *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland* (2014) and *Irishness on the Margins: Minority and Dissident Identities* (2018), and Brisset and Doody’s *Voicing Dissent: New Perspectives in Irish Criticism* (2012). For compelling critical conceptualizations of the crisis of Irishness albeit in the context of gender, see Holohan and Tracy’s *Masculinity and Irish Popular Culture: Tiger’s Tales* (2014) and Cahill’s *Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years, 1990-2008* (2011). Finally, for astute, though conceptually limited, explorations of the remedial possibilities of the discourses of “dysfunction” or the “imperfect, the disquieting and the dystopian” in Irish culture (González-Arias 13), see Altuna-García de Salazar’s *Ireland and Dysfunction: Critical Explorations in Literature and Film* (2017) and González-Arias’s *National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature: Unbecoming Irishness* (2017).

seeks to make a case for the value of these less favourable qualities and behaviours—those that make up loserdom—in articulating the experience of contemporary Irish life.

The second way in which contemporary Irish criticism has fallen short in its investigation of the connections between Ireland's existential and sociocultural crises has to do with its either limited or, conversely, overly broad view of the sociopolitical basis or "currency" of the crisis of Irishness. In other words, given the tendency in recent scholarship to focus on individual sociocultural shifts and read these as primarily responsible for this crisis, or, on the other hand, to analyze this contemporary crisis using texts which, though perhaps illuminating, do not engage with it as compellingly as many contemporary works, few of these critical texts offer a cogent analysis of the very distinct contemporaneity of the sociocultural bases for what I have previously referred to the Irish ethos of failure. Again, though most scholarly explorations of this topic acknowledge the many social, economic, political, and cultural changes that have generated or exacerbated this existential crisis, many fail to articulate the cumulative effect of these contemporary changes on this crisis, opting instead to offer more exhaustive analyses of the effects of a single social transformation.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, those that do touch on a broader range of the social or cultural roots of Ireland's contemporary crisis do so by turning to works which, to my mind, are less attuned to the contemporary nuances of this crisis and by offering a broader conceptualization of the Irish experience of crisis.<sup>28</sup> In looking both at how the

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Ging, Cronin, and Kirby's *Transforming Ireland: Challenges, Critiques, Resources* (2009), Coulter and Murray's *Northern Ireland After the Troubles: A Society in Transition* (2008), and Magennis's *Sons of Ulster: Masculinities in the Contemporary Northern Irish Novel* (2010).

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Lyons and O'Malley-Younger's *No Country for Old Men: Fresh Perspectives on Irish Literature* (2009), Harte's *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel*,

loser figure in contemporary fiction enables writers to explore Ireland's experience of all of these sociocultural changes, and also at how novelists' interest in the ostensible loserdom of contemporary Irish society clearly follows from the collective experience of *all* of these transformations, this project offers a more comprehensive interpretation of the ways recent Irish writing has dealt with the contemporary moment. That is, in not only focusing on novelists' use of losers to examine and critique each major sociocultural shift of the last thirty years, but also in suggesting that their shared emphasis on loserdom is indicative of the cumulative effect of these shifts on Irishness, I show how Irish fiction grapples with Ireland's complex sociocultural realities and captures the contemporaneity of the Irish experience of being "mauled" by the "Irish situation" (O'Donnell 78).

#### **1.4. Chapter Outlines**

Given the scarcity of scholarship that specifically considers what I see as Irish fiction's preoccupation with the figure of the loser, as well as the myriad ways in which this figure offers new means of conceptualizing or thinking about issues of Irish identity in the context of the island's unstable or changing social conditions, I offer here a series of divergent, though methodologically consistent, examinations of novels published since 2010 that use losers to explore, respond to, or represent one key social crisis from the last thirty years. In each of the following chapters, I examine two contemporary novels as case studies of the ways in which Irish fiction makes use of loser characters both to represent the return (or perpetuation) in the contemporary era of what O'Toole calls "the

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*1987-2007* (2014), and Kiberd's *After Ireland: Writing the Nation from Beckett to the Present* (2018).

pall of failure that had hung over the Irish state for most of its independent existence” (*Ship* 14), and also to examine what it means to be Irish during and following this period of significant sociocultural change. In closely examining the ways in which each novel not only portrays its characters as losers but also highlights these characters’ “loser motivations”—that is, the way in which the novel “dramatizes” both the characters’ experiences and the rationale guiding their responses to these experiences—I emphasize, broadly, the degree to which contemporary Irish novelists imagine loserdom as an embodied Irish identity, but one that is inherently generated or exacerbated by social realities. In considering the social conditions shaping the different characters’ loserdom, and in emphasizing the underlying basis prompting their “performances” of loserdom, I respond to Halberstam’s call for an examination of how and why “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing . . . offer more creative [and] surprising ways of being in the world” (2-3). Moreover, given that my interrogation of “the unregulated territories of failure, loss, and unbecoming” in contemporary Ireland occasionally demands an analysis of fictional characters as motivated figures, I approach each text, like Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*, with a readiness to make an occasional “detour around disciplines and ordinary ways of thinking” (7). Also, I offer my analyses of these novels as case studies because, though the texts uniformly use loser characters to engage with recent sociocultural transformations, they neither imagine or characterize losers in the same way, nor use loserdom to the same thematic ends. Overall though, these individual case studies will begin to call attention to the prevalence and significance of “loser fiction” in Ireland, and they will offer some answer as to why the loser has become such a central figure in contemporary fiction.

This dissertation is, broadly, divided along thematic lines: Chapters Two and Three deal with Ireland's significant economic rise and fall, respectively, while Chapters Four and Five examine more distinctly sociopolitical transformations and crises, namely, the clerical abuse scandal and the end of the Troubles. In each of these chapters, I begin by situating my readings of the respective novels historically as a means of establishing the specific sociocultural issue shaping the writers' respective depictions of these loser characters and, of course, guiding these characters' trajectories within their respective narratives. From there, I turn to the texts, one at a time, and primarily focus on the ways in which they each characterize loserdom as an effect or an affect of a specific social, cultural, or economic shift. While referring throughout to the colonial and historical roots of Irish loserdom from which these characterizations of contemporary losers arguably derive, as well as to the masculine dimensions of the form of Irishness this loserdom reflects, I consider, first and foremost, the ways in which each novel's loser characters embody or perform their identities as losers and the ways this embodiment or performance of loserdom is tied to a distinct social transformation.

In Chapter Two, I read Donal Ryan's *The Thing About December* (2013) and Peter Cunningham's *Capital Sins* (2010) as novels whose rather violent narratives respond to both Irish society's ambivalence about the Celtic Tiger and the underlying threat of what David McWilliams calls "the New Irish Dream" (*Pope* 62). More specifically, I argue that both novelists use depictions of violence to not only demonstrate the sense of confusion and uncertainty that attended Ireland's drastic shift from poverty to prosperity and its embrace of neoliberalism in the early 1990s, but also to highlight the inherent threat of failure generated by the ideological compulsion to be a "full-on nation"

during the Celtic Tiger period (McWilliams *Pope* 4). I argue that the male characters of both novels experience the Celtic Tiger as a period of tremendous existential instability that feeds their existing feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability, and I suggest that their respective tendencies to resort to violence is symptomatic of an underlying anxiety about the neoliberal reconfiguration of Irish subjectivity, broadly, and Irish masculinity specifically. By analyzing the novels' respective depictions of the difficulties of navigating the socioeconomic responsibilities that undergird the Celtic Tiger, I ultimately argue that the texts present the atmosphere of confidence and optimism engendered by this economic boom as superficial, as a facade covering a more sinister and unexpressed ambivalence about the country's economic triumph.

Using Paul Murray's *The Mark and the Void* (2015) and Claire Kilroy's *The Devil I Know* (2012), I examine, in Chapter Three, the outcome of Ireland's years of frenzied spending and unchecked property development, and I offer a reading of what the island's socioeconomic hangover meant for Irish identity. I suggest specifically that the loser protagonists of each novel not only personify the crisis of self-definition that arose following the economic crash and banking scandals, but also embody the nation's reluctance in accepting blame for the economic collapse. In foregrounding their characters' submissiveness, powerlessness, resignation, and delusions, these novels, I argue, undermine the narratives of victimization and blamelessness that Irish bankers, politicians, property developers, and, arguably, citizens use to account for the country's significant shift "from prosperity to austerity" (Maher and O'Brien *Prosperity* 6). The losers of Murray and Kilroy's texts, in short, not only typify Ireland's socioeconomic failures, but also call attention to the sociocultural equivocation that marks both the

nation's interpretation of this economic collapse and its attempts to work through this failure.

Turning away from the more socioeconomic issues of the two previous chapters, Chapter Four explores the ways in which the clerical abuse scandal has fundamentally altered the relationship between Irish society and the Catholic Church and has, likewise, complicated the ways in which the Church shapes contemporary conceptions of Irishness. In the chapter, I look at Roddy Doyle's *Smile* (2017) and John Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* (2015) and argue that these works portray the clerical abuse scandal as a sociocultural problem that resists "correction" and pushes against society's desire for redemption and restitution. I contend that by depicting both victims of clerical abuse and priests who either perpetrated or perpetuated the culture of abuse as loser figures who are defined by disappointment, powerlessness, shame, and regret, *Smile* and *A History of Loneliness*, respectively, reveal the overall degradation of Irish society resulting from the abuse scandal. Overall, the loserdom in these novels, I argue, serves to critique Ireland's culture of inaction and its uncritical deference to a morally bankrupt Church, and it works to demonstrate the difficulties of severing an inherently flawed though historically (and politically) consequential Catholic tradition from contemporary ideals of Irish identity.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I take up the issue of Irish subjectivity in Northern Ireland in the post-Troubles period. I use Paul McVeigh's *The Good Son* (2015) and Garbhan Downey's lesser-known *Across the Line* (2012) to suggest that, in view of both the apparent instability of the peace in Northern Ireland and the tendency of opposing communities to cling to divisive ethnopolitical identities, loserdom—as a way of being that is bound up with vulnerability, resignation, and even humility—offers a potential

alternative to those identities rooted in tribal narratives of ethnic pride and confidence. That is, unlike the novels I consider in earlier chapters, McVeigh and Downey's works depict losers and loserdom as potentially positive: for both novelists, they provide viable alternatives or antidotes to those sectarian identities and values tied to the conflict that defined Northern Ireland in the later twentieth century. In the chapter, I show, specifically, the ways in which both novelists not only deploy their loser characters to mock or trivialize the conflict and emphasize the absurdity of the country's lingering sectarian divisions, but also portray loserdom as a subversive, if submissive, quality that enables their respective loser characters to define themselves (or set the parameters for this necessary redefinition) outside of destructive sectarian ideologies. I suggest, in simple terms, that both novels use losers to critique the objectives and value of the conflict and to put forward prospective foundations for a reconceived post-Troubles subjectivity.

I end with a short concluding chapter in which I rearticulate the function of the figure of the loser in contemporary Irish fiction. I also briefly expand on the versatility and value of such recalcitrant figures and others like him (e.g. the Rubberbandits) in cultural depictions of an Ireland still in the process of "arriving."

## Chapter Two

### Liberation or Limitation: The Violence of the Celtic Tiger in Donal Ryan's *The Thing About December* and Peter Cunningham's *Capital Sins*

#### 2.1. Introduction

“But today, with the New Irish Dream governing the society, if you or your Destiny’s Child does not exceed, ascend or make the grade, there is something wrong with her as an individual. She cannot blame the system. She is at fault. The flip side of the Expectocracy is not disappointment, but humiliation, loss of face and banishment into the outer darkness of average-ness.”  
(McWilliams *Pope* 62)

Though it was given many names—the Celtic Tiger, the Boom, and the Economic Miracle—the economic upturn that began in Ireland in the mid-1990s fundamentally transformed Irish society, and it put an end, at least temporarily, to the country’s history of “almost unbroken impoverishment and national impotence” (Lynch 4). Not only did the Celtic Tiger period stand in stark contrast to the periods of poverty and emigration that had defined Ireland for centuries, and even a radical departure from the years of economic stagnation that immediately preceded it, this contemporary moment of prosperity and economic expansion also prompted a dramatic shift in the ways the world viewed Ireland and the ways Ireland viewed itself. The state’s willingness to court the IT and pharmaceutical sectors, its openness to foreign direct investment, and the consequent establishment of large multinational corporations transformed Ireland from a peripheral European nation to a global(ized) economic hub.<sup>29</sup> These economic policies, though, also

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<sup>29</sup> Historians and economists have debated how long Ireland was actually able to maintain its position as a major economic centre, but, as Donovan and Murphy explain, the nation was an economic hub until at least the first years of the new millennium. At this time, Ireland’s economy experienced a “slowdown” due to a number of factors including “the puncturing of the [American] dot.com bubble” to which “Ireland’s export-led boom [was] closely linked,” the reduction of its “agricultural exports” because of “measures

improved life in Ireland, producing a relatively financially secure populace. For effectively the first time in its history, the Irish public broadly had money to spend and things—most notably, property—on which to spend it. Though it would later become clear that Celtic Tiger consumerism was expanding in a dangerous and largely unchecked way and was also being financed largely through debt, in the mid-1990s, the very possibility of this kind of consumerism was cause for tremendous excitement in Ireland. As Róisín Ní Mháille Battel suggests, “‘tigerhood’ had a value to the Irish nation other than the economic growth that it heralded” given that people generally perceived it as “an important stage in the construction of postcolonial Irish identity, arguably the first one that was not constructed on ‘otherness,’ on being anti- or not-British” (101).<sup>30</sup> As the Celtic Tiger emerged, it not only provided new, productive economic potential for Irish people and promised to benefit a historically impoverished nation, but also provided an opportunity for genuine social progress and supplied fertile ground for cultivating a national sense of pride and self-confidence. And the Irish did, indeed, seem proud and

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introduced to prevent the spread of an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the UK to Irish livestock,” and, ultimately, of the events of 11 September 2001, which exacerbated “global economic pessimism” and “caused the Irish property market and confidence in the Irish economy to fall further” (63).

<sup>30</sup> Battel’s comments on “tigerhood” and its relationship to postcolonial Irish identity recall or play off of Wole Soyinka’s denouncement of *négritude*, a concept which Declan Kiberd has explicitly connected to “Irishness” as a “label *to have* rather than a way *to be*” (*IWW* 139 ital. in original). In response to the idea that *négritude* was, as Kiberd explains, trying “to return to Africans something that they had never lost: an identity” (142), Soyinka claimed that “a Tiger does not shout about its Tigritude” (qtd. in Kiberd *IWW* 141). In suggesting that “tigerhood”—a pun on the notion of “Celtic Tiger-ness” and Soyinka’s “tigritude” which is itself a dismissive play on *négritude*—lent itself to the “construction of a postcolonial identity” (101), Battel’s comment seems to flip the original idea that *négritude* (and its Irish variant) was something that (Irish) people needed to overcome or cast-off in their formation of a new, contemporary form of identity.

self-confident. Based on various “determinants of quality of life” including material wellbeing, health, political stability, community life, job security, and others (“Economist” 2), *The Economist* ranked Ireland as “the world’s best country” in terms of quality-of-life in 2005 (“World’s”). In David McWilliams’s view, the *Economist* survey (like many others at the time), although partly rooted in “economic calculations,” accurately reflected “what we, the Irish people, had said about how we thought how our lives were going” (*Pope* 23). The consensus, according to McWilliams, was that amidst this unprecedented economic boom, the Irish public felt “happy, content and optimistic about the future,” and “felt that Ireland, warts and all, was a good place to live” (*Pope* 23).

The effects of Ireland’s rapid socioeconomic expansion were not uniformly positive, however. As Colin Coulter claims, the “euphoria that . . . exemplified the era of the Celtic Tiger” concealed ongoing problems of income inequality, racism, violent crime, drug abuse, and high rates of suicide (Coulter 23).<sup>31</sup> The tension between, on one hand, the excitement surrounding the possibility of one’s personal socioeconomic gains, and, on the other, these complex and problematic social realities speaks to the pressures of the Celtic Tiger ideology, the demands, that is, of what McWilliams calls “the New Irish Dream” (*Pope* 52). As McWilliams describes it, the New Irish Dream “centres on the art of the possible. It is the dream of motivation [and] it believes that any Irish person can be or have whatever he or she wants” (53). It is an ideology that claims, “no-one is

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<sup>31</sup> A detailed examination of these issues and their causes is far beyond the scope of this chapter, but for more on them, see Bonner, Coulter, Holmquist, Kitchin and Bartley, Keohane and Kuhling, Linehan, Loyal, Ní Mháille Battel, Nolan and Maître, O’Reilly, and Sweeney.

mediocre, average or not good enough,” and one that “speaks in the possessive case;” it is “about me, mine, yours” (54). Though McWilliams does not use the term “neoliberalism” in his discussion of the New Irish Dream, this ideology is a fundamentally neoliberal one. In that it not only offered “opportunities for all” (54), but, more importantly, “demand[ed] that [the Irish] accomplish things, conquer fears and achieve [their] goals” (61)—demanded, in short, that they “want it all and . . . want it now” (54)—the New Irish Dream effectively “marketized” Irish life. In their “constant jostling for . . . position” (54), both economic and social, the Irish adopted what Wendy Brown calls a “neoliberal rationality [that] disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities . . . and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors” (31). Taking advantage of the opportunities of the Celtic Tiger meant embracing a culture of competition and fierce rivalry, and succeeding in this socioeconomic context meant more than furthering one’s own social position; it meant rising above everyone else. As such, the New Irish Dream represented what Brown, again, describes as a move in which “all market actors [were] rendered as capitals,” and this “capitalization” meant that “every subject [was] rendered as entrepreneurial . . . and every aspect of . . . existence [was] produced as an entrepreneurial one” (65).

Despite promising significant socioeconomic benefits, the New Irish Dream also proved rather pernicious in Ireland given its ties to this “profoundly destructive” neoliberal rationality (W. Brown 9). First of all, this ideology fundamentally reconfigured notions of identity by aligning them with the needs of the market. National identity, or Irishness, was reduced to one’s “integrat[ion] into and . . . subordinat[ion] to the supervening goal of macroeconomic growth” (W. Brown 83). For instance, in the latter

years of the Celtic Tiger, when Ireland's economy was effectively propped-up by an inflated real estate market and speculative construction boom, resisting the pull of "the great land mania that [swept] all before us" was unpatriotic, certainly un-Irish (McWilliams *Pope* 54, 71). "The land trip [had] changed the psychology of the nation," according to McWilliams, and so the New Irish Dream demanded that, as Irish people, "we . . . be involved; only losers are not in the game" (71). Similarly, like in most other neoliberal contexts, ideas about gender, if not gender identities, in Ireland were significantly affected by the Celtic Tiger. As Brown explains, within neoliberalism, "the generic individual who becomes responsabilized human capital [is], unsurprisingly, socially male and masculinist within a persistently gendered economic ontology" (107), and as McWilliams shows, Ireland proved no exception to this. He describes, for instance, the social "feminisation of certain jobs" identifiable in "the gradual disappearance of the school master who has been replaced by the school mistress" (*Pope* 124). He also characterizes Ireland's competitive and acquisitive consumer culture as primarily (though not exclusively) male: "in the past, men were envious of only one attribute that another man might possess. Not any more" (131). He claims, for example, that "every time you buy a swanky lawnmower, you throw down the gauntlet to me to go one better . . . For real status one-upmanship, posh lawnmowers are obviously where it is at" (131). Though the conflation of hegemonic Irish masculinity and this notion of "competitive consumption" was, of course, detrimental insofar as it meant that men were compelled to "work harder with the express sole intention of consuming more" (132-3), it was also damaging in that it simply reduced men's masculinity to their willingness and

ability to up-the-ante, as it were, regardless of the circumstances—the effects of which we see in Cunningham’s *Capital Sins*.

In addition to detrimentally realigning Irish identities with the needs of the market, the New Irish Dream also proved damaging to Irish society in that, like neoliberal ideologies generally, it produced subjects that could never be fulfilled, satisfied, or, crucially, happy. Like the neoliberal subject continually “tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its . . . value” (W. Brown 10), the Irish subject during the Celtic Tiger was tasked with continually succeeding or exceeding and, of course, of *desiring* success and excess. According to Émile Durkheim—whose notion of “anomie” has been used to analyze Ireland’s Celtic Tiger period—“unlimited desires are insatiable by definition” (208).<sup>32</sup> As such, the neoliberal “rationality” of the Celtic Tiger that insisted that people “have it all and have it now” (McWilliams *Pope* 129), created social conditions in which, as Durkheim puts it, individuals “condemn [themselves] to a state of perpetual unhappiness” (209) and in which “reality seem[ed] valueless by comparison with the dreams of fevered imaginations” (Durkheim 216-7). Moreover, as a result of this ideological compulsion to desire, the boom-time Irish subject consistently faced the possibility that he or she was inadequate: to be Irish in a socioeconomic context shaped by both the opportunities and demands of the New Irish Dream was, in McWilliams succinct formulation, to face “not

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<sup>32</sup> Certain critics have made the connection between the experience of “anomie” and Irish society’s experience of (hyper)modernization during the Celtic Tiger. Keohane and Kuhling, for instance, suggest that the experience of anomie results in part from the ways in which “in the accelerated culture of globalised Ireland” the “corrosive effects of [the country’s] structural transformation”—transformations, that is, at the level of politics, economics, family, community, etc.—collide “with the vestiges of traditional community” (126).

[just] disappointment, but humiliation, loss of face and banishment into the outer darkness of average-ness,” to face, that is, loserdom (62).<sup>33</sup> Put another way, the threat of humiliation and disappointment loomed over Celtic Tiger society because failing to “exceed, ascend or make the grade” during the boom represented a personal failure; it showed that “there [was] something wrong with [that person] as an individual” (62). It was not, under the neoliberal rubric, a systemic failure, as the Celtic Tiger apparently maximized “opportunities for all” and destroyed the “old barriers [that] prevented people from ‘rising above their station’” (54). To fall short in an apparently limitless socioeconomic context both signalled and led to, in Sandage’s words, “an inner deficit as much as a monetary one” (45), because, as Durkheim insightfully reminds us, “the less limited one feels [or ought to feel], the more intolerable all limitation appears” (214). Overall, it is this complex intersection of liberation and limitation that permeates McWilliams’s neoliberal notion of the New Irish Dream, and it is this intersection that helps explain the fact that though profound economic change came to Ireland in the early 1990s, it did not establish itself without shaping the “collective psychology of the nation” into “one of anxiety” and confusion (McWilliams *Pope* 129).

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Representations of the conflicting social conditions of contemporary Ireland are relatively common in fiction dealing with the Celtic Tiger period. Deirdre Madden’s *Time Present and Time Past* (2013), Anne Haverty’s *The Free and Easy* (2006), Chris

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<sup>33</sup> McWilliams, too, connects the notions of failure and “average-ness” in Celtic Tiger Ireland to that of “loserdom.” He claims, specifically, that “to rate in the New Irish Dream . . . [no] one can overshadow you and if they do, it can’t be permanent” because “if it is permanent, you’re a loser” (*Pope* 129).

Binchy's *Open-handed* (2008), and Paul Murray's *An Evening of Long Goodbyes* (2003) all approach the realities of life in the Celtic Tiger from a relatively ambivalent angle and depict them as problematic, if not entirely destructive. In the scholarship on such texts, critics tend to focus on the ways in which the themes of anxiety and uncertainty resulted from the Celtic Tiger shift. Susan Cahill and Heather Ingman, for instance, have suggested that Celtic Tiger fiction critiques the social disruptions brought on by the economic boom by challenging the idea that late twentieth-century Ireland was a period of prosperity and abundance, and by centering on the "losses consequent on the Celtic Tiger lifestyle" (Ingman 240) or the "occlusions and absences of Celtic Tiger culture" (Cahill *Irish* 6). Likewise, both Cahill and Downum have suggested that Celtic Tiger novels frequently frame their engagement with the sociocultural anxiety and ambivalence of the boom years by portraying the difficulties of navigating the complicated temporal terrain of past and future within a present that feels radically detached from both, an issue to which Ryan alludes in his brief exploration of the newness of the Celtic Tiger in *The Thing About December*.<sup>34</sup> More specifically, as Downum claims, though these authors do not suggest "that life in Celtic Tiger Ireland was unusually horrible," their novels "dramatize, on the individual level, the cultural condition of a disconnect with the past" and "depict Celtic Tiger Ireland as a society in danger of losing its openness to its own historical self" (91-2).

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<sup>34</sup> See Cahill's introduction to *Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years, 1990-2008: Gender, Bodies, Memory*, and Denell Downum "Learning to Live: Memory and the Celtic Tiger in Novels by Roddy Doyle, Anne Enright, and Tana French."

In short, the scholarship on Celtic Tiger fiction has rightly focused on the apparent identity crisis prompted by what Harte describes as the “radical disintegration of the certainties that had formerly sustained” Irish life and those contemporary experiences of loss and unease that have “exposed deep fissures beneath . . . life’s affluent façade” (223). It has identified, in Derek Hand’s words, the ways “anxiety is central to the lives of [contemporary] Irish characters” given that, just as in Irish society broadly, “the traditional principles by which [these characters] negotiate relationships and work have been put under pressure” (281). And though these critics are entirely right to highlight this fictional emphasis on contemporary experiences of ambivalence, anxiety, and even anomie, these analyses of the crisis underlying the Celtic Tiger era are insufficient in that they generally fail to account for the ways both the immense ideological pressure to succeed and the mere prospect of failing to do so shape fictional portrayals of contemporary Irish experiences. Put another way, though this scholarship has rightly identified the tendency in Celtic Tiger fiction to depict the personal toll of adapting to Ireland’s new socioeconomic realities and the difficulties of coming to terms with the confusion of a world in which, as Cahill puts it, “the economic and the marketplace are shown to be the paramount structuring principles” (*Irish* 186), it has largely overlooked the ways some of this fiction points to a simpler and perhaps more ambiguous threat posed by the socioeconomic shift to contemporary conceptions of Irishness: the threat of failing, of facing “the outer darkness of average-ness” (*Pope* 62), and, thus, of “losing” in a period in which success, affluence, and self-realization seem effortless and assured.

In this chapter, I show that Donal Ryan’s *The Thing About December* (2013) and Peter Cunningham’s *Capital Sins* (2010) depict Celtic Tiger-era Irish society as one that

“has arrived” (McWilliams *Pope* 3), but that is also uncertain about how to navigate the destabilization and reconfiguration of Irish life caused by this “arrival” into a neoliberal modernity. I demonstrate, broadly, that the many scenes of violence in both novels harks to the social uncertainty generated, on one hand, by Ireland’s rapid shift from relative poverty and weakness to prosperity and confidence—a shift rooted in Ireland’s integration into a “normalizing narrative of progress and economic development” to which it had been unassimilable under British imperialism (Deane 146)—and, on the other hand, by the looming threat of failure to which this neoliberal shift gives rise. More specifically, I argue here that both Ryan and Cunningham use depictions of violence in their novels to explore both the overt and underlying harms arising from the ideological compulsion to consume, indulge, and (most importantly) succeed in the Celtic Tiger era. They use this violence, I suggest, to illustrate the damage produced by the obligation to embody a Celtic Tiger subjectivity and adopt or uphold contemporary attitudes conducive to participating in Ireland’s moment of socioeconomic self-realization. By connecting violence to the socioeconomic forces shaping life during the boom, both novelists portray Celtic Tiger society as beset by the possibility of failure—of failing to heed the call of the New Irish Dream, and of failing to act in accordance with the neoliberal principles of the contemporary Irish variant of the *nouveau riche*.<sup>35</sup> After showing how Ryan uses scenes of intercommunal hostility and brutality to foreground his characters’ contemporary

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<sup>35</sup> In *The Pope’s Children*, McWilliams divides this new class of Irish *nouveau riche* into two camps: the “Decklanders” who are characterized by an “optimism that resembles America more than Europe” given its focus on consumerism and acquiring “new things” (145-6), and the “HiCos” or “Hibernian Cosmopolitans” who reject the idea that Celtic Tiger Ireland is “just suburban America with shitty weather” and instead seek to fuse “the best of our Hibernian culture that makes us special and the best of the cosmopolitan culture that has created the Expectocracy” (146-7).

anxieties about failing to flourish within Ireland's new socioeconomic context, I show how he uses these violent scenes to critique the underlying, and arguably more severe, damage of neoliberalism on Irish subjectivity. I contend that he portrays violence in *The Thing About December* as a manifestation of the more symbolic violence of neoliberalism's reconfiguration of Irish subjects into nothing but market actors. From there, I show how Cunningham, like Ryan, questions the value of the Celtic Tiger in Ireland by showing the detrimental and often violent consequences of the "marketization" of Irish subjectivity. However, Cunningham's critique of the Celtic Tiger focuses more explicitly on the effects of neoliberalism on masculinity. In foregrounding the connections between the violence precipitated by the prospect of failing in the Celtic Tiger economy and his characters' sense of masculinity, the novelist, I argue, makes a subtle point about the damage caused by the boom's macho discourse of consumption, competition, and excess. All in all, by examining how Ryan and Cunningham's respective characters' anxieties and uncertainties hark to the intersections of loserdom and violence in the context of the Ireland's Celtic Tiger transformation, I argue that the novelists attempt to point to an unexpressed ambivalence about these shifts and critique the cost of the socioeconomic modernity the boom brought to Ireland.

## **2.2. "Caught on the Hop": Adapting, Failing, and Failing to Adapt in Donal Ryan's *The Thing About December***

In his second novel, *The Thing About December*, Donal Ryan captures the economic revitalization and simultaneous social degeneration that took place in Ireland

during the Celtic Tiger years.<sup>36</sup> He challenges his readers, as John Boyne puts it, “to examine [their] own failings instead of those [of] faceless institutions,” by drawing attention to the hypocrisy of “those who gambled and now cry victim” (“Thing”). Ryan has described his structurally straightforward, albeit stylistically digressive and meandering, second novel as “an exposition of [the] chaotic inner discourse” of its protagonist, Johnsey Cunliffe, as he grapples with the changing social dynamic of rural Ireland during the boom (Wachtel). I want to suggest here, however, that it is the “inner discourse” of a character unable to cope with the newness of the Celtic Tiger, distraught by its ethos of compulsory ambition and competition, and tormented by the demands of Ireland’s neoliberal condition. In showing “how the putative value of . . . land as an object of speculation seems to drive [a community] from what wits and grace [it] had,” and how the neoliberal imperatives of Ireland’s modern socioeconomic conditions prompt the members of Ryan’s fictional community to “conspire to extinguish” each other (S. Barry “Thing”), the novelist depicts the underlying damage of ostensibly positive economic developments on contemporary Irish life.

After first offering a few examples of the ways Ireland’s Celtic Tiger modernity begins creeping into the lives of Ryan’s characters and provoking, in them, feelings of anxiety, confusion, and resentment, I turn to Ryan’s depictions of hostility, callousness, and violence. I show, in particular, how Ryan depicts both literal and figurative forms of

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<sup>36</sup> I borrow the notions of “regeneration” and “degeneration” from Marie Mianowski who uses them in her analysis of Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart* to explore the ways in which “place, identities, and heritages, are renegotiated” in the context of Ireland’s recession (61). Though *The Thing About December* depicts the period before the recession, these notions are equally applicable given the novel’s concern with Irish society’s similar attempts to realign itself within its radically transformed socioeconomic context.

violence as the means by which his characters respond to the new socioeconomic conditions of the Celtic Tiger and, more specifically, to the threat of being cut off from the benefits of the boom, of “losing” in a contemporary context in which socioeconomic gains seem all but guaranteed. However, I argue that, insofar as the novel draws a connection between violence, loserdom, and Ireland’s boom, Ryan uses this connection to critique both the overt harm of the Celtic Tiger in Irish society—the brutality of competition, the deterioration of communal relationships, etc.—and the significant, albeit more nebulous, damage caused by “the Irish version of global neoliberalism” on individual Irish subjects (McDonough 8). The novelist uses the characters’ “external” displays of violence, in short, to illustrate their experiences—and, by extension, the Irish public’s—of failing to adapt to the neoliberal marketization of their community and their roles in it.

In her reading of *The Spinning Heart*, Marie Mianowski suggests that the Celtic Tiger “had strong repercussions on the way people related to one another, as well as to the place in which they lived” (61).<sup>37</sup> And though Mianowski focuses on how this destabilization of community plays out in Ryan’s first novel, the effects of the boom on contemporary communal life also prove critically important to Ryan’s critique of the detrimental qualities of the Celtic Tiger in *The Thing About December*.<sup>38</sup> As such, I want

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<sup>37</sup> Mianowski’s account of Ireland’s altered communal dynamics during the boom are rooted in Fintan O’Toole’s suggestion that “booms always engender hysteria but what made the Irish one so extreme was that it was filling a void. The Celtic Tiger wasn’t just an economic ideology. It was also a substitute identity. It was a new way of being that arrived just at the point when Catholicism and nationalism were not working anymore” (*Enough* 3).

<sup>38</sup> Though the town of *The Thing About December* is never explicitly named, the implication is that it is the same town as that of *The Spinning Heart*. In his narrative, Jim, one of the characters of Ryan’s first novel, recalls the time “years ago when the rapid

to begin by sketching out how Ryan presents the rural setting of his second novel as a place grappling with “the loss of the old coherent codes” of Irish society (Kiberd *II* 573)—those of family, community, and tradition—and how he portrays these “losses” as an effect of the community’s integration into the neoliberal modernity of the Celtic Tiger. From the outset of the novel, for instance, Ryan depicts his community as one defined by pettiness and suspicion, and he illustrates how these qualities are a product of the increasing social and economic competitiveness taking root in the fictional town. Johnsey and his mother’s descriptions of both the “hi-pull-eye” and Dermot McDermott bear this out. For one, in claiming that they all “have mongrel dogs and loads of children [or] loads of dogs and mongrel children,” Johnsey’s mother suggests that the “hi-pull-eye”—those “who live in the council houses outside the village”—are a scourge who threaten the stability of the community (*TAD* 13). Though these “hi-pull-eye” are essentially unseen in the novel and though Ryan clearly shows that they are a peripheral group in the town, the characters view them as both an economic drain on the town and a group against whom they must differentiate themselves. It becomes unsurprising, then, that characters such as Johnsey’s mother characterize the “hi-pull-eye” as indecent, indolent, and threatening. Likewise, in Johnsey’s mother’s descriptions of Dermot McDermott—a neighbour who leases the Cunliffe land because her son is unable to farm it himself—Ryan emphasizes the ways the man represents nothing more to her than the wickedness of upstaging one’s neighbours. She claims, for instance, that “people who give their sons names like *Dermot McDermott* are up their own arses,” and she resents the fact that they

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response lads were called out to that lad of the Cunliffes and he above in the farmhouse waving his shotgun at the neighbours” (*Spinning* 137), an obvious gesture towards the conclusion of *The Thing About December*.

think “they’re . . . one cut at least above their neighbours” (13). McDermott also represents for Johnsey and his mother the arrogance of economic ambition. The pair cannot stand the man’s “swagger” and the way he acts as though “he owned the [Cunliffe] land” while “driving [his] big tractor over [Johnsey’s] birthright” (12-3). And though the narrative suggests that Johnsey and his mother’s descriptions of McDermott are perhaps justified given the way he treats Johnsey as a “trespasser” on his own family’s land (13), the characters’ more general disparagement of their neighbours, Ryan shows, is symptomatic of the antagonism and resentment beginning to taint personal relationships in modern Ireland. The tense relationships between neighbours in this fictional community and the ways they are shaped by suspicion and bitterness reveal the changing nature of communal life in an evolving contemporary economic modernity. These strained relationships are a testament to the ways the neoliberal realities filtering into this small Irish community (e.g. growing competitiveness and the establishment of “human capital for itself” [W. Brown 211]) effectively destabilize it; these new socioeconomic realities “gravely disrupt” and challenge what the characters know as “traditional patterns of living” (Kiberd *II* 329). In a more general sense, these scenes highlight the fractures growing in the characters’ sense of locality and solidarity—the “codes” that had formerly undergirded narratives of national or communal identity. Their relationships, or lack thereof, compromise the characters’ sense of belonging, and they reveal the underlying current of selfishness and estrangement taking hold and altering the social landscape of Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Though Ryan’s early descriptions of how the underlying bitterness and sense of socioeconomic competitiveness defining the Cunliffe’s relationships with their

neighbours stems from the changing sociocultural terrain of boomtime Ireland, not all of the text's examples of the encroaching modernity of the Celtic Tiger are so plainly "negative." Indeed, in his depictions of Johnsey's encounters with the changing ideas of food and travel, Ryan points to the ways the Celtic Tiger provokes a more general sense of confusion and anxiety for the character. As he considers what he should do the summer after his mother dies, for instance, Johnsey recalls

fellas his age less than two miles away that had actually . . . [headed] off in a jet to a ski resort in some faraway country full of glamour with a girl and [who] flew down snowy mountains and drank liquor with foreign names and [who] rode the girl all night and [came] home engaged to be married and the whole place [talking] about how brilliant it was and [telling] them they were great (52-3).

In this lengthy, unpunctuated description of the "fellas'" exploits, Ryan points to the overwhelming nature of the opportunities of the contemporary moment. He shows, specifically, the tremendous novelty of leisure in Ireland and, implicitly, what this leisure means in Irish society.<sup>39</sup> However, in emphasizing that Johnsey's life bears no resemblance to "that kind of a life" and that the "fellas'" experiences are something the character can only "imagine" (53), Ryan frames the socioeconomic opportunities that travel represents in the scene as entirely unfamiliar, even unavailable to Johnsey. When Johnsey imagines the "glamour" of this kind of travel, he clearly identifies its cultural value but again demonstrates the degree to which this value remains largely inaccessible

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<sup>39</sup> As McWilliams explains, holidays and travel in Celtic Tiger Ireland acted as a specific kind of cultural capital that revealed "[one's] elevated status" and demonstrated a drive for kinds of "adventure . . . and curiosity" generally unseen in Ireland before the boom (*Pope* 249-50).

to him. He belongs, of course, to a community that can only really “talk about how brilliant [the men’s experience] was” (53). Similarly, the novel’s depiction of Johnsey’s encounters with contemporary dietary habits illustrates the disconnect between the protagonist’s antiquated social context and the new norms taking hold of his country. For instance, Johnsey is entirely bewildered after learning of his friend Siobhán’s hankering for “a sandwich made out of brown bread with cheese and sliced apple” (170), because it is a dish entirely unlike the traditional “fry” or “plate of burnt, dead pig” he has prepared for her (170). The character’s surprise at Siobhán’s request for a sandwich made with apples, an ostensibly unusual ingredient, however, points to his confusion about what these new tastes represent. As McWilliams claims, during the Celtic Tiger “there [was] a spiritual revolution where being right in the head and soul [was] linked to what food we [ate]” (*Pope* 245). Food, during this time of prosperity and personal competitiveness, could reveal “your depth of culture, travel and learning as well as your rootedness” (258). Eating a certain way was a means of collecting cultural capital and shoring-up one’s distinctly modern identity—an issue that recalls Seamus Deane’s claim that, for the Irish under colonial subjugation, “food is problematic . . . because there is so little of it” and “a starving . . . people obviously lack articulacy” (55). In short, during the boom, “food mark[ed] you out. It distinguishe[d] the truly educated from the merely rich” (*Pope* 264), and it is clearly this idea of food as a symbol of modernity and “self-assuredness,” the text shows, that baffles Johnsey. It is the “newness” that this food represents that the protagonist is compelled to resist or, at the very least, reluctant to accept: though he claims that he will ensure, in the future, to “have a bit ready to eat for [Siobhán],” he will never include apple “*in the sandwich*” (*TAD* 170 ital. in original).

Though Johnsey's fascination with and reservations about these modern customs are minor details in the novel, they nonetheless illustrate the obvious disparity between Johnsey's sense of the world and that world produced by the Celtic Tiger. Like Johnsey's mother's unsympathetic descriptions of the "hi-pull-eye" and Dermott McDermott, these scenes shed light, that is, on the primary tension that Ryan critiques in the novel, the tension between Irish society's experience of the Celtic Tiger—or, at least, the dominant, largely positive, social narrative of this experience—and the personal experiences of Irish people. The encroaching realities of the Celtic Tiger clearly surprise and mystify Johnsey and his neighbours, and the text shows that this mystification provokes a sort of crisis for these characters. It forces them to confront the fact that they not only need to accept the changing socioeconomic realities of Celtic Tiger Ireland, but, more importantly, that they need to adapt to the various ideological demands that come with it. This compulsion to adapt is, according to the novel, fundamentally destructive for the characters because it leaves no room for failure. Though the Celtic Tiger ostensibly brings benefits to this fictional community, in other words, it also threatens to leave those characters who cannot adapt to its neoliberal demands behind. I want to turn now to Ryan's brief depictions of his characters' experiences of this unfortunate prospect and show specifically how he critiques it by pointing to the ways in which it leads to acts of cruelty and violence.

Early in the novel, Ryan connects his characters' violent or hostile behaviour to their underlying sense of socioeconomic inadequacy and anxiety. He ties, for example, the threat of "torment" that "Eugene Penrose and his pals" represent for Johnsey to the fact that these "yahoos" and "thugs" are on unemployment benefits (7-8): Johnsey's

mother claims that “the dole is great” because it “allows thugs to live like little lords” (8). Though “Penrose’s campaign [against Johnsey] started in primary school” and, thus, predates the period of growing economic prosperity during which the novel takes place (35), his unrelenting bullying and “hatred” is exacerbated by the fact that, in the “present” of the novel, Johnsey “had a job and Eugene Penrose hadn’t” (36). Likewise, Packie Collins’s “special hatred” for the “brown-faced people, or even proper blacks, driving through the village,” results from the storeowner’s belief that they “cheat the system” and threaten his co-op (11)—a belief echoing what Villar-Argáiz calls Celtic Tiger Ireland’s “xenophobic attitude towards immigrants which is, ironically, reminiscent of the colonial treatment of the Irish by the British” (“Immigrant” 66). In claiming that “they’re probably *Hoo-Toos*,” and “probably they killed a rake of *Tootsies* and they’re over here now, hiding” (*TAD* 11), the storeowner imagines the new Irish as violent delinquents and hints at one of the Celtic Tiger’s primary tensions. Namely, though Ireland developed “a multicultural economy,” it did not develop “a multicultural society” and indeed retained an “anti-cosmopolitan” sensibility (Keohane and Kuhling 67). In a broader sense though, Packie and Penrose’s aggressive tendencies exemplify what Steve Loyal describes as boomtime Ireland’s attempts to “make a causal link between observed, material differences [and perceived inequalities] in Irish society” brought on by the Celtic Tiger (87). That is, the novel shows that Packie and Penrose’s respective aggressive tendencies stem from their views of themselves as victims of an increasingly unfair, unregulated, and chaotic socioeconomic system whose ostensible benefits they both desire and perceive as a kind of right. The characters’ acts of aggression and suspicion reveal, in short, the basis

of their struggles, but also point to the mechanism through which Irish boom-time subjects tried to resist these struggles and redirect responsibility for them.

Although Ryan depicts Packie's "special hatred" for immigrants and Penrose's ongoing harassment as a means of highlighting these characters' sense of socioeconomic vulnerability in the context of the Celtic Tiger, he also shows how violence, in the Celtic Tiger years, serves as a way of resisting the prospect of failure and, as such, acts as a sort of bulwark against socioeconomic loserdom.<sup>40</sup> With respect to the narrative specifically, when the success and wealth of Ireland's boom become distinct possibilities for the characters later in the novel, Ryan shows how severe violent incidents surge. In highlighting this correlation, however, Ryan shows that the violence that defines his characters' responses to Ireland's new neoliberal conditions are less a result of the actual socioeconomic changes of the Celtic Tiger period and more a result of the disorientation and turmoil that these changes produce in Irish society and for Irish subjects. Put another way, as he continues to depict the ways the Celtic Tiger takes hold of his fictional community, Ryan emphasizes that violence is both a product of and a response to the neoliberal conditions of Ireland's boom, and that it, thus, epitomizes the damage of these conditions. These violent acts, in short, enable Ryan to show the negative by-products of the apparently positive economic developments and to critique the ideological basis of these by-products.

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<sup>40</sup> Insofar as they enable the characters to assert themselves and foreground their agency amidst what the characters perceive as oppressive social conditions, the forms of violence that Ryan depicts in the novel can arguably be traced back to the earlier forms of (nationalist) violence, those that were not only critical in helping Ireland establish its political independence and cultural autonomy, but which also proved significant in helping establish the cultural narratives of boldness and resilience within which the economic boom certainly fit.

Ryan's most explicit and significant critique of the violence and brutality produced by the increasingly competitive culture of the Celtic Tiger occurs in the second half of the novel after the value of the land around the fictional town begins to rise. As this speculative rise in real estate prices promises to benefit Johnsey's community, many of his neighbours begin demonstrating an eagerness to position themselves so as to make the most of the coming economic changes. However, as the novel clearly emphasizes, taking advantage of the town's changing socioeconomic situation requires gaining the upper hand on competitors, or, in a more theoretical sense, "destroying or cannibalizing other capitals" within this increasingly competitive market economy (W. Brown 64). Ryan's characters' aspirations, in this way, reveal the ferocity of properly participating in and benefitting from Ireland's socioeconomic good fortune.

Packie, for example, begins ordering building materials including timber, concrete blocks, and cement as a means of establishing a monopoly in the town and of asserting himself as "the height of fashion" and as "a fierce big deal" in the community (68-9). However, in alluding to the storeowner's inability to stop "rubbing his hands together" as the materials are delivered to the co-op, Ryan highlights the almost predatory nature of the man's attempt to gain a foothold in the town's construction sector (69). In a similar scene in which Dermot McDermott offers to buy the Cunliffe family farm, Ryan again points to the exploitative quality of the character's economic drive. Though McDermott claims that his "milk quota was going to be doubled shortly" and that he "want[s] to be sure of the land" (63), the novel later characterizes his offer as "sneaky" (90). Ryan uses the subsequent scenes in which Johnsey learns that his "big farm of land [is] worth millions" to suggest that McDermott knows more than he is letting on (70). His offer to

buy the farm and, thus, secure later financial gains evinces a kind of devious motivation as it leaves Johnsey “caught on the hop” and left standing “there with his mouth hanging open . . . like an unadulterated gom” (63). The spontaneity of McDermott’s offer and Johnsey’s confused and startled reaction reveal the obvious power imbalance this interaction creates and point to the ways in which McDermott’s attempt to profit from the growing value of land hinges on his counterpart’s lack of intelligence and defenselessness. Again, given McDermott’s tense relationship with the Cunliffe family and his eagerness in trying to get a hold of his neighbour’s valuable assets, his unexpected bid for the land reveals an underlying rapaciousness and shows the aggressive sensibilities required in order to compete and benefit in the Celtic Tiger economy.

Although he clearly challenges the value of the Celtic Tiger by pointing to figurative forms of violence (e.g. communal resentment, interpersonal exploitation, etc.) that accompany the increasingly competitive social climate produced by the land boom, Ryan also dramatizes and condemns the unfortunate social by-products of Ireland’s economic revolution by showing how the boom spawns acts of actual brutality. For instance, in perhaps the novel’s most violent scene in which Penrose and his gang savagely beat Johnsey as he heads home from the co-op, Ryan emphasizes that this “hiding” results from the discrepancy in the characters’ respective economic prospects (72). This beating is an example, that is, of what Cormac O’Brien characterizes as the “competitive and hostile” responses of “men struggling to secure a foothold in a fast-paced capitalism that seems just beyond their reach” (132). Before their encounter deteriorates into outright violence—the men take turns “planting [their] dirty runners into some part of Johnsey’s body” (72), and they leave him with a broken arm, “massive

bruising on his legs and back,” and a swollen head (77)—Penrose aggressively berates Johnsey for owning “land worth millions” and having “a grand old job as well” while “the whole fucking parish [is] on the dole” (70). And though Johnsey is baffled by these accusations, claiming that he “didn’t think the whole parish was on the dole,” and indeed that “plenty of lads had trades . . . and plenty more had fecked off altogether and were professional people above in Dublin or other big places” (70), he acknowledges the existence of socioeconomic fault lines in the community. He claims, specifically, that Penrose and his gang are unemployed because they ran “straight from the school gate to [a] meat factory” that “was never going to last” (70). And though Johnsey’s windfall is certainly part of the reason Penrose and his friends beat him, the novel frames the altercation as the result of the gang members’ perceptions of the lack of economic opportunities available to them, their impressions, that is, that they are victims of a kind of systemic socioeconomic discrimination. For instance, when Penrose scornfully asks Johnsey if he will “still be below getting rode up the hole by Packie Collins” after he “get[s] all them millions for that farm above” (71), he alludes to the fact that his hostility is not simply due to the fact that Johnsey is an undeserving heir to an immensely profitable asset (his farm). Rather, Penrose’s words clearly show that he views Johnsey as a representative of financial possibilities unavailable to him and his friends. If, as Penrose claims, a “fat fool” (72), “gom,” or “fuckin gimp” such as Johnsey is worth “millions” (70), then he, Penrose, must necessarily be an even more pathetic loser precisely because he is worth very little in economic terms. The financial value of Penrose and his friends—that is, both their net worth and their value as employed capital—pales in comparison to Johnsey’s, and yet Johnsey, according to Penrose, remains a “gom.” This

obviously does not reflect well on the gang. The violent beating that transpires, the narrative clearly suggests, proceeds, then, from Penrose and his friends' general perception that they are little more than "dole boys" (72), social and economic losers who are ostensibly more contemptible in contemporary Ireland than the feckless Johnsey.

Though it is a relatively minor point in Ryan's overall critique of the Celtic Tiger, it is worth noting that Ryan's depiction of this assault might be read as an example of the ways in which, as Lindisfarne and Neale claim, "violence is central" to the concept of "masculinity under neoliberalism" (31). Although the economic inequalities between the characters are clearly at the heart of Johnsey's beating in this scene, the way in which Penrose and his gang violently attack Johnsey subtly calls attention to the ways in which their economic failure within Ireland's new neoliberal context also subtly implies a failure of masculinity. Ryan shows, specifically, that as an assertion of physical power over an emasculated and feminized victim—again, Penrose and his friends claim that Johnsey gets "rode up the hole by Packie Collins" (71), and they call him a "faggot and a fat cunt" (74)—Penrose and his gang's attack on Johnsey effectively symbolizes an attempt to re-affirm their position within what Singleton and others have describe as the "hegemonic masculinity at the very heart of the Celtic Tiger Irish economy and social order" (16). Their aggressive acts prove to be a response to their failures, or prospective failures, in "competing" with Johnsey as well as to the "failed" masculine authoritativeness, ability, and determination that these economic inadequacies imply. Given their lack of employment, assets, and prospects, these men, the novel suggests, "have no access to [traditional forms of] breadwinner masculinity" and, as Salzinger claims, therefore "become excess, categorically unfit" to meet the needs or expectations

of the market and, by extension, to benefit from the boom (9). Compared to Johnsey, these men embody a “wholesale lack of value” in contemporary Ireland (Salzinger 15), and they are thus “coded as unruly [and] undisciplined” (9). Again, though it makes up only a secondary part of the novel’s overall assessment of the detriments of the Celtic Tiger, the men’s violence against Johnsey and the ways in which it reflects typical ways of reasserting heteronormative or hegemonic masculinity points, in simple terms, to the degree to which the Celtic Tiger’s neoliberal modernity puts pressure on every aspect of Irish subjectivity, including the “non-monetary” aspects such as gender.

Despite this passing reference to the gendered dimension of the neoliberal culture of the Celtic Tiger, Ryan’s primary focus in the novel remains on the underlying damage of Ireland’s economic developments. As I have shown, the novelist points specifically to the characters’ violent actions against one another as evidence of the unfortunate consequences of the boom. He explicitly shows, again, how the aforementioned displays of aggression or outright violence by Packie, McDermott, and Penrose are a direct result of the ostensibly positive “big news” circulating in the town (88):

The council inside the town had been to-ing and fro-ing and fighting and arguing for years and had finally made a big decision. A load of the land to the west of the village had been *rezoned*. That meant that instead of being simply fields of grass for tilling and grazing, the land the council had marked out with a red marker and put on display on a map for all to see inside in the civic offices was now land on which houses, shops, hotels, and what have you could be built. That land included all of Daddy’s, and nearly all the Creamers’, and half of Paddy Rourke’s and a bit of the McDermotts’. (88-9)

However, though Ryan clearly deploys the displays of aggression, selfishness, and brutality that arise out this news—news the characters perceive as “the best thing that could ever happen to any small village” (89)—to call attention to the overt social degeneration brought on by the boom, the novelist also uses the consequences of this development to make a point about the more significant, albeit more subtle, violence of neoliberal ideologies on Irish people. Put another way, though Ryan certainly demonstrates how this land boom exacerbates his characters’ hostile tendencies and how this hostility, in turn, exemplifies the ways the Celtic Tiger was not an altogether auspicious development in Ireland, he also uses the crisis that this land boom provokes for his protagonist to show the destructive nature of neoliberalism on contemporary Irish subjectivity. It is this final point to which I want to turn.

As the character most affected by the “big decision” to rezone the land outside the town (88), Johnsey Cunliffe is at the heart of Ryan’s critique of Celtic Tiger neoliberalism. He is the character for whom the socioeconomic upshots of this decision are most significant, and, as such, comes to exemplify, in the text, the ways in which the true damage of the neoliberal ideology of the Celtic Tiger—the New Irish Dream—is inflicted not on the Irish market or even on Irish society broadly, but, rather, on the Irish subject. As is probably already apparent, Johnsey is the novel’s most obvious loser character, and it is largely by exploring Johnsey’s loserdom and, of course, the violence that emerges from it that Ryan critiques the damage of neoliberalism. Throughout *The Thing About December*, Ryan repeatedly points to Johnsey’s failures, fecklessness, and his general uselessness: he shows that the character is incapable of farming his family’s small plot, that he is very much a loner, that he relies on his parents (and his parents’

friends) to care for him, etc. However, whereas Johnsey's loser qualities are relatively inconsequential early in the text and primarily serve to show the character's pathetic state, they become very significant in the latter half of the novel after the land decision alters his community's economic prospects as well as his own. Indeed, after the town council approves this "rezoning" and the value of the Cunliffe land increases exponentially, Ryan's depiction of the very nature of Johnsey's loserdom shifts. Rather than stemming solely from Johnsey's social ineptness and apparent stuntedness—we learn, for example, that he "had never really spoken to a girl besides Mother and the aunties" (18) and that, after his mother dies, he is too much "of a gom" to "get on with the important business of burying [his] mother and sorting out [her] affairs" (50)—his loserdom emanates more directly from his economic failures. In the later portions of the novel, that is, Ryan portrays Johnsey's loserdom as a matter of the character's uncertainty about how to navigate the new economic realities shaping his town, and, more importantly, his failure in adopting a neoliberal subjectivity based on the idea that "there are no motivations, drives, or aspirations apart from economic ones" (W. Brown 44), a subjectivity, in short, rooted in ambition and upward-mobility. Johnsey's loserdom, in simple terms, results from his failures in aligning himself with the role his community—and, by extension, Celtic Tiger Ireland—requires of him, *homo oeconomicus*, and Ryan uses the character's "economic loserdom" to foreground the fundamental destructiveness of such neoliberal ideologies and identities to Irish subjects.

In the scenes following Johnsey's vicious beating at the hands of Penrose and his gang, Ryan explicitly demonstrates how both the changing socioeconomic realities of Johnsey's home and the increasing demands put on Johnsey himself, aggravate the

character's already strong sense of inadequacy, failure, powerlessness, and loserdom broadly. On a superficial level, for instance, Ryan depicts Johnsey as troubled by the idea of conspicuous consumption. The character is mystified, overwhelmed, and even paralyzed by his friend Mumbly Dave's suggestion that he ought to "take what's offered" by Ireland's economic boom and ought to make the most of his new wealth by purchasing "a couple of them nice shirts," a few pairs of "*boot cut* jeans," those "nice slip on shoes," and even "a nice blazer or a leather jacket" (156). Bemoaning the compulsory nature of this kind of consumption—and, arguably, the "commodification of idealized . . . masculinity [and] narrow models of manhood" that are "fed to the consumer under the aegis of free choice" (C. O'Brien 127)—Johnsey wonders why it is that "you can have no say in what happens to you," and claims, in a notable admission of his loserdom, that it is "probably because he'd choose for nothing to ever happen [to] him and he'd live out his days behind the window, looking out" (157-8). Ryan shows, in short, how having to not only consume but also behave according to the prescribed norms of Celtic Tiger society exacerbates Johnsey's sense of inadequacy. Rather than liberating the character, the ostensible economic freedom of Ireland's Celtic Tiger culture only re-affirms Johnsey's sense of failure in fitting-in with his community.

However, by far the most potent example Ryan offers of the ways the Celtic Tiger realities compound Johnsey's sense of failure and loserdom consists of his depiction of the character's inability to navigate the pressures put on him to do something with his land. In his depictions of Johnsey's encounters with his neighbours, Paddy Rourke and Herbert Grogan, for example, Ryan demonstrates how the obligation, under neoliberalism, to profit or otherwise enhance one's value proves devastating for Johnsey

and, indeed, engenders nothing in the character but an anomic experience in which he becomes fully aware of his failures in the community and his status as an outsider in the town (W. Brown 10). When, for example, Paddy warns Johnsey not only about the fact that “every little sneaky prick in the country is watching to see what’ll you do about the land” (117), but also about the fact that those like McDermott might try to “grab all [Johnsey’s land] inside the courthouse by making out [that he is] soft in the head” (120), Johnsey remains unsure how to process this information. Moreover, after Paddy implores Johnsey to “farm your own land or sell it or sell some of it but . . . don’t leave it to [the] rats” (120), the latter simply lets “Paddy’s words [settle] softly on the cracked ground” and essentially does nothing (121). In suggesting that Paddy leaves Johnsey in such a manner “as to say to hell with this, you’re only a gom, I’m wasting precious time trying to talk sense to you” (120), Ryan emphasizes the degree to which Johnsey is paralyzed by the compulsion to take control of his land. He shows, more specifically, that the character’s failure and disappointment (e.g. his loserdom) arise from his inability to fall in with what the community expects of him, namely, to profit from this farm. As Paddy’s words show, it is not a matter of deciding whether or not to profit from the land, but rather a matter of deciding *how* to profit from it—recall, again, that he directs Johnsey to sell it or to farm it himself.<sup>41</sup> As such, Johnsey’s inability to act on Paddy’s appeals about

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<sup>41</sup> Though land is valuable in a strictly economic sense for the Ryan’s characters, it also proves valuable in a more symbolic way. The community’s significant regard for land recalls nationalist narratives linking the struggle for independence to the desire to reclaim Irish land confiscated during British colonialism. Though a comprehensive outline of the history of Irish land is far beyond the scope of this chapter, the history of the colonial land appropriation inflects Ryan’s depictions of the characters’ anxieties regarding the land. For example, Johnsey’s dithering over what to do with his farm is evocative of the connection between the projects of Irish self-determination or self-realization that undergird both the land development schemes of the Celtic Tiger era and the symbolic re-

finding some way to profit from his assets, and, by extension, to make the most of the boom, induce the protagonist's sense of loserdom. Put simply, as Paddy leaves Johnsey, Ryan characterizes his protagonist's economic paralysis not only as a failure to "compete" and participate in the marketplace, but as the very reason why the character is, as Paddy imagines, a "disgraceful end to a long line of great men" (120).

In a similar scene in which another neighbour, Herbert Grogan, attempts to convince Johnsey to "sell [his] land, without delay, to a consortium of mainly locals who [have] progress and employment at their heart" (125), Johnsey, again, demonstrates how his inability to act according to the economic desires and aspirations of his community and, as such, to fall in line with the economic imperatives of the Celtic Tiger engender his loser status in the community. As he reflects on Grogan's offer, Johnsey claims that it would be "a fright to God [that] a man could end up being a bar to progress and could deny jobs to half the village and wealth to all" (126). However, like in his interaction with Paddy, Johnsey remains reluctant to have his land "grabbed away for good and covered over with concrete" given that, as we later learn, the land represents his father's labour: the man "gave his life to it . . . sweated over it . . . and killed himself trying to mind it and drag a living out of it" (127, 144).<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, the implication in this scene

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appropriation of Irish land achieved through political independence. This implicit connection, though not directly relevant to Ryan's point about the damage of neoliberalism, harks to the stakes of renegotiating a national identity in view of the boom. That Ireland's postcolonial self-assertion reverberates in its contemporary attempt to carve out a modern identity amidst a booming, deregulated economy gestures towards the danger of tying the validity of national identity to specific motivations, especially those of economic success.

<sup>42</sup> Though it is subtle and largely inconsequential to Ryan's broader point about the violence of neoliberalism, the way in which Johnsey imagines selling his land as a kind of betrayal of his father's legacy hints at the gendered undercurrent of Ryan's depiction of his protagonist's failure. As Ní Laoire's explains, given the "socio-cultural

and those that follow is that though Johnsey himself recognizes the frustration and disappointment his refusal represents—Johnsey claims, for instance, that it is only after Grogan leaves that he “could breathe again” (128)—he remains effectively incapable of doing what his neighbours think he should. Again, though he claims neither to want to “bar progress” nor to stop those who want to “better this community and build for the future” (126), Johnsey nonetheless refuses to sell his land given that he feels it is not his to sell. In doing this, Johnsey incurs the wrath of the community who see his refusal to sell as a matter of money and, thus, as an example of Johnsey’s “gross indecency . . . staggering greed . . . arrogance” (140). In refusing to go along with the rest of the townspeople’s ambitions, Johnsey confirms that he is fundamentally unlike them, a misfit and “a rotten yoke” amidst a community bent on “improv[ing] their lives and hous[ing] their children and secur[ing] the future of their little hinterland” (140). Ryan shows, in other words, that by virtue of his unwillingness to agree to the requests of his neighbours—even those he likes, such as Grogan or the Unthanks—and by resisting the obligation to profit from his asset, and to benefit the community, Johnsey solidifies his place as a contemporary failure, a loser in a town determined to win.

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construction of farming as a masculine activity,” the “decision . . . to sell or lease the land, even . . . for development can imply the culpability of the farmer for what is seen as the loss of the family inheritance” and is, therefore, a dereliction of one’s “masculine responsibilities” (108). Though Johnsey is not a farmer himself, his conflation of the land and his father—a reflection, of course, of a sense of “Irish rural masculinity [that is] closely associated with land-ownership, control of property . . . tenacity, self-reliance, [and] autonomy” (Ní Laoire 97)—suggests that to sell the land represents a failure to live up to these gendered expectations. The character’s resistance in selling the farm speaks to the difficulties of navigating the “changing gender order” of contemporary Ireland and, specifically, the changing ideals of masculine duty within the Celtic Tiger context (107).

Though the scenes in which Johnsey essentially fails his community by turning “a deaf ear to his neighbours’ appeals for sanity in his approach to the brokering of a massive property deal” clearly demonstrate the negative social effects of contemporary Celtic Tiger aspirations (138), Ryan’s more incisive critique of Irish neoliberalism stems from his depiction of his protagonist’s experience of this failure. Put another way, despite demonstrating the sense of isolation and inadequacy that arises out of Johnsey’s failure to fall in with his neighbours’ shared desire for economic prosperity as well as the social tension that comes from Johnsey being “a drag on [the market] rather than a contribution to it” (W. Brown 84), Ryan’s depiction of Johnsey’s own guilt in relation to these failures enables him to point to and critique the most damaging and symbolically violent aspect of neoliberal ideologies: namely, the ways in which it requires that one *wants* to compete, *wants* to be rich, *wants* to exceed and ascend over others.<sup>43</sup>

In the final chapters of the novel, after Paddy Rourke, Herbert Grogan, and others confirm that Johnsey is “the talk of the village below” (131), the protagonist effectively shuts himself into his house and agonizes over the fact that he has become a scourge precisely “by doing nothing” (131). In these sections, the character refuses to “[set] foot outside the gate anymore” (178), and spends his days lamenting the fact that the turmoil in the town and in his mind “all boiled down to Johnsey Cunliffe” (163). Ryan portrays Johnsey, here, as being distraught by the fact that “a man could have such luck and . . . have nothing only misery come of it” (179). However, in these final scenes, Ryan shows that Johnsey’s tremendous trepidation about the land issue and his incredibly strong sense

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<sup>43</sup> Recall McWilliams succinct description of the ideology of what he calls “the Expectocracy” and the New Irish Dream: “I want it all and I want it now . . . I wanna [sic] be number one and no-one is going to stop me” (*Pope* 54).

of failure, inadequacy, and ineffectualness stem not simply from the hostility or even external violence to which he is subjected by his neighbours for failing to satisfy their economic aspirations. Rather, they stem from the fact that Johnsey fails to value these economic aspirations. Johnsey's repeated references to the fact that he wishes "he'd done away with his stupid self while he'd had the impetus" (191), the novel suggests, come not from the fact that he has upset his neighbours, but rather that he has failed in a more ambiguous way. To use Brown's formulation, Johnsey's degeneration—which, in the text, is manifest in Johnsey's extreme sense of his own loserdom and his suicidal tendencies—stems from his inability to align himself with a "neoliberal rationality" that dictates that "capital is both our 'is' and *our 'ought'*—what we are said to be [and] what we *should* be" (W. Brown 36 emphasis mine). It stems from the character's realization that selling his father's land and satisfying his community's desires would not, ultimately, eliminate the pressure he is under, given that this sale would not represent his adoption of a zealous, ambitious, or competitive subjectivity. In revealing that Johnsey is the only character who "could see past big auld plans for cinemas and shops and matchbox houses" and the only one who seems aware that "only the same few fat fuckers that was running the show all along and making pure-solid fools of the whole country" would be the ones "who'd benefit" (180), the novel shows that Johnsey's true failure is not in refusing to sell the land, but in adopting a subjectivity driven by ambition and enterprise. In the same way, it shows that the true violence of the Celtic Tiger and of neoliberalism more broadly is not simply that it creates a damaging, competitive arena by pitting Irish subjects against each other—those "haves" such as Johnsey and "the haven-nots" such as Penrose (175). Instead, the violence of the Celtic Tiger stems from the way in which it

“swallows humanity” by configuring not only how subjects ought to act, but how they ought to want to act (W. Brown 44). In these scenes, Ryan takes issue with what Brown calls the neoliberal “form of valuation” (44): Johnsey’s demise, we see, is a result of his inability to value the right things (e.g. profits from selling his land, economic improvement of the town, etc.) as much as it is a result of his inability to value in the right ways (e.g. to want profits, to aspire to betterment).

That Johnsey dies in a violent way in the final scene of *The Thing About December* reemphasizes Ryan’s critique of the detrimental effects of the Celtic Tiger on Irish society and, more precisely, on his Irish protagonist. On the one hand, in his depiction of Johnsey getting killed by Gardaí after he emerges from his house with his father’s gun, unable to deal with the pressure “building up and up, waiting to explode in on top of him” (204), Ryan makes literal the underlying or internal violence of the confusion, uncertainty, anxiety, wrought by the socioeconomic transformations of the Celtic Tiger. He dramatizes, in other words, what is at stake in attempting to navigate contemporary socioeconomic realities, and, more importantly, he harks to the underlying perils not simply of failing to flourish in the context of the boom but of failing to adopt a Celtic Tiger subjectivity. Johnsey’s violent death in this final scene, Ryan shows, is the culmination of his figurative loss of self amidst the pressures of contemporary Ireland. Where, earlier, Johnsey is unable to make sense of his neighbours’ demands, or, at the very least, his duty in relation to their demands, he is here literally unable to make sense of what the police are saying to him: using a bullhorn, they appeal to Johnsey in language

in which “none of them words made any sense” (205).<sup>44</sup> Though Johnsey’s humanity has already been figuratively erased by the land boom—he has, again, been reduced to an economic function by and for the community—he is, here, literally destroyed by the Guards. In an act of force directed at an uncooperative subject—both in an economic sense, as we have seen, and in a more direct sense, given that he points his gun at the police to “give these boys a fright [so that they] go on away and leave him alone” (204)—the police kill Johnsey, the failure. Though Johnsey is never really part of the community and is really just a barrier to their success, this violence finally removes him completely from the community and their ambitious plans, and, as the novel’s final words suggest, “it’s like [he was] never there” (205).

By ending *The Thing About December* so suddenly and with such a forceful, violent act, Ryan calls attention to the potency of neoliberal ideologies in his fictional town and, by extension, in Ireland more broadly. He portrays, that is, both his characters’ experience of the threat of failure during the Celtic Tiger period and, of course, Irish society’s unwillingness to pass up the economic opportunities that had finally arrived on the island. His protagonist’s violent death, in other words, speaks to the uncompromising nature of Celtic Tiger ideology and Irish people’s unwavering acceptance of neoliberalism’s injunction to consume as much as possible, profit in every endeavour, and continually upstage others. The novel shows, overall, how in a period of seemingly

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<sup>44</sup> The fact that Johnsey fails to understand the Gardaí’s words as they effectively encroach on his family’s farm subtly calls back, again, to earlier struggles for self-assertion during periods of tremendous social change. Specifically, the scene seems to play off of historical accounts of Irish-speaking tenants being evicted by English-speaking police officers during the Famine, an event which decimated the Irish speaking population.

assured personal and national socioeconomic success, all obstacles, complications, and setbacks needed to be (if not literally, then at least symbolically) eradicated, and its abrupt ending emphasizes the readiness with which society undertook this eradication in its pursuit of its long-awaited prosperity.

### **2.3. The Threat of “Endless Possibilities”: Resisting Loss and Fighting Failure in Peter Cunningham’s *Capital Sins***

Unlike Ryan’s tremendously bleak second novel, Peter Cunningham’s *Capital Sins* tackles the economic shifts of the Celtic Tiger and the concomitant unsettling of Irish society using humour. Given the otherwise unremarkable stylistic qualities of *Capital Sins*, the humour is notable, especially in that, according to Cunningham, it is part and parcel of the novel’s exploration of failure. On the role of humour in his depiction of Ireland’s boom (and bust), Cunningham himself suggested that “Ireland is a naturally self-deprecating country” and that “when people can laugh at the outrageous . . . it means they have not been defeated” (Agudo 244). Though Cunningham has repeatedly clarified that he “started writing *Capital Sins* in 2006-2007, before there was any collapse of the Celtic Tiger” (243), his emphasis on humour and its relationships to “defeat” and failure has, understandably, led many to view the novel strictly in terms of Ireland’s economic downturn. In what little scholarship exists on *Capital Sins*, critics tend to focus primarily on the text’s depiction of the impending collapse of the Celtic Tiger, and most read it in relation to the unfortunate socioeconomic outcomes of Ireland’s boom. Elices argues, for instance, that Cunningham “construct[s] a bitterly farcical portrait of Ireland and evince[s] the weak foundations that sustained its ephemeral economic outburst” (38),

but he limits his analysis to the ways in which the text deploys “satire as a mechanism to denounce and ridicule the excesses both the government and the citizenship revelled in throughout [the Celtic Tiger period] and which eventually led to the EU bailout of the Irish financial system” (38). Likewise, though her brief exploration of *Capital Sins* focuses on how Cunningham’s peripheral immigrant characters are “active [participants] in the rise and downfall of the Celtic Tiger” (89), Estévez-Saá describes Cunningham’s work as “a pioneering novel fictionalizing Ireland’s economic collapse” and a text whose critique concerns “the egotism and lack of scruples that led Ireland to the socioeconomic crisis” (87). And though these critics are right to point to the novel’s engagement with the excesses that led to the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, they fail to consider its examination of the ways Ireland’s economic realities *during* the boom affected Irish motivations, behaviours, and subjectivities. They overlook, that is, the novel’s consideration of the effects and consequences of Ireland’s economic upturn on Irish subjects and their day-to-day lives.

Given Cunningham’s obvious interest in how the forces of neoliberalism shaped Irish subjectivities during the boom, I focus here on the novelist’s depiction of his three protagonists’ attempts to navigate the realities and demands of the Celtic Tiger and I make two key arguments. First of all, in showing how the characters of *Capital Sins* are defined by their economic roles as well as to how these roles inevitably produce the characters’ feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and failure—their sense of loserdom, in other words—I argue that Cunningham critiques the underlying damage of Celtic Tiger neoliberalism on Irish society. More specifically, I suggest that Cunningham uses loserdom to challenge the idea that the Celtic Tiger was entirely beneficial for Irish

subjects. However, by showing how Cunningham also emphasizes the ways in which the protagonists' economic subjectivities and their loser qualities are distinctly gendered—that is, the ways in which they are tied in with their sense of masculinity—I allude to the way Cunningham's critique of the Celtic Tiger hinges in large part on the way neoliberalism permeates every facet of Irish subjectivity. From there, I turn to the novel's more explicitly violent scenes and argue that Cunningham comments on the merits of the Celtic Tiger by portraying this violence as a response to the prospect of failing or losing within Ireland's neoliberal conditions. In other words, the ways in which violence, hostility, and aggression are intertwined with questions of economic loserdom demonstrate, I argue, the damaging effects of neoliberal ideologies (e.g. the New Irish Dream) in Ireland. Again though, by hinting at the ways in which Cunningham's depictions of violence are always, in some way, linked with issues of hegemonic masculinity, I suggest that the novel also critiques the macho culture of the Celtic Tiger. Given these allusions to the innately "masculine" quality of this Celtic Tiger violence, I contend that although *Capital Sins* is primarily a critique of the damaging effects of neoliberalism in Ireland, it also offers a subtle critique of the very masculine culture of the Celtic Tiger—that embodied, in particular, by those bankers and developers such as Seán Dunne, Seán Fitzpatrick, Michael Fingleton, etc.—that facilitated or exacerbated the establishment of these damaging neoliberal realities in Ireland.<sup>45</sup>

*Capital Sins* tells the story of three men during the final year of Ireland's economic boom: Albert Barr, a wealthy property-developer bent on securing a large site

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<sup>45</sup> In the interview with Agudo cited above, Cunningham himself claims that *Capital Sins* engages with and satirizes "real life public figures in the country" (243).

in Dublin and developing it into a massive commercial and residential centre; Lee Carew, a cynical journalist who, after losing his job, “stumble[s] on information that could destroy Albert’s grand scheme and bring down bankers, fat cats and politicians alike” (Mac Anna); and Dr. Eric Chester, the chairman of the Hibernian Universal Business Bank Ireland (HUBBI), faced with the task of saving his bank from insolvency. Though the men’s respective storylines generally develop independently, each depicts the characters’ attempts to navigate their prospective failures as “marketized” Irish subjects.

From the outset of *Capital Sins*, Cunningham draws attention to the ways in which his protagonists are figuratively confined by the socioeconomic pressures of the Celtic Tiger, or, at the very least, the degree to which these pressures govern their actions. He shows, in effect, how the characters fundamentally embody the role of *homo oeconomicus*, and, moreover, focuses on the highly gendered, or masculine, nature of this role.<sup>46</sup> The novel opens, for instance, by introducing Albert Barr as a character whose subjectivity is entirely circumscribed by his role as an entrepreneur, as a participant, in short, in a Celtic Tiger economy whose “winning streak . . . looked as if it could never end” (CS 1). “Sometimes on those Saturday mornings,” we learn, “Albert wondered if he was ever going to be free. To soar beyond his worries and be truly happy, to wake up on Saturday morning and not have to think about the net-net, the bottom line” (1). Though we are told that Barr belongs to “the first generation of Irishmen to make money at home, to realise their true potential” and that men like him are “a breed apart from ordinary people” (1), this introduction, nonetheless, suggests that Ireland’s favourable economic

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<sup>46</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising, given that, as I have already mentioned, the standard form of neoliberal subjectivity—that of *homo oeconomicus*—is, according to Wendy Brown, “socially male and masculinist” (107).

conditions and the innumerable financial opportunities born out of these conditions both dictate his lifestyle and define who he is. Barr may be a man, but his masculine role is subordinate to his role as an agent of the economy; his gender is only relevant insofar as it links him with those other “men like himself,” those “kings of the earth” who essentially birthed the boom. Put another way, Barr is a marketized subject in the purest sense: rather than his role as a father or husband, Barr’s identity, the text explicitly shows, is fundamentally tied to the character’s ranking “on Ireland’s Rich List” (1). He is defined by his possessions, affluence, and social status rather than by his morals or personal relationships. “He wasn’t free,” the narrator claims, “because of the financial commitments with which all [his] *things* had been acquired” (2 ital. in original). Like with Barr, the novel ties Dr. Eric Chester to his economic role in society and his embodiment of Ireland’s seismic economic shift. Not only does the novel show the man’s connection with the banking world by demonstrating how his days are made up of meetings with various financial committees (35), it also demonstrates this connection by suggesting that Chester and his bank are symbolically one and the same. Chester, we learn, “had celebrated his fiftieth birthday with the coming into being of the new millennium, a confluence of one man and his planet [and] in the year 2000 HUBBI had gone stratospheric” (36-7). Likewise, after HUBBI’s bad loans become public knowledge, the narrator recounts that the investigation by “government regulators, lawmakers, [and] law enforcers” into the bank’s operations aim primarily to find “the telling moment when HUBBI ceased to be run as a bank and became an extension of Eric Chester’s personality” (238). And, just as with Barr, the narrative frames Chester’s economic subjectivity as circumscribing his masculine identity. As chairman of HUBBI,

Chester is not only responsible for ensuring the bank's financial growth, but also responsible for directing his exclusively male committees. His ability to manage a financial institution is one and the same as his ability to manage the men that the bank employs. Overall, as these early descriptions show, Chester and Barr represent the idea that though "Ireland had . . . caught up with the rest of the world" (37), those men responsible for the country's progress, those "broad-chested former block layers and plumbers, chippies and plasterers who had made fortunes as if out of thin air" (1), have, in creating the boom, become fundamentally defined by and inextricably linked to the financial realm. These characters *are*, in effect, the Celtic Tiger, and they foreground the ways the Celtic Tiger economy has reconfigured every facet of Irish subjectivity and subordinated subjectivity to the needs of the economy.

Though Cunningham clearly shows how these characters' economic activities and concerns define them as a way of illustrating how Ireland's neoliberal modernity reduced humanity to "mere life" (W. Brown 44), he also uses these links to demonstrate and critique the self-perpetuating quality of the socioeconomic forces of the Celtic Tiger. The way the characters fundamentally embody their economic roles demonstrates, that is, how the Celtic Tiger sustains itself by forcing neoliberal subjects "to engage in a particular form of self-sustenance that meshes with . . . the [continuing] health of the economy" (W. Brown 84). To maintain their success in boomtime Ireland, these characters are compelled not only to maintain their roles as agents of the Irish market, but also to accept that the needs of this market can never actually be satisfied. With regard to Chester, for instance, the narrator claims, "he knew that his work would never be finished" and that "he was never satisfied" (35). Ultimately though, the novel emphasizes that it is as a

result of the chairman's ability to continually meet the needs of the market that "HUBBI had come to be a major force in Irish banking" (35). Likewise, after a health-scare involving a burst rectal polyp and his ongoing inability to urinate, Barr hints at the lack of genuine security or satisfaction available in achieving prosperity: he wonders, "what was it all about if, despite his money, he was bunged up like this every morning," literally and figuratively unable to "buy . . . himself comfort" (48). Barr also alludes to these same unrelenting demands of success when he suggests that the "trouble was, everything was intertwined," and that his "cross-guarantees on a dozen or more loans" entail that "he couldn't just write a cheque for ten million and disappear" (48). Cunningham shows that, in conceding that "it didn't work like that" (48), Barr clearly understands that maintaining his strong socioeconomic standing in Celtic Tiger Ireland requires his ongoing participation in the marketplace. Preserving Celtic Tiger subjectivities—and, by extension, that sense of contemporary Celtic Tiger Irishness that seemed to debunk conventional stereotypes of "the Irish as lazy, indolent [and] undisciplined" (Dobbins 25)—forces Cunningham's characters to re-commit themselves *in perpetuo* to the needs of the Celtic Tiger and to neoliberal ideologies in which, as Chester claims, "cash [is] the lifeblood that everything depended on" (49). The novelist's point here is simply that though the characters clearly benefit in a strictly economic sense, their compulsive commitments to the needs of the Irish market circumscribe their lives. The Celtic Tiger and its demands erase the characters' humanity—metonymized, in the text, by their masculine identities or roles—and reduce them, in short, to mere instruments of capitalism.

Just as in *The Thing About December*, the characters' compulsion to pursue economic success at all cost clearly betrays Cunningham's broader concern with the unfortunate by-products of Celtic Tiger responsibilities; namely, the overwhelming anxiety and sense of inadequacy that Ireland's rapid move into this neoliberal modernity generates for Irish subjects. In other words, the unease both Barr and Chester experience with regard to their abilities to maintain their success in contemporary Ireland reveals the inherent ambivalence that results from submitting to the Celtic Tiger doctrines of endless possibility. Reflecting on the obstacles he faces in finalizing his acquisition of the Goose Point site and of ensuring that the land is suitable for development, for instance, Barr bemoans "the banks, the banks" and "the pressure, the pressure" while condemning the "little farts with the title of underwriters" who scrutinize "his every move" and ensure that "every potential risk [remains] underpinned and buttressed by his assets" (47). He complains that "it wasn't fair to ask one man to take so much pressure" (47). That the Goose Point development promises to be "extraordinary" and "Albert's masterpiece" is effectively undermined, in these scenes, by the uncertainty surrounding it (7). Barr's anxiety about the site and about "what would happen" if he ultimately fails to develop it (47), in other words, counteracts any of its symbolic or literal value for the character and therefore hints at the undependable nature of the boom's benefits. Similarly, in the scene in which Chester picks up a newspaper featuring an "in-depth analysis regarding HUBBI's upcoming quarterly result," the banker sees an accompanying photograph of him looking "doleful [and] apprehensive" (37). Though the article describes how HUBBI "had reported sixty-five successive quarterly earnings increases," Chester's "apprehensive" appearance subtly indicates that the "[endless] expectations of the

market” also imply, for him, the inevitability of disappointment or of failure—these “successive increases” can only continue for so long (37). The pressure to continually improve, expand, and exceed in the marketplace of the Celtic Tiger, indeed, proves to be Chester’s “overarching worry, [the] umbrella beneath which all his other worries huddled” (35). Despite repeatedly claiming that he “hate[s] [the] kind of cautious shit [i.e. investing]” his head of risk, Fagan, recommends (55)—he even claims that “if he’d taken on board Fagan’s advice . . . HUBBI would still be funding supermarket inventories” (42)—and despite consistently encouraging his executive committees to “start concentrating on opportunities that [HUBBI’s powerful economic] position has created” (153), Chester remains anxious about the possibility of what he calls “a completely doomsday scenario” (55). He worries, more importantly, what such a scenario would mean or him personally (55). This debilitating fear that Chester experiences as “surreal: out of body, unreal, not actually happening, weird, unnatural” reveals the underlying personal strain of navigating Ireland’s socioeconomic “opportunities” and of embracing a neoliberal ideology in which one’s value is proportionate to one’s ability to profit (151). Chester’s generally “queasy and apprehensive” demeanour about how he and his bank will fare on the market demonstrates, in short, how the apparent benefits of the boom are always compromised by the underlying pressure to thrive amidst this boom, to reap the rewards of the Celtic Tiger economy (145). Just as with Barr, Cunningham shows that though it promises—and, in some ways, provides—opportunity and wealth, the Celtic Tiger, for Chester, really only creates anguish and is, as such, of limited value. Like Barr, whose anxiety ultimately leads him “to regret Goose Point, to regret that he had been egged on by banks such as HUBBI” and to curse “the fickleness of fate, [and] the absence

of mercy in his life” (71), Chester comes to regret the sense of “unlimited optimism and insatiable greed, [the] arrogance, pride, smugness, [and] sense of overweening superiority” that enabled him to establish his significant personal wealth (228).

Cunningham shows how Barr and Chester come to resent the “endless possibilities” of the market, the very conditions that engendered their success, because of the ways in which these possibilities are structurally undergirded by the possibility of failure and inadequacy (37). One’s success in the Celtic Tiger, these characters see, is always on the cusp of being undermined by failure.

Although he does not operate within the Celtic Tiger economy in quite the same way as Barr or Chester, the character of Lee Carew also betrays an uneasiness fundamentally rooted in the demands or expectations of neoliberal Ireland. Whereas Barr and Chester’s anxiety stems from their need to preserve their economic success and not be reduced to economic “losers,” Carew’s anxiety and loserdom emerge specifically from the journalist and former mechanic’s ostensible inability to navigate the demands of the market and, more importantly, from his inability to reconcile his own personal aspirations with accepted (neoliberal) modes of participating in Ireland’s Celtic Tiger. First of all, as a journalist employed by a tabloid focused on selling issues to a readership that only wants “tits . . . pussy and salacious gossip” (28), Carew develops an anxiety about his failure in resisting the economic drivers embodied by the paper. Though he objects to the pressure to write sensationalized features as a way of generating revenue for the newspaper and thereby saving his job, Carew is, nonetheless, unable to determine any

alternative means of situating himself and asserting his value within the Celtic Tiger.<sup>47</sup> Given how thoroughly he is shaped by the demands of the market, Carew is not even able to imagine what such an alternative form of personal value or subjectivity might look like. When his therapist (and later girlfriend), Gwen, questions him about his desire to be a writer, and specifically asks him what he would “really like to write about,” Carew responds that “that’s the problem; I have no idea” (59). He admits that “nothing inspires [him]” (59). Though Carew is clearly determined to resist the journalistic compulsion to produce “ordure” that will sell (26)—the editor, Eddie, reminds Carew that “we don’t have readers anymore[,] we have consumers” and that consumers want “anything but fucking news!” (27)—the marketization of his role as a journalist and writer leaves him without the means of producing or embodying anything of value. Of course, as with Barr and Chester, Carew’s economic identity, or lack thereof, extends into his identity as a man. In describing Carew’s inability to adapt to the new market realities of the Celtic Tiger, Cunningham explicitly pits the character’s failure against his father’s readiness to “get a trade” as a means of supporting his family (56). Carew’s failures as an economic subject, in other words, are directly compared to his father’s willingness to work in a garage and to make something of himself as a man by starting a successful mechanic shop and providing for his family (57). In simple terms, though Cunningham shows that Carew is not without ambitions—the narrator later claims that, in his failure to both preserve his father’s business and to refuse to abide by the demands of the newspaper

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<sup>47</sup> Carew is forced to write articles, for instance, about a mackerel whose “heart [has] grown around [a] medal” of “Our Lady of Guatemala” (30-3), and “a young Polish-Irish player [on] a hurling team [whose] Polish immigrant family [relates] to well-known public figures such as Lech Wałęsa or John Paul II” (Estévez-Saá 88).

editors, Carew has simply “up to then, failed to fulfil his own ambitions” (87)—he also shows that contemporary Irish society’s neoliberal reality stifles the character’s creativity and gives rise to his inability to, in Gwen’s words, “dig deep at times like these” (59). In the novel’s conception, Carew’s personal crisis is shaped by both his failure to negotiate or overcome the marketization of his subjectivity, and, as such, is indicative of the personal and social cost of Celtic Tiger neoliberalism.

In characterizing his three protagonists, Cunningham clearly gestures to the incongruity that exists within the notion of success in the Celtic Tiger period. He points, that is, to the idea that rather than producing satisfaction, gratification, and freedom, Ireland’s “neoliberalization” during the Celtic Tiger generates nothing more than anxieties about losing money and status, about failing to adapt to the country’s new market realities, about inadequately embracing the confidence and assertiveness of the Celtic Tiger “persona,” and, ultimately, about degenerating into both a literal and figurative form of loserdom. Though Barr, Chester, and Carew are perhaps not paralyzed by the Celtic Tiger’s demands in quite the same way as Johnsey in *The Thing About December*, these characters are nonetheless victims of a neoliberal compulsion to succeed and of a culturally-conditioned responsibility to make money, either for themselves or others. Moreover, like Johnsey, the three epitomize the anxieties and uncertainties that the Celtic Tiger produced along with economic prosperity. Cunningham shows that they embody an existential crisis rooted in the possibility of failing to make good on Ireland’s contemporary economic potential and, therefore, highlight the underlying drawbacks of Irish society’s immersion into what it broadly imagines as its long-awaited, if not predestined, economic entitlement.

Before turning to my second major point about how this cultural sense of economic anxiety leads to violence, it is worth briefly re-emphasizing the ways questions of masculinity fit into Cunningham's critique of the damaging neoliberalism of the Celtic Tiger. I want to quickly show, specifically, how, just as Cunningham ties his characters' economic subjectivities to their masculine identities, he also links their economically-conditioned anxieties, inadequacies, or loserdom to their failures (or prospective failures) as men. Though this intersection between Ireland's economic context and notions of gender is, as we will see, especially significant to Cunningham's critique of the symbolic violence of the Celtic Tiger, I simply want to call attention to the ways Cunningham aligns his characters' primarily "economic" loserdom with their failures as men as a means of showing the ways the neoliberal ideology of the Celtic Tiger encompasses every facet of these characters' subjectivities, and again, reduces individual subjects to market actors.

In the aforementioned scene in which Barr reflects on the ambiguity surrounding the development of Goose Point and the prospect that he will be unable to pay back his significant debts (47), for example, the character explicitly connects his prospective economic downfall with his ostensible failure as a father. Barr's stress about "wash[ing] away all his . . . debts" is particularly severe in the scene because such a failure means he will not be able to provide for his family (48). With respect to his children, he suggests that his potential financial ruin means that he cannot "squirrel away enough money" to "educate the girls," to buy them "Wellington boots[,] plaid jackets [and] foals" (48). In that Barr's financial failure portends his failure as a "breadwinner" or "provider"—a crucial component of the "configuration of traditional hegemonic masculinity in Ireland"

(H. Ferguson 121)—the novel connects his economic loserdom with his failures as a father and family man. The novel shows, in a broader sense, how, within neoliberalism, “definitions of hegemonic masculinity in Ireland have . . . shifted [from] breadwinner ideals to a new global transnational business masculinity” (Hanlon and Lynch 45-6), but also, more importantly, how the innate anxiety that stems from this Celtic Tiger shift affects and reconfigures every sphere of life. In a similar way, the novel connects Chester’s anxieties about maintaining his bank’s solvency and his personal wealth to his sexual anxieties. In an early aside about the banker’s daily rituals, we learn that the chairman has three main ambitions: he wants to be slim, wants to turn “HUBBI into an intercontinental financial behemoth,” and wants to be sexually “subsumed into [his] intern Inge” (38). The man’s desire to be “swallowed whole” by the young German woman, to end up “naked . . . in her Teutonic embrace” is equated with his desire to triumph as a banker (34). The competitive financial markets in which he compulsively participates and ultimately fails are symbolically tied to his fantasies of sexually “consuming” Inge—or having her sexually consume him, that is, “gulp him down” (34)—and, of course, his inability to do so. As such, not only does the novel point to the ways the model of the market and the ideology of consumption structure his masculine subjectivity—again, his sexual desire for Inge is set-up as a matter of consumption and profit—it also highlights how failure within the financial market filters into every aspect of his symbolically “marketized” subjectivity. Finally, with regard to Carew, the novel again ties the character’s failures as a writer to his failures in his relationships with women. As the journalist laments his inability to come up with “a breakthrough story,” his thoughts drift to “the young women with the sharp heels and spiky little tits who . . .

looked at him, but never saw him” (21-2). As he wallows in “the twilight place of personal revulsion” brought on by his professional failures as a journalist and as the manager of his father’s garage, he also thinks about how his wife, Tallulah, has left him and how it has been “months since he’d had sex with someone else” (22). The point here, as in the description of Chester and Inge, is simply that within Celtic Tiger Ireland, Carew’s failures are totalizing. His inability to produce the stories the newspaper (as a corporation) requires of him, to save the business his father left for him, and to develop an alternative means of situating himself in the market are all tied into his sense of sexual inadequacy. He may be an economic loser, but his loserdom extends to his identity as a son, husband, and lover: “Jesus,” he claims, “I mean, I lost Dad, I lost my business, I lost Tallulah, I’m about to lose my job, my flat, my dog . . .” (61).

In his emphasis on the intersections between the characters’ economic roles, their masculine identities, and their broader anxiety about loserdom, Cunningham shows how the neoliberal structures of the Celtic Tiger not only damage Irish masculine subjectivity, but how this damage stems from the ways neoliberalism configures identity according to the needs of the market. However, Cunningham also demonstrates in the novel that the intersections between economic subjectivity and loserdom inevitably produce both literal and figurative forms of violence. More specifically, Cunningham shows how the characters’ sense of prospective failure in the context of the Celtic Tiger engenders both the violent situations in which they find themselves and the discourses of violence in which they engage. I want to turn now to the scenes in which Cunningham most explicitly depicts acts of hostility, anger, aggression, and brutality and show that he not

only casts these forms of violence as his characters' responses to their economic "loss," but also frames them, like loserdom generally, in the context of gender.

In the many scenes in which Barr and his wife Medb-Marie aggressively argue with one another, Cunningham portrays the couple's rage and the vitriol they hurl at one another as implicitly resulting from the possibility of Barr's financial failures and his inadequacy as an economic subject. For instance, in the scene in which the pair argues about Albert's unwillingness to make arrangements in the event that he dies—something Barr is pressured to do after he is released from the hospital following his burst rectal polyp—Cunningham clearly suggests that Medb-Marie Barr's fury is rooted in her fear that she will lose her Celtic Tiger lifestyle: "the horses, the jet, the Burj-Al-Arab, her 200-grand credit card that [enables her to] go into Tiffany's on Fifth Avenue and walk out with a gold necklace that cost more than ten years' wages for a builder's labourer" (9). During their quarrel, Medb-Marie articulates the financial dimension of their quarrel when she specifically acknowledges that she does not know anything about Barr's business and admits that she worries "that if the tide turns we could be out on the street [and] that if interest rates keep going up we'll be fucked" (15-6). Barr himself recognizes the economic "source" of this tense interaction. He aggressively criticizes, for instance, her unsympathetic reaction to his physical well-being, asserting that "maybe he was living in a different universe, where the expected reaction of a wife to the looming death of her husband was concern and grief, and then the financial problems of succession, but in that order" (15). In another scene, when Albert informs his wife that, despite his protests, HUBBI will likely acquire one of her apartment blocks as collateral for the Goose Point project, we see, again, how economic issues intensify the strife between

them. In this latter scene, Medb-Marie violently scolds her husband and threatens to divorce him, all the while revealing “the dark galaxy of [her] most evil disposition” (77). During the altercation, the narrator highlights the intensity of Medb-Marie’s indignation, describing her as “grinning crazily, like a madwoman enjoying the first few seconds of a freefall over a cliff” (78). Nonetheless, the novel once again implies that the woman’s obvious outrage and unrestrained belligerence towards her husband stem from the literal and figurative loss that her husband’s forfeiture of her apartments represents. The novelist depicts the character’s rage as proportional to the weakness and “loserdom” that Albert personifies in his willingness to bow to the demands of the banks and his inability to navigate the pressures of the market.

Obviously, by drawing parallels between Albert and Medb-Marie Barr’s hostile relationship and their economic situation, Cunningham critiques the economic myopia of Irish culture during the boom and draws attention to the destructive influence of the pressure to succeed during this moment of prosperity. The rage Medb-Marie shows is, again, a direct result of Albert’s economic failures and loserdom. However, there is also a gendered undercurrent in these scenes. Namely, in the scenes depicting the Barrs’ heated exchanges, the strife between them is articulated in the context of Albert’s masculine failures. Although the violence is not necessarily enacted by the loser protagonist here, and though it correlates directly with his economic failures, it is nonetheless articulated in the context of the character’s failures as a man. For example, when Medb-Marie aggressively berates her husband for his fecklessness in dealing with the bankers trying to collateralize the apartment block belonging to her, she specifically attacks his failures as a husband and father; though Barr’s economic loserdom, in other words, proves to be

Medb-Marie's primary concern, her anger is framed in the context of Barr's failure in providing for his family. After learning that the banks are effectively taking her apartments and, therefore, her financial "security . . . [her] lifeline" (76), she claims the she wants to have nothing to do with her husband. "I should never have married you," she yells, adding that Barr is "common, a lout, uneducated" and unworthy of "bring[ing] up my children" (77). Moreover, in a particularly cruel moment in the same scene, Medb-Marie attacks her husband's sexual abilities. The character's anger about her husband's financial failings drives her to humiliate him by revealing not only that she knows he has cheated on her with a maid, but also that she herself cheated on Albert with the same woman. She claims, furthermore, that "that's what I think of when you're fumbling around me like a gorilla in heat. Got it now?" (78). In demonstrating how Medb-Marie's antagonism is clearly driven by Barr's economic loserdom and yet expressed in the context of Barr's masculine inadequacies, Cunningham draws a direct line between economic success and masculine sexual proficiency and undercuts the Celtic Tiger narrative of machismo that Barr, as an aggressive investor, embodies. In using Medb-Marie's aggressive hostility to pinpoint Albert's economic and sexual inadequacy, Cunningham undermines the character's value as a man whose masculine sense of "insatiable greed . . . pride [and] overweening superiority" is responsible for Ireland's economic boom (228).

Albert and Medb-Marie Barr are not the only characters in *Capital Sins* who demonstrate the ways individual acts of violence and brutality are engendered by the neoliberal ideology of the Celtic Tiger. Indeed, Eric Chester's panic about HUBBI's seemingly imminent failure confirms the relationship between violence and the prospect

of socioeconomic loserdom in Ireland at the turn of the century. During an executive committee meeting that Chester calls after learning of the contingencies that threaten the Goose Point project and endanger both HUBBI's solvency and Chester's own financial standing, the banker repeatedly invokes war metaphors and displays other violent tendencies towards his employees in response to his anxieties. From the start of this meeting, for instance, Chester glares at Fagan O'Dowd, his head of risk, with unconcealed contempt. After perceiving this hostile gesture, O'Dowd claims that "they hated him, these people. They hated the truth" (146). Chester wonders "if the little bastard was actually taking pleasure in [the chaos at HUBBI]" (145), and when O'Dowd fails to alleviate Chester's concerns regarding the potentially massive losses HUBBI could suffer as a result of the Goose Point project, the chairman even explicitly vows "to hurt him badly one day" (148). Likewise, reflecting on "what had to be done" so as to avoid losing HUBBI and his own wealth, Chester claims that "it was simply war, and in war you had to fight to survive" (152). Financial loss, for Chester, is again metaphorically aligned with the concept of wartime defeat, and, as such, he unleashes his "undisguised venom" at the committee and even describes wanting the "lifeblood squeezed out of the bastards that are short selling HUBBI" (153-4). And though the chairman is not the only character to threaten violence in response to HUBBI's potential economic losses and the humiliations these losses would cause—one committee member, for instance, confidently holds that the "short sellers" betting against the bank and undermining their positive international public image "will get burned, of course, their arms will get torn off" (151)—this scene nonetheless emphasizes that the aggression and violence the banker deploys here is in direct response to the threat of economic loserdom. Indeed, the

banker's aggressive reaction to the prospect of failing in his economic duties, in the scene, harks to McWilliams's notion that the Celtic Tiger is fundamentally rooted in a kind of social combat in which socioeconomic success hinges on the ability to outdo one's neighbours, to wield economic "weapons" against others, and to succeed where others fail. Put simply, Chester's confrontational approach to securing his economic future—by, for example, recommending that "a couple of these short sellers [have] the shit beaten out of them" (227)—highlights the ways in which Celtic Tiger neoliberalism produces combative social structures, and reveals the idea that resisting economic failure requires aggressive, if not outright violent, counterattacks.

Like the strife that results from Albert and Medb-Marie Barr's economic anxieties, Chester's aggressive hostility in these scenes is also subtly marked by gender. Specifically, Chester's violent verbal assaults in these passages is couched in misogynistic and chauvinistic language that implicitly undermines the targets' legitimacy as men. For example, in his attacks on those who challenge or otherwise threaten to undo his economic success—Fagan O'Dowd, Albert Barr, the short sellers, etc.—the chairman repeatedly deploys terms such as "bastard" and "son of a bitch." Though these terms might certainly be read as straightforward insults or offensive epithets, there is something to be said for their gendered undertones. Given the extreme machismo that characterizes Chester's executive committees—an extension, clearly, of what critics including Salzinger have described as the "commitment to masculinity" that "constitutes and upholds the purportedly impersonal neoliberal marketplace" (19)—the chairman's descriptions of wanting to "screw the sons of bitches" who challenge HUBBI's economic supremacy in Ireland by impaling (and perhaps figuratively penetrating) "them on the

very weapon they've chosen to use against us" should be read as emphatically emasculating (155).<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the fact that the emasculating quality of Chester's violent verbal attacks serves both as a rallying cry for his all-male committee and as a means for Chester to reassert his prowess in managing men and financial matters, harks to the hypermasculine context of Ireland's banking sector. More importantly, these sexist attacks point to the problematic ways in which "masculinity comes into play as an incitement to the fundamental speed, decisiveness, and ruthlessness necessary to . . . handle the consequences" of participating and prospering in the Irish market (Salzinger 17). Put another way, Cunningham's subtle yet potent depiction of the underlying misogyny of the violence that takes place at HUBBI constitutes an astute critique of the ways in which, as Salzinger again notes, "winning and losing" in a neoliberal social context are conceived in "vividly gendered and sexualized terms in which subject position is . . . all one needs to know to estimate profit or loss" (17).<sup>49</sup> He shows here that the financial sector with which Chester is intertwined demands "hav[ing] the balls" to make money, and, as such, that reacting against the potential loss of capital necessarily means reacting against those, like Fagan, who seemingly do not "have the balls" for the

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<sup>48</sup> In her discussion of the "commitment to masculinity" undergirding neoliberalism (19), Salzinger suggests that the "basic social relations" structuring banks and other financial institutions are largely "organized around [the idea of] 'men behaving badly'" (16-7). Stock market traders, she claims, "greet each other with punches and slaps," and "routinely address each other as men" while shaping "masculinity [as] a kind of trading fuel" (17).

<sup>49</sup> Salzinger offers a number of examples of the kinds of gendered and sexualized phrases that are used in banks and on trading floors to convey one's economic prowess or lack thereof: "I fucked him; he fucked me; he doesn't have balls; he's a fag; he's a whore; I've got him tied down" (17).

job (228).<sup>50</sup> As an example of what Cormac O’Brien calls a “corporate warrior”—a neoliberal archetype who “is figured as having risen to the top of the ladder by virtue of an innate masculine control” (133)—Chester relies on sexist forms of violence as a means of maintaining both his masculine and economic power. However, in later pointing to the ways in which Chester’s misogynistic tirade does nothing to help him reassert either his masculine strength or his financial standing, Cunningham conveys the insufficiency of these narratives, and he ridicules the inherently problematic sexism of neoliberalism. In tracking both Chester’s gendered aggression and his personal downfall, Cunningham explicitly challenges the “culturally imagined paradigm of aspirational Irish manhood” that the character represents, a “manhood” tied to the “neoliberal strategies of social Darwinism” in which economic success corresponds with “a masculine survival of the fittest” (C. O’Brien 133).

Although the inherent violence produced by the neoliberal conditions of the Celtic Tiger are certainly more pronounced in the narratives of Albert and Medb-Marie Barr and Eric Chester, it also affects the character of Lee Carew. For instance, in the scene in which Carew returns to the offices of the newspaper from which he has recently quit his job, Cunningham explicitly points to the character’s sense of the violence of the financial “stranglehold” that different groups begin exerting on the newspaper. In this scene,

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<sup>50</sup> These references to “having the balls” to participate in the boom recall Anglo Irish chairman Seán Fitzpatrick’s description of “the Celtic Tiger as [the] result of a potent masculine virility” and they point to the “trope of celebratory Celtic Tiger discourse” that, as Molony explains, was conceived around a “figure of virile entrepreneurial masculinity [who] functions as an ideal neoliberal body around which all other modes of living must adjust” (184-5). In O’Toole’s recounting, Fitzpatrick, of whom Chester seems to be a barely-veiled caricature, “paid tribute to people like himself who had created the boom” by claiming, specifically, that “we had ideas and we had balls . . . as we worked the scene and maximized the moment” (*Ship* 196).

Carew's former supervisor and confidant, Eddie, describes to him the ways in which working for the newspaper is akin to living under violent political regimes: specifically, he compares the atmosphere of the offices to "Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge" (166), and suggesting "it's the fucking Holocaust multiplied by a thousand" (167). The editor even describes company layoffs as "a bloodbath" (167). Like during the HUBBI executive meeting, the sense here is that Ireland's financial pressures demand an aggressive sensibility and a combative disposition. Ensuring financial success within Ireland's modern Celtic Tiger context means taking no prisoners, as it were, and we see this approach play out in the scene's final moments as Dick Bell, a senior figure at the newspaper, threatens Carew in no uncertain terms for his role in exacerbating the newspaper's precarious financial (and political) standing:<sup>51</sup>

Walking towards Lee, his face alarmingly incandescent, in a voice that gathered force like a dangerous wind, Dick said, —You get downstairs and you write the story I want you to write or so help me God I'll strangle you, do you understand? Do you fucking understand, you retarded arsehole? You go out that door and you go down to the shithole where you turned out the garbage you've been dishing up here for years, and you tell our readers that the city of silver is a story made up by bum boys like yourself. Do you understand? Do you? (190)

Obviously, the violence with which Bell threatens Carew here stems from the latter's role in potentially leading to the newspaper's bankruptcy; it is, again, a violence stemming

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<sup>51</sup> To be clear, Carew unintentionally threatens Bell's newspaper by publishing an article about the archaeological significance of the Goose Point site. The article prompts Barr to threaten to "sue [the] paper for fucking millions" (184), and therefore jeopardizes the already financially vulnerable company.

from economic concerns and, more specifically, from the newspaper's prospective financial failure. However, though it is perhaps not as pronounced as in the scenes of violence involving the Barrs or Chester and his committee, Bell's violent outburst against Carew is undergirded by similar notions of gender heteronormativity. Namely, Bell's outburst, though tied to the economic security of the newspaper, is also framed as being a result of the fact that Carew and his article have made him look like "a cunt" in front of the "big sharks who control these waters" (185). In undermining Bell's ability to maintain a profitable newspaper and, therefore, his value as a market subject, Carew undermines Bell's masculinity. In turn, Bell's violent reaction to Carew's economic disruption is expressed using a similarly gendered or sexualized insult. The editor uses a gay slur—he refers to him as a "bum boy" (190)—to emasculate Carew in the scene and pressure him into symbolically realigning himself with the financial needs of his media corporation. Again, though it is much less striking than in the novel's earlier scenes of violence, the gender or sexual dimension of the hostile attack directed at Carew points again to the inherently macho, if not misogynistic and homophobic, culture of the Celtic Tiger. More importantly, this gesture helps critique, in short, the problematic social discourses stemming from the form of toxic masculinity born out of and responsible for Ireland's neoliberal present.

Ultimately, in the novel's climactic scene in which Medb-Marie Barr attempts to kill her husband,<sup>52</sup> Cunningham re-emphasizes the stakes of "losing" in the neoliberal context of the Celtic Tiger. In the scene, Medb-Marie chases her husband around their house with an axe after he notifies her that "the property market was in sudden freefall"

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<sup>52</sup> She nearly succeeds after planting an axe in his head (249).

(244). The woman is “at once determined and distracted” by the news that “bastards are going to try and sell our house” because of “the fuckers in the bank and all the shite that’s going on in the papers about credit and the economy,” and so she attacks her husband (247). Moreover, the novel characterizes Medb-Marie’s anger as being tied to the fact that her “fish-faced husband” (247) has not only failed in his apparent responsibility to care for his family—something Albert himself recognizes when he claims that “it was his failure on their behalf that hit him the hardest” (244)—but that he has effectively lost their wealth. In portraying the brutality of Medb-Marie’s response to her husband’s failure as a developer and husband, however, Cunningham highlights the true legacy of the Celtic Tiger. In pointing to how this outrageous display of violence epitomizes the degeneration of the characters’ grasp on reality, the novelist indicates the extent to which the ideology of economic gain has become ingrained in the Celtic Tiger psyche. For Cunningham, the irrational and instinctive quality of this and earlier displays of violence epitomizes the ways contemporary Irish notions of ambition and desire are conditioned by a Celtic Tiger ideology that both offers the possibility of limitless wealth but also deems that anything that threatens one’s desire to take advantage of this wealth or that presages a kind of socioeconomic failure must be eliminated. And although this latter point echoes the one Ryan makes in the last scene of *The Thing About December*, by highlighting in the epilogue that Barr does not actually die as a result of his wife’s attack, Cunningham ends *Capital Sins* with a more cynical comment. Namely, though the Celtic Tiger reality fashioned by bankers, businessmen, and politicians—those men Albert Barr and Eric Chester represent—is a fundamentally destructive force in Ireland, Cunningham shows that the social damage it causes does not prompt the Irish public to do away with

it. That is to say, the harms caused by the marketization of Irish subjectivity and culture during the Celtic Tiger, Cunningham seems to suggest, are not enough to overturn Ireland's neoliberal condition or bring down those responsible for it. Indeed, the novel's last lines suggest that, in the same way that Albert Barr "ask[s] for his wife" upon opening his eyes even though she is the one who almost kills him (255), the country, irreparably damaged by the neoliberal ideology of the Celtic Tiger, is inevitably doomed to uphold it.

#### **2.4. Conclusion**

Though the precise nature of loserdom differs slightly in Ryan's *The Thing About December* and Cunningham's *Capital Sins*, that both novels characterize loserdom as intertwined with the experience of Ireland's modern socioeconomic realities speaks to the complexity of the transformations of the Celtic Tiger period and the underlying damage of neoliberalism in Ireland. In other words, in emphasizing both the characters' ambivalence about the boom and their uncertainty about how to navigate Ireland's changed socioeconomic landscape, Ryan and Cunningham complicate and challenge the superficial narratives of optimism, confidence, and empowerment that largely shaped the country's popular imagination during the Celtic Tiger period.

However, in portraying the inherent difficulty of overcoming the prospect of failure in a context defined by the obligation to succeed, and in using depictions of violence to problematize the very value of "success" in Ireland's neoliberal context, these novels do more than challenge the ostensibly positive view of the Celtic Tiger. Indeed, by demonstrating the inevitable brutality, both figurative and literal, that attends the

boomtime experience of what Anthony Sweeney calls “irrational exuberance” (vii), Ryan and Cunningham uncover the underlying repercussions of such radical socioeconomic shifts in Ireland. For one, they use violence to show how neoliberal ideologies—and the concomitant reconfiguration of ambition and desire—exacerbate the degeneration of Irish society by reshaping personal and communal relationships as nothing more than competitive interactions. As we see in both *The Thing About December* and *Capital Sins*, it is the characters’ increased greed, envy, jealousy, hostility, and antagonism that defines their relationships with those around them. Likewise, both novelists deploy scenes of violence to call attention to the more sinister effects of neoliberalism on individual subjectivity. They use violence to show specifically how, in the context of the Celtic Tiger, there are effectively no ways of conceiving of Irish identity beyond the social framework of the market. Likewise, there are certainly no means of articulating personal value without recourse to neoliberal ideas of profit, returns, and improvement.

Overall, in highlighting the ways in which anxieties about failure define the Irish experience of the Celtic Tiger, Donal Ryan and Peter Cunningham effectively account for the mechanism by which Celtic Tiger neoliberalism penetrated the Irish psyche and shaped the choices and actions that would ultimately ensure the country’s economic undoing. The writers reveal that Irish communities could only resist the constant threats of failure or “averageness” generated by the aforementioned ideological compulsion to succeed by embracing Ireland’s economic opportunity and by “doubling down,” as it were, and adopting subjectivities configured by the very forces that produced these threats. For Ryan and Cunningham, violence and conflict exist as products of this cyclical relationship between success and failure, between liberation and limitation, during the

Celtic Tiger. More importantly though, they show that by resorting to violence and hostility as a result of the possibility of failing during the boom, Ireland implicitly yielded to a socioeconomic system which ensured that Irish people remained powerless consumers and economic functions.

## Chapter Three

### **Losers, Bankers, and Schemers: Figures of Failure and the Collapse of the Celtic Tiger in Paul Murray's *The Mark and the Void* and Claire Kilroy's *The Devil I Know***

#### **3.1. Introduction**

“Also, this is a recession, not a famine. It’s only a recession relative to the boom. It’s a very painful adjustment, but we still have colour TV and the Internet. And the suffering has been spread relatively evenly across the classes, which gives a sense of solidarity. We’re in the shit, but we’re in the shit together.”  
(Gough)

“I accept that I have to take responsibility, as a member of the governing party during that period, for what happened, but let’s be fair about it: we all partied.”  
(Lenihan)

In an article for *The Guardian* from 2010, two years after Ireland’s economy began its drastic downward plunge, Patrick Barkham describes the conditions which led to the eviction of Ann Moore and her family from their home in South Dublin. He writes:

The Moores were badly in arrears, owing the council €10,000 (£8,500). For eight months, Ann had been paying back €50 on top of her €100 weekly rent. But in a country where 300 000 homes lie empty, the authorities decided to make the Moores homeless and punish them for their perceived fecklessness. Yet it is the politicians, bankers and developers of Ireland who have been rather more feckless. (Barkham)

Barkham is right to suggest that there was more than enough fecklessness to go around in Ireland in the years following the end of the Celtic Tiger. According to Fintan O’Toole, the Irish “practiced the economics of utter idocy” during the boom, and watched “a controlled explosion of growth turn into a mad conflagration [while] aiming petrol-filled pressure-hoses at the raging flames” (*Ship* 19-20). Having mismanaged billions of euro,

engaged in reckless banking practices, and fostered a construction market that “encouraged [the] limitless building” of homes and commercial properties “which it seemed almost no one cared to buy” (Lynch 133, 160), Ireland’s government, its bankers, and its property developers effectively ruined the country’s economy, turning the Celtic Tiger to “a bedraggled alley cat” (O’Toole *Ship* 10).<sup>53</sup>

As the economy collapsed, Ireland lost more than just money. Indeed, it effectively lost the opportunity to develop a truly sustainable economic system.<sup>54</sup> As noted in the previous chapter, from the mid-1990s until the first years of the new millenium, Ireland did experience a bona fide economic boom. What the state did not do, though, was use its economic good fortune to develop and implement a financial strategy which would guarantee long-term, if moderate, prosperity for all of its citizens, instead succumbing to the “ingrained Irish political habit of thinking only in the short term” (O’Toole *Ship* 24). And though the Irish authorities’ myopia and mismanagement should come as no surprise given Ireland’s well-documented history of corruption and cronyism, what is more difficult to account for is the role of ordinary Irish people, those such as

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<sup>53</sup> For a more comprehensive view of the political and financial causes and effects of Ireland’s economic collapse including both the country’s troubled financial sector and its failed property market, see Carswell’s *Anglo Republic*; Donovan and Murphy’s *The Fall of the Celtic Tiger*; Kinsella and Leddin’s *Understanding Ireland’s Economic Crisis: Prospects for Recovery*; McDonald and Sheridan’s *The Builders*; McWilliams’s *The Good Room*; Ó Riain’s *The Rise and Fall of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger: Liberalism, Boom and Bust*; Roche, O’Connell, and Prothero’s *Austerity & Recovery in Ireland*; Ross’s *The Bankers*; Ross and Webb’s *Wasters*.

<sup>54</sup> As O’Toole notes, “The boom had given Ireland a historic opportunity” (*Ship* 21). He observes that for essentially the first time, “there was money in the government coffers” and “the air of depression and inferiority had been banished” (21). Unfortunately, however, rather than developing a “vision of how [the] boom could be shaped into a steady and socially just kind of prosperity,” the Irish authorities (and, arguably, the Irish public more generally) let “the creation of public services and of an equal and inclusive society” become “afterthoughts to the creation of wealth” (21).

Ann Moore, in this economic collapse.<sup>55</sup> Certainly, as Rosmary Meade suggests, the “narratives of blame” that followed the crash were problematic in that they often failed “to interrogate issues of power, social reproduction, inequality, and exclusion in the Irish context” and generally amounted to a “showy lancing of collective guilt” (33). However, as other critics including McWilliams, Cleary, and Lewis have noted, during this period of widespread wealth, the Irish people broadly seemed to feel no need to question where the money was coming from, how it was being spent, and why there was so much of it.<sup>56</sup> Of course, as I discussed in the previous chapter, the public’s ostensible approval of and participation in the boom can be explained as an effect of neoliberal ideologies and the “marketization” of Irish subjectivity, but, as Joe Cleary notes, it would “be wrong to see

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<sup>55</sup> Though corruption was rampant at every level of political and financial administration in Ireland and certainly helped to create and exacerbate the economic crisis—an exhaustive account of which is far beyond the scope of this chapter—it is worth noting that this problem with corruption was not in itself responsible for Ireland’s economic collapse. Certainly, the significance of administrative wrongdoing should not be underestimated, but it should, nonetheless, be analyzed with an eye to the fact that, as Ó Riain notes, “continuing revelations about a catalogue of governance failures in the public and private sectors led to a focus on cronyism and corruption rather than on the systemic dynamics of the Irish model” (7).

<sup>56</sup> There were, of course, dissenters. In 2006, economist Morgan Kelly disputed the popular belief that “the Irish housing market [could] look forward to a soft landing,” and suggested that given the recent history of “other small economies where sudden prosperity and easy credit drove house prices to absurd levels” (namely, Finland and the Netherlands), the Irish “should be very worried indeed” (Kelly). Likewise, David McWilliams prophesied that Ireland’s boom, built as it was on an inflated property market, could not last. In articles such as “Why Our Life in the Fast Lane Can’t Stop Without Skidding” and “Our Debt Financed Lifestyle Is Just Staving Off the Inevitable,” both from July 2006, McWilliams describes how the Celtic Tiger would end with “widespread unemployment, a fall in real wages [and] falling property prices” (“Lifestyle”). In what has since become one of the most famous quotations related to Ireland’s economic crisis, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern responded to the concerns of economists like Kelly and McWilliams in a 2007 speech, claiming that “sitting on the sidelines, cribbing and moaning is a lost opportunity. I don’t know how people who engage in that don’t commit suicide” (“Ahern”). Ahern apologized for the comment soon after.

Ireland only as a passive victim of an externally imposed neoliberalism” (165). The fact remains, in other words, that in this period of prosperity many Irish people were more than willing to enjoy themselves, even if it meant, as Lewis puts it, approaching the boom as something that “was sustainable so long as it went unquestioned” (91). In this respect at least, Finance Minister Brian Lenihan was not wrong when, on 4 November 2010, he told RTÉ’s Miriam O’Callaghan that “we all partied” (Lenihan).

Despite the tremendous overstatement of Lenihan’s claim that all Irish people had “partied” during the boom, the fallout from the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, again, proved that many had. The actions (or inaction) of government officials, banking executives, and other financial or political administrators in particular plunged Ireland into a recession and ultimately led to years of harsh austerity measures implemented by the European troika. What is most notable about the aftermath of the crash, however, is how few public displays of anger the Irish showed in response to both the wrecklessness of state officials and banking elites during the boom and even to the severe penalties doled out as a result of this wrecklessness. Unlike their Greek and Icelandic counterparts, for example, the Irish did not take to the streets to protest the gross political and financial mismanagement which led to the economic crisis.<sup>57</sup> In the words of a Limerick man interviewed by Barkham, Ireland’s lukewarm acceptance of and compliance with the troika’s harsh

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<sup>57</sup> As Michael Lewis notes, by 2011, there had been only “two conspicuous acts of Irish social unrest” related to the economic crisis (123). Unlike in Iceland, where protesters called for the resignation of the Prime Minister and Governor of the Central Bank (“Icelanders”), the Irish people’s demonstrations were effectively limited to “a senior citizen [hurling] rotten eggs at [Allied Irish Bank’s] executives,” and a property developer adorning “his cement mixer with anti-banker slogans, [driving it] across the country, and after locking its brakes and disabling the release, [stalling] the machine between the gates of the Parliament” (Lewis 123).

austerity could be explained by the fact that the Irish were simply accustomed to the role of victim or loser: “Irish people were used to shit homes, shit education, shit hospitals,” he explains, adding that “there is no cultural memory in Ireland of things working” so “cut us to fuck . . . because we’re used to being the downtrodden victim. We almost feel better for it” (Barkham). This pragmatic, if masochistic, approach to dealing with a national catastrophe can, arguably, be traced back to Ireland’s colonial history and its experience of tragedies such as the Famine, which, as Seamus Deane explains, “cast the Irish, as if by destiny, in the role of a traditional people who had failed to survive in the Malthusian, Darwinian universe of economic law and its racial-cultural counterpart, the character of nations” (50).<sup>58</sup> However, these words also reflect contemporary writer Julian Gough’s more caustic and flippant comments about the Irish psyche after the bust. If, before the boom, the Irish were indeed accustomed “to shit homes, shit education, [and] shit hospitals” (Barkham), then it was easy, after the crisis, to cope with being plunged back “in[to] the shit,” as Gough puts it, as at least the Irish were once again “in the shit together” (Gough).<sup>59</sup> Despite this apparent indifference, the Irish did want answers about the country’s economic predicament, if not someone to take responsibility

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<sup>58</sup> In a recent article, Seán Kennedy has taken up Ireland’s “masochistic” response to the troika’s management of its debt crisis. He argues that “Ireland’s traumatic experience of, and muted response to, troikanomics” is an “erotic problem,” and that the public discourse about the financial crisis has been shaped by “a recurring tendency to frame the issue in terms drawn from the diverse vocabularies of BDSM” (Kennedy). More specifically, however, he argues that Ireland’s willing submission to an austerity program suggests that there is perhaps “some masochistic strain in us, [which is] gratified by the suffering,” and that Ireland’s endurance of austerity confirms that the Irish “are, indeed, naughty children” (Kennedy).

<sup>59</sup> Gough’s comment about being “in the shit together” is particularly evocative given the significant economic inequality in Ireland during the boom. See, for example, Kirby (55-8).

for it. As Colm McCarthy notes, “everyone in Ireland had the idea that somewhere in Ireland there was a little wise old man who was in charge of the money” and that this man could surely explain what exactly was happening to the Irish economy (qtd. in Lewis 98). As such, both the government and the CBI trotted out officials such as the Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan and Financial Regulator Pat Neary to reassure, if not persuade, the public that the country’s economic difficulties were under control. Their message was consistent, if not always convincing: they were doing all they could to remedy the situation, and, more importantly, the various governing bodies that they represented were not entirely to blame for the nation’s dire economic conditions. And though the general public received these explanations with a healthy degree of cynicism, by reluctantly accepting, as Lenihan did, “to take responsibility, as a member of the governing party during that period, for what happened” (Lenihan), these men bore the brunt of the Irish people’s quiet fury.<sup>60</sup> These men along with former Taoisigh Bertie Ahern and Brian Cowen, and bankers Seán FitzPatrick, David Drumm, and Michael Fingleton, represented not only the “hyper-masculinity associated with the boom”—a neoliberally-inflected masculinity built around risk-taking and entitlement and expressed through “phallic pretensions [such as] ‘we have balls, we deserve this’”—but, also, the fundamental failures that their actions created (Bracken and Harney-Mahajan 1). They became “the hate figures of modern Ireland” and those to whom the Irish people could point the finger for the country’s economic downfall (Ross “Neary”). Though Simon Carswell used the

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<sup>60</sup> Pat Neary’s appearance on RTÉ’s *Prime Time* on 2 October 2008, for instance, was met with widespread consternation. As McCarthy, again, notes, upon watching Mark Little aggressively cross-examine Neary on television, the Irish people “saw him and said *Who the fuck was that??? Is that the fucking guy who is in charge of the money???* That’s when everyone panicked” (qtd. in Lewis 98, ital. in original).

term to describe Pat Neary specifically, each of these men became a “financial fall guy” in the eyes of the Irish public (Carswell “Financial”).

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In the decade since Ireland’s economic undoing, Irish novelists have started considering their country’s economic collapse as well as the nation’s reticence in facing “up to the reality that the economic miracle was no more than a chimera” (Maher and O’Brien *Prosperity* 7). Though a fictional turn towards such a significant economic catastrophe may seem unsurprising, critics including Kiberd, Maher and O’Brien, and Cleary have posited that this new thematic focus in Irish writing represents something of a reversal. Kiberd has noted, for instance, that “Tiger Ireland . . . never fully evolved literary forms for coping with affluence” (*AI* 482), while Maher and O’Brien explain that “writers and artists . . . failed to alert the public in an adequate manner to the dangers associated with the Celtic Tiger” and have only adopted this critical project since the end of the economic boom (*Prosperity* 6). Cleary, too, has suggested that, just as “no momentous literary work of celebration or obloquy greeted the Irish economic boom” (140), “it was inevitable . . . that the response by Irish writers to the global crisis has remained in most respects as muted, as pragmatic, and as self-interested as that of the wider population generally” (171). And though these claims about the lack of “artistic representation[s] of a society in flux” or of fictional engagements with the dangers posed by “the sordid relationship between politics and business” are perhaps overstated (Maher and O’Brien *Prosperity* 6), there has been, in recent years, a marked increase in novels

dealing with the Celtic Tiger period.<sup>61</sup> Novels including Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2012), Julian Gough's *Crash!* (2013), Lisa McInerney's *The Glorious Heresies* (2015), and Dermot Bolger's *Tanglewood* (2015) all deal in some way with the socio-cultural repercussions of the collapse of the banking and property sectors in Ireland. These works dramatize and satirize Ireland's economic downfall and explore, often using black humour, the significant transformations of Irish society in the wake of this downfall. In particular, they examine how responsibility and blame for this downfall have been apportioned in Ireland. These texts ask, more generally, what the collapse of the Celtic Tiger means for Ireland, and they explore how the Irish have tried to come to grips with their country's sudden move "from prosperity to austerity" (Maher and O'Brien *Prosperity* 6).

What marks many of the novels of the post-Celtic Tiger period dealing with contemporary Ireland's economic challenges is a return to the mild cynicism and resignation of pre-boom fiction. That is to say, many recent Irish novels take up what Derek Hand describes as the "powerful fatalism" at play in pre-Celtic Tiger works by writers such as Roddy Doyle, a fatalism that undermines "any real opportunity for revolutionary change and transformation within characters' lives" (266). This return may perhaps seem unsurprising given that Ireland's recent socio-economic situation bears a distinct resemblance to the socio-economic terrain of the 1980s and early 1990s, but it is notable given that the "fatalism" of this earlier period was apparently replaced, at least in the social sphere, by a superficial sense of optimism and confidence during the boom

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<sup>61</sup> Susan Cahill, for one, has pointed to the fact that those claiming Irish writers have failed to show "a clear engagement with the Celtic Tiger moment" tend to "ignore the output of contemporary Irish women writers" (*Irish* 13).

years, something I explored and problematized in the previous chapter. As the Irish economy began to expand in the mid-1990s, the pessimism of Irish fiction from this period neither captured the prevailing mood of Irish society nor reflected its improving social conditions. Discussing Roddy Doyle's so-called "Barrytown Trilogy," for example, Hand notes that "what is remarkable from the vantage point of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland is how rapid was the dating of Doyle's Dublin, which was vanishing into a world of work, jobs, success and money" (266-7). However, Doyle's "Trilogy" was not the only work which revealed a disconnect between Irish fiction and Celtic Tiger society. In view of how quickly and drastically Ireland's economic circumstances improved following the publication of Bolger's *The Journey Home* (1990) and Joseph O'Connor's *Cowboys and Indians* (1991), the novels' respective fatalistic depictions of Ireland's "bleak time" during the 1980s and early 1990s seemed rather *passé* (Hand 270). In other words, the works' respective portrayals of Irish characters facing the socio-economic desolation and cultural despondency of life in (and beyond) Ireland in the years before the economic surge failed to square with the social experience of the country's changing fortunes, with the growing outward confidence, that is, of what McWilliams called the "mad-for-it nation" of the late-twentieth century (*Pope* 6). There was a sense, according to Mary Burke, that, as the boom took hold, the Irish people, including writers, "were invited to celebrate the newly globalized capital," but, in doing so, were required to "forget" any version of Ireland or Irishness that "did not gel with the mainstream media narrative" of the boom (14). Nonetheless, since the Celtic Tiger's ultimate demise, it is towards these themes of despondency, uncertainty, and inadequacy, and failure—still often explored

through the lens of humour—to which post-Celtic Tiger novels have returned, and it is to these themes and the characters who embody them to which I turn my attention here.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which Paul Murray and Claire Kilroy use the figure of the loser in *The Mark and the Void* (2015) and *The Devil I Know* (2012), respectively, to explore Ireland's attempts to come to terms with the collapse of the Celtic Tiger and to assess the issue of responsibility in relation to the crash. I argue, specifically, that both texts grapple with the legacies of Ireland's economic crash, but that Murray and Kilroy deploy their loser characters to respond to and complicate the “narratives of blame” that have circulated since the economic downturn (Meade 33). In both texts, I suggest, the losers not only epitomize the nation's failed economy, but indeed embody Ireland's broader cultural unwillingness to accept blame for this economic catastrophe. Overall, the way in which both Murray and Kilroy point to their loser characters' reliance on narratives of victimhood and powerlessness enable the novelists to challenge what Maher and O'Brien describe as the “line of thought [in Ireland] which espouses helplessness in the face of forces beyond [Ireland's] power” and which relinquishes the nation's “onus to make any changes in society or culture” (*Prosperity* 10).

### **3.2. “More Comfortable Wrapped in Chains”: Economic Loserdom and Neoliberal Failure in *The Mark and the Void***

On the topic of Ireland's boom and bust, Paul Murray has suggested that “the interesting thing about the financial crash was that bankers were enabled by the rest of the world” because, “to a large degree, everybody started thinking like bankers” (Mark O'Connell). In his 2015 novel, *The Mark and the Void*, he examines both what this

“thinking” looks like and what effects it has had on Irish society in the post-crash era. The novel—which is, on the one hand, concerned with the function of art, or “simulacra,” in helping us conceive of our “real” existence—depicts the aftermath of Ireland’s banking crisis as a means of showing how the economy and neoliberal ideology, more broadly, have replaced art in this way. And though Murray’s interests lie, more specifically, in the ways Irish “people [started to] conceive of themselves in society . . . in economic terms” becoming, in the process, the purest form of *homo oeconomicus* (Mark O’Connell), he asks whether—or how—the collapse of the conditions and institutions of which these “marketized” subjects were an integral part have affected this socioeconomically reconfigured society. If, as the novel suggests, “marketized” ideologies are what give Irish life meaning and give Irish identity its shape, then what, Murray asks, do the socioeconomic consequences of the neoliberal project in Ireland—the project, that is, that ostensibly represented Ireland’s “arrival,” its emergence “from the shadow of [a] continuing postcolonial dependence on Britain,” and from its “peripherality in relation to the Continent of which [it was] always, culturally as well as economically, a part” (Lloyd *IT* 1-2)—mean for contemporary Irish subjects?

In his review of *The Mark and the Void*, Alex Clarke characterizes Murray’s novel as one whose “successes are serious and impressive,” but also as one that is “a mess” and in which “there’s too much going on” (Clarke). It is, indeed, a novel into which Murray has weaved elements as disparate as the economic history of a small island nation slowly sinking into the Pacific, a former KGB agent who runs a pest-control business in Dublin, *two* novels about depressed clowns looking for love, a failed art-heist targeting an abstract painting by a French philosopher, a waitress-stalking website, and a

young boy named after Remington Steele. *The Mark and the Void* is, however, also a novel whose characters are almost uniformly figures of failure, and it is to the ways in which Murray uses these loser figures to examine both the effects of the crash and also the legacies of Ireland's neoliberal shift that I turn my attention here.

Although *The Mark and the Void* is clearly about Ireland's socioeconomic condition in the aftermath of the economic crash, the novel is not simply an indictment of those individuals and institutions that brought down Ireland's economy—like the fictional Paul's prospective novel, it is not simply “a kind of exposé” or “a takedown” (*MV* 16). Rather, the novel explores Ireland's post-crash conditions to mount a more incisive critique about Ireland's contemporary socioeconomic predicament. After first showing how Murray depicts his protagonists as entirely “marketized” subjects and connects this “marketization” to their failures, their loserdom, I argue specifically that the novelist deploys Ireland's “marketized” failures to show that though the significant rates of unemployment, debt, emigration and the fact that the country “lost its economic sovereignty” were indeed devastating (Cleary 141), the true tragedy of the economic crisis lies in the fact that, despite this devastation, Irish society has not disavowed the neoliberal principles that caused it. In depicting the primacy of the market in structuring his loser characters' lives and motivations in the text's fictionalized post-crash Ireland, Murray, I contend, challenges the neoliberal ideologies that led to the crash, and, more specifically, takes issue with Irish society's apparent inability to relinquish those ideologies in light of the socioeconomic destruction they produce. I end, though, by briefly showing that, tied into this comment about Ireland's inability to “learn the lessons of the neoliberal disaster” and divorce itself from the ideological sources of its

socioeconomic misery is a much more cynical, albeit subtle, point about what this failure represents (Cleary 143). Namely, I contend that Murray frames this failure to reject neoliberal ideologies as part of an underlying Irish tendency—or, at least a tendency *within* Ireland—to justify failure or disappointment. He invites his readers to view his characters’ inadequacies—and, by extension, those of his fictionalized Irish society—in adjusting to the country’s post-crash realities as evidence of society’s inability to accept responsibility for its socioeconomic disappointments. I argue, in short, that Murray’s is implicitly a critique of a national psychology of victimhood that, the text seems to suggest, is at the heart of being Irish and that clearly informs Irish responses to the neoliberal project that led to the crash.

Though much of the highly metafictional narrative of *The Mark and the Void* revolves around the mystifying and insular world of high finance in the wake of the economic crisis, it immediately establishes that the Irish economy as well as its underlying mechanisms and ideals remain tremendously consequential for the characters and for Irish society more broadly. Like the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) around which much of the action takes place, the Irish marketplace is characterized early on as “the engine room, the world-within-the-world” and the system that defines “how we live our lives” (16). Indeed, by emphasizing from the outset the extent to which his protagonists—Claude Martingale, a business analyst working for the Bank of Torabundo (BOT), and Paul, a writer-cum-conman intent on basing his next novel on Claude and, at least momentarily, robbing BOT—are immersed in Ireland’s market culture, Murray demonstrates the importance of both the economy and neoliberal ideology more generally in shaping Irish life. As Murray shows in the first pages of his

novel, both characters prove to be fixated with their successes and failures within Ireland's market, and both conceive of themselves largely as market actors—that is, “individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain” (Giroux 113). Murray uses these characters' fixations, though, to begin to point to the ways in which Ireland is, even in the post-crash era, undeniably defined by its embrace of neoliberalism.

For instance, in the novel's self-reflexive prologue, an unnamed and unidentified narrator characterizes Claude as someone who passes “his days in the service of money [and] most of his nights that way too” (3). Like the characters of *Capital Sins* who I discussed in the previous chapter, Claude, we learn, “has no friends, no pastimes, no life outside of the bank” (3), and, as such, remains fundamentally defined by his profession as a bank analyst. Although the narrative points to the minor ways in which Claude maintains the semblance of a personal life—it describes, for example, his “micro-romances” with “beautiful girls” (2)—it also suggests that the banker has thrown himself into his work. Claude's success, the narrator describes, is contingent on his willingness to watch “money flow through the market, [learn] the secret influences at work on it,” and work “early mornings, late nights, hour after hour in the cold glow of the screen, developing models, [and] monitoring trades” (1-2). And though Claude is French, the text emphasizes that it is primarily after he relocates to Dublin that he really becomes a fully “economized” individual. In the Irish capital, we learn, Claude “doesn't have a moment to himself, or, indeed, a self to have a moment” (3). He is effectively nothing outside the IFSC where he works and nothing beyond an embodiment of the centrality of “financial capital, rather than industrial or commercial capital . . . to neoliberalism” (Connell 31). In this short prologue, Murray characterizes Claude as almost wholly an agent of the Irish

economy. Though the passage briefly alludes to the character's roles as a son and as a sexual being, it nonetheless emphasizes that he is *homo oeconomicus* in a very direct way. Not only does Claude participate in the neoliberal marketplace by acquiring "a nice apartment[,] a nice new Mercedes" and by doing what he needs to in order to remain "wealthy and respected" (2), he operates, as a banker, as part of the "machinery" of neoliberalism. He is responsible, that is, for helping develop "instruments that will ensure profits no matter what," and, more broadly, ensuring that "at BOT the good times continue to roll" (226-7). In a more theoretical sense, Claude's function, according to the novel, is to help maintain "the disembodied world [that] we truly inhabit," the competitive world of literal and symbolic profits for which "the International Financial Services Centre is merely a frame" (11). Again, though he may be French, the novel clearly stresses that in Ireland, Claude's subjectivity exists exclusively to serve the needs of the market.

Although he does not, like Claude, work directly "in the service of money" (3), Murray's other protagonist, Paul, is equally shaped by Ireland's neoliberal realities. He is, in other words, subject to the fluctuations, mechanisms, and effects of Ireland's financial sphere, and serves to re-emphasize the economy's significance in giving Irish life, in general, its shape and meaning. In a more superficial way, the first thing Claude learns about the enigmatic writer who has asked to study him in preparation for his next novel has to do with money. As he attempts to ascertain something about the novelist after their first meeting, all Claude can really find about Paul is a review of his first novel that "consists solely of the line 'On no account should you lend money to this man'" (22). In addition to one other negative write-up, this concise warning about Paul's financial

mismanagement is effectively all that defines the writer; “there is nothing,” Claude tells us, “he might as well not have existed” (22). Later, however, we learn that Paul’s problems with money are much more significant, and that, in a way, the failed novelist effectively personifies Ireland’s trajectory under neoliberalism. After Paul fails to show up at the IFSC for several days, Claude goes to Paul’s home and discovers that the writer’s personal finances are in shambles. The novelist, first of all, lives in a “glittering” apartment complex that, although looking at first “like a five star hotel” from which “gilt filigree gleams[,] mosaics twinkle [and] a majestic eagle peers down from the distant rooftop,” is actually in a state of complete disrepair (113-4). Inside, Claude notes, there is nothing to “indicate the intercom is working,” the “nameplates of the metal letterboxes are empty,” and plastic sheets hang like “filthy veil[s] from ceiling to floor” (114). Paul’s actual apartment, moreover, is decorated with all the “signature excesses of the Celtic Tiger” (118)—including, of course, “Louis Quatorze chairs, [and] black chandeliers” (118)—but remains, Paul complains, “a classic Celtic Tiger piece of shit” in which, for instance, “there’s a Jacuzzi, but the water’s brown,” and “there’s a heated towel-rail in every room, but the radiators don’t work” (165). Worst of all, Paul reveals, “the whole building’s totally worthless,” built, as it is, on a foundation laced with pyrite (165).<sup>62</sup> More than simply drawing attention to the decadence of the Celtic Tiger period, Murray’s description of Paul’s home serves as an example of the consequences of overzealous

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<sup>62</sup> Pyrite, also known as “fool’s gold,” is a mineral occasionally found in building materials which “expands in the presence of moisture and oxygen” (Brennan). In the years following the economic collapse, huge numbers of Irish homeowners faced a “devastating ‘pyrite problem’ which [was] destroying recently built houses” (Brennan). Ireland’s “pyrite problem” was so significant that in 2011, homeowners from all over the country established a “Pyrite Action Campaign” in an effort to publicize their problems (Gartland).

participation in the market. More importantly though, it demonstrates the extent to which this past participation in Ireland's boom governs the fictional novelist's entire life. As Paul explains to Claude, for instance, the frequent rows between him and his wife, Clizia, are a product of his readiness to take on a massive mortgage that he is no longer able to pay. He claims, specifically, that his marital problems derive primarily from the fact that "a first-time novelist and an ex-stripper could get half a million for an apartment that didn't exist yet" (165), and that, now that the Irish economy has crashed, a person with "two degrees [who has] read more books than anyone," as Clizia has, needs to get "up at 5 a.m. to clean toilets for minimum wage" simply to help pay for these tremendous financial blunders (168). Overall, though he represents a kind of foil to the successful Claude in that he has fundamentally failed as a marketized subject, the novel stresses, first and foremost, that Paul is an economic being. Rather than a husband, a father, a writer, or a friend, the character is an agent of the market shaped (and oppressed) by Irish economic realities, and his life, the novel shows, is, like Claude's, defined in almost every aspect by its ties to Ireland's economy.

Though the realities of the economic crash provide the background of Murray's descriptions of his protagonists' marketized subjectivities, the emphasis in these scenes remains primarily on the fact that the forces of the market continue to structure life in the Irish capital. That is, though the text clearly hints at the effects of the crash in these scenes, the passages themselves seem designed primarily to emphasize how these characters are defined by their connections to the Irish economy. And although Murray's portrayal of the intersection of the economy and his characters' subjectivities brings to mind the broader economic anxieties of the post-crash era, Murray, I contend, uses this

intersection as evidence of the influence of neoliberalism in Ireland and, specifically, the ways in which subjects remain marketized even in a context in which the market itself has effectively collapsed. In other words, in emphasizing the “economized” ethos of contemporary Ireland, Murray offers an incisive critique of the value of neoliberalism in an Ireland that “has gone from neoliberal success to profligate failure” (McDonough 8). His focus on the significance of economic issues to his characters’ lives, in short, is part of a broader comment on the failures of the Irish economy and the ideological basis of this failure. This underlying assessment of Ireland’s economic failures and the neoliberal rationality that engendered it comes to the fore by way of his exploration of loserdom, and, in particular, in Murray’s depictions of how his protagonists’ loser qualities are effectively a product of their economic subjectivities.

Insofar as Murray uses his protagonists to provide a sense of how Irish life in the post-crash era is imbued with economic concerns, he also uses them to frame this portrayal of the “marketized” quality of Irish life as fundamentally destructive. With respect to the text, he characterizes his protagonists’ economic subjectivities as part and parcel of their failures, disappointments, and sense of inadequacy. Claude, for instance, claims that though, as a banker, he might occupy a prominent role in Irish society, he believes he has very little to offer outside the IFSC. He suggests, specifically, that, although his profession may be of critical importance, he feels himself, personally, to be indiscernible, an outcast rightly ignored by the mainstream world. Anxious about being tailed in the streets of Dublin early in the text, Claude reminds himself that no one “would be interested in following you,” and that “nobody outside my department even knows I exist” (10). As primarily a function of the market, he explains, he does not “have

a story” (27); his life is “boring [and] empty” (28), and it is such because “I have organized my life here precisely in order not to have a story” (27). After reluctantly agreeing to let Paul study him, Claude struggles to overcome his concern about being unable to “give [Paul] what [he] need[s]” (29). In short, Claude maintains that it is his embodiment of the financial sector that makes him both unsuitable as a compelling subject for a novel, and, more broadly, a nonentity—a loser—on the streets of Dublin.<sup>63</sup> Something similar is true about Paul. I have already mentioned, for example, the ways in which the fictional novelist’s mortgage on his decaying apartment dictates much of his daily life and, more importantly, the ways his debt effectively secures him to economic markets. It is also the case, however, that this debt and the crumbling property to which it is tied both correlate with and exemplify Paul’s “loser” attributes. The writer’s inability to repay what he owes stands, of course, as a symbol his impulsive spending and, more

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<sup>63</sup> There is something to be said about the text’s early metafictional meditation on the suitability of the figure of the banker as a fundamentally modern Irish subject (and, arguably, of its metafictional moments more generally). Namely, it calls attention to Murray’s underlying attempts to address what Kiberd calls “the national longing for form” (*II* 115) insofar as it participates in the project of “the first artists of the decolonizing [Irish] world” who, Kiberd explains, sought to develop an aesthetic based “around a single question: how to express life which has never yet found full expression in written literature” (*II* 117-8). Certainly, there is an underlying cynicism built into the self-reflexivity of *The Mark and the Void* which seems meant not only to undercut “the daunting seriousness with which literature is taken by a subject people” as well as the very content of such literature, but to dispute the very possibility of finding this “full expression” (Kiberd *II* 118). However, Murray nonetheless seems intent on formally exploring the degree to which the contemporary Irish self—like the modern Irish subject taken up by writers of the Irish Literary Revival—is “a project” whose representation (or “characteristic text”) is necessarily “a process, unfinished, fragmenting,” an intention he demonstrates by formally disrupting the fictionality of his novel, and therefore refusing to elicit “a merely passive admiration for the completed work of art” and implicitly inviting “the reader to become a co-creator with the author” (*II* 120). This last point is clearly best exemplified by the image of a finger pointed outwards (at the reader) that appears on the novel’s final page.

broadly, his failure to act rationally within Ireland's boomtime economy. Given that, as he informs Claude, his "is the only apartment they actually managed to sell" and that he "bought it off the plans" on a whim, the "half a million" Paul owes on his mortgage is simply a record of his frivolous spending and his delusional investing during the boom (165). If Paul's apartment represents his attempt at "enhancing [his] portfolio value . . . through the practices of self-investment" (W. Brown 33-4), then the debt and his inability to repay it represent not only his economic inadequacies, but his diminished value as a subject. The debt, moreover, is symbolic of Paul's inadequacies as a provider for his family. I alluded in the preceding chapter to the ways in which neoliberal realities complicate the notion of the "breadwinner" and how this can affect men's sense of success or failure, and *The Mark and the Void* uses Paul's debt as an example of this very idea. The fact that he is "in so much negative equity," the novel shows, means that Paul cannot even afford coffee or tea for him and his wife (165), something we learn when Clizia derisively asks him whether he wants her "to steal some" (161). Indeed, as I mentioned above, Paul's debt even forces Clizia to take a job "clean[ing] toilets for minimum wage" (168), this despite the fact that she is far more educated than her failed novelist husband. The point here is simply that, though Paul's failures are financial, they are totalizing in that they give rise to his failures in the non-monetary parts of his life—especially, his failures as a husband and father. Late in the novel, Clizia explicitly claims Paul's fixation with finding ways to make money, and his failure to do so, is effectively what prevents him from being "here in the world with me," from being "here with his son [instead] of walking around like the dead man" (421). Overall, both Claude and Paul's failures, humiliations, and inadequacies are all linked with their economic identities and,

thus, illustrate the destructive nature of the neoliberalism that conditions these identities. Their feelings of inadequacy and disappointment are both highly personal, but they are, nonetheless, born out of their inability to extricate themselves from their roles in the financial world.

Clearly, Murray uses his two protagonists to show how, given the neoliberal framework of contemporary Ireland, personal failures and inadequacies come to be imagined largely in the context of the economy. However, it is worth briefly noting that Murray extends his depiction of this intersection between disappointment or inadequacy and the marketized reality of Irish life to the broader Irish public of the novel. In his brief descriptions of the Irish public wandering the streets of Dublin, in other words, Murray emphasizes not only the degree to which the financial crisis has left its marks on Irish life, but also the ways in which these financial failures are manifest in a kind of shameless degeneracy and lethargy reminiscent of what Declan Kiberd describes as the “psychology of self-doubt and dependency among the Irish [that was] linked to the loss of economic and political power” (*II* 6). We see this, for instance, when Claude encounters the Irish outside the IFSC and describes them using a litany of flaws. When he sees the Irish, he sees that they are:

blanched, pocked, pitted, sleep-deprived, burnished, beaming, snaggle-toothed, balding, rouged, raddled, beaky, exophthalmic; the Irish with their demon priests, their cellulite, their bus queues and beer bellies, their foreign football teams, betting slips . . . their dyed hair, white jeans, colossal mortgages, miraculous medals, ill-fitting suits, enormous televisions, stoical laughter, wavering camaraderie, their flinty austerity and seeping corruption, their narrow minds and

broad hearts . . . their books, saints, tickets to Australia, their building-site countryside . . . their mistakes, their punchbag history, their bankrupt state and their inveterate difference. (112-3)

Though Claude's description is arguably insulting, it is more notable for the way in which it intertwines the Irish people's unfortunate characteristics with economic issues including high mortgage rates, severe austerity measures, widespread political corruption, the uncontrolled construction sector, and national bankruptcy. Without adding much to the plot of the novel, the passage nonetheless emphasizes the relationship between the apparent social defects of modern Irish life and the country's economic difficulties or failures. The Irish public here stands as a testament to the nation's economic troubles, and, as such, harks to the ways the economy and the marketplace are the "underwriters of all this [unfortunate] humanity[,] the Fates [that] weave the fabric of the day" (113). The brief scene illustrates, in short, the ways economic realities undergird the very shape of contemporary Irishness in the world of the text.

Though it is perhaps subtle, by emphasizing how his fictional characters' loserdom—their failures, inadequacies, degeneracy, fecklessness, etc.—is conceived primarily in an economic context, Murray denounces the neoliberalism that produces or sustains this context. I discussed in the previous chapter how neoliberal ideologies clearly took hold in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger, and in *The Mark and the Void* we see both the extent to which Irish society has become imbued with these ideals, and the unfortunate results of these ideologies in Ireland. Not only do economic issues permeate every part of the narrative, they are uniformly presented as having undesirable effects and as being detrimental for the characters who embody them. Put another way, if within

neoliberalism, as David Harvey explains, “the market is presumed to work as an appropriate guide—an ethic—for all human action” (165), then by portraying how the results of “human action” within this neoliberal ethic are always innately disappointing and even pathetic, Murray undermines the very value of neoliberalism as a “productive” ideology. Again, in showing how Paul’s loserdom is effectively a product of his financial failures, Murray undercuts his uncritical veneration of “the joys of home ownership, private property, individualism, and the liberation of entrepreneurial opportunities” promised by the country’s contemporary neoliberal reality (D. Harvey 61). Likewise, by framing the loser qualities of Claude and the nameless Dubliners in the context of Ireland’s financial apparatuses and the effects they have had, Murray points to the ways in which loserdom is arguably the only sure product of the neoliberal project. By repeatedly highlighting the convergence of his characters’ personal shortcomings and Ireland’s broader financial realities, Murray offers a pointed critique of the ideological framework generating these conditions and driving these shortcomings. He seems to show, in short, that *homo oeconomicus* is always a loser.

Despite challenging the overall value of neoliberal ideologies in Ireland by calling attention to the ways in which loserdom is an inevitable by-product of these ideologies, Murray, I argue, uses the apparent detriment of neoliberalism on his characters to make a more significant argument about the absurdity of the fact that these ideologies remain intact in the post-crash era. In other words, in depicting how neoliberal ideologies persist in a (fictionalized) post-crash setting that has been devastated by the reduction of “all spheres of existence” to “economic metrics” (W. Brown 10), Murray points to the most regrettable by-product of Ireland’s boom and bust: namely, that Irish society seems

unable to reject the ideological sources of its significant contemporary challenges. As I have suggested, Murray portrays his protagonists, in particular, as both aware of the fact that they are losers—and, of course, that their loserdom largely stems from their roles in the economic sphere—and yet generally resigned to this fact. However, by juxtaposing the characters' respective resignation about their "economic loserdom," as it were, with their recognition of the devastation caused by the market in Ireland, the novelist suggests that the true tragedy of the Irish economic downturn is that it has not provoked a wholesale disavowal of the neoliberal ideals responsible for the country's socioeconomic disaster.

Though Paul conceives of his wide range of failures as born out of "market realities" (169), the character's half-baked schemes and "totally legitimate business venture[s]" demonstrate his inability to separate himself from the ideals driving these realities and, by extension, these failures (220). The characters' confidence in his most significant endeavour, [www.myhotswaitress.com](http://www.myhotswaitress.com)—a website which enables lonely men to essentially stalk their favourite waitresses, and which is designed to eliminate the possibility of arriving at "a café or restaurant only to find that your favourite waitress isn't there" (221)—illustrates, for example, the degree to which he is unable to break out of the neoliberal paradigm of Irish life. Paul's commitment to this foolish idea displays the character's failure to abandon a neoliberal ethic that positions "enterprise as the orientation and activity of human capital and society as a whole" (W. Brown 66), this despite the fact that he acknowledges—and experiences—the ways this compulsive entrepreneurialism only leads to failure.

When Paul first introduces Claude to his prospective business venture, he presents the website as the “polar opposite” of his novel (223). He explains, first of all, that the idea first came to him when, after his novel was poorly received, his anxiety about its lack of success—and resulting lack of profits—along with the fact that he had “taken out this huge mortgage” that he had to pay, created a “vicious circle [in which] the more I worried about it, the less chance there was I’d ever come up with an idea for a [second] book” (220-1). The idea for this website, he claims, brought with it the possibility of true wealth, something his writing career would never do.<sup>64</sup> He describes how he “had investors queuing out the door! Venture capital, private equity!” (223). And though he admits that he ultimately failed to launch the website, the ambition, determination, and excitement he demonstrates in this scene betrays his ongoing belief in the neoliberal precept articulated a few chapters earlier: with the right idea, “ordinary people [could be] turned to stars overnight” (153). Though this initial description of Paul’s abortive enterprise again enables Murray to subvert the symbolic, if not monetary, benefit of participating in the market, it is in his portrayal of Paul’s renewed attempt at launching [www.myhotswaitress.com](http://www.myhotswaitress.com) that Murray foregrounds his protagonist’s fundamental failure in learning from his economic mistakes. After re-dedicating himself not only to the website, but to the heedless entrepreneurialism that helped take down Ireland’s economy, Paul, Murray shows, is forced to admit defeat and to concede to his loserdom. Soon after he confidently declares to Claude that his website “is the future” and that he is “not going to stop until [he has] turned the boring old world into a sexy, fun MyHotsWorld” (296),

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<sup>64</sup> Earlier in the text, Paul connects his failures as a novelist to economic factors: he claims that “people don’t want [books] anymore. They’ve got other things,” and therefore that it is Ireland’s “market realities that persuaded [him] to stop writing” (169).

Paul realizes that he will again be unable to come up with what he needs for the website to succeed. Not only does he fail to acquire “a small injection of capital” for the website (296), his plan to show Claude how the website works to ensure that customers can track their favourite waitresses fails when the waitress he has brought Claude to see is absent. As these failures sink in, the feckless, would-be entrepreneur “slumps leadenly in his chair,” and “defeatedly” asks Claude to order so that they can “just get this over with” (297). Notably though, in dramatizing how Paul convinces himself that it is simply difficult “out there for the entrepreneur at the moment” given the socioeconomic circumstances generated by the uncritical entrepreneurialism championed during the boom, Murray foregrounds, here, that what is really pathetic is not Paul’s inability to succeed in his business ventures—an inability to succeed that extends, again, to his career as a novelist, con man, etc. (299). Rather, what the novelist presents as fundamentally deplorable is the fact that the character can justify such a failure at all. Though his entrepreneurial drive consistently fails him and leaves behind him a trail of humiliations and loss, Paul continues to abide by it. The obvious harms of this neoliberal ideology do nothing, in short, to dissuade Paul from abandoning it. If Paul is “a washed-up loser with nothing to show for the last seven years but a mortgage in arrears and a wife who hates [his] guts” (316), it is not, Murray shows, because he has simply failed as a marketized subject, but rather because he agrees to continue failing, to continue to adopt an ethic ensuring these failures.

Paul’s commitment to his website exemplifies Murray’s point about how Irish society’s true failure consists of its masochistic readiness to submit to the very philosophies that have laid waste to its country, but the text’s critique of this most

significant post-crash failure is nowhere better exemplified than in his portrayal of the goings-on at BOT. In showing how BOT's myopic focus on keeping its investors happy and its assets afloat does nothing but exacerbate the institution's precarious financial position, Murray highlights what David Harvey calls the "tension between the power of neoliberal ideals and the actual practices of neoliberalization," practices that largely serve as "a system of justification and legitimation for whatever [needs] to be done" to "restore the power of economic elites" (19). He shows, more simply, how neoliberal ideals continue to dominate despite verifiably undermining the very benefits they promise. In several scenes, for example, Claude is compelled to draft reports that will reassure BOT's investors that recapitalizing "Royal Irish" is the right strategy despite the fact that, as the banker well knows, the bank "has been haemorrhaging money for months," and that "it is finished as a going concern" (52). Claude's obligation to help propel the failing financial institution forward against all reason not only negates his agency as "one of [BOT's] most talented analysts" but threatens to aggravate the country's poor economic standing (50). Indeed, it exemplifies the degree to which the "marketization" of Irish society under neoliberalism is essentially self-sustaining. Though they have generated Ireland's financial failure, and though, in the world of the novel, they have led to the financial problems at Royal Irish, neoliberal ideals have, as Braedley and Luxton put it, undone "the dream of a society in which individuals [and institutions] freely make choices in the direction of their desires" (19), and instead have conditioned Irish subjects to continue to give themselves over to the needs of the market. Despite perceiving the damage Royal Irish has suffered as a result of its investment strategies, the employees at BOT are effectively subservient to the ideals of neoliberalism, and they do nothing but deploy or

encourage similar strategies in attempting to try to rescue it.<sup>65</sup> Late in the text when the Irish government takes BOTs advice and injects billions of euro into Royal in a desperate attempt to keep it solvent, Murray frames this senseless investment as a legacy of the Celtic Tiger's ideology of profit or, at the very least, as an effect of neoliberal Ireland's unremitting belief in the pre-eminence of economic growth. The text shows that this last-ditch effort at preserving the bank's wealth—something, the text emphasizes, that goes against Claude's "professional opinion . . . that the bank is fucked" (180)—in fact compromises the state's ability to actually mitigate its financial losses and, by extension, alleviate the nation's economic foundering.

In this way, the novel demonstrates, again, that perhaps the most pressing issue Ireland faces in the post-crash era has less to do with finding ways of fixing what Claude describes as the "catastrophic series of events" instigated by the crash—specifically, "factories shutting down, homes repossessed, mass emigration"—and rather more to do with finding a means of overcoming the very ideals that caused these catastrophes (31). As BOT's COO, Rachel, angrily explains to Claude—an employee she sees as feckless and inept when it comes to ensuring the continued prosperity of BOT's "extremely important clients" (342-3)—why BOT has advised the government that Royal ought to be rescued, the banker realizes the degree to which the bank's entire operation remains built on the neoliberal compulsion to "make something happen" no matter the cost, to "get the

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<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, Claude's surname, I would suggest, hints at this caustic evaluation of Irish banks in light of the economic collapse they produced. A "martingale" is a gambling strategy in which "a losing player repeatedly doubles . . . a stake such that any win would cover losses accrued from preceding bets" ("Martingale"). Without putting too fine a point on the matter, the "martingale" is effectively a "loser's" strategy and one that prioritizes chance over the careful consideration of risk.

money out to the fella who's going to use it," and to "do a fucking deal" regardless of what "Risk and Treasury and whoever else" determine with their "fucking pie charts and breakdowns and all that" (153). He realizes, Murray shows, that Ireland's value has become fundamentally intertwined with its economy, and that without at least the prospect of prosperity, the nation is, as Rachel puts it, "nothing. We're irrelevant. We're a godforsaken rock in the middle of the ocean. If [Ireland] sank under the waves tomorrow, [the world would] barely notice" (343). Perhaps more than in any other scene, Murray foregrounds here the problematic ways in which Ireland ostensibly imagines itself. He denounces how, since the boom, Irish society effectively acts in a way that suggests it occupies a "place on the map" so long as it can contribute in a significant way to the global economy and, specifically, maximize investors' profits (343). Like Claude, Murray takes exception to the degree to which the economic turn is fully entrenched in the Irish psyche in spite of the fact that this neoliberal "turn" has devastated the country. The novelist bemoans the fact that, like the fictional Royal Irish, this turn is "too big to fail," as it were, and he uses his protagonists' readiness to "do as I'm told" to account for the "self-devouring incomprehensibility" of Ireland's preservation of neoliberal rationality in the post-crash era (345-6).

Murray's representation of the influence of the marketplace to his characters' loser statuses—and, by extension, the relationship between Irish society's embrace of deleterious market-driven ideologies and its socioeconomic failures—enables the novelist to account for the ways "neoliberalism is profoundly destructive to the fiber and future of democracy" and society in Ireland (W. Brown 9). Moreover, it enables him to express the urgency of overcoming such ideals. However, by the end of the novel, it becomes clear

that underlying this primary critique is a subtle and much more cynical point about the roots of this failure. Although much of his novel remains centred on Irish society's failure in renouncing neoliberal ideologies in view of the harms they cause, by the end of *The Mark and the Void*, Murray harks to the ways these failures are arguably the product of an Irish psychology or culture of victimhood born out of the country's colonial experiences. More simply, Murray ties Irish society's willingness to abide by ideals that are identifiably damaging as an effect of what one of his more peripheral characters describes as an Irish readiness to act "like they are the victim" rather than take responsibility for "what they did during the boom" (253). Though he repeatedly alludes to Ireland's colonial history as he explores the effects of Irish society's failure to break away from the neoliberal ideals that generate the country's contemporary misery (71, 152, 245, 253, 443), Murray makes explicit near the end of the novel the degree to which this general unwillingness to "learn the lessons of neoliberal disaster" can be read as symptomatic of the legacies of colonialism (Cleary 143). More specifically, he highlights that Ireland's readiness to embrace and defend an oppressive socioeconomic rationality is indicative of what David Lloyd calls one of "the enduring paradoxes of Irish misery," namely, that "miserable as their conditions of life were" during the decades of colonial subjugation, the Irish "clung to [these conditions] with often vehement resistance" and "persisted in practices that British political economists regarded as profoundly irrational" (*IT* 45). In short, Ireland's ostensibly irrational assent to the neoliberal project is, in the final sections of the novel, framed explicitly as a symptom of "the cultural recalcitrance of the Irish" (Lloyd *IT* 45).

Following the novel's climax, Murray calls attention to the ways in which his earlier critique of the market-driven ethos of post-crash Ireland is indeed also a critique of what Claude, describes early in the text as the Irish ability "to absorb any amount of punishment without complaint" (54)—an ability clearly evocative of "the sense of punishment whose internalization" defines the colonized psyche and, in Ireland's case in particular, that undergirds the "mood of melancholy fatalism [of] Irish culture" (Lloyd *IT* 33). In this scene following the fictionalized Irish government's decision to take on "six billion euros' worth of . . . radioactive Greek shit" (442), thereby "deliberately bankrupting [itself] so that [it] can get a handout from Europe" (443), Jurgen, Claude's immediate superior at BOT, explains how this kind of catastrophic self-sabotage and implicit admission of failure and incompetence is in keeping with Ireland's history of colonial subjugation (by Britain and, in this case, by Catholicism). When Claude asks how the Irish government can rationalize its foolish decision to render itself and its country powerless as a means of getting a "handout"—that is, how it can ignore the damage of again submitting to the "normalizing narrative of progress and economic development" that neoliberalism represents, a narrative, it is worth re-emphasizing, that the nation was, for years, imagined as being "impossible to recruit into" (Deane 146)—Jurgen incisively replies, that the banker is "perhaps making the mistake of judging Irish actions by an external standard" (443). In imperfect English, Jurgen explains to Claude that Ireland, broadly speaking, welcomes this kind of socio-economic misery because

unlike the French, the British, [and the] Germans, the Irish have never commanded their own empire. For the greater part of their history, they have been the subjects of foreign powers . . . [The] fact is that the Irish are at root a slave

race. We have seen this during their brief period of good fortune, when they are acting like the servant who has found the key to the wine cellar while his master is away. Even then it is clear they are not fit to be rulers of themselves. And they do not wish it either. This is why, although it seems to you and me the terrible injustice, they will carry their new debt without grumbling, even with gratitude . . . Do not forget, Claude, this is a country until very recently ruled by priests. Thanks to them, the Irish believe they are born in debt . . . A people like this is more comfortable wrapped in chains. (443)

Ventriloquizing Jurgen, Murray stresses the degree to which Ireland's willingness to both embrace failure—in this case, the harsh austerity measures implemented by its European financial overlords—and cling to the very sources of its failure are both products of the nation's longstanding position as the continent's loser and, more specifically, a product of centuries of colonial and religious domination. Though Murray's novel, as a whole, traces the personal and institutional missteps that led to Ireland's economic difficulties, this explanation, which effectively concludes *The Mark and the Void*, enables Murray to undergird his critique of Irish society's ongoing validation of the neoliberal ideologies enabling these failures with a subtler point about why these ideologies remain valid. He ultimately suggests that though the nation voluntarily accepts that "Paddy's got to pay for it [when] the whole place is in the shitter" (136), this willingness to "[carry] the can for the whole country turning to shit" (157) is indicative of both Ireland's intrinsic sense of victimhood, and of Irish people's inherent fondness for "do[ing] what they're told" even when "what they're told" is responsible for their suffering (137). The novel demonstrates, on the whole, the ways in which the

nation's history of acquiescent loserdom not only persists following the failure of the neoliberal project, but, more importantly, that this history enables these harmful ideologies to remain firmly in place. And in this rather cynical conclusion, the novelist leaves his readers with the grim prospect that "the whole thing will happen all over again," as, in Ireland at least, there is no other option (444).

### **3.3. Powerlessness, Entrepreneurialism, and the Question of Masculine**

#### **Responsibility in *The Devil I Know***

Like Murray's *The Mark and the Void*, Claire Kilroy's fourth novel, *The Devil I Know* (2012), uses loser characters to examine the state of Irish society in the aftermath of the crash. In Kilroy's own words, the text consists of an attempt to answer questions about "how on earth we ended up where we did" after the crash (Wallace). However, in her effort to "explain what happened" and to capture the "confusion" of the post-crash years in her novel, Kilroy takes a slightly longer view of Ireland's economic meltdown than Murray does (Wallace). That is, unlike *The Mark and the Void*, which focuses almost exclusively on the post-crash era and explores how Irish society has failed to abandon the very neoliberal ideologies and motivations that engendered the economic crisis, Kilroy's novel examines the damaging socioeconomic effects of neoliberalism both during the final years of the Celtic Tiger and after the crash. Obviously, in its focus on the last years of the economic boom and the decisions and actions that effectively led to the crash, Kilroy's novel covers similar terrain as Cunningham's *Capital Sins*. What differentiates Cunningham and Kilroy's respective novels, however, is that *The Devil I Know*'s dramatization of the final years of the boom is focused on the real estate market

and, more importantly, marked explicitly by the outcome of Ireland's economic disaster. Put simply, though she looks beyond the crash and indeed explores the neoliberal project of the Celtic Tiger in her novel, Kilroy examines these topics and reassesses their impacts explicitly in view of the socioeconomic devastation they created.

*The Devil I Know* takes the form of Tristram Amory St Lawrence's testimony during a 2016 tribunal gathering information about Ireland's overinflated property market and the corrupt developers driving it. The narrative, which is "presented visually like a dialogue and an interrogation in a trial," consists of Tristram's answers to the probing questions of Justice Fergus O'Reilly (Mianowski 88). These answers, in turn, consist mainly of Tristram's detailed accounts of his dealings with the incompetent yet boisterous aspiring property mogul Desmond Hickey, and they reproduce "what his [thoughts] had been or . . . what they might have been" (Mianowski 88-9). Over the two-week interrogation, the returned Irish *émigré* Tristram recounts how he came to be in Ireland after many years away from his homeland and, more specifically, how he became involved with both Hickey and the secretive "Golden Circle" of investor-cum-developer billionaires. The narrator also relates his ongoing struggles with alcoholism and his significant relationship with his Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor, the mysterious and cunning Monsieur Deauville. Ultimately though, Tristram's narrative both chronicles his experiences at the heart of a particularly masculine Irish neoliberal culture of greed, hubris, and foolishness, and, crucially, offers a compelling reassessment of "how on earth [Ireland] ended up where [it] did" after the boom (Wallace).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given his focus on the collapse of the Irish economy, Tristram reveals, throughout this testimony, his sense of failure and guilt in relation to his

role in his country's economic downfall. That is, in recounting the part he played in causing Ireland's "economic implosion" (*DIK* 153), Tristram repeatedly calls attention to his failures and his loser qualities as a neoliberal subject. In the novel though, Kilroy's narrator presents his loser qualities as tied in with his powerlessness amidst the boomtime neoliberal ideologies that led to Ireland's downfall. However, given that, as Burke has noted, "Kilroy is an author profoundly interested in the manner in which gender norms shape contemporary Ireland" (18), I suggest that the novelist's depiction of the intersections of Tristram's loserdom—and, arguably, the loserdom of her more peripheral characters—and the economic crisis is notably gendered. That is, unlike Murray's protagonists whose loserdom largely reflects broader Irish society's failure to abandon neoliberalism in the post-crash era, Kilroy's depiction of her characters' loserdom and powerlessness is distinctly gendered and, as such, grounds her commentary on the economic crisis explicitly in the context of the masculine failures that generated it. In depicting the ways in which her male characters are all directly involved in foolish property development schemes and yet seem "to think of [themselves] as [victims]" once these schemes fail, Kilroy interrogates, I suggest, the "narrative . . . of Irish masculinity in crisis" that emerged after the crash (Burke 16).<sup>66</sup> She uses her loser characters to point to the "role that [problematic forms of masculinity] played in the boom's madness" (Burke 15), and, implicitly, to push against social narratives in which, as Cahill among others has

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<sup>66</sup> This narrative of "masculinity in crisis" that, as Negra and Tasker explain, "positions men as privileged subjects of recessionary exigency" is, of course, not limited to Ireland (9). Although I address this "crisis" in more detail below, see Hamilton Carroll's "Stuck Between Meanings: Recession-Era Print Fictions of Crisis Masculinity" and Sarah Banet-Weiser's "'We Are All Workers': Economic Crisis, Masculinity, and the American Working Class" for discussion of this crisis in other recessionary contexts, namely the United States.

claimed, “women and girls are made to carry the burden of the excesses of the Tiger” and in which they are “blamed for [Ireland’s] rampant consumerism and for [its] money-driven culture” (“Girl” 154). In short, unlike Murray whose critique is directed at post-crash Irish society broadly, Kilroy’s critique in *The Devil I Know* is clearly aimed at the kind of “virile entrepreneurial masculinity” that, as I discussed in the previous chapter, was at the heart of Irish neoliberalism and the “celebratory Celtic Tiger discourse” (Molony 185).

Although Kilroy’s emphasis on the gendered dimension of her characters’ loserdom differentiates her critique of the Celtic Tiger and its demise from Murray’s, *The Devil I Know* does share with *The Mark and the Void* a subtle interest in the way the crash plays into issues of Irish national history. In other words, just as Murray undergirds his analysis of Irish society’s ongoing embrace of neoliberalism in the post-crash era with a more subtle, albeit notable, comment on the ways this embrace can be tied back to its history of oppression, Kilroy offers a minor point about how, for all of the “madness” of the boom years (Burke 15), none of the prosperity it generated helped the nation make good on its opportunity to leave behind its history of poverty and socioeconomic stagnancy. Kilroy has claimed that “we were so starved of the sweet shop [in Ireland] that as soon as we were let in, we went bananas,” but her novel subtly suggests that the failures of going “bananas” were not simply economic (Burke 23). Instead, the nation’s readiness to be “swallowed up by the real-estate frenzy, the building of the property bubble and the general atmosphere of corruption” (Mianowski 83), she shows, constitutes a kind of national(ist) disappointment in that it ultimately resulted in Ireland’s failure to

“invent a future for itself,” a future for which it had been waiting since independence (O’Toole *Ship* 221).

After first showing how Kilroy critiques the value of neoliberal ideologies in Ireland by portraying her characters’ loserdom as intertwined with their neoliberal subjectivities—that is, their participation in the Ireland’s real estate boom—and, of course, with their awareness of the results of their actions during Ireland’s boom, I argue that the novelist uses the powerlessness that undergirds her characters’ loserdom to condemn those most responsible for Ireland’s trajectory from boom to bust. More specifically, I argue that, unlike Murray who uses his characters’ “economic loserdom” to skewer an Irish society that remains unable to give up the neoliberal ideologies that caused the crash, Kilroy uses the apparent powerlessness that attends her characters’ sense of loserdom to denounce those men that brought down the Irish economy and, more specifically, to emphasize the ways in which narratives of masculine victimization get used to conceal the responsibilities of these men. Put another way, as opposed to the critique of *The Mark and the Void* which takes aim at Irish society’s inability to abandon the flawed and obviously harmful neoliberal project of the boom, that of *The Devil I Know*, I contend, targets those largely male figures—namely, the property developers and those supporting them—responsible for contemporary Ireland’s economic predicament as well as the social narratives that work to absolve them of their misdeeds. And though the focus of *The Devil I Know* remains on those individuals who were, in Kilroy’s words, unable to “walk away from the trough” after gorging themselves (Burke 23), her novel, like Murray’s, also includes an underlying comment on the ways Ireland’s economic failures also represent national(ist) failures. As such, I end by briefly suggesting that

insofar as Kilroy uses loserdom to lambaste both the “virile entrepreneurial masculinity” shaped by Ireland’s neoliberal turn and the discourses that cover up this damaging neoliberal masculinity (Molony 185), her critique is also subtly motivated by the fact that those who embodied this kind of masculinity not only sunk the Irish economy but squandered the country’s opportunity to establish a postcolonial modernity by achieving the “steady and socially just kind of prosperity” that eluded it until the boom (O’Toole *Ship* 21).

From the outset of *The Devil I Know*, Kilroy emphasizes that the outcome of the Celtic Tiger and the socioeconomic damage caused by Ireland’s overinflated property market are fundamentally intertwined with her characters’ loserdom. That is, like Murray’s *The Mark and the Void*, Kilroy’s novel establishes, early on, the degree to which the characters’ loser qualities are an effect of their marketized subjectivities, and, like Murray, she uses this connection to undermine the value of neoliberalism in Ireland and its advantages for Irish society. Given that he is both Kilroy’s narrator and the main loser of the novel, Tristram most clearly demonstrates how loserdom intersects with or arises from participating in Ireland’s neoliberal marketplace.

It is worth noting, first of all, that throughout his testimony, Tristram repeatedly characterizes himself as a loser and as a figure of pathos. From the novel’s first pages, the character explicitly articulates that he is a loser, describing himself as figuratively “separated from the herd” of “worried sheep” that make up Irish society (10). Likewise, he expresses his sense of himself as a loser using self-denigrating remarks and by belittling himself throughout the novel. Answering the judge’s first question, he claims, for instance, that “people have been saying a lot of bad things about me in the press” and

acknowledges that he is “here to say a few more” (5). In the pages that follow, he paints himself as “the kind of man who let[s] himself lose out on the best part of things” (243), and by the end of the novel, in perhaps his most explicit acknowledgement of his loserdom, Tristram claims that “if one thing stands out about my miserable tale,” it is “that it has no winners” (360), which means, of course, that he, like everyone else who appears in his “tale,” is inevitably a loser. And though Tristram’s tendency for self-deprecation sets the stage for his account of his own inadequacies and failures as an economic subject, his conception of himself as a “sorry soul,” a loser, is marked by more than just his awareness of the entrepreneurial failures that have brought him before the tribunal (39). Indeed, Tristram emphasizes that his loserdom, though undeniably bound up by the significant socioeconomic failures to which he is an accessory, define him and thus extend into the parts of his life that are not explicitly “economic.” Put simply, in the narrative of his involvement in the real-estate boom, the character highlights the ways in which he is simply a loser in relation to the world around him. In a line that closely echoes Claude’s own self-assessment in *The Mark and the Void*, Tristram claims, for instance, that people almost fail to detect him given that he “barely interact[s] with this world,” that he is “barely here” (25). Rather than belonging to a “country or class or creed,” Tristram explicitly states that he does not belong (26). When characters such as Hickey do interact with him though, Tristram suggest that their interactions are always marked by his apparent personal inadequacies. For instance, recalling his first encounter with Hickey since returning to Ireland, Tristram describes “the act of ridicule” to which Hickey has always subjected him, the “utter freedom [Hickey] felt in expressing it,” and his own “utter powerlessness in having to listen to it” (14). Later in the novel, we become

privy to such an act: when Hickey, irritated by Tristram's unwillingness to invite him in for tea, yells after him, "you're a gent. I always said that about you. Always stood up for you, no matter what they accused you of . . . I'd say: you have him all wrong. Bit up his hole, I grant you that, but he wouldn't hurt a fly," the brute calls attention to Tristram's submissiveness and passivity (58). However, given the overt sarcasm with which Hickey delivers this line and the way in which Tristram walks away, unperturbed by—even resigned to—the latter's provocation, the novel broadly mocks these qualities and presents them as part of the protagonist's personal shortcomings. And though these scenes do not add much to the plot of the novel, by returning to these kinds of minor, albeit tense, interactions throughout his testimony, Tristram highlights their relevance to his sense of himself as a loser amidst the people around him and, by extension, the degree to which this loserdom is integral to his narrative about the failure of the property boom.

Despite the fact that Tristram perceives himself as a loser by and large, and despite the fact that his relationships with the novel's other characters seem to bear this out, what is notable about the protagonist's perception of his haplessness is the way in which he repeatedly connects it to the outcome of Ireland's economic boom and, thus, of the country's neoliberal project. Put another way, Tristram consistently characterizes his sense of personal inadequacy as tied to his awareness of how his business ventures shake-out, and, more broadly, how his adoption of neoliberal ideologies ultimately served to ensure the end of the country's period of prosperity. For example, describing the moment he accepted a cheque from Monsieur Deauville for "a staggering figure of €100 000" and, thus, officially became director of Castle Holdings (71), Kilroy's protagonist claims that the cheque "was a test . . . of my character. A test I failed" (72). Though the cheque

here—and the literal and symbolic embrace of profits it represents—does not necessarily produce Tristram’s failure, both the money and Tristram’s irrational compulsion to accept it confirms his inadequacies and his propensity for failure. Though he may have already had a disappointing “character” or disposition, his unthinking acceptance of the neoliberal project that the cheque effectively represents does nothing but prove his tendency for disappointment and failure. Similarly, in the scene in which Tristram describes the company that he managed at the direction of Hickey and Deauville, he again draws a connection between his sense of failure and his awareness of the socio-economic collapse that this company helped precipitate. Of the company, Castle Holdings, Tristram observes:

[It] was a shell company. It bought nothing, sold nothing, manufactured nothing, did nothing, and yet, as your piece of paper states there, it returned a profit of €66 million that first year. Huge sums of untaxed money were channelled through it out to the shareholders of its parent companies, which is perfectly legal under Irish tax law, as you know. (72-3)

Though this depiction of Castle Holdings as a “shell company” clearly works to call attention to the economic conditions and loopholes that helped create and, later, destroy Ireland’s period of economic prosperity, it also demonstrates the ways in which Tristram perceives his own loserdom as entwined with his role in the country’s fraudulent and corrupt economic system. Tristram’s description of the company, along with the fact that it reminds him of his unquestioning readiness to accept compensation for his part in helping the money flow through Castle Holdings (72), in other words, illustrates that his sense of failure is not a result of his inability to succeed—as they are, say, for Paul in *The*

*Mark and the Void*—but instead a result of his readiness to buy-in to the demands of the market. Kilroy’s narrator shows here, in other words, the degree to which Ireland’s neoliberal conditions during the boom compounded his sense of failure if not his actual tendency to fail. The sense here is that the character’s embrace of neoliberalism, though profitable, does nothing but ensure his eventual failure, his inevitable misery. Kilroy calls into question the very value of neoliberal ideology by pointing to the obvious tension between the success it generates and the failure it guarantees. Later, after completely disparaging his company and berating the lawmakers who “made the [Irish tax] laws . . . and must shoulder some blame” for the crash they enabled, Tristram again derides himself for his involvement with this company, an involvement he sees as an utter moral failing (73). He claims, “my appointment [to the directorship of Castle Holdings] struck me as appropriate on a mordant level. Who better to direct a shell company than a shell of a human being? M. Deauville could not have chosen a more fitting candidate” (73). The consequences for Ireland created by companies such as Castle Holdings and engendered by the Celtic Tiger project are clearly at the heart of both Tristram’s sense of personal failure and Kilroy’s assessment of neoliberalism, and it is, in short, primarily in the context of the socioeconomic effects of these “shell companies”—and the neoliberal ideologies of endless profit that they represent—that the novel portrays Ireland’s ethos of failure.

Certainly, Kilroy’s protagonist is the main loser of her novel, but as Kilroy’s depiction of Hickey shows, in no way is he the only character who embodies the ethos of failure caused by Irish neoliberalism. Nevertheless, as evidenced by his narrative, Tristram’s view of his associate’s personal flaws again correlates with his broader

understanding of the aftermath of the economic crash and their shared roles in causing it. For example, Hickey's hopeless incompetence and idiocy are, for Tristram, clearly tied to his role in the boom and bust. From the start of his testimony, Tristram characterizes his partner's generally oblivious demeanour and his "sheer ham-fistedness" as an offshoot of his marketized subjectivity and, more specifically, of his irrational pursuit of profits within Ireland's property market (57). For instance, as Hickey and Tristram arrive at "Hilltop," Tristram's mother's birthplace, and a so-called "big house," the former shows his lack of concern for the historic qualities of the property and reveals his myopic focus on what he can gain from it. He dismissively claims that "the house itself was probably a protected structure since it was Victorian, or Georgian, or Edwardian, or something," but nonetheless recognizes that "he could squeeze twelve or so luxury apartments behind the façade" (42). Hickey's concerns are exclusively with Ireland's contemporary moment of unchecked prosperity, and his loserdom, at least in Tristram's estimation, is an extension of these concerns and, therefore, fundamentally part of the "virile entrepreneurial masculinity" that he seeks to embody (Molony 185). Later, when he describes his own ambition in becoming a wealthy property developer, Hickey even concedes that his ostensible success as a neoliberal subject participating in Ireland's property market is a result of his willingness to embrace foolishness and a kind of fecklessness. Hickey claims specifically that unlike those "fucken eejits" who used to wander Ireland's beaches with metal detectors looking for "the next Tara Brooch or Ardagh Chalice" only to give up the search soon after (141), he "never stopped trawling the place" (142). He asserts that he finally found the "treasure buried around here" by "chang[ing] [land] into *property*" and transforming "a heap a muck into gold" (142). Again though, the implication is that

Hickey has only succeeded in Ireland's marketplace by accepting the role of "fucken eejit" and sticking around a formerly economically-cursed homeland.<sup>67</sup> Put simply, Kilroy aligns Hickey's entrepreneurialism with his loserdom here and, as such, questions again the value of such marketized roles. When Hickey later asserts that "we are the Celtic Tiger" (248), he demonstrates how his success within Ireland's neoliberal marketplace hinges, as Mianowski suggests, on his readiness to give up "any sense of purpose and reality" (88)—especially a "purpose or reality" that is not entirely rooted in economic advancement—and on his willingness to occupy the role of social pariah. And given that the collapse of the Celtic Tiger haunts the narrative, the novel clearly offers the characters' adoption of ideals of economic excess as indicative of the danger of such motivations.

As I have shown, Tristram and Hickey's loser qualities share with those of Murray's characters a connection with Ireland's economic realities. Moreover, like in *The Mark and the Void*, Kilroy uses these loser qualities to point to the inevitable harm produced by neoliberalism in Ireland. By explicitly connecting her characters' loserdom to their roles as market subjects, Kilroy, in short, subtly critiques the value of the neoliberal project that was touted, as we saw in the previous chapter, as a long-deserved opportunity for prosperity. However, for all of *The Devil I Know's* similarities with *The*

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<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, Hickey's espousing of the role of "eejit" recalls what Kiberd describes as "certain short-term advantages" of adopting Irish stereotypes (*II* 29). Though I am arguing against the idea that Hickey's idiocy (his "eejicy," as it were) is portrayed as feigned, the way in which it enables the character to profit certainly evokes Kiberd's observation that donning "the mask of the Paddy" enabled colonial Irish subjects (especially immigrants) to "control and regulate" their relationships with the native English and to perfect "an art of fawning duplicity" in which the Irish "acted the fool while making shrewd deals which often took their rivals unaware" (*II* 29-30).

*Mark and the Void*, the way in which Tristram repeatedly frames his description of his loserdom in the context of powerlessness fundamentally differentiates it from the loserdom Murray explores in his novel. Whereas Murray's characters' loserdom essentially stems from their unwillingness—that is, a conscious decision—to give up neoliberal ideologies even in view of the crash and general ethos of failure that they have engendered, Kilroy's narrator consistently emphasizes that his failures—and, by extension, those of his associates—are, in large part, due to his inability to control himself as an agent of the market during the boom. More simply, insofar as Tristram conceives of his loserdom as a result of his neoliberal subjectivity and his awareness of what effects this subjectivity has had, he crucially also presents this loserdom as a matter of his powerlessness and lack of agency as a subject in the Irish marketplace. Throughout the novel, he claims that his failures, humiliations, and personal shortcomings are all, in some way, consequences or effects of his victimization, as it were, at the hands of the invisible forces of the Celtic Tiger neoliberalism and of his apparent “[conversion] into the administered condition of . . . responsabilized [human capital]” that, as Wendy Brown explains, takes place outside “the domain of agency” and instead occurs “through demands emanating from an invisible elsewhere” (133).

However, rather than simply pointing to the ways Tristram's powerlessness is simply another manifestation of the character's loserdom, Kilroy, I argue, positions her protagonist's narrative of powerlessness in the context of the “cultures of male entitlement and risk [that] had much to do with the . . . financial collapse” (Negra “Adjusting” 223), and thus invites her readers to view it with a degree of suspicion. I suggest, that is, that the novelist deploys her protagonist's ostensible powerlessness—

and, more importantly, his tendency to contextualize his whole narrative in relation to this powerlessness—as a means of challenging what Negra and Tasker call the “tropes of male injury” that “financial cris[es] promulgat[e]” (8). More specifically, by highlighting the degree to which Tristram stresses his lack of agency during the Celtic Tiger, and uses this lack of power to justify his role in the destruction of Ireland’s economy, Kilroy, I argue, challenges those cultural narratives that “[deflect] attention from the macho politicians, builders, and developers [who hustled] the economy away” and who turned “a disordered male capacity for dangerous risk taking . . . into [Ireland’s] national economic strategy” (Burke 15).<sup>68</sup> She pits his narrative of masculine powerlessness, that is, against boom-time discourses that celebrated the “canny, ballsy progenitors of [Ireland’s] impossible economic boom” (Molony 184).

Before showing how Kilroy utilizes Tristram’s sense of powerlessness as a means of critiquing the “affectively potent” notion of “men as particularly and singularly impacted by the [Irish] recession” (Negra “Adjusting” 225), it is worth noting that the issue of powerlessness filters through every part of Tristram’s narrative. Though it is perhaps not a directly related to Kilroy’s gendered critique, the very testimonial structure of the novel, for instance, plays into Tristram’s emphasis on his powerlessness. Namely, though Tristram’s voice dominates the novel, his is a voice, of course, that is prompted by the tribunal’s inquiry and, specifically, by Justice Fergus O’Reilly’s leading questions. Although he describes the events as he remembers them, Tristram consistently calls

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<sup>68</sup> Former Finance Minister and later Taoiseach Brian Cowen would be forced, in 2009, to apologize for the Celtic Tiger’s problematic *modus operandi* and, specifically, for his role in helping to create a “society in which construction serviced the economy into one in which the economy existed to service construction” (O’Toole *Ship* 118).

attention to the way in which his testimony is shaped by the questions he is forced to answer and the ways in which he must answer them. He must offer his account, he claims from the outset, according to Justice O'Reilly's "wish[es]" (5), and we see the effects of this restriction, for example, after the judge quickly concludes his questioning on the day Tristram first describes his dealings with the Golden Circle. In the scene, Tristram questions the thoroughness of the inquiry and acknowledges the extent to which he is prevented from disclosing all he knows about this group of investors. When the judge refrains from asking about the members of the Golden Circle, Tristram asks Fergus "isn't the State paying you to conduct a full inquiry?", and he suggests that the officials conducting the inquiry are satisfied to hold one member of the Circle "personally accountable for the economic implosion" and intent on letting him take the blame for "the downfall of the country" in an effort to deflect blame away from themselves (153). Tristram insinuates here that though he is seemingly in control of the account he is charged with giving, the "testimonial" parameters of his narrative, in fact, highlight his powerlessness because of the ways in which they obstruct his ability to maintain control over his statement. I would argue though, the very structure of Tristram's account betrays the ways in which external forces come to determine the content, shape, meaning, and significance of his story; indeed, he alludes to the ways in which his testimony and the limits placed on it are prime examples of how the nefarious forces that turned Ireland's boom into an unprecedented socioeconomic failure continue to exert their influence over him and, by extension, over Irish society.

Beyond simply showing how Tristram's testimony is effectively governed by others and, thus, that the character himself ostensibly remains powerless over his

narrative, Kilroy's more significant concern with respect to the question of Tristram's powerlessness has to do with the ways in which it exists in tension with the character's obvious authority as a neoliberal subject. Again, however, Kilroy does not simply depict this lack of agency as a symptom of Tristram's loserdom—that is, as yet another example of the character's general inadequacies—but, in fact, depicts the character's sense of powerlessness as part of the broader problematic narrative built to absolve the men Tristram and Hickey represent of their destructive actions during the boom. She shows, that is, the extent to which Tristram, though portraying his powerlessness as part of his loserdom, uses this narrative of powerlessness to rationalize what he sees, in the post-crash present of the novel, as irrational and imprudent behaviour by men like himself during the boom.

Though the examples Tristram gives in his testimony of his powerlessness may not always seem related to Ireland's economic realities, they nonetheless fit into the novel's broader interrogation of the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath, and, therefore, function as part of Kilroy's broader critique of neoliberal masculinity and its role in sinking the Irish economy. Tristram's alcoholism is a case in point. Although it is a relatively minor issue in relation to his broader account of the shady inner-workings of Ireland's boomtime property market, this addiction and Tristram's struggle in controlling it is, as Molly Ferguson has suggested, presented "as a symbol suited to depict the excess and abuse of the Celtic Tiger" (62). For one, Tristram repeatedly emphasizes that he is always at the mercy of his alcoholic impulses: he claims, for instance, that the experience of drinking is akin to "holding my soul, distilled into liquid and aching to be reunited with my body" (23). He therefore requires those like Deauville to help him overcome his

temptations, to take control and pluck him “from the jaws of Hell” (24). However, in that it situates him within a distinctly gendered Irish discourse, Tristram’s alcoholism, the novel shows, also reflects “the role gender norms and the imperative to consume play in addiction in contemporary Ireland” (Burke 17).<sup>69</sup> Indeed, in an article in which she covers the issue of alcoholism in Kilroy’s fiction in a much more comprehensive way than I do here, Ferguson claims that Tristram’s addiction is part of the novel’s attempt to pair “reckless spending with out-of-control drinking to record anxieties about Ireland’s complicity in . . . neo-liberal policies” (58), and she reads the narrator’s alcoholism, more specifically, as “the agent of transfer between . . . Irish businessmen” intent on doing anything “in exchange for profiting off their country” (71). As such, although he (perhaps justifiably) characterizes his alcoholism as a marker of his general powerlessness and as part of his shortcomings as a person, the fact that this drinking habit is aligned with questions of masculine excess in Celtic Tiger Ireland suggests that the powerlessness that undergirds this addiction can be read as part of the more significant narrative Tristram weaves regarding his role in Ireland’s neoliberal project. It represents, in other words, part of the character’s broader attempt to account for the “lack of discipline of [the] patriarchal culture in Ireland” during the boom that effectively wrecked the economy (M. Ferguson 69), a lack of discipline that he himself acknowledges having. In that this alcoholism is “akin to the type of rash investment addiction seen in [those characters who] giddily pursue property acquisitions in day-long benders” (McGlynn 47), the

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<sup>69</sup> David Lloyd, for instance, has pointed to the gendered nature of drinking culture in Ireland. He claims, specifically that, in a country in which “pub culture [is an important] aspect of Irish life[,] drinking rather than sexuality became the principle site for the performance of masculinity” (qtd. in M. Ferguson 60).

narrative of powerlessness at its core, Kilroy suggests, constitutes a fundamentally problematic attempt to redirect responsibility for the damage caused by these acquisitions and the investments they entailed. Although it is obviously not an example of economic failure, this alcoholism fits into the narrative of victimhood Tristram deploys as a means of explaining, and arguably excusing, these failures.

Although the powerlessness of Tristram's alcoholism can be read as part of the character's broader narrative of economic powerlessness, the text's more important examples of Tristram's powerlessness consist, without a doubt, of his descriptions of his association with Hickey and Castle Holdings, and his participation in the neoliberal economy of the Celtic Tiger. First of all, to trace Tristram's relationship with Hickey, his involvement in Castle Holdings, and his role in the development schemes that ultimately lead to his downfall is to trace, according to the narrator, a series of decisions that are made for him, but decisions for which he himself must suffer the consequences. He reiterates at several points, for example, that though he was certainly involved in Hickey and Deauville's property development plans, his involvement was at the "instigation" of these other characters (39). Likewise, Tristram describes the position he occupied as Director of Castle Holdings—himself as "figurehead position" (47)—as one that required him to "empty" himself so as to accommodate the needs of others. He suggests that in this position, he was merely a "conduit, an instrument of others," and that "Deauville issued the instructions and I carried them out" (93). In a more general sense, Tristram, here, calls attention to the ways in which his participation in the boom and his adoption of the reckless ideologies that ultimately put an end to the years of prosperity were certainly irrational but that he was in fact powerless to resist them. In a rather unambiguous

allusion to the strength of neoliberal ideologies during the boom, he claims that “various undocumented forces were at work upon me during that period,” agencies which “invisibly and inexorably exerted [a] pull” (244-5), forces such as money, which “disrupts the cognitive process [and] gums electrodes to your skull and scrambles your brain” (72). These forces, he claims, had a direct effect on his daily life by eliminating his ability to act according to his own morals. Moreover, Tristram even suggests that Hickey, one of the characters he presents as largely responsible for his powerlessness, is also essentially without agency. Tristram characterizes the entrepreneur as a pawn manipulated by other, more powerful people. Just before their housing operation goes belly-up, the *Irish Times* publishes a profile on Hickey which describes the builder as only one half of a joint property venture. The article describes Hickey’s “powerful publicity-shy business partner” who is “considered to be the mastermind of the operation but about whom little [is] known other than he [is] connected at the highest level to the world of international investment banking” (263). Though the point in this scene is that Tristram fails to recognize that he is this “partner,” it remains the case that the character believes that “Hickey had a puppet master too,” and that “background figures were yanking [Hickey’s] strings just as . . . they were yanking mine” (263). In these scenes, Tristram portrays himself and Hickey as nothing more than vehicles for the desires of others, and yet simultaneously the only figures through whom these desires can become reality. As such, he highlights, again, the tension between their authority and influence and their lack of personal agency. Both men, according to Tristram, are essentially representatives of the destructiveness of the boom, and yet they are also figures whose destructive power is effectively bestowed on them from elsewhere.

Though Tristram presents his and Hickey's powerlessness as rooted in their inability to counteract the manipulative external forces which both prompt and enable their project, he also depicts their powerlessness as inherently tied to the socio-economic conditions of Celtic Tiger Ireland. That is, insofar as the characters are subject to the manipulation of others, their apparent impotence also stems, according to Tristram, from Ireland's socio-economic realities during the period of national prosperity, essentially the pervading sentiments of the time. Throughout his testimony, Kilroy's protagonist repeatedly invokes the realities of the Celtic Tiger period in Ireland, always characterizing these realities as ridiculous, dangerous, but, most importantly, permissive. Recalling the point at which he wrote himself a cheque for €100 000, Tristram notes, for example, that "anything was possible in a bank back then" (93), and he suggests that his decision to deposit this cheque was prompted by this very possibility. He states that the lack of regulation not only enabled men like him to act in ways they would otherwise deem foolish, but indeed ensured that they did so. The character raises the point here that the highly permissive conditions of the Celtic Tiger created a situation in which builders and investors—again, the men that he and Hickey represent—succumbed to their every impulse, or, to use Mary Corcoran's phrase, that they "lost the run of themselves [and] just got carried away" (qtd. in Lynch 155). In a socio-economic context in which, as Tristram puts it, Irish banks "were throwing money at people," and "forcing it down their throats" (137), men like him became unable to control themselves. It is this lack of control produced by the neoliberal injunction to profit, he suggests, that fuels the boom but also implicitly accounts for his role in its ultimately destructive project. In short, according to Tristram, the country's booming economy did not create economic freedom

for him, and was, instead, self-perpetuating, effectively compelling him to spend and, in turn, profit against all reason. The character explains that he understood the dangers of his property ventures with Hickey—his “gut feeling” he claims, tells him that “Hickey was digging us into a big hole” (164)—but emphasizes that he had no choice but to continue to take advantage of Ireland’s new economic opportunity.

In that Tristram’s descriptions of his powerlessness in these scenes subtly enable the character to justify his role in producing the economic collapse, they hark to what Mianowski identifies as one of *The Devil I Know*’s key objectives: namely, the text’s call for Ireland’s boomtime subjects to take “collective and individual responsibility in the cataclysm,” to take the onus for “hearing or seeing only what they wanted to hear or see” (88). Certainly, his account of his lack of agency highlights that the apparent freedom to do as one pleases and to borrow or spend vast sums of money during the boom actually concealed an ideological imperative to do so. However, it also calls attention to the discourses that get deployed to absolve those primarily responsible for the effects of these indiscriminate financial activities. Put another way, like the issue of Tristram’s alcoholism, Kilroy offers Tristram’s account of his and Hickey’s ostensible powerlessness as entrepreneurs not just as part of their overarching loserdom, but rather as a point about the social traction of the idea of masculine victimhood in explanations for and accounts of the boom. The question of powerlessness in these scenes is not simply part of Kilroy’s exposition of Tristram’s loserdom, but rather, it is part of the novelist’s critique of the “discourse of masculine crisis” in which those who caused the economic crash attempt “to recoup political, economic, and cultural authority in the face of a destabilized national consensus” (H. Carroll *Affirmative* 2). Kilroy frames Tristram’s

various accounts of his powerlessness as convenient narratives by which the character can acknowledge wrongdoing without accepting responsibility for the effects of these actions.

We see this particular critique, for example, in Kilroy's depiction of Tristram's inability to recognize himself as the figure "yanking" Hickey's strings (263). Though Tristram holds that he and Hickey are at the mercy of invisible forces dictating their actions, Kilroy calls attention to the ways in which Tristram's failure in perceiving that he is the "mastermind of the operation" serves only to obscure his role in Hickey's aggressive financial enterprise and the considerable social problems this enterprise causes (263). Likewise, in highlighting the defensiveness of Tristram's explanation of why he accepted the €100 000 cheque—again, he claims to have done so largely because Irish banks "were throwing money at people" and "forcing it down their throats" (137)—Kilroy clearly points to the dubiousness of the character's ostensible lack of choice in the matter. In general, she explicitly undercuts this narrative of powerlessness by calling attention to the ways in which it enables him to effectively explain away the fact that he and Hickey are guilty of participating in a destructive neoliberal economy, and that they are part of the group of men who remain "at the helm" of Irish society and have, in their surrender to ideologies championing profits over anything else, "shaped recent history" (Magennis and Mullen 2). Not only does this ostensible powerlessness mitigate the character's sense of wrongdoing, it enables him to sustain, Kilroy shows, the idea that, as he punningly claims, he is "equally responsible, equally irresponsible" for the socioeconomic consequences produced by the overheated property market that men like him and Hickey helped create (355). In short, insofar as it enables Tristram to redirect

responsibility for the socioeconomic damage caused by his exploits during Ireland's period of prosperity, this narrative, Kilroy shows, is part of the cultural discourse meant to divert attention away from the fact that "fiscal irresponsibility derived from hypermasculine egoism" (M. Ferguson 62). The critique of the novel is aimed, in other words, not simply at the (male) characters responsible for the crash, but at their reliance on narratives of powerlessness that enable them to turn away from, if not vindicate, the harms engendered by "the private profit of the risk-taking Celtic Tiger man" (Molony 185). Overall, though Tristram's descriptions of his powerlessness may not be directly inflected by gender, they fundamentally epitomize his embrace of a problematic and highly gendered explanation of the crash. They exemplify the cultural discourse, Kilroy shows, that seeks to turn away from the fact "that 'balls' were what got Ireland into such a mess" (M. Ferguson 70).

Although Kilroy clearly deploys these narratives of powerlessness to undermine those discourses that detract from the responsibility of the property developers like Tristram and Hickey—and, by extension, the politicians, bankers, and investors like Monsieur Deauville, Ray Lawless, the Golden Circle—who destroyed Ireland's economy by believing that, as Kilroy herself put it, "we have balls, we deserve [Ireland's economic windfall]" (Burke 23), by the end of *The Devil I Know*, we see that this critique is also motivated by the fact that these men also wasted "an opportunity that was unique in Irish history" (O'Toole *Ship* 19). Though it is certainly a more peripheral point in her novel, Kilroy suggests that not only did these men squander Ireland's prosperity, they squandered an opportunity to "break cycles of deprivation" that had been a feature of Irish life for much of its history (O'Toole *Ship* 20). Early in the text, Tristram claims that

“the recent history of [Ireland] has been moulded by those without the vision to perceive the flaws in their plans” (94). And though he spends much of his testimony suggesting that the neoliberal conditions of the Celtic Tiger prevented men like him from perceiving these “flaws” or working to counteract them, Kilroy emphasizes that this questionable powerlessness does not excuse their failures to carve out of the “new Ireland” of the boom what the country’s long history of nationalism had aimed to achieve: a “basic level of decency for all [Irish] citizens” (O’Toole *Ship* 213).

Despite emphasizing (and undermining) the narrative of male entrepreneurs’ lack of choice in investing in and developing the Irish property market—that is, in profiting even if it meant letting “big holes [spread] across Ireland like the pox, eating away at the heart of the island” (164)—Kilroy also suggests that this problematic lack of integrity is compounded by the fact that the developments and ventures these men undertook during the boom did not provoke a move away from the oppressive realities of Irish history. Instead, the text shows, these ventures essentially exacerbated these realities, adding insult to injury, as it were. Kilroy’s critique, then, not only concerns the fact that Tristram (and the masculine entrepreneurial culture he represents) continues to fail to accept liability for his role in Ireland’s economic downfall, but indeed concerns the fact that, of the ostensibly profitable ventures that ultimately caused the failure of the Irish economy, none served to help Ireland realize in any meaningful or long-term way the “promises [that] were hard won over decades of struggle” (Lloyd *IT* 8). Describing the “army of cranes” dotting the Irish landscape and “declaring which territory belonged to whom,” Tristram explicitly acknowledges, for instance, that as a result of the actions of men like him—those actions, again, that Tristram suggests effectively prop-up his loserdom—

Ireland was “more than ever a colonised nation” (232). Likewise, in the novel’s final pages, Tristram juxtaposes the effects of the fiscal irresponsibility of men like him with the legacies of the Easter Rising. He despondently claims that the celebration of “one hundred years since the Proclamation” will be “messy” because, due to his boomtime actions and those of men like him, the Irish national sovereignty declared on the steps of the GPO “had been hocked” (354). These claims, I would argue, point to the text’s underlying comment on the ways in which the opportunity to develop true prosperity, both personal and national, was cast aside during the boom in favour of seizing the “opportunity to sit at the big boys’ table, to be on the other side of the fence” (236)—a new experience completely at odds with that of “the dirt-poor Irish” of history, those who “had been on the losing end . . . while other nations rose in turn” (Lynch 4). The zeal with which developers and builders embraced the opportunity to achieve wealth, enhance their socioeconomic value, and figuratively pull themselves out of the “muck” (*DIK* 142), Kilroy subtly demonstrates here, eclipsed the fact that their boomtime ambitions were misguided and that the boom was not simply “a genie whose golden lamp need only be stroked to ensure success” (O’Toole *Ship* 20). This “virile entrepreneurialism,” to borrow Molony’s term (185), ensured that, rather than arriving at the (long-awaited) establishment of “decent public services and of an equal and inclusive society” (O’Toole *Ship* 21), the Irish would remain, as Hickey puts it, “a nation [reared] to chase after leprechauns an crocks a gold” (141), victims of “nineteenth-century revenants”—namely, a psychology shaped by poverty, a “pre-modern land hunger,” and a political system built

on “a private network of mutual obligations”—that had “come back to haunt [Ireland’s] dreams of twenty-first century success” (O’Toole *Ship* 214).<sup>70</sup>

In the novel’s final pages, Tristram suggests that there was not “an Irishman who wasn’t delusional during the boom,” just as there is not “an Irishman who still is” in the contemporary period (341), and, as the text shows, it is these (notably gendered) delusions and the broader cultural attempts to disregard them that Ireland must grapple with in the post-crash era. And although they are consequences of both his wholehearted embrace of Ireland’s neoliberal project and his unwillingness to accept his responsibility for the damage caused by this project, Tristram’s loser qualities can also be read, then, as the result of living “as a little god” while believing he could do so without inviting “the other fella in” (359). His sense of loserdom and the various failures that shape it, constitute, to use Tristram’s words, a kind of metaphorical payment on a “debt [that] must be settled” for the boomtime overreach of the men he represents (360). His loserdom, Kilroy’s critique stresses, is not just a consequence of his failures in resisting Ireland’s neoliberal ideologies nor a result of his desire to defer responsibility for these failures. Rather, this loserdom is a symbol of the cost of Irish entrepreneurs’ delusions of grandeur during the boom and, by extension, of their readiness to fall “in thrall to a heedless consumerism” rather than carve out a modernity in which “culture, politics, and economics would all work together to promote freedom in conditions of decent self-sufficiency” (Kiberd *AI* 486, 489), a kind of national modernity long out of Irish society’s

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<sup>70</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, several critics and historians have traced Ireland’s housing bubble to the country’s historically complex relationship with land, and, in particular, its “obsession with land ownership rather than land use” (Kiberd *AI* 8). A comprehensive overview of the issue of land ownership is beyond the scope of my work here, so, for more, see the work of R.F. Foster, Clark, Dooley, Campbell.

reach. Heading down to hell with Monsieur Deauville/Devil in the novel's final scene, Tristram does so, Kilroy ultimately shows, as an embodiment of these failures and as a symbol of society's difficulty in overcoming them: as he follows Deauville down, he does so on behalf of the "benighted fool[s that] squandered everything . . . Every last farthing and more besides," those who remain resistant to "the devastation they wreaked" (359), fundamentally "afraid of what [they would] see" (361).

### 3.4. Conclusion

To read either *The Mark and the Void* or *The Devil I Know* as merely concerned with reassessing the legacies of the economic crash is to ignore their thematic complexity. These texts, of course, do more than simply re-examine the crisis and explore how it has changed (or not changed) Irish society. In their obvious use of intertextuality, for example, these texts can be read as attempts "to inscribe the contemporary events of Ireland within [a] larger cultural and literary heritage" and to resist "restrict[ing] those events to the economic and financial focus to which they have often been limited" (Mianowski 90).<sup>71</sup> It is, nonetheless, impossible to overstate the degree to which both

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<sup>71</sup> For instance, both texts play off of elements in Joyce's works. In the case in *The Mark in the Void*, Joyce's *Ulysses* is invoked early on (as Paul describes his desire to cast Claude as his modern day "everyman") to comment on the lack of contemporary configurations, especially in fiction, of Irishness, of new "Leopold Blooms" or of new "Ulysseses." Likewise, in *The Devil I Know*, Kilroy explicitly cites the first lines of *Finnegans Wake* as well as names her protagonist (ostensibly) after the "Sir Tristram, violer d'amores" of Joyce's final novel as part of her engagement with "historical and fictional antecedents" (McGlynn 48). As Mary McGlynn suggests, by invoking Joyce's *Wake* at the outset of her novel and by giving her protagonist this name, Kilroy enters into further dialogues with Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Goethe's *Faust* which, together, serve not only to reflect "on the circularity of time and the paradoxes of narration," but more importantly to "resist the relentless pressure of the present, providing history and

Paul Murray and Claire Kilroy concern themselves with questions of responsibility and blame with respect to Ireland's economic downfall. As I have shown, their texts clearly dramatize a post-crash nation attempting to get "free from reality's contingencies and humiliations" (*MV* 266), and yet demonstrate the ways in which, given the influence of the neoliberal turn in Ireland, these very modern humiliations are effectively ongoing, perhaps even insurmountable. Their texts ultimately show, in short, how the dramatic shift from boom to bust has produced a cultural ethos of failure in Ireland, but they also illustrate how the failures of the Celtic Tiger and its neoliberal project come to be articulated beyond the economic realm.

In portraying the effects of Irish society's readiness to turn away from its role in the country's economic failures, however, these novelists draw attention to the sense of national maturity as well as the kind of soul-searching, as it were, needed to overcome to these failures. More specifically, both writers emphatically resist what Fintan O'Toole describes as "the idea that things will probably be terrible in the long run, [and] that there's nothing much we can do about it" (*Ship* 213). For all of their cynicism about Ireland's responses to the crash and about the problematic narratives that have been deployed to account for how it occurred or who is responsible, neither novelist discounts the possibility that these responses might be improved and that changes might be made. In this way, the image that appears on the final page of *The Mark and the Void* offers more than another metafictional gesture, and indeed encapsulates the broader symbolic purpose of both novels. The image of a finger pointing straight out of the page does not

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grounding in opposition to neoliberalism's present of non-places and empty conduits" (48).

simply point to the culture of losers that caused these problems; it points to the reader, holding him or her to account for these failures and gesturing towards the possibility of redemption in responsibility.

## Chapter Four

### The Shame, Regret, and Resignation of Living with the Legacies of Clerical Abuse in Roddy Doyle's *Smile* and John Boyne's *A History of Loneliness*

#### 4.1. Introduction

“Young people of Ireland, I love you! Young people of Ireland, I bless you! I bless you in the name of our lord Jesus Christ.”  
(Pope John Paul II)

“You have suffered grievously and I am truly sorry . . . I openly express the shame and remorse that we all feel. At the same time, I ask you not to lose hope.”  
(Pope Benedict XVI)

Pope John Paul II's papal visit to Ireland in the fall of 1979 is arguably one of the most significant events to occur on Irish soil in the latter half of the twentieth century. This three-day trip to the island was the first ever papal visit to the country whose history had long been intertwined with Catholicism.<sup>72</sup> And to say Irish Catholic zeal was on full display during the Pope's stay in Ireland would be putting it lightly, as over 2.5 million Irish people attended events over those three days—this in a country of less than 3.4 million people (Rep. of Ireland Central Statistics Office vii). In the words of Nuala McCann, who attended a papal mass in Galway, the experience of seeing the Pope in Ireland “was euphoria, Catholic-style;” and she suggests that “the joy came from the fact that this man had come to see us” (N. McCann). However, in addition to generating a national sense of excitement and spiritual invigoration, the 1979 papal visit also marked a time when the Catholic Church in Ireland found itself at a crossroads. As Vic Merriman puts it, the visit was, after all, “an event in which a hegemonic Church whose step was

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<sup>72</sup> The visit was organized in part to celebrate the centenary of the of the apparitions of the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, and John the Evangelist at Knock in County Mayo.

faltering invested a great deal of resources and aspirations” (198). More importantly, it was imagined as a trip during which “a man widely touted as a charismatic and engaging figure would ‘bring all the lapsed Catholics back to the Church’” (198).<sup>73</sup>

It is notable that many felt that the Irish needed to be “brought back” to the Church at all, given that for much of the nation’s history, as Tom Inglis succinctly puts it in his seminal *Moral Monopoly*, “being Irish and being Catholic [were] synonymous” (17). Though this conflation overlooks the significant contributions of Protestant nationalists—e.g. Wolfe Tone, Parnell, Hyde, Yeats—and disregards the Protestants living in the Republic who “regarded themselves as Irish” despite living in a country whose Gaelicized “national narrative bore so little relationship to their own” (Bury 116), Inglis’ words do foreground the significance of Catholicism to Ireland’s sense of national(ist) identity in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century.<sup>74</sup> As Littleton explains, “most Irish defined themselves . . . in opposition to the [Protestant] English” (26), and this connection between Irishness and Catholicism enabled the church to become a considerable sociopolitical and ideological force on the island and to wield that power for decades.<sup>75</sup> Expanding on Paul Blanchard’s exegesis of Catholic power in

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<sup>73</sup> This belief that the Pope would succeed in attracting all lapsed Catholics was related to Merriman by “a parish priest serving in a large working-class area of west Dublin” (198).

<sup>74</sup> For more on the complex intersections of Protestantism and Irish identity in the post-independence era, see Bowen’s *History and the Shaping of Irish Protestantism* (1995); Busted, Neal, and Tonge’s *Irish Protestant Identities* (2012); Rafferty’s *The Catholic Church and the Protestant State* (2008); and Bury’s *Buried Lives: The Protestants of Southern Ireland* (2017).

<sup>75</sup> Though the Irish certainly adopted Catholicism as “a symbol of their identity and [as] a means of political resistance to British imperial policy” (White 2), it is worth noting that the consolidation of the Church’s power in Ireland in the 1800s was also a result of “the triangular relationship between Rome, the Catholic Church in Ireland and the British state” (Inglis *MM* 98). Specifically, Inglis claims, the Church’s power in Ireland must be understood “in terms of the failed attempts of the British state symbolically to dominate

Ireland, Bryan Fanning even suggests that because of the Church's significant role in helping Ireland achieve independence—and its function in the pre-independence period as a kind of legitimate indigenous “state” authority for Irish nationalists—the Republic of Ireland “came closer to becoming [a theocratic state] than any other Western democracy during the twentieth century” (51). However, despite the Church's importance in the country's national(ist) history, by the time of the Pope's departure from Ireland in 1979, any hope for a large-scale reintegration of lapsed Irish Catholics would prove to be wishful thinking. In the years following the papal visit, Irish society would instead witness what Inglis describes as “the decline of the influence of the institutional Church [not only] in the religious field [but also] in other social fields, particularly in politics, education, health, social welfare and the media,” and be forced to reassess the Church's role in an increasingly secular, “post-Catholic” country (*MM* 205).<sup>76</sup>

Resulting from a series of events and revelations during the 1980s and 1990s, the Irish public would grow increasingly aware of “possible links between [the Church's] traditionally conservative, authoritarian and puritanical, [sic] ethos and various social problems” (Mulholland 165).<sup>77</sup> This increasingly “critical attitude” to the Church in the

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the Irish through legislation[,] religion[,] and education[,] and the state's gradual acceptance of and surrender to the symbolic legitimation of the Church” (*MM* 98).

<sup>76</sup> Building on Habermas's use of the term “post-secular,” Gladys Ganiel defines Ireland as a “post-Catholic” country in that it has undergone “a shift in consciousness in which the Catholic Church, as an institution, is no longer held in high esteem by most of the population and can no longer expect to exert a monopoly influence in social and political life” (4). However, she also holds that Ireland is a “post-Catholic” nation as “people from a variety of religions (including Catholicism) [continue to define] their faith in opposition or contrast to Catholicism” (52-3).

<sup>77</sup> Though my focus, here, is on the decline of the Church following the 1979 papal visit, it is worth noting that, as Louise Fuller suggests, the “full answers to questions about collapse of Irish Catholicism . . . lie further back in time and sometimes go beyond the Irish context” (“Revisiting” 39).

wake of the Kerry Babies case, the “moving statues” phenomenon, the Magdalen laundries scandal, and revelations that prominent Irish clerics had fathered children—events that Maher and O’Brien contend “shook the credibility of the Church to the core” (*Tracing* 4)—signalled a significant departure from what formerly constituted “the criterion of a good Irish Catholic” and indicated the growing schism between notions of Irishness and Catholicism (Inglis *MM* 2).<sup>78</sup> As Inglis observes, part of being Catholic in Ireland in much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries meant blindly following “the rules and regulations of the Church” (*MM* 2). Although “one could be forgiven for breaking the rules of the Church,” Inglis explains, “questioning them was a different matter” (*MM* 2), especially given that the “unquestioning centre of [Ireland’s] religious habitus” corresponded directly to the social and political “strength of the institutional faith” (*MM* 21). More importantly though, society’s growing “critical attitude” in the wake of these events would show how the Church would “no longer exercise the old, unquestioned authority over its flock” (Holland 8)—a loss of power I focus on in my analysis of *A History of Loneliness*—and would demonstrate society’s growing inability to turn a blind eye to the Church’s culture of deception, hypocrisy, and self-interest.

The Church’s loss of power worsened in the mid-1990s when allegations began to surface regarding the psychological, physical, and sexual abuse of children and young people by priests and other clerics. As Casey notes, these allegations and the so-called “clerical abuse crisis” (CAC) they uncovered proved “by far the greatest contributor to

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<sup>78</sup> For more on the Kerry Babies case, the “moving statues,” and Ireland’s Magdalen laundries, see Inglis’s *Truth, Power and Lies: Irish Society and the Case of the Kerry Babies*; Mulholland’s “Moving Statues and Concrete Thinking”; and Smith’s *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment*.

the change in Church-State and Church-public relations in Ireland” (178).<sup>79</sup> Ongoing revelations that Irish priests not only sexually abused children, but that they were protected from the police and public alike by virtue of the actions (or inaction) of Irish bishops and cardinals—and, as has been suggested, by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI—came to be one of the most pressing issues in late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century Ireland. And although the rampant abuse and mistreatment of children significantly exacerbated the demise of Catholic Ireland and prompted an apology from Pope Benedict XVI, public reactions to this longstanding culture of abuse were magnified in Ireland, as the crisis proved a grievous betrayal by an institution that was significant both as a religious authority, and, more importantly, a political one.<sup>80</sup> As Finnegan notes, for the Irish people, “devotion to the Church was devotion to the country” given its deep ties to the longstanding “Irish quest for political liberty” (73). The Church was vested

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<sup>79</sup> Though “child sex abuse by priests was [already] being reported extensively in the United States, from the mid-1980s,” according to Colum Kenny, revelations of clerical abuse in Ireland would only begin to emerge a decade later, in 1994, when RTÉ broadcast “one of the earliest televised interviews with a victim of clerical abuse” (63-4). In spite of the fact that these early reports helped to shed light on the existence of a culture of abuse within the Church in Ireland, it was due to the broadcast of *States of Fear* (1999) that reports of reprehensible behavior by a handful of priests became a full-blown scandal. As Colum Kenny puts it, “broadsheets and tabloids reacted, and the radio airwaves were filled with anxious discussion about the implications of what people had seen on *States of Fear*. There was no longer any possibility of the government continuing to look the other way” (67). Donnelly and Inglis, too, have identified the significance of the media in the uncovering of the CAC, and they suggest that “in playing its role as the Fourth Estate” and holding “religious personnel” accountable for the way they “dealt with Clerical Child Sexual Abuse,” the Irish media “replaced the Catholic Church as the social conscience and moral guardian of Irish society” (1-2). I point to both Doyle and Boyne’s portrayals of the media’s function as “social conscience” in CAC-era Ireland in my readings of *Smile* and *A History of Loneliness*.

<sup>80</sup> As I noted in Chapter One, it is difficult to draw direct causal relationships between the CAC and Ireland’s growing secularization. Again, though, critics such as Donnelly and Inglis identify a clear pattern of increased secularization in Ireland in the wake of the CAC (10-13).

with actual political power in pre- and post-independence Ireland, and, in many ways, it represented a legitimate authority structure for Irish nationalists living under British rule and, later, working to form their own state.<sup>81</sup> When the crisis came to light, it undermined the legitimacy, significance, and value of the Church-State link in Ireland and so represented not only a religious affront, but a national or political one. Moreover, these revelations of abuse were clearly antithetical to the values preached from the pulpit, and they fully contradicted one of the most memorable and explicit messages the Pope delivered during his 1979 visit: in his sermon for the Holy Mass for the Youth of Ireland, John Paul II proclaimed, “Young people of Ireland, I love you!” (Pope John Paul II). Although the Irish Catholics gathered in Galway in 1979 met the pontiff’s expression of love with obvious jubilation, those who received Pope Benedict XVI’s “Letter to the Catholics of Ireland” thirty years later would be forced to reassess the sincerity of his predecessor’s words. In his letter, Benedict acknowledged the failures of Irish Church officials in dealing with the crimes of the clergy and claimed to “share in the dismay and the sense of betrayal that so many [Irish people] have experienced on learning of [the] sinful and criminal acts” perpetrated against “children and vulnerable young people by members of the Church in Ireland, particularly by priests and religious” (Pope Benedict XVI). More significantly though, Benedict’s letter pointed to the apparent dubiousness of his predecessor’s declaration of both the Church’s love for young people as well as his

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<sup>81</sup> As William Crotty notes, the Church acted as a substitute “for the underfunded government [and] made significant investments in education, schools, health care, hospitals, orphanages, homes for unwed mothers, and [provided] for welfare recipients and the unemployed (121).

own.<sup>82</sup> It effectively undermined the words that had inspired so many young Irish Catholics on that day in Galway in 1979.

Though it was obviously not confined to Ireland, the problem of clerical abuse was immense on the island.<sup>83</sup> The scope of the problem was such that the Irish government initiated a series of inquiries and investigations into allegations of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse by priests and other religious figures in Irish Catholic dioceses, as well as in state-funded, Catholic-run institutions. Together, the “Murphy Report,” the “Ferns Report,” the “Cloyne Report,” the “Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse” (also known as the “Ryan Commission”), and others all conclude that various forms of child abuse by clerics and other religious figures were, in the words of the Ryan Commission, “endemic within [Catholic] institutions,” and they prove that “there was a systemic failure to provide for children’s safety and welfare” (Commission 12). And while these often “gruesome” official reports provided a “necessary corrective to the atmosphere of secrecy, shame, and the unspeakable that has surrounded these experiences [of abuse] for so many years” (Crowe 60), they also raised, as Kilkelly puts it, “extremely serious concerns about the failure of the statutory authorities, including the Gardaí, to

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<sup>82</sup> Although he appears only as a very minor character, Pope John Paul II is portrayed in *A History of Loneliness* in a way that calls attention to his “unreliable soul” (HL 270). In the main scene in which he appears, Boyne’s fictionalized pontiff is certainly not the charismatic man who visited Ireland in 1979, but rather a man who, with “an expression of near disgust on his face,” slaps the protagonist’s sister “in what might have been an affectionate gesture but which left a red mark on her face, so hard did he hit her” (196).

<sup>83</sup> Though the reports that I mention here all refer to abuse largely perpetrated in the Republic, the CAC did extend to Northern Ireland. Brendan Smyth, for instance, was ultimately convicted of child sexual abuse in Belfast (“Profile”), and the Northern Ireland Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry was set up to investigate allegations of child abuse in state-run institutions, including the Protestant-affiliated Manor House, in Northern Ireland.

respond appropriately and effectively to the allegations” of abuse (12). By confirming the existence of a culture of clerical abuse, these reports raised a particular question for Catholics in Ireland: namely, with whom does the responsibility for these failures lie? Though the crimes committed certainly belonged to the offending priests, responsibility for the moral failures epitomized by these crimes was more widespread. The scandal surrounding the CAC arose in equal measure from the revelations of priests harming children and from the inability or unwillingness of Church authorities—and, in some cases, State authorities—to prevent these crimes from (re)occurring. “People wanted to know how [Church officials] could fail to take the necessary steps to prevent this abuse,” Angela Senander claims, as well as how trust could be restored in these institutions given that these failures represented “incompetence or poor character” (861), neither of which befitted individuals in leadership positions.

It is worth briefly noting that given that the Catholic Church hierarchy constitutes a “gendered regime” made up of men, certain critics have suggested that the failures the CAC represent amount to a specifically “gendered abuse of power” (Gleeson 783). However, as Marie Keenan, who has written extensively on the role of “clerical masculinity” in the Catholic Church and in the CAC specifically, has suggested, insofar as gender (i.e. masculine) identity is relevant in discussions about why priests sexually abuse children, it is relevant only in view of the Church’s broader sociopolitical power. In other words, Keenan’s work shows that there is a connection between clerical abuse and the “power dynamics and structures of the Church that . . . function by reifying [a] hegemonic [form of] masculinity, which dominates men as well as women and children” (Gleeson 783), as well as between perpetrators and a particular form of “perfect celibate

clerical masculinity” (Keenan “Masculinity” 67). However, in that perpetrators of clerical abuse generally cannot “resist the pull of the model of priesthood that [is] in the hegemonic position in the Catholic Church” (“Masculinity” 70)—that is, insofar as their “sense of selfhood [arises] through the [social and political] status that the role [provides]”—and given that they embody an identity “based [primarily] on the priestly or religious role, with gender or maleness acting merely as a secondary consideration” (“Masculinity” 67), these gendered explanations, if not accusations, are insufficient and, indeed, relate primarily to analyses of the psychopathology of perpetrating priests. Put simply, the fact that, as Keenan explains, clerical perpetrators of child abuse “over-identified with the public dimensions of their role and lived their lives as though the role represented their whole identity” or as though there was “no boundary between their clerical identity and their identity as male human beings” suggests that gender, although interconnected with the CAC, is of secondary importance to the issue of the Church’s sociopolitical authority (*Child* 239). The critiques of both *Smile* and *A History of Loneliness* seem to corroborate the importance of these sociopolitical questions, and so, though I highlight instances in which the gendered elements of the CAC enter into both novels, my focus lies primarily with the texts’ depictions of the sociopolitical aspects of the crisis in Ireland.

Now, despite clearly resting with those directly responsible for abusing Irish children and with those who, whether intentionally or not, protected the abusers enabling them to abuse again, accountability for the suffering of the victims of clerical abuse also lies with the Irish public. As Inglis put it in his response to the Ryan Commission report, “Ireland has become an international disgrace” for the way “we incarcerated thousands of

innocent little children into schools where they were abused, raped and tortured” (“Disgrace”)—a reality whose legacies we see in *Smile*. By extending the Church’s “disgrace” to the entire nation, and by suggesting that “we” fostered environments in which the atrocities took place, Inglis implicates the whole of Irish society in the crimes of the Church. He attributes the guilt of specific individuals or groups (i.e. the Church, and in some cases the state) to the general public. Like Inglis, Linda Hogan implicitly suggests that Irish society bears the blame for the CAC. She suggests that the government inquiries into clerical abuse reveal “the devastating contradiction at the heart of post-independent Ireland,” that is, that the Irish state and society enabled “the Catholic Church [to preside] over a ‘secret, enclosed world, run on fear’,” while simultaneously “being lauded internationally as a model ‘Catholic’ nation” (176). Though these comments on the Irish public’s complicity in the CAC stem from the aforementioned government reports, Paul Garrett has suggested that the public’s failure in protecting children from abuse can be traced back to at least 1922. He claims that though knowledge “about sexual abuse [has] existed since the foundation of the Irish Free State . . . as reflected in the accounts provided to the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts 1931,” later attempts “to address the abuse of children” by reforming “poorly funded systems and anachronistic practices were undertaken in a haphazard and inconsistent manner” (44). Like for Inglis and Hogan, the suggestion here is not only that one of the underlying causes of the CAC is the largely unheeded responsibility on the part of the Irish public to protect children, but that any public anger directed at Church or State authorities should be accompanied by sincere self-reflection on this public’s own failures. It is precisely this

kind of critical self-reflection that we see in Doyle's *Smile* and Boyne's *A History of Loneliness*.

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Revelations about the prevalence and severity of clerical abuse in Ireland obviously unsettled the nation, and the series of inquiries into these allegations of abuse left the country, as Paul Colton, the Church of Ireland's Bishop of Cork, Cloyne, and Ross, famously put it, "in the midst of a national trauma" (qtd. in McGarry).<sup>84</sup> As such, the CAC has unsurprisingly become the subject of much of Ireland's recent literary output. Though Irish writers have, as Maher notes, long offered "an alternative view of [Irish] existence by challenging aspects of church and state dominance" ("Half-Life"), revelations of the CAC have spurred contemporary writers and playwrights to turn their attention to the place of Catholicism in modern Ireland and to focus explicitly on the

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<sup>84</sup> As mentioned above, Protestants in the Republic make up a small minority of the population and, despite identifying as Irish, "are still considered [or consider themselves] 'other'" given their historical links to British culture (Bury 196), as well as their distinctly anti-nationalist sense that "the British connection had been [and arguably remains] positive for Ireland and . . . essential to its prosperity" (Ruane 130). As such, the fact that Colton, a prominent Anglican bishop, has been vocal about the CAC speaks to the degree to which this crisis has crossed religious boundaries and has become an "Irish problem" rather than simply a "Catholic problem." Again, just as Catholicism is not a monolithic identity in Ireland given the presence of Protestants in the South who, in some cases, imagine themselves as culturally different than their Catholic neighbours, so too, the problem of clerical abuse is not simply a Catholic problem in Ireland. Clerical abuse crosses denominational lines and involves various religious institutions including the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland (see, for example, the cases of Patrick O'Brien, Reverend Glenn Milne, Reverend Joe Condell). Though Colton's words perhaps do not explicitly show what critics such as Niall Meehan have described as "the problem of the invisible Protestant narrative" of clerical abuse ("Irish"), they demonstrate, in short, the "extra-religious" nature of clerical abuse in Ireland and the genuinely "national" quality of Ireland's trauma.

issue of clerical child abuse and of the Church's failings in dealing with these problems.<sup>85</sup> William Trevor's "Justina's Priest" (2004), Colm Tóibín's "A Priest in the Family" (2006) and "The Pearl Fishers" (2011), and William King's *A Lost Tribe* (2017) are just a few examples of works that take on the decline of the Church and the legacies of clerical abuse, while plays including Gerard Mannix Flynn's *James X* (2003), Ronan Noone's "The Lepers of Baile Baiste" (2003), and Thomas Kilroy's "Christ Deliver Us!" (2010) cover similar ground.

Despite this rich body of fictional work dealing with the CAC and the significant amount of ink that has been spilled on the crisis more generally, there has been little sustained scholarly attention on Irish fiction's representations of the legacies of the CAC. The criticism that deals with these texts, instead, focuses on matters such as the "trans-generational transmission of trauma and memory in an Irish context" (Yebra 122), or on the ethical imperative of these works' representations of the traumas of clerical abuse. Of "Justina's Priest," for example, Eugene O'Brien writes that "the knowledge that we gain through this story about the role of the church in contemporary Irish society is of equal value to that gained in reports, interviews and other discourses in the Irish public sphere" precisely because the story's insights about this role and its "comments on the current state of the church" lie "in the ethical [realm]" (4-5). The "value" of Trevor's story hinges on its (synecdochic) representation of the difficulties of assessing personal and

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<sup>85</sup> I want to explicitly note, again, that though I am focused here on instances and fictional representations of Catholic clerical abuse, the crisis is by no means limited to the Catholic Church in Ireland. My emphasis on abuses involving the Catholic Church is rooted in the fact that Catholicism is undeniably the more dominant and historically influential religion in the country, and that, given this influence, these Catholic cases came to typify the CAC in Ireland.

ethical responsibility within a sociocultural setting (i.e. contemporary Ireland) defined largely by an ideology (i.e. Catholicism) whose very claim to “ethics” has been stripped away. With regard to contemporary drama dealing with clerical abuse (including Flynn’s *James X*), Emilie Pine notes that the works call “for a true performance [or representation] of ethical memory, to achieve justice for the past, and to ensure that these crimes never recur” (51). “By listening and watching the testimony on stage,” she suggests, “the audience . . . plays a key function in this drama [of abuse] as witnesses who must attend to each voice” (50). These works demand viewers become “agents of change” by first reflecting on “the State, the Catholic Church, and Irish society’s culpability for the suffering of children” and, second, by insisting that “remembrance culture . . . represent the full story of institutional abuse” and “hold the past accountable to the present” (51). Sheila McCormick echoes this point, claiming that the significance of *The Darkest Corner* series—a documentary theatre program commissioned by the Abbey Theater which included Flynn’s *James X*—“lies in [its] revelation of a particular truth and in the action of bearing witness” (186). The strength of these plays, though “tempered” by the fact that their productions were delayed until “much of the initial debate that surrounded the publication of the [Ryan] report had subsided” (188-9), rests on their ability to position the findings of the state inquiries into clerical abuse in “the public domain,” in helping, that is, “the findings of the report to become public property” (190).

This critical focus on the ethical potential of trauma in these works corresponds with Irish literary scholarship’s recent emphasis on the ways Irish fiction reflects “a willingness to confront the traumas and crimes of the past” as a way of moving “away

from its histories of silence and repression toward a more open and self-reflective society” (Costello-Sullivan 2). In *Trauma and Recovery in the Twenty-First-Century Irish Novel*, Costello-Sullivan explains that Irish fiction dealing with trauma is indeed “hopeful” in that it “catalyze[s] a move towards recovery” (4-5), and that it responds “to what Irish society seeks: to recognize past failings[,] to acknowledge the past without either occluding or overprivileging it [and] to seek ways to move ahead productively as a society” (6). Though their analyses refer specifically to fiction dealing with violent conflicts, both Leszek Drong and Robert F. Garratt express similarly optimistic views on the uses of these representations of trauma. Drong claims, for instance, that the “post-traumatic realism” of recent Irish fiction is “a means to an end, not an end in itself, just as history is not explored for its own sake, but with a view to overcoming . . . not only individual predicaments, but also the social, political and religious divisions which have bewildered Irish people for the last century” (23). Likewise, Garratt suggests that “narratives of historical trauma . . . allow a future generation to discover or confront something unknown as something forgotten, as a part of a collective emotional past” (17). The implication for these critics is that contemporary explorations of trauma in Irish fiction are fundamentally productive. Irish depictions of the traumas of postcolonial resistance, sectarian conflict, or clerical abuse are effectively “ethical” for these scholars in the sense that they enable national healing. And though many works of contemporary Irish fiction and drama do demonstrate a concern for the ethics of “national trauma,” I suggest that certain texts dealing with the CAC resist such “hopeful” or “corrective” readings. In these works, the importance of the ethical dimension falls away. Instead, these works point to more basic questions about the sociocultural experiences of shame,

regret, and failure that arose from Ireland’s growing sense of the consequences of the decades-long (if not centuries-long) entwining of Catholicism, the Irish state, and Irishness. By exploring the difficulties of Ireland’s reckoning with the ramifications of the intertwined histories of Irish national identity and the Church, these texts not only reveal a significant interest in how certain traumas—including those of the CAC—push against society’s remedial impulses, but also challenge the idea that any resolution can be achieved in a sociocultural context so fundamentally imbued with the ideologies that enabled these crimes or traumas.<sup>86</sup>

In this chapter, I look at Roddy Doyle’s *Smile* (2017) and John Boyne’s *A History of Loneliness* (2015) and consider the ways they portray Ireland as a bleak place and point to the traumatic legacies of the CAC as a direct contributor to this bleakness. I want to show that both works deploy losers—characters beset by disappointment, shame, and regret—not only to signify the various failures that constitute the abuse crisis, but also to show the degree to which these failures remain resistant to “correction.” These novels, I also argue, reveal Ireland’s “national trauma” with respect to the abuse crisis, but they do so without portraying graphic scenes of abuse. Instead, they depict Ireland as a country sullied by the crimes of the clergy yet equivocal about its own responsibility for these crimes—an equivocation that belies society’s desire to break away from a Church that, in Enda Kenny’s words, “downplayed or managed” the abuse of children “to uphold the

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<sup>86</sup> Even in the wake of the CAC, the Church has retained a degree of political power in Ireland. For one, the Church continues to manage 90% of primary schools in Ireland (Darmody and Smyth 5-6), and, in such schools “religion [still] permeates the school day and pupils participate in sacramental preparation” (Faas, Darmody, and Sokolowksa 84). We will see allusions to and critiques of the Church’s continued role in Ireland’s school system in *Smile* and *A History of Loneliness*.

primacy of the institution, its power, standing and reputation” (“Commission”). However, by using losers to emphasize this equivocation—that is, Ireland’s difficulties in accepting and making amends for its repeated failures with regard to the victims of clerical abuse—Doyle and Boyne frustrate any attempt to derive neat morals about the abuse crisis from their works. By pointing to the longstanding inaction and permissiveness of Irish society with regard to criminal clergy, the losers of these texts challenge the very possibility of “righting” Irish society’s wrongs, of recovering what has been lost in the CAC.

#### **4.2. “Part of What We Are”: Interrogating Institutional Abuse and Irish Inaction in Roddy Doyle’s *Smile***

Although critics have long noted that Roddy Doyle “is a mercurial writer” who is “loath to remain in one narrative style for very long” (Farquharson 410-1), Doyle’s *Smile* arguably represents his most radical departure yet. The novel, which centers on the traumatic legacies of clerical sexual abuse in Ireland, follows Victor Forde, a failed middle-aged Irish writer living in Dublin, and tracks his memories of his youth, early adulthood, and especially his time as a student in a Christian Brothers School (CBS) where he was sexually abused. And though Doyle primarily sets *Smile* in a communal pub, he depicts contemporary Ireland as a place defined by isolation and passivity, a country that bears the marks of the CAC and in which the possibility of working through these scars, of “healing,” remains unlikely.

In spite of the fact that Doyle treats the CAC in *Smile* in a measured and understated way, resisting, as one critic put it, the impulse “to carve deeper into a new limb of explicitness” (Charles), the novel has polarized its readers: though most

appreciate the seriousness of Doyle's subject matter as well as his willingness to engage with such weighty material, reviewers are divided in their assessments of the ways the novel treats this subject. Many find fault with the work's surprising, even heavy-handed, conclusion which effectively reveals that Victor Forde and Ed Fitzpatrick are separate parts of the same traumatized psyche.<sup>87</sup> James Grainger believes, for instance, that the novel's "risky" ending "works brilliantly" given that "only such confrontational force and honesty . . . can break the spell of bravado and willed-forgetting that is the true cultural heritage of the Irish" ("Risk"), while Valerie Sayers claims that it is an ending that might "roil" those who "haven't been personally touched by abuse [and] could probably use that kind of literary roiling" (34). Conversely, reviewers including Brian Dillon suggest that if "*Smile* is meant to be about the vexing effects of trauma upon the memory," then its ending "semaphor[es] that message too clearly," and, thus, offers "a remarkably crude view of the psychic effects of sexual abuse" ("Doyle"). Though I am tempted to agree with Dillon's assessment of the awkwardness of *Smile*'s ending and of Doyle's "crude view" of his protagonist's damaged psyche, I suggest that the novel offers a compelling comment on the complex social legacies of the CAC, and on the ways this psychological trauma exists as a symptom of Ireland's ongoing inability to extricate itself from the appalling national failure laid bare by revelations of abuse.

I want to trace, here, how Doyle uses the hapless Victor Forde, as well as Victor's mysterious, sinister, and equally pathetic former classmate, Ed Fitzpatrick, to point to the

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<sup>87</sup> Though *Smile*'s ambiguous ending reveals that Forde and Fitzpatrick are the same person, and, it seems, that the bulk of the plot occurs only in Forde/Fitzpatrick's damaged psyche, I treat them as different characters here given that Doyle's comment on the links between loserdom and the legacies of clerical abuse hinges on the character of Fitzpatrick and on Forde's perception of him.

ways contemporary Irish society's spirit of inadequacy, resignation, and what I have been calling "loserdom" exists as a symptom of the traumatic legacies of decades of widespread abuse perpetrated by priests and other clerics. I argue that these characters demonstrate the degree to which an ethos of failure defines *Smile*'s Ireland and point to the ways this ethos is representative of the moral erosion triggered by the Irish public's responses to the crimes of the Catholic clergy. Similarly, I want to suggest that *Smile*, unlike other works dealing with the CAC, does not simply present Irish culture's isolation and sense of fatalism as the result of its sense of dismay about the Church's crimes, but, instead, reveals that these are effects of a deterioration precipitated by what Maher describes as the "severe myopia" of a society in which "orthodoxy and lack of critical capacity hold sway" ("Crisis" 23-4). I argue, in short, that *Smile*'s commentary on the CAC is aimed at the Irish public rather than the Church. The text primarily critiques the culture of inaction and permissiveness that exacerbated the systemic problem of clerical abuse, and it links Irish society's sense of resignation to its past (and arguably present) disregard of the suffering of its most vulnerable at the hands of the Church.

Before turning to the text itself, I want to quickly but explicitly note that, unlike the losers and loserdom I discussed in previous chapters and those from *A History of Loneliness* that I will discuss later, Forde and Fitzpatrick's loserdom, though related to their traumatic experiences, is not synonymous with their victimhood. That is, although I will be showing how Doyle depicts these characters as losers and uses their loserdom to critique the Irish response to the CAC, I want to emphasize that the characters are not losers or failures *because* they are victims of abuse. The failures conventionally associated with loserdom are not, in other words, theirs. Instead, as I will argue, Doyle

uses Forde and Fitzpatrick's loserdom in *Smile* to highlight the failures of the public with regard to victims of abuse. Put simply, the fact that Doyle's fictional victims of clerical abuse are losers is not meant to indicate that these victims have failed or that their victimhood is a shortcoming but is instead meant to foreground the way these victims have been rendered losers by the failures of Irish society and, as such, easily kept at arm's length.

Now, Doyle immediately characterizes *Smile*'s protagonist, Victor Forde, and its setting, contemporary Dublin, as marked by an underlying sense of disappointment, inadequacy, lethargy, and inertia. From the outset of the novel, as Forde sits in Donnelly's, his new "local," the failed former writer demonstrates a significant degree of self-consciousness and discomfort; he worries about the barman "coming over," and tries to avoid appearing "lonely or sad. Or neglected," looking as if he "needed someone to talk to" (S 1). Likewise, he emphasizes his feelings of isolation and unease when he describes having to train himself "to feel that [the pub] was mine," to adapt to "this new place" (2). Having recently divorced from his wife Rachel, a minor celebrity in Ireland, Forde has returned to the area of Dublin where he was raised, and he acknowledges that this return represents an obvious failure. Recounting how he settled on Donnelly's as his new "local," he suggests that patronizing any number of other pubs in the area would be humiliating. "That would have been sad," he claims, "a man my age going back to some wrinkled version of his childhood. Looking for the girls he'd fancied forty years before. Finding them" (2). Not only do these words highlight Forde's discomfort with his home and his embarrassment about his homecoming, they also draw attention to the idea that (this part of) Dublin is unchanged—the people and the pubs are perhaps older, more

“wrinkled,” but they carry on as they always have. Though Forde’s reintegration into the Dublin of his youth results from and echoes his own personal shortcomings, his description of the stasis of the place (he identifies, for instance, “a Renault that looked like it hadn’t been moved in a long time” [5]) also suggests that this community shares these shortcomings and illustrates the degree to which he is attuned to and unsettled by them.

Forde’s heightened awareness of both Dublin’s stuntedness and of what his return to this setting says about him extends throughout the novel. As he visits a prospective apartment, for instance, Forde lightly mocks the young female letting agent, asking if her father owns the business (4). Likewise, he takes a rather condescending view of the apartment, inquiring whether “there [was] blood on the walls” and wondering whether “the last tenant had died in here” (4). However, by quickly apologizing for “being stupid” and acknowledging that “it was going to do” (4), Forde shows that both his actions towards the agent and his opinion on the apartment are rooted in his self-consciousness about his own inadequacies, and, implicitly, in his difficulty navigating this basic social encounter. Though the text shows that Forde’s hostility clearly masks his shame about having to rent a unit alone in a dilapidated building, it also points to the ways in which his diffidence stems from the humiliation and failure that his divorce, middle-aged bachelorhood, and return to North Dublin represents. We see Forde’s anxiety and humiliation surface again after he befriends a group of fellow pub patrons later in the novel. In his meetings with the men and their female acquaintances, Forde reveals a significant degree of self-consciousness as he agonizes over his ability to fit in with them. For instance, in hopes of maintaining his tenuous relationship with the men, and, more

importantly, of minimizing the possibility that he will humiliate himself in their company, Forde not only vows to acquire a “basic knowledge of current rugby” and adopt their colloquialisms (145), but also to impress them, whenever possible, by pretending that, owing to his wife’s celebrity, he knows a number of television personalities and sports stars. “Going right back into the [communal] life I’d missed” (143), for Forde, means adopting a kind of typical macho charade, of “mak[ing] it up” and embracing a role as the group’s “man on the dark side” (153). Likewise, in his relationship with Brenda, Forde is compelled to embody a degree of excitement and danger. Given that the married Brenda “liked the adventure, she liked to be scared” (193), Forde is forced to adopt those characteristics in order to maintain his relationship with her and, more importantly, preserve the joy their friendship brings him (197). By highlighting that Forde’s relationships with these characters is contingent on his “performance” or “adoption” of certain qualities or characteristics (153), Doyle subtly calls attention, here, to the character’s sense of loserdom or, at least his anxiety about being perceived as a loser by others. He shows, in short, that the character’s entire personality is shaped by his attempts to cover-over his innate sense of inadequacy and overcome his feeling that he is “outside . . . looking in” (135).

Forde is not, however, *Smile*’s only loser: joining him is his former classmate and fellow pub patron Ed Fitzpatrick. Unlike Forde though, Fitzpatrick exhibits a much more overt shiftlessness and social ineptness. From his first meeting with Fitzpatrick, Forde identifies the man’s ill-fitting clothes, his shorts “with the pockets on the sides for shotgun shells and dead rabbits” and a pink shirt which, Forde knows based on “the way it sat on [Fitzpatrick that] it hadn’t always been his” (8). Moreover, we see that

Fitzpatrick betrays none of his counterpart's sense of self-consciousness. At the pub, the man openly "smack[s] his stomach" to remind "the women that he was there" (36), "bark[s] at the ceiling" and shamelessly "adjust[s] his crotch" (13)—all aggressively "virile" performances that only reveal Fitzpatrick's inability to act within "the bounds of masculine normality" (Messner and Montez de Oca 1894), and that stand in stark contrast to his admission during the novel's climax that, due to his experiences of abuse, "I've never had an erection. Can you believe that?" (212). Although this behaviour irritates and embarrasses Forde, who claims that "I didn't like him. I knew that, immediately" (8), it also establishes a significant symbolic connection between them—a connection on which the novel's final scene hinges. That is, though Forde seems embarrassed to be in Fitzpatrick's presence, he simultaneously, albeit reluctantly, acknowledges an affinity with him. Meeting Fitzpatrick later, Forde admits that, "I knew we'd be meeting again, and I'd done nothing to avoid it . . . I'd let this happen" (28). Despite suggesting that he "wanted to run" from Fitzpatrick as he ogles the women in the pub, Forde holds that "if I'm being honest . . . I welcomed his provocation" (33). "There was something about him," Forde suggests, something "that I recognized and welcomed," something that compels him to remain "sitting there" in spite of himself (33). Doyle's point here seems to be that, though they are superficially unlike, Forde and Fitzpatrick share several attributes, not least of which is their social haplessness and apparent isolation—both of which are typical characteristics or responses of abuse victims.<sup>88</sup> Although they embody different aspects of loserdom, their shared loser status—and, of course, their shared

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<sup>88</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of the differences between men and women's experiences of sexual abuse, see Chan.

experiences as survivors of clerical abuse—provides the basis of their simpatico relationship and fundamentally sets them apart from the novel's other characters.

It is worth noting at this point that though Doyle draws a connection between Forde and Fitzpatrick's loserdom and their performances of masculinity, the relationship between their loserdom and their gender is far less important to his critique of the CAC than is the intersection of their loserdom and their status as victims of clerical abuse. In other words, though Fitzpatrick's overtly "virile" performance of masculinity or Forde's (prospective) humiliations in front of the female letting agent, the barman, the men at the pub, or Brenda are all intertwined with the characters' respective embodiments of loserdom, these gender issues are largely inconsequential in the context of the narrative's commentary about the effects of the CAC, an issue to which I will turn momentarily. In the context of this commentary, what matters, instead, is simply the way in which the characters' loserdom seems to both define and differentiate them in this community, and how it overshadows their relationships with their neighbours.

Before turning to how the novel's depiction of Forde and Fitzpatrick's segregation (as losers) forms the basis of *Smile*'s critique of the CAC and its sociopolitical implications, I want to briefly articulate the ways Doyle subtly but repeatedly calls attention to the links between the two characters' loserdom and their experiences of abuse at the hands of priests. Although the characters' abusive experiences are only confirmed late in the novel, the suggestion that they were abused is clear from its outset. Significantly though, these intimations of abuse and its effects often occur alongside references to these characters' loser qualities. For instance, when he visits the run-down apartment that he ultimately rents, Forde is "reminded . . . of my old primary school" (3);

he claims that “the stairs up to the first floor were wide enough for gangs of charging boys” and that “there was something about the light that came through the high window at the stairwell in the morning [that made it seem] exactly like the school stairs more than forty years ago” (4). In light of the revelation, late in the text, that a Brother abused him, this memory of the primary school, though not especially notable at this early point, clearly serves to tie Forde’s traumatic experience to the loserdom he exhibits in the scene—a loserdom apparent, again, in his difficulty navigating the social interaction with the letting agent, but also in having to return to a part of Dublin he thought he had left for good. Something similar occurs during Forde and Fitzpatrick’s first meeting. Before Forde mentions Fitzpatrick’s awkward clothing and expresses his embarrassment about the man’s unrestrained coarseness, Fitzpatrick asks, “what was the name of the Brother that used to fancy you?”, insisting, “it was the one who taught French that wanted your arse. Am I right?” (8-9). This explicit mention of a Brother’s inappropriate behaviour towards the young Forde again juxtaposes the trauma of his childhood experiences with the overall social ineptness and incompetence that he displays. Although it is subtle—and although the significance of the Brother’s behaviour only emerges after Forde describes an unsettling incident in which a Brother proclaimed in front of his class that he “can never resist [Forde’s] smile” (18)—the impression the narrative gives in these scenes is that the character’s loser qualities are inherently linked to his experiences as a victim of sexual abuse and the memories of these experiences.

Despite continuing through *Smile*, these juxtapositions change slightly in the latter half insofar as Fitzpatrick himself comes to represent, for Forde, the conflation of his experiences of abuse and his loserdom. As I mentioned, Forde immediately identifies

with Fitzpatrick even though he claims not to like him. He repeatedly acknowledges their shared history but consistently notes that he cannot actually place Fitzpatrick at the school (8, 33, 35, 73). This subtle identification, however, emphasizes the correlation between Forde's trauma and his loserdom. When, for instance, Forde begins trying to visit Donnelly's at times he knows his new friends will be present, he claims to worry about getting "the timing or the day wrong . . . and be[ing] stuck with [Fitzpatrick]" because, the text implies, of the overt loserdom he represents (140). In this same scene, however, Forde's desire to avoid being associated with the loser Fitzpatrick is again immediately tied to his history of abuse: as he plans how to avoid Fitzpatrick, Forde recalls school days when he would "stand at the front door and try to see through the pebbled glass, make sure it was Moonshine passing on the road outside and not Cyril Toner or some other spa, before I opened the door and got stuck [with them]" (140). Though Forde's approach to both Fitzpatrick and, in this case, Cyril Toner, is the same—he wants to avoid those he perceives as "spas" or losers—the fact that Fitzpatrick's loserdom evokes memories of Forde's time at school again calls attention to the links between Forde's conception of loserdom (including his own) and his traumatic childhood. Likewise, in his social interactions with the men in the pub—situations in which he must overcome his own sense of inadequacy and fecklessness—Forde shows a considerable amount of anxiety about Fitzpatrick joining their group given that he represents Forde's abusive childhood: when the men ask who Fitzpatrick is, Forde replies only that he is a former classmate and that "I hardly know him, just when we were kids" (193). Just as Fitzpatrick's loser qualities prompt Forde to recall his time at the CBS in the earlier scene, the man's reminders of (abusive) school days occur alongside Forde's

attempts to navigate a social dynamic in which he risks being perceived as a loser. In short, Fitzpatrick serves a dual function by standing in for both “loserdom” and the experience of a childhood trauma, and as such demonstrates the way the novel weaves together histories of trauma and social haplessness. More specifically, Forde’s perception of Fitzpatrick underscores the coexistence of loserdom and trauma in Forde’s psyche, but it is the underlying parallels between Forde and Fitzpatrick—that is, their shared loser qualities and their shared experiences of abuse—that underpins this conflation for him.

More than simply using the dynamic between Forde and Fitzpatrick to highlight the correlation between loserdom and trauma, Doyle uses these losers in *Smile* to make a broader point about Ireland’s failure to respond to the CAC. He does this, specifically, by pointing to the subtle ways in which both characters’ loserdom isolates them from others, but he shows that this alienation always bears the marks of the characters’ experiences of abuse. For example, during an early encounter with the men in the pub, Fitzpatrick reveals that he and Forde attended “St Martin’s CBS,” to which one of the men immediately replies “Oh, for fuck’s sake” (136). The man’s reaction—and Fitzpatrick’s response that “it wasn’t the worst” (136)—betrays a (justified) assumption regarding CBSs: they were the places where priests abused students. However, given Forde’s note that the men in the pub had “been growing up and old together” (136) and that they attended the same school (150), the implication of the man’s response is also that Forde and Fitzpatrick’s (presumed) experiences of abuse or proximity to abusive clergy sets them apart from Donnelly’s other patrons. In a later scene, Forde describes recounting his experiences of abuse to his ex-wife’s friends “who’d ask me about school” (162), and he recalls that these friends also reacted to the revelation that he went to a CBS with

amazement and discomfort. “If we were at a table,” he claims, “they’d listen, appalled, delighted, spellbound” because of the connotations of a CBS education (162). More importantly though, reactions to Forde’s explicit accounts of abuse, which include both attempts to change the subject (136) and even attempts “to blame [Forde]” (163), again, point to the ostensible distinctiveness of his experiences and the sense of disbelief with which others treat them. These reactions to Forde’s abusive past, he even suggests, stem from the fact that this abuse means that he “wasn’t one of them,” that he has “come from another world” (162). When his ex-wife’s friends ask each other, “did anything like that ever happen to any of us?” (163), Forde homes in on the “*Us*” (163 ital. in original), and, as such, emphasizes the gap between him and them and shows that his isolation is tied to his status as an abuse victim.

Whether it is due to Forde’s loser qualities or his traumatic experiences of clerical abuse or both, the novel repeatedly points to the idea that Forde exists at the periphery of Irish society, socially detached from the general Irish public. And though Forde’s social segregation is mostly tempered by other characters’ sympathy for him—the men do welcome Forde into their group, and Rachel’s friends, “nice people,” do worry that “a shake of the head would propel me out of the room” (164)—it nonetheless belies the notion that Ireland has come to grips with the CAC or that it has adequately dealt with its legacies. That is, Forde’s inherently isolated life as a loser and the fictional public perception of his experiences speak to Doyle’s point about the Irish public’s accountability for the CAC. As Marie Keenan explains, “while the accusation of cover-up has been levelled at the Catholic Church,” there is evidence “that cover-up was a feature of how Irish people and the Irish state responded to the abuse of children from the 1920s

until the 1990s” (“Sexual” 102). It is this ostensibly wilful blindness to victims of clerical abuse and the sociocultural decay stemming from these failures that Forde’s apparent marginalization within Irish society demonstrates.

Though the very act of child abuse epitomizes a kind of social failure, in *Smile*, Doyle’s concerns with the social failures exemplified by the CAC hinge mainly on the inadequacy of Irish society’s ongoing response to the legacies of this crisis. Certainly, *Smile*’s depictions of child abuse hark back to the abuses of power of perpetrating priests, as well as to the Church’s failures in protecting children and punishing offending clerics and to society’s failures in putting proper measures in place to ensure the safety and welfare of its children. However, in the novel, Doyle is more concerned with the ways Ireland continues to fail to approach its national shame resulting from the revelations of the myriad failures of the CAC. His interest lies in exploring how contemporary Irish society’s ideological rejection of the Church’s “system of absolute power” fails to negate the fact that “many ‘good’ Catholics knew for a long time what was happening in these [Church-run] schools, but they deliberately turned a blind eye [and] could not mention the unmentionable” (Inglis “Disgrace”). I have already alluded to Doyle’s depiction of the resistant, accusatory, defensive, and often indifferent reactions to Forde’s revelations of his abuse, but Doyle’s broader point about the Irish public’s failures in addressing the scandal rests on his portrayal of the tendency in Ireland to downplay the significance of clerical abuse or to acknowledge its significance while refusing to accept responsibility for these crimes. In Forde’s description of his time at St Martin’s CBS, he acknowledges, for instance, Irish society’s deference to the Christian Brothers (and the Church) even in

instances in which they commit heinous acts of violence. After describing a classmate, Toner, being “loafed” by a Brother, he notes:

And nothing happened; there were no consequences. Toner went home with a broken nose after Murphy sent him to the Head Brother’s office. And Toner would have felt lucky when he got out of the Head Brother’s office without being assaulted again. That was the thing: it wasn’t assault. Not back then. It wasn’t what most of us saw at home and it wasn’t what we experienced in the national school, the primary school. But I never thought I was witnessing anything illegal. Even being felt up by a Brother was just bad luck or bad timing. Toner wouldn’t have told his parents . . . The Brothers knew they were safe. (16)

Although Forde explicitly mentions both physical and sexual abuse in his accounts of his time at the CBS, he does not condemn the Brothers guilty of these offences. More tellingly, he suggests that condemnation was impossible at that time. He points to the fact that this kind of abuse is a reality of the CBS system, and suggests, more importantly, that the public not only knew about these crimes, but tolerated them because abuse at the hands of a priest “wasn’t assault” (16): it is not violence that is “illegal,” nor is it violence that society (victims, perpetrators, and others) treats as objectionable (16). He reiterates this idea as he describes his naiveté in assessing the damage done by a Brother’s remark that he could “never resist [Victor’s] smile” (18). Forde explicitly notes that “the word ‘inappropriate’ didn’t appear until years later [but] it was all inappropriate;” the Brother “was being taunted and teased by a room of boys,” he explains, “and he was loving it” (18).

By highlighting that the very concept of “inappropriateness” did not fit with these improper acts, Forde again foregrounds the disconnect between society’s perceptions of conventional examples of physical or sexual violence and of clerical abuse, and echoes Vincent Twomey’s remark that what “was so shocking” about the Ryan Report and other state inquiries into clerical abuse was that they “revealed what most people living in the 1950s and 1960s suspected was happening but had done nothing about” (90). The characters’ descriptions of the realities of attending the CBS and his references to the absence of any alternative ways by which the public could imagine the immoral or criminal nature of clerical abuse point to the ways in which (certain) priests’ abilities to abuse students with impunity was perpetuated not by the public’s ignorance of this abuse, but rather by its reluctance to act on this knowledge—a reluctance, again, tied to the intertwining of Catholic and Irish national identities and the historically “anti-national” implications of defying the Church. These references point, in short, to the ways the Church has shaped “a particularly passive Irish personality” (Crotty 119), and, therefore, to the public’s complicity in the Church’s crimes. Doyle shows that, like the Church which occupies an exceptional role in Ireland, clerical abuse proves an exception to typical, prohibited forms of violence (i.e. “assault”) in Irish society. Clearly, for the novelist, this social exception amounts to social acceptance.

Although Doyle’s ideas about the Irish public’s “severe myopia” and “lack of critical capacity” (Maher “Crisis” 23-4), and more specifically of the ideological deficiencies that exacerbated the CAC in Ireland in the twentieth century perhaps imply a kind of “presentist” bias, I would argue that these points are not, in fact, meant to be read

as part of an anachronistic assessment of Ireland's former deference to the Church.<sup>89</sup> In other words, rather than simply criticizing the failures of the Irish state, the Church, and the public both in monitoring institutions in charge of young and vulnerable citizens, and later, of addressing or responding appropriately to reports of clerical abuse, Doyle's emphasis on these failures is instead meant to provide a point of comparison for contemporary Ireland's response to the legacies of the same crisis. Doyle uses these past failures as something according to which the reader might measure the "contemporary" characters' impressions of the CAC.

If, as *Smile* seems to suggest, the initial (i.e. past) Irish responses to the clerical abuse issue were inherently inadequate, conditioned, as they were, by the ideological supremacy and political authority of the Church in Ireland, then Doyle's views of Ireland's contemporary responses to these same issues seem equally unfavourable. The novel's juxtaposition of the "contemporary" approach to dealing with the issue of clerical abuse and society's earlier tendency to ignore the signs of abuse enables him to highlight and condemn the moral deficiency of contemporary Irish society. In the narrative, Doyle's depiction of his fictional Irish society's unimproved approach to the loser-victims, Forde and Fitzpatrick, enables him to explain how Ireland's loser ethos does not arise from its victimization at the hands of the Church nor is it a result of its sense of collective trauma resulting from these experiences. Instead, Doyle shows, this ethos

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<sup>89</sup> Dermot Keogh has levelled similar charges at other works dealing with the CAC including Mary Rafferty and Eoin O'Sullivan's *Suffer the Little Children*. He suggests, specifically, that the past "can be fairly judged only on the basis of its own norms and culture" and that it should not be judged "by the standards of the present" (137).

stems from Irish society's unwillingness to confront its inaction and complicity in the Church's crimes.

Doyle critiques Irish society's unchanged and inherently flawed approach to dealing with victims of clerical abuse and of the legacies of the CAC by emphasizing his characters' ubiquitous reluctance to reflect on or discuss this abuse. Like his classmate, Toner, who does not inform his parents that he was beaten by a Brother, Forde, for instance, does not inform his mother of the sexually suggestive comment a Brother makes about his smile (173). Though Doyle repeatedly points to the young boy's underlying sense of shame and embarrassment about his abuse—feelings apparent in his self-consciousness about being called the “queer” by his classmates (22)—and implies that these feelings are part of the reason for his silence, he also calls attention to the fact that Forde's reticence in disclosing his experiences of abuse stems from a sociocultural unwillingness to acknowledge both the betrayal of Ireland's moral authorities and the problematic legacies of the nation's political links with the Church. Later in the text, as revelations of clerical abuse begin surfacing in Ireland, Forde nonetheless sustains his past unquestioning approach to the issue: during a radio interview in which he reveals his experiences of abuse, Forde immediately diminishes the significance of this revelation as well as the severity of the experience. He notes that “my account of the Brother molesting me had taken only three minutes” (172) and recalls that “I'd kept talking. I should have stopped . . . I didn't exactly bury the story—*my* story—but I made it, somehow, an expected part of every Irishman's education . . . Not so bad. Part of what we are” (173). In Fitzpatrick's repeated attempts to raise the issue of abuse with Forde, Doyle, again, highlights the protagonist's anxiety about engaging in any substantive reflection on the

topic. At the pub, when Fitzpatrick asks him which Brother “wanted [his] arse” or inquires whether he has told his new friends about “the Brother playing with [his] mickey” (9, 187), Forde immediately looks “to see if anyone had been listening to him” and disengages from the conversation, instructing his counterpart, “don’t start” (9, 187). In these, *Smile*’s most explicit depictions of contemporary Ireland’s attempts to engage with the CAC, Doyle emphasizes the overwhelming tendency to downplay or ignore the issue. Again, in the radio interview, Forde “listen[s] to [him]self, making small of it;” he describes how “eight minutes after I’d told . . . the rest of Ireland that a Christian Brother had placed his hand on my penis, I was laughing” (172). Doyle illustrates, here, that despite showing an apparent openness to the reality of clerical abuse, Irish society also betrays a fundamental unwillingness to reflect on its implications. By turning away from the realities of the abuse issue, Irish society fails to “belatedly come to the rescue of Ireland’s abused children” (Pine 51). These actions, the novel suggests, are not motivated by a desire to “truly intervene,” to “uncover the truth of abuse,” or to applaud the resilience of abuse survivors (Pine 51). Rather, they serve simply as a means of acknowledging the significance of the issue without really engaging with the complex question of responsibility. For Doyle, these abortive discussions of both the Church and society’s failures are fundamentally inadequate: they do not amount to atonement for these failures, nor do they constitute a meaningful engagement with their legacies.

In these scenes, Doyle shows that Forde’s compulsive, even instinctive, urge to turn away from the abuse issue is deliberate, not symptomatic of Irish culture’s ostensible lack of awareness of clerical abuse. His evasiveness, however, not only represents the Irish public’s failure to “take a good look at [itself], and to ask what abuses or inhuman

injustices we are responsible for” (Colton qtd. in McGarry), but also symbolizes a protraction of the very ideological failures that helped sustain Irish Catholicism’s culture of sexual assault, a protraction, that is, of what Inglis describes as the Church’s “considerable influence in the way people viewed and understood their world” and, crucially, of its “parameters for how people behaved socially” (*MM* 65). More significantly, the novel implies that by downplaying the effects of his abuse at the hands of a priest whenever this issue arises, and by expressing a sense of resignation about these experiences, Forde effectively exonerates those guilty of these horrendous crimes. What is most disturbing about Forde’s tendencies to excuse these crimes, however, is that they are in line with the actions of those closest to him, those equally, if not more, reluctant to acknowledge the severity of his experience. Although his mother, wife, and others are concerned about Forde once they learn of his childhood experiences, Doyle shows that they also accept his claim that the abuse “was no big deal . . . It happened to everyone. Like an initiation” (173). It is as a result of this questionable rationale that Forde not only receives little genuine support after he publicly discloses his childhood abuse, but also that his disclosures of abuse are met with “uproar” as if, in expressing these traumatic experiences publicly, he “was undermining the Church and the education system,” even “assaulting the country itself” given the Church’s role in shaping a distinctly “national” sense of Irish identity (173). Though these characters demonstrate genuine empathy for Forde, Doyle shows that they are, like him, equally quick to put these crimes out of their minds. Again, Doyle foregrounds here society’s underlying belief that showing this kind of meaningful support necessarily means contravening the principles of Irish Catholicism and, as such, betraying an institution that has shaped what it means to be Irish. And

though their pervasive reticence in fully engaging with the problem of clerical abuse clearly stems from this sociocultural deference to a religious establishment that, as I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, largely undergirds Irish national identity, it clearly also epitomizes, for Doyle, that though “there were many innocent victims” of abuse as well as “many willing collaborators in all levels of official life,” there “were [also] the bystanders” who bear responsibility for the crimes committed against Irish children (Keogh 139).<sup>90</sup> In depicting how, in relation to the clerical abuse issue, the concept of victimhood gets overlooked and even redirected, as it were, as those who come forward as survivors of clerical abuse are seen as “blackguard[s]” and “self-serving” (173), Doyle foregrounds the idea that the failures surrounding the CAC are primarily Irish society’s and returns to his initial point about how it is these failures that give rise to Forde’s loserdom and sense of inadequacy. In his portrayal of Ireland’s ongoing disregard for the victims, he draws a direct line between the public’s tepid response to reports of clerical abuse and his character’s stuntedness, disappointment, and his internalization of society’s failures and inadequacies.

In *Smile*’s final scene, in which Forde/Fitzpatrick’s trauma is most apparent, Doyle demonstrates how this trauma is correlated with both the experience of abuse, and, more importantly, with the experience of isolation, shame, and loserdom that results from Irish society’s indifference regarding this abuse. In this fantastic, obscure, and rather awkward scene in which Fitzpatrick reveals that he is a creation of Forde’s fragmented psyche, Doyle implies that Forde’s narrative about his life, the narrative that makes up

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<sup>90</sup> Keogh explicitly names the Irish state as a guilty party insofar as much of the abuse occurred within its “‘child-care’ system” (138).

the novel, is entirely fictitious, but that this fictional account is symptomatic of Irish society's readiness to repress its failed responsibility to victims of clerical abuse. After reminding Forde that, they were not only molested, but also repeatedly raped by the Christian Brother—incidents Forde has obviously repressed—Fitzpatrick claims that these experiences have left them spurned by society, as if they embody Ireland's shame, rather than a kind of courage in the face of suffering.<sup>91</sup> He claims:

I see people walking . . . Just during the day, like. I see them and they all seem to know where they're going. And I always think they're keeping the secret from me. Where they're going—where they know they're going. I've always felt that. Left out, I suppose. Excluded—that's a big word these days, isn't it, Victor? Excluded . . . I was a happy enough kid . . . But I always felt a bit left out—left behind. (204-5)

Likewise, while reminding Forde how the series of assaults transpired, he suggests that “no one said a thing. Remember?” (211), and that, as such, he became convinced that he was “old enough to stop [the Brother]” and the abuse (214). Though it may be subtle, Fitzpatrick, here, articulates the obvious discrepancy between society's willingness to acknowledge the reality of clerical abuse and its unwillingness to admit its own failure in addressing this problem, a distinction to which Doyle points throughout the novel. These words point, that is, to the nation's continued reticence in accepting its complicity for crimes it has no issue acknowledging. Moreover, Fitzpatrick's admission harks to the ways in which it is society's inaction that has resulted in their (i.e. Fitzpatrick and Forde's) despondent and pathetic conditions. It shows that Irish society's unwillingness

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<sup>91</sup> At this point, I am treating Forde and Fitzpatrick as two parts of the same character.

to accept the onus for the suffering of its most vulnerable means that victims must accept blame for their own suffering, and that the novel's broader treatment of victims as losers is a result of this unwillingness. This scene shows that loserdom is shaped equally by the Church's betrayal and by Ireland's. It is a traumatic epiphany for Forde, but one that explicitly illustrates the extent to which the harms of clerical abuse were and are aggravated by the inaction of Irish society.

The words that end *Smile*, "I was crying. I couldn't stop crying. And I can't stop" (214), clearly call attention to the failures of Ireland's efforts to deal with the legacies of clerical abuse.<sup>92</sup> Though Doyle does not use these words or *Smile* as a whole to openly criticize the Catholic Church, the Irish State, or the Irish people, his emphasis on the systemic sociocultural minimization of these crimes serves to undermine the notion that Irish society has completed its remedial or restorative work, that it has undone or dealt with what has become a source of national shame. The text is, in this way, perhaps a call to action rather than a polemic: the point seems to be that to continue to demonstrate this kind of acquiescence or, more specifically, to *accept* this kind of social resignation with regard to those like Forde or Fitzpatrick constitutes nothing more than a perpetuation of the crimes committed against them. Ultimately though, by ending *Smile* with a display of unrelenting sadness and of the fundamental isolation of the loser-victim, Doyle casts doubt on the possibility that Ireland can recognize its sociocultural failures with regard to the victims of clerical abuse, let alone make amends for them.

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<sup>92</sup> The fact that it is unclear which character speaks these words helps underscore, I think, the sense that these words are meant to signal the nation's failures broadly.

### **4.3. “Rotten to the Core”: From Priests to Pariahs in John Boyne’s *A History of Loneliness***

Unlike *Smile*, John Boyne’s *A History of Loneliness* centres more explicitly on the Catholic Church and its authorities’ moral failures in perpetrating and concealing the rampant abuse of minors in Ireland. And though the novel subtly addresses the role or responsibility of the Irish public with respect to the CAC, its primary concerns are with the ideological and bureaucratic mechanisms at work within the Church that served to protect those guilty of abusing children. However, this concern with the logistics and effects of the Church’s cover up of abuse is rather superficial, and it gives way to a broader assessment of the ways the Church’s crimes against young people have not only shifted the “religious” landscape in Ireland, but also prompted a kind of “soul-searching” both within the Church and within Irish society. That is, despite its emphasis on the inner-workings of the Church, the novel dramatizes the erosion of a once powerful ideological force in Ireland and points to the idea that both the Church and Irish society share the responsibilities and challenges precipitated by this erosion.

*A History of Loneliness* details the inner turmoil of Odran Yates, a “good” priest forced to grapple with the changing role of the Catholic Church in Ireland in the late twentieth-century and, in particular, his proximity to Ireland’s CAC. Boyne not only depicts Yates’ ambivalent relationship with his Irish Catholic faith, but also portrays the priest’s attempts to make sense of the obvious ethical dilemmas raised by the deviant or criminal tendencies of seemingly moral authorities. More specifically, the novel deals with Yates’s attempts to reconcile his perception of himself as an ostensibly blameless agent of the Church with the tremendous failures that institutional Catholicism embodies

in the wake of the CAC. The text depicts, that is, Yates's attempts to navigate a sociocultural terrain in which a "decline in the trust of the Church's credibility" is palpable, and in which, as Mary Kenny explains, people feel "that the clerical way of life was the cause of the [CAC]"—this in spite of the fact that the overwhelming majority of Irish clerics were "not committing sexual abuse of minors [and were] not breaking their vows at all" (384-5). This depiction of Yates's reckoning in the face of this crisis should not, however, be read as a veiled attack on the Church, nor should it be read as an attempt to further discredit the already disgraced institution. As Boyne explains, "it would be very easy to write a novel with a monster at the centre of it, an unremitting paedophile who preys on the vulnerable without remorse" ("Priesthood"). Instead, he suggests, "the challenge . . . was to write about the other priest, the genuine priest, the one who has given his life over to good works and finds himself betrayed by the institution to which he has given everything" ("Priesthood"). Just as in Doyle's *Smile*, Boyne's aim in *A History of Loneliness* is not to shock readers using graphic scenes of abuse or belabouring the cruelty of certain priests. Rather, the book aims to explore the effects, reverberations, and cultural traumas of the CAC. It seeks to examine how the acts of specific clerics tarnished Irish society's view of the Church and represented a betrayal not only of those innocent victims and their families who trusted in the Church but also those who Boyne identifies as the "many decent [priests] who have lived good lives within [the Church]" ("Priesthood"). As Boyne succinctly puts it, the novel represents his attempt "to uncover goodness where I had spent a lifetime finding evil" ("Priesthood").

Although reviewers of *A History of Loneliness* are torn in their evaluations of the work, nearly all connect their assessments to Boyne's adeptness in condemning the

Church for the CAC. These reviews, in other words, focus on what they see as the work's scathing depiction of the Church and of its sycophantic followers. Schilling, for instance, praises the realism of Boyne's portrayal of "how the hierarchy's determination to maintain the power and image of the church has colluded with the laity's strong desire for religious certainty" ("History"), while Dunmore claims to admire his readiness to put "the paedophiles . . . on trial at last" along with "the silent enablers of crime" ("Denunciation"). Given his condemnation of church corruption, Jennifer Yacovissi even suggests that "Boyne might have done better developing a nonfiction treatise on the [inherent] protectionist attitude that has damaged the institution" ("History"). And though these critics are correct in noting Boyne's critical approach to his subject matter, they nonetheless fail to account for the text's principal examination of how society's attempts to reckon with the deteriorated state of the Church has provoked a national sense of uncertainty, shame, and regret—all important hallmarks of loserdom. Put simply, readings of *A History of Loneliness* that privilege Boyne's pointed analysis of the Church's crimes necessarily overlook what, I argue, is a more complex commentary on the damage inflicted on Irish society and Irish Catholicism by morally bankrupt members of the Church. Building on Joseph Veale's writings, Fuller, Littleton, and Maher claim that "the wound inflicted by the clerical abuse scandal was nothing so superficial as the loss of influence or diminished power," and that the fallout from the scandal went "right to the core of how Irish people related to the Catholic Church" (8). It is this shifting conception of Irish Catholicism, I argue, that Boyne turns to in his novel and uses to explore whether Irish society is adequately equipped to address its role in the CAC.

After demonstrating how Boyne's protagonist Father Odran Yates is a loser, I want to show how Yates's loserdom stems from his uncritical deference to the Catholic Church, and how, in light of the CAC, this loserdom symbolizes the shame, regret, and uncertainty that arise from Irish society's recognition of its readiness to submit to a morally dubious institution. I will also demonstrate, though, how Yates's loserdom is symptomatic of the increasingly liminal state he occupies as a priest in the era of the Irish CAC. More specifically, I suggest that Boyne depicts his protagonist as a loser as a means of highlighting the Church's transition from a powerful moral and political institution to one whose ethical *bona fides* have been compromised and, thus, whose authority in Ireland and value as a marker of Irishness has become a thing of the past. I contend that Boyne's emphasis on the ways Yates's loserdom is a social manifestation of failure enables him to dramatize society's experience of the untethering of traditional Catholic Ireland from modern Irish identity. I argue, however, that Boyne insists that this untethering does not constitute a solution to the widespread social or religious failures of the CAC, and that the possibility of such a solution remains uncertain.

Although *A History of Loneliness* is not organized chronologically and, instead, moves back-and-forth through Yates's life, Boyne alludes to his protagonist's passivity and weakness very early in the novel and, from there, illustrates how his readiness to yield defines him as a loser. Recalling a tense encounter in which Aidan, Yates's young nephew, antagonized him by asking whether he felt he had "wasted [his] life" by becoming a priest and, moreover, suggesting that he would "rather shoot [him]self" than be a priest like his uncle, Yates acknowledges, for instance, that the young man "did not share my innocence or my inability to confront" and that "even as a boy, [Aidan] was

more of a man than I would ever be” (*HL* 5). Despite claiming to have felt assured in his decision to become a priest—a certainty that is later called into question<sup>93</sup>—Yates, here, is unwilling to defend himself. Likewise, when Archbishop Cordington informs Yates of his pending reassignment from Terenure College to a Dublin parish—an assignment Yates stresses he does not want—the priest simply concedes that “once the decision was made, it was made, and I was supposed to just get on with things” (37). Although he claims to be “rattled” by the encounter with the Archbishop—an encounter that ends with the more senior cleric suggesting that Yates’s sister is “better off not knowing about that son of hers,” Yates’s nephew Jonas, given that “he’s a queer” (37)—Yates retreats from the encounter, describing how “I said nothing, simply took my leave, closing the door behind me” (37). In these early scenes, Boyne points to his protagonist’s tendency to retreat from even the slightest pressure or confrontation and, thus, reveals his resignation and powerlessness. More importantly, however, he positions these qualities as failures of sorts. Yates’s unwillingness to defend himself, his nephew, and even his sense of

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<sup>93</sup> The scene in which Yates most explicitly articulates the possibility that he did not really have a vocation and that his mother instead forced him to become a priest also constitutes the novel’s most explicit depiction of the way in which Yates’s role as a priest overshadows the other aspects of his identity, especially his masculinity (264). In the scene in which Yates is castigated by a Roman waitress with whom he is infatuated after entering her home uninvited, he explicitly suggests that this encounter, though emasculating, is in fact more humiliating because he is a priest. As the waitress humiliates the “pathetic” priest (263), he claims that his humiliation and shame come not from her rejection but from his inability, as someone who has given himself over to the priesthood, to properly desire her (263-5). The point here is not about how “male sexual identity is a primary requirement for [the] priesthood,” and yet remains a “male sexual identity [that] cannot be evident in actual experience” (Kennan *Child* 234), but, rather, a simpler one about how the priesthood is built on the negation of both individual (male) identities and of the “distinction between their work and their personal lives” (239)—a negation required in order to solidify the symbolic difference between the clergy and the laity and, by extension, to ensure the former’s power over the latter.

morality is not symptomatic of a docile disposition; rather, these are signs of inadequacy and cowardice, and indications of his loserdom. They signal, in short, a readiness to yield to the erasure of his agency not only in his official capacity as a priest, but also as a person.

While Yates consistently avoids any confrontation related to his personal life, his tendency to yield to external pressures and to demonstrate a rather pathetic submissiveness is most acute when these pressures involve matters related to the sociopolitical power of the Church. His uncritical acceptance of his vocation and his descriptions of the seminary are cases in point. First, Boyne makes much in the novel about the fact that the young Yates is effectively told of his vocation by his mother. The priest recalls that rather than having realized his calling to the priesthood, he learned of his vocation during a turbulent period after his alcoholic father drowned himself and his younger son while on vacation in Wexford.<sup>94</sup> He specifically recounts how his devout mother rushed into his bedroom in the middle of the night on his tenth birthday “declaring that she had just had a great epiphany, one for which we should all be grateful” (56-7): her son has a vocation. And although Boyne’s descriptions of the “expression of wonder on [the mother’s] face” and of her frenzied confidence that “she was right” are uncomfortable (56-7), what is most unsettling about this scene is the way the young boy so quickly accepts his mother’s conviction. “I thought if she said so, she must be right,” Yates admits, unmoved by this unusual assertion (57). Though Yates

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<sup>94</sup> Though it may not explicitly fit within his broader examination of the CAC, I would suggest that, in his portrayal of this infanticide, Boyne alludes to the crimes committed against children by priests. Following his lengthy description of Cathal Yates’s drowning, Odran Yates austerely claims, “what a world it is that we live in and what injuries we do to children” (55).

suggests that his indifferent response to his mother's revelation was a product of his childhood naiveté and the fact that "I'd been brought up . . . to believe everything my mother told me" (57), his readiness to consent to his mother's views indeed typifies a form of Irish deference to the Church.<sup>95</sup> In view of the "powerful alliance between priests and mothers" through which "the Church became a dominant force in economic and social life" (Inglis *MM* 179), Yates's readiness to comply with his mother's religious aspirations points to the ideological hegemony of the Church and of the underlying cultural imperative to maintain the Church's social power. We see the strength of this ideological hegemony again in Yates's descriptions of the seminary. Though Yates concedes that "perhaps I have given the impression that I was forced into this life, that Mam pushed me down a road that would offer her some consolation," he emphasizes that "I knew from the moment I arrived at the seminary that here was a role to which I was well suited" (126).<sup>96</sup> More importantly, he claims that his willingness to attend the seminary is based in the fact that the "priesthood was a noble calling" and that it was "a noble profession filled by decent men who wanted to propagate kindness and charity"

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<sup>95</sup> As Inglis explains, "it was the [Irish] mother who . . . became the organizational link between the Catholic Church and the individual," who "carried through the new moral and civil code from the church and school into the home," and who, "through a variety of social and cultural practices which [she] handed down, . . . produced the Catholics of modern Ireland" (*MM* 179).

<sup>96</sup> It is worth mentioning that Keenan has observed a direct correlation between clerical perpetrators of sexual abuse and their experiences at the seminary. She claims that "those men who became the abuse[rs] were rule-keepers by and large who were molded by their seminary experiences [and those of] losing their personal selves and integrity in their attempts to embody a Perfect Celibate Clerical Masculine identity" (*Child* 248). I raise this point because it shows the degree to which it is the "idea" of the Church, its symbolism, that shapes priests and abusers, according to Keenan. Though Yates is not an abuser in the text, his claim about intuitively knowing that he is "well-suited" to the seminary echoes, I would suggest, this point about the ways the social significance of the Church eclipses the other aspects of priests' identities.

(126). Not only do these comments about the “nobility” of the priesthood and the Church’s ability to “promote a better world” echo the idea that historically “the priest acted as a civilizing agent in Irish society” and that “he was a model of morality and civility” (Inglis *MM* 140), they also hark to the idea of the priest as “a civilized, disciplined and well-mannered Catholic man” who served as the foundation for the Church’s attempts to “constitute itself as a power to be obeyed” (*MM* 141). Again, as an organized “national” apparatus that “took over many of the responsibilities of the state” by serving as “the principle provider of social welfare and service agencies” in the early days of independence (Crotty 121-2), the Church dominated Ireland politically as much as it did morally. It provided an organized political institution that, unlike the official state, could actually create “a better world” for the Irish people. As such, by suggesting that his vocation rests as much in his understanding of priests’ influence as it does in his faith, Yates reveals the deferential nature of this vocation and implicitly bows to the ideological and political dominance of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Like with his descriptions of Yates’s passive acceptance of his vocation, Boyne uses Yates’s uncritical reflections on the sexual improprieties of fellow Irish priests to highlight the protagonist’s tendency to conform to the demands, both justified and unjustified, of Irish Catholic life and to critique both the character’s and Irish society’s reluctance in developing “an intellectual interest in, or critical attitude towards . . . religion” (*MM* 2). For instance, in the aforementioned meeting with Cordington, the two men briefly discuss the recent incarceration of a priest, a discussion Yates attempts to sidestep by looking “down at the floor” (27). When Cordington presses Yates about what he would do if he learned of a fellow priest’s transgressions, Yates responds that “I don’t

know what I'd do," but that he would probably not immediately "go to the Gardaí" (27-8). However, in a revealing display of his unassertiveness, he also notes that "*nothing* was the honest answer" to the Archbishop's question (27, ital. in original). Yates's tentativeness in addressing the crimes of fellow priests, especially after Cordington sternly instructs him to stay quiet about such matters given that the "papers are all out to get us" (28), speaks to his diffidence and his wilful blindness to the severe implications of the abuse crisis in the Church.<sup>97</sup> However, Yates's inability to adequately express what actions he would take in addressing rumours of clerical abuse as well as his readiness to concede to the Archbishop's instructions not only hint at the culture of silence and inaction within the Church's ranks, but they also reveal Boyne's point that this culture of silence is at least as much a result of a social sense of resignation or shame as it is of powerlessness. Though Boyne shows that Yates yields to the Archbishop's orders as a result of his subordinate position and the power imbalance between them, he also portrays Yates's response to the issue of abuse here and elsewhere as indicative of a broader underlying tolerance of what he perceives an inevitable abuse of power within the Church. Yates shows here the extent to which his "individual identity is subsumed

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<sup>97</sup> It is worth noting that Cordington's apprehension with regard to the "papers" is entirely justified given the impact of Irish media in unearthing the CAC. As I mentioned above, it was with the release of televised specials including Rafferty's *States of Fear* that the abuse issue gained traction in Ireland. Historically, as Inglis explains, there had been a "moral tradition within the media of not touching [scandalous] stories [involving the Church]" (MM 218), but starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this "institutional deference to the Church" was abandoned, and the Church had "become another interest group in civil society which [was] open to the same inspection as any other" (MM 217). In an interesting reversal, by exposing the rampant moral hypocrisy of the Irish Catholic Church and by driving "a stake into the heart of the institutional Church" (MM 257), the Irish media has come to take the place of the Church in contemporary Ireland, and has come to "symbolically dominate public and private life in a way that is far more pervasive and effective than the Church ever achieved" (MM 257).

into that of the larger [religious] organization” and is, thus, molded by “rules and regulations, conformity to the system, [and] obedience to superiors” (Keenan *Child* 156). His is a deference aligned with, indeed symbolic of, society’s unquestioning obedience to a powerful Irish institution.

For Boyne, Yates’s pathetic deference to the crimes of fellow clergymen does not suggest that he is bereft of a sense of morality, nor does it show that he is innocent. Rather, Boyne’s portrayal of Yates’s handling of the clerical abuse issue not only shows that this resignation about the Church’s crimes is effectively compulsory—an extension or effect of Irish society’s obligations to the institution that helped legitimize and consolidate the Irish state—but also that, in the widespread acceptance of the failures of Church authorities, these crimes extend to “innocent” priests (and arguably to the Irish public) rendering them complicit in these failures. Yates’s complicity recalls Maher’s note that “when one is closely aligned to an institution like the Catholic Church, as priests inevitably are, it is difficult to become part of its dismantling” (“Prophetic” 118). The portrayal of his failure to address the issue of clerical abuse is in keeping, with the notion that it was “painful and professionally dangerous for a priest to point out fault lines and champion causes that could be viewed as unacceptable, or even heretical, by other priests and members of the hierarchy” (118). After recalling seeing a young abuse victim slash the tires of his friend Tom Cardle’s car in the middle of the night, Yates claims, for instance, that “I got back into bed and didn’t know what to think,” yet immediately retracts this claim and admits, “there’s the lie [because] I did know what to think. Only I could not bring myself to think it” (212). Boyne portrays Yates as clearly cognizant of his moral failure in refusing to act based on what he witnessed. When Yates later receives

confirmation that Cardle is accused of “interfering” with children, he describes an acute sense of disgrace about his “silence and complicity” and his readiness to place his suspicions “at the very back of my mind” (232-3). During Cardle’s trial where he learns that the boy he had watched slash Cardle’s tires ultimately “hanged himself in his bedroom” (283), Yates unambiguously expresses remorse about his approach (or lack thereof) to the clerical abuse issue. He wonders:

What kind of life was this? . . . To what sort of organization had I dedicated my life? And even as I searched for blame, I knew that a darkness was stirring inside me concerning my own complicity, for I had seen things and I had suspected things and I had turned away from things and I had done nothing. (281-2)

In emphasizing Yates’s realization that, in repressing any suspicion about priests, “we are none of us innocent” (283), Boyne points to the ways society and members of the Church in Ireland—and, of course, elsewhere—might have known about the abuse issue long before it grew into an outright scandal but would have been unable or unwilling to raise any concerns due to the Church’s innate political significance in Ireland as well as the country’s clerical culture. As Mary Kenny notes, Irish clericalism—the “idea of [the] clergy as an elite who were set apart from and above the laity” (106)—meant that, in the eyes of the Irish public, the “Catholic clergy could do no wrong,” and victims of abuse who came forward, and thus “[spoke] ‘ill’ of their clergy,” were “not to be believed” (106). Using Yates’s sense of remorse in these sections, Boyne highlights the fact that though the longstanding suppression of the abuse issue resulted from the political role and ideological domination of the Church, this “tolerance” and “complicity” are nonetheless direct contributors to the sense of guilt, shame, uncertainty, and failure—

loser qualities, in essence—that define Yates and, arguably, characterize Irish society’s relationship with and view of the Church in the post-CAC era.<sup>98</sup> Put another way, Yates’s pattern of submission is consistent with and symbolic of Ireland’s longstanding ideological impotence under the Church and, by the same token, within the cultures of permissiveness and secrecy fostered by the Church with respect to the problem of clerical abuse. However, it also shows the degree to which the loserdom and failure Yates represents are born out of and compounded by the shame of this complicity and the ostensible impossibility of rectifying these failures to act.

Although Yates’s guilt and regret about his lifelong submission to a morally questionable institution are clearly at the heart of his loser qualities and lead to his early claim that “I did not become ashamed of being Irish until I was well into the middle years of my life” (1), Boyne shows that his protagonist’s unfortunate characteristics in the novel are also symptomatic of Catholicism’s waning sociocultural significance in Ireland. That is to say, though Yates’s personal failings—failings that represent those of the institutional Church and Irish society in obliquely permitting the abuse of children—frame his loser persona, Boyne shows that Yates’s loserdom is equally based in the fact that he epitomizes both an institution whose social power in Ireland has slowly receded and mores that are increasingly at odds with the nation’s “post-Catholic” sensibilities. Describing his role as a teacher, librarian, and “a spiritual counsellor to the boys” at Terenure College early in the novel, Yates acknowledges, for instance, the growing

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<sup>98</sup> Keenan herself has noted that “Catholic clergy in Ireland are suffering even lower levels of morale and deflation [than at the outbreak of the CAC] particularly in those dioceses where there have been disclosures of a significant amount of abuse by their colleagues” (*Child* 56).

irrelevance of this latter task (20). He claims that his was “a job whose demands decreased dramatically” given that “the life of the spirit was one that seemed less important to the students as the years went on” (20). However, Boyne shows that Yates’s students are not the only ones turning away from “spiritual life” and driving the obsolescence of the priesthood. At several points, he alludes to a decline in the value of spiritual counsel that priests such as Yates provide as well as the incompatibility between the priesthood and modern Irish life. He emphasizes, for instance, Yates’s strong dread of situations in which he must offer laypeople advice or “dig deep to discover some personal problem that I would probably be unable to fix” (111) given that, like all priests, his “knowledge is theoretical” (76). Priests, Yates admits, “don’t keep [their] own finances, the church does that . . . [they] don’t clean [their] own homes, [they] have housekeepers. And sure what do we know of sex” (76). In what is perhaps the novel’s most explicit statement regarding the inadequacy of what the priest can offer his parishioners, Yates wonders, “why did they come to me, anyway, me who knew nothing of this life” (111). The sense is clearly that though the duties of the priesthood have perhaps remained the same, the demands put on priests in contemporary Ireland have changed.<sup>99</sup> For Yates, Boyne shows, these new demands highlight the growing disparity between life as a priest and life as a modern layperson, and they compound his sense of failure by revealing the growing redundancy of his function as counselor. Boyne shows that, though many still view Yates as an authority—in an especially uncomfortable scene, several train

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<sup>99</sup> According to Inglis, the historical tasks of priests in Ireland were “to preach, catechise, and administer the sacraments” and to respond “to the spiritual and moral needs of the laity” in part by acting “as a broker of power [and] as a social consultant” (*MM* 47).

passengers vie for Yates's attention by offering them their seats (62-72)—his authority and value are repeatedly called into question in contemporary Ireland.

Though Boyne illustrates the ways Yates's influence and abilities as a priest in modern Ireland have decreased—and, in doing so, draws attention to the idea that his loser status is intertwined with this decline—he also demonstrates how the CAC has exacerbated the Church's transition from sociocultural force to antiquated institution. That is, not only does Boyne depict Yates's loser qualities as bound up with his personal inadequacies as a priest, but he also implies that these qualities are part and parcel of the increasing social and ideological liminality of the Church in Ireland in the wake of the CAC. The novel highlights, for instance, the “demoralizing experience” of being “among crowds while wearing [a Roman] collar,” of being the target of “sneering stares of self-important students or puffed-up businessmen,” and of encountering mothers who “hold their children closer to them” and “strangers [who] approach me with some provocative or insulting remark” (146). Yates's conspicuous garb no longer commands the respect it did when he was a young man. Unlike those passengers ready to give up their seat for Yates in the 1980s, those he encounters on the Luas in 2011, act much more aggressively towards him. “Two lads had pushed past me deliberately,” Yates recalls, and “as they walked on unapologetically, one coughed and muttered the word *pedophile* under his breath” (149). In the context of the CAC, Boyne shows that not only has Yates lost the dignity that priests would formerly have embodied, but he has, indeed, become a social pariah. As a priest, Yates is an outcast in Ireland: he is rendered powerless by virtue of his role within a religious order that many Irish people perceive (in light of the ongoing revelations of abuse and its cover-up) as having become too powerful. As a figure linked,

however loosely, to the CAC, Yates has no place in what Enda Kenny described as the “republic of laws, rights and responsibilities,” an Ireland in which “the delinquency and arrogance of a particular version of a particular kind of morality [is] no longer . . . tolerated or ignored” (“Commission”). Yates’s identity, linked as it is with his role as a priest, is rendered inconsequential, if not dangerous, in Irish society by the fact that “things had changed” since the abuse crisis surfaced (172). After he is arrested for “abducting” a lost child while trying to return the boy to his mother, Yates explicitly points to the ways public trust in the Church has been eroded and replaced by a sense of suspicion. He claims that the Gardaí “held all the power [and] I held none” and that “there was a time when a priest was trusted, when you would bring a lost boy to the curate’s house, not to the Garda station” (172). He expresses how the apparent misgivings about priests exemplify a more significant shift in the balance of power between the Church and Irish society: the Irish State, epitomized by the Gardaí in this scene, has reached a point at which it can truly govern itself and no longer needs the Church as a political (or moral) apparatus. That Yates is rendered powerless and useless by the Gardaí or by those commuters he encounters on the Luas evokes, in the text, the displacement of the Church as a useful political or regulatory force in contemporary Ireland and alludes to the anachronism of the Church’s authority in a confident, fully-formed modern Irish State.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Again, the Church achieved its ideological and political dominance by not only serving as a functioning indigenous pseudo-state apparatus in the years of British colonialism, but by constructing “an orientation to life that defined the way [the Irish] behaved in different social fields and the strategies and tactics people used as they engaged in the daily struggle to attain power” within a context circumscribed by colonial oppression (*MM* 65).

Boyne's depictions of the Church's degraded position in Ireland—its transformation from sociopolitical power to institutional pariah—show more than the ways Yates's loserdom (his powerlessness and resignation) exists as a symptom of this degradation. Indeed, the conflation of the Church's waning influence in Ireland (especially, as a result of the CAC) and Yates's loserdom are part of the novel's broader comment on the relationship between failure and the untethering of traditional configurations of Irish Catholic identity and contemporary Irishness. It is, in short, part of the text's critique of the Church's responsibility for the abuse crisis and its concurrent value in the modern republic. In a brief scene in which Archbishop Cordington criticizes the defiance of an Irish society willing to prosecute a priest—in the tirade, he not only vows that the Church “will fight and we will win” and that it will “bring these pups to heel if it takes every penny we have” (236)—Boyne demonstrates, for instance, that the man's consternation emerges not, as he claims, from his concern for the spiritual health of Ireland, but rather from his anxiety about the end of Catholic supremacy in Ireland and the break between Catholic life and Irish identity. Cordington claims, for instance, that society will “tear us all down if [it gets] the chance” and asks Yates “where will the country be then?” (235). However, by emphasizing the degree to which the Archbishop insists that “we have to think about the country [and about] the future” (235), Boyne foregrounds that the character's concerns epitomize more than the Church's self-serving response to its increasing vulnerability and dwindling influence. Rather, they exemplify a justifiable concern about the rupture forming between the Church and the country, and it is to Boyne's depiction of the experience of failure born out of this rupture that I finally want to turn.

Throughout the novel, Boyne repeatedly points to the secularization of Ireland in the latter half of the last century. I have already mentioned, for instance, Boyne's depiction of the irrelevance of Yates's role as "spiritual advisor," but we also see his portrayal of Ireland's social and sexual liberalization. He describes the arrival and censorship of films such as *Mutiny on the Bounty*, which include scenes involving "bare-breasted women" (4). In an early scene, he also alludes to Yates's young neighbour whose surprise pregnancy not only forces her to escape to Spain but ensures that the parish priest "named [the girl] from the pulpit and made sure that her poor parents were there to hear [his] spiteful, mean bit of belligerence" (82).<sup>101</sup> And although these allusions to the tension between Church teachings and Ireland's slow sexual liberation are rather inconsequential to the plot, they are significant because of how they point to the social inadequacies of doctrinal views of sexuality as "something dark, dirty, and unclean, [as something] to be feared" and those who epitomize those views (Keenan *Child* 139). Moreover, these scenes anticipate Yates's confrontation with the nature of Irishness in the era of the CAC, an Irishness that has started to break away from its staunch Catholic foundations. These scenes set the stage for Yates's climactic epiphany regarding both the damage caused in Ireland by the historically significant interlacing of the Church, the Irish state, and ideas of Irishness, and the need to loosen these connections in the modern country, an epiphany we start to see during Tom Cardle's trial for what one priest flippantly calls "kiddie fiddling" (273).

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<sup>101</sup> Of these examples of Catholic Ireland's policing of sexual morality, Yates claims, "there was precious little compassion to be found in the hearts of anyone in those days" especially with regard to "the lives and choices of women," but notes that "in that way, if not others, Ireland has hardly changed for forty years" (83).

Using Cardle's trial, Boyne shows both Yates's recognition of his own responsibility for the antipathy that exists in Ireland with regard to the Catholic Church as well as the idea that this apparent antipathy has seemingly become a characteristic of modern Irishness. First, by portraying Yates as fixated on those gathered outside the Four Courts rather than on the trial itself, Boyne demonstrates the priest's growing awareness of the severity of the abuse crisis and its broader ramifications in Ireland. Identifying, for instance, a protester relating his experiences of abuse and denouncing the "culture of conspiracy" at the heart of the CAC, "his voice rising in anger" as he does so, Yates fixates on the man's remarks about the significance of the CAC in Ireland (276). Yates expresses his dismay about the man's condemnation of "the bishops, the cardinals, the Pope himself . . . the whole bloody lot of them" who "should be taken out of their houses and their palaces, dragged out into the street by their hair if necessary, and made to stand trial one by one in the full public gaze" (276). He recoils at the man's rage about how the Church remains "in control of ninety percent of the schools," and how, despite the moral hypocrisy of the Church, "poxy little sheep" continue to "climb into the pews . . . even though they don't believe a word of what they hear or live their lives in the way their contaminated religion tells them to" (277).<sup>102</sup> After hearing the man tell reporters (and, by extension, the Irish public), that the Irish people should "get rid of [the priests]" and "stop

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<sup>102</sup> This allusion to the Church's control of 90% of Irish schools emphasizes the degree to which the Church continues to occupy a pseudo-state role in Ireland even if its ideological control or influence has begun to fall away. More importantly, it points to the inherent problem of the Church's enduring sociopolitical authority in a Republic increasingly made up of individuals and communities (Protestant, Jewish, Islamic, etc.) who fall outside of the traditional, albeit not universal, formulation of "Irish as Catholic." It exemplifies, in short, what Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather identify as "a mis-match between the inherited pattern of denominational school patronage and the rights of citizens in the much more culturally and religiously diverse contemporary Ireland" (1).

at nothing to expel every last one of them from Ireland, like Saint Patrick got rid of the snakes,” Yates claims he “could listen to no more” (277). However, Boyne suggests that the despondency, shame, and sense of failure that Yates exhibits as he walks away from the scene are due not only to his recognition that the protester’s life has “been ruined by men in black suits with white collars” (277), but also due to his recognition that the man’s outlook is indeed justified. The text clearly shows that Yates sees that the radical (even violent) measures the man proposes are perhaps warranted given the suffering inflicted onto Ireland by the Church. After Cardle is convicted of child abuse and is sentenced to eight years in prison, Yates watches the crowd begin to “chant and [roar] down the streets,” repeating the simple command “get them out! Get them out!,” and he accepts that the Irish “want a clean country from now on” (291). Overall, these scenes reveal that the “simple message” which told “the world Ireland had finally had enough” corresponds with the nation’s wider attempt to separate itself from the Church and jettison what it sees as a cruel, antiquated aspect of sociopolitical Irishness (291). Boyne shows how these public reactions are an offshoot of Ireland’s underlying national attempt to symbolically “pull down the churches” (290), and they epitomize the need for a sociocultural renunciation of Catholicism in Ireland, a renunciation attributable to the failures of Irish priests like Yates. The loser’s disillusionment, according to Boyne, stems from his realization that “it’s not just one man,” as the protester explains, “it’s the whole bloody lot of them” (276).

Near the novel’s conclusion, as Yates listens to a radio interview on the topic of the CAC between an RTÉ journalist and Cordington, a newly-named cardinal, Boyne finally highlights the irreconcilability of Catholicism and Irish society in the wake of the

CAC. Again, Boyne's portrayal of this interview points to the Church's anachronistic influence in modern Irish society and to the importance of recognizing the destructiveness of this social power. As he describes how Cordington "dither[s]" as he attempts to answer journalist Liam Scott's pointed questions about his role in the abuse crisis, Yates claims that "I found myself rooting for Scott, urging him along, telling him not to let the cardinal off the hook" (296). Similarly, as the Cardinal struggles to assure Scott, with "well-rehearsed remorse" (295), that he "feel[s] great regret" about the abuse of innocent children (298), Yates even characterizes Cordington as a "stupid man" and wonders how he attained his "elevated rank" given that he does "not seem to have an iota of wisdom in [his] head" (298-9). The symbolic insubordination Yates displays as he listens to the interview reveals the end of the priest's deference to the Church, and it betrays an underlying sense of remorse about the failures for which Cordington is being "tried" on national airwaves. In other words, the fact that Yates's disparaging commentary on the Cardinal's interview occur alongside his brief moments of empathy for the man demonstrate an underlying sense of complicity for these crimes and, I would argue, subtly point to Yates's self-reproach. When Cordington expresses his genuine confusion about "why any man, let alone a priest, would do these things," Yates, who expresses this same confusion at several points in the text, explicitly comments, for example, that "I felt a certain sympathy for how lost he sounded" (302). Boyne uses Yates's brief empathetic response to the Cardinal's humiliation and his implicit identification with his inept superior to suggest that the priest shares Cordington's guilt, and that the Church, broadly, is deserving of this public shaming. Though there is an "honesty in [Cordington's] voice" as the Cardinal addresses the abuse issue—an

“honesty” much like Yates’s—Boyne clearly indicates that this “honest” remorse does not undo his failures, nor does it undo Ireland’s need to sever ties with the Church.

In addition to illustrating Yates’s own underlying sense of guilt for the shameful actions of the Church, Boyne’s portrayal of this radio interview calls attention to his point about how the crisis has not only undermined Ireland’s former Catholic identity, but has also delivered the final blow to the notion of Ireland as a bastion of Catholicism as well as to the legitimacy of the Church as an influential pseudo-state apparatus. In a line that echoes Yates’s protracted attempt to come to terms with the altered (albeit justified) negative public perception of priests in Ireland, Cordington articulates his sense that “I don’t know when the world changed so much . . . it’s like I went to bed in one country and woke up in another” (302). Though both characters clearly acknowledge that the revelations of abuse are to blame for this shift, Boyne shows that Yates, unlike Cordington, seems to recognize and accept that the damage that produced this “changed” Ireland is irreversible, and that this “new” country will endure. After Scott suggests that Pope John Paul II was “the brains of the operation,” Yates notes that “I never thought I would hear [this kind of irreverent remark] over the national airwaves in Ireland,” but acknowledges that his astonished reaction to this comment is “not because I didn’t think there was truth in it,” but rather because “I didn’t think anyone out there in RTÉ had the guts to say it” (303). His comments echo Donnelly and Inglis’s claim about how, at the height of the CAC, the Irish media began representing the Church not as “paragons of virtue [or] self-serving national heroes,” but as “self-serving masters of evil” (2). These comments are symptomatic, moreover, of Irish society’s increasing rejection of its previous unquestioning submission to the Church and correspond to Fuller’s claim that in

the wake of the CAC, “the wheel had turned full circle from the deference afforded the Church . . . by politicians, the laity, and the media” (*Irish* 254). As he turns off his radio after Cordington finishes the interview unwilling to acknowledge his guilt for “the lives [he has] destroyed and the lives [he has] ended” and naïvely convinced that “the Lord moves in mysterious ways,” Yates claims that “there’ll be no recovery from that” (304). The sense is clearly that Cordington, the clergy, and the Church are entirely out of touch with the nation, state, and public they had helped form and govern. In his apparent refusal to disregard the crimes and failures of the Church, Yates, like Ireland, the scene shows, has broken from his former religious and ideological chains. And though the novel suggests that there are those who remain bound to their faith in spite of the Church’s crimes—as Mary Kenny notes, there is a “theory that Catholicism in Ireland never truly recedes: that it falls away in one form and is reborn in another” (393)—in emphasizing Yates’s admission that “criminal cases involving priests” have become “just more of the same [news]” (326), it also suggests that the CAC has fundamentally altered the Irish sociocultural landscape and, as such, that Yates’s loserdom as a priest is tied to his responsibility in provoking this transformation (326).

Though Boyne uses Yates’s experiences of Cardle’s trial and his interpretation of Cordington’s interview to depict the ways contemporary Ireland has essentially broken away from the Church in the aftermath of the CAC, his concluding depiction of Yates’s epiphany regarding Ireland’s irremediable degeneracy belies the notion that this break is sufficient as a solution to the crimes of the Church. As he looks out over Dublin while grappling with the guilt he shares with Cardle and all other priests for the crimes of the Church, Yates recognizes for the first time that

young men were passing money to each other and going back to bedsits to tie tubes around their arms and fill their veins with the only thing that could give them some release from the misery of the place. Old women were turning down the gas heaters, for they couldn't afford to keep warm . . . and at least if they froze to death they wouldn't be sent to prison for non-payment [sic]. Teenage boys were standing on the quays late at night, looking out for some lost soul who might throw them twenty euros to kneel down before them with their pants around their ankles. The pubs were full of young men and women, graduating from universities, filled with fear as to what in God's name they would do with their lives now . . . Men were retiring from their jobs after forty years and having to scrimp and save because their pension funds had been wiped out by a bunch of Fianna Fáil crooks . . . And over there, at the airport, a group of men from Europe were flying in to tell us that we hadn't the sense to govern ourselves anymore . . . And for all of us, for all of these people, this is what Ireland had become, a country of drug addicts, losers, criminals, pedophiles, and incompetents. (332-3)

By juxtaposing this description with Yates's reckoning with his guilt in turning a blind eye to the Church's culture of abuse, Boyne gestures to the ways the failures of the Church (as well as those of the banks and the government) are to blame for the unfortunate condition of contemporary Ireland. However, he also uses this unflattering depiction to suggest that Ireland is beyond repair, that this scene of misery is effectively "what Ireland had become" (333). Though the nation's symbolic divorce from the Church—exemplified in the novel's final moments when Yates claims to want to "rip [his roman collar] off and throw it away" (335)—might be necessary given the damage the

institution has done in Ireland, the fact that this separation only provokes, for Boyne's protagonist, feelings of guilt, shame, and regret about having "wasted every moment of my life" as a priest and having exacerbated the need for such a separation suggests that this separation is anything but a panacea for society's ills (337). And by ending with the suggestion that Yates's acceptance of his responsibility for Irish society's decay does not negate the fact that, as his nephew notes, "Ireland is rotten. Rotten to the core" and that "you priests destroyed it" (316), Boyne ends his novel seemingly uncertain of what steps might actually stop this "rot" or undo the damage inflicted on Ireland by the Church. In fact, I would argue that in seeing nothing but a "country of drug addicts, losers, criminals, pedophiles, and incompetents" emerge in the wake of the CAC (333), Boyne, like Yates, seems sceptical of the possibility that this damage can be undone. Early in the text Yates claims that "the world as I had always known it and the faith that I had put in it were about to come to an end" (19), but by the end of *A History of Loneliness*, Boyne shows that this shift has not been positive. Indeed, by the novel's end, Yates's anxiety about "what would take [the] place" of his faith has been replaced by an anxiety that what has been lost might, in fact, never be restored (19).

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

In 1999, before issuing an official apology to victims of clerical abuse, former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern remarked that the treatment of children in many Church-run institutions across Ireland "was inhuman and degrading" (qtd. in "State"). More importantly, Ahern suggested that "we have never, as a society, dealt with these things" (qtd. in "State"). In their use of loser characters to illustrate Irish society's lingering

shame, regret, resignation, and uncertainty with regard to the CAC, both Doyle's *Smile* and Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* attest to the continued relevance of Ahern's concern. These works point to the ways in which Irish society's failures in dealing with the issue of clerical abuse are longstanding and continue to the present day. Not only do the novels' respective losers stand in for Ireland's culture of inaction and deference, they demonstrate the ways in which the public "outrage and incomprehension" that followed the revelations of clerical abuse in the 1990s have had no real productive effect on Irish society's ability or willingness to deal with the effects of this abuse (Keogh 139)—this despite the fact that, in legalizing such things as same-sex marriage and abortion, Ireland has moved away from the moral domination of the Church. Moreover, these losers epitomize the degree to which Irish society in the post-CAC era remains ambivalent about its complicity in the crimes of the clergy, and they help reveal the degree to which, insofar as it prolongs the suffering of abuse survivors, this ambivalence is akin to the moral failures these crimes typify. However, by using losers to illustrate the tremendous difficulties in working through the sociocultural traumas of Ireland's CAC, Doyle and Boyne do more than simply highlight the long-term damage caused by the crimes of the Irish Catholic Church. Indeed, in depicting the ongoing failures of Irish society in addressing its "national trauma," these novelists make a more significant point about how the roots of this trauma exist in Ireland's ideological, political, and cultural coupling with the Church. That is, in these novels, society's failures in coming to grips with the severity of the abuse crisis, and, more importantly, its uncertainties about how to atone for its complicity in this crisis, stand as consequences of the intertwined ideologies of Catholicism and Irishness. That the characters are ultimately unable to find redemption in

the face of their failures with regard to the scandal demonstrates, in short, the underlying challenges Ireland faces in the post-crisis era: namely, of trying to condemn crimes committed by an institution which “was merely a reflection of the society which spawned it and [which] allowed [it to have] almost unbridled [political] power for the best part of a century” (Fuller, Littleton, and Maher 8).

Overall, in deploying losers to explore the ongoing inadequacies of Ireland’s response to the legacies of clerical abuse, both Doyle and Boyne counter the “remedial” narratives of other works treating the scandal. The thrust of these novels clearly echoes Keenan’s point about the revelations of the crisis more generally: she notes that “it would be wrong . . . to think that, just because clerical child abuse has been identified and analyzed, the problems . . . are over” (“Sexual” 107-8). Although both texts portray the Irish public as aware of the problem of clerical abuse and increasingly detached from the institution that perpetrated these reprehensible offenses, the novelists use these depictions to suggest that there remains a general reluctance in acting on this recognition as well as significant ambiguity about what, if anything, this split actually accomplishes. Nonetheless, both Doyle and Boyne seem more interested in raising questions about how post-Catholic Ireland might go about making meaningful reparations for its past failures. And though their focus on their respective characters’ experiences of shame, regret, and passivity betrays little optimism about Irish society’s ability to make sense of its fraught relationship with the Church and with the legacies of the CAC, their emphasis on these experiences and their causes serves to uncover the obstacles that Irish society will need to overcome in order to begin to move past its regrettable national history of clerical abuse.

## Chapter Five

### Being Losers, Finding Alternatives in Paul McVeigh's *The Good Son* and Garbhan Downey's *Across the Line*

#### 5.1. Introduction

What we need is  
An alternative Ulster  
Grab it and change it, it's yours  
(Stiff Little Fingers 0:45-0:52)

BIG MANDY. What's wrong with Orla, like?  
TINA. She's such a dick.  
ERIN. Ya, she might be a dick. But she's *my* dick!  
CLARE. Actually, she's *our* dick!  
(“Episode Six” 22:17-22:37)

Just as Erin, Clare, Michelle, and James defiantly join their “dick” friend, Orla, as she performs an aerobics routine at the Our Lady Immaculate College talent show, oblivious to the sneers of her classmates and her humiliation in front of the whole school, the scene abruptly cuts to the Quinn family’s living room where a dismayed Ma Mary, Da Gerry, Aunt Sarah, and Granda Joe watch a televised report of a fatal bombing. As The Cranberries’ “Dreams” plays, the episode ends with alternating shots of the group of teenaged friends dancing enthusiastically, entirely indifferent to the mocking of the student audience, and shots of the adults gathered around the television, horrified as they listen to the details of “what is already being described as one of the worst atrocities of the Northern Irish conflict” (“Episode Six” 23:04-23:08).

This final scene of the first season of Channel 4’s popular comedy *Derry Girls* (2018) epitomizes an important way contemporary northern Irish culture has engaged

with its own Troubles.<sup>103</sup> Specifically, the series trivializes the conflict between Irish republicans and British loyalists (in the 1990s) by exploring the disparity between the region's serious political situation and the antics of its teenaged protagonists. More importantly, it uses this disparity to considerable comedic effect. Although the series neither downplays the seriousness of the political situation nor dismisses its tragic effects—as evidenced by the concluding scene, which Sarah Doran describes as “a gut-punch” that “almost jarred with the show’s light-hearted tone” (“Derry”)—its emphasis on representing conflict-era Northern Ireland using characters who are, as Shilpa Ganatra puts it, “more wrapped up in boy troubles than the Troubles” contrasts starkly with the austere tone and somber images of more typical depictions of the conflict (“Derry”).<sup>104</sup>

Given my purposes here, however, what is most interesting about *Derry Girls* is the way in which its rather snide comments on the Troubles and its depictions of the conflict as a nuisance, inconvenience, and essentially ridiculous social reality are bound up with its depiction of five adolescent losers and their equally feckless parents trying to

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<sup>103</sup> I use the term “the Troubles” and “the conflict” interchangeably to refer to the protracted ethnopolitical conflict that defined Northern Ireland from the late-1960s (ostensibly) until the signing of the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement (GFA) in 1998 rather than the revolutionary period preceding the founding of the Irish Free State. Also, as stated in Chapter One, I use “Northern Ireland” and “the North” to refer to the state formed after the partition of Ireland. However, I use “northern Irish” as a regional designation for things from or connected to the territory and sociocultural specificity of Northern Ireland without divorcing them from a broader Irish context and without assenting (through my use of terms) to a political state that a segment of the population does not recognize. That is, I use the uncapitalized “northern Irish”—rather than “Northern Irish,” “Irish,” or “British”—to denote the regional specificity of the material I am treating here but to do so without employing contentious political designations.

<sup>104</sup> Such somber and unsettling images are evident in recent films such as *Fifty Dead Men Walking* (2008), *Hunger* (2008), *Five Minutes of Heaven* (2009), and *'71* (2014), and clearly visible in the political murals adorning walls all over the country. Notably, none of these films are directed by citizens of Northern Ireland, which perhaps speaks to northern Irish society's continued reticence in fully engaging with its Troubles.

navigate the demands of school, family, and a notably divided community. For example, Erin Quinn's anger about being prohibited from wearing a denim jacket as part of her school uniform far outweighs the distress of having British soldiers board her school bus at an army checkpoint on the way to school. Likewise, Michelle's desire to establish a romantic relationship with a young member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) far exceeds any fear about getting caught crossing the border with him on the Twelfth of July. The clash between paramilitaries and state forces even leaves Aunt Sarah, one of *Derry Girls*' adult characters, feeling weary: when she learns that the Craigavon Bridge is closed as soldiers attempt to defuse a bomb, she claims, exasperated, that she is "not enjoying this bomb," but not because of the potential destruction it could cause ("Episode One" 3:02). Rather, the situation is "disgusting and disgraceful" because it means that Aunt Sarah will "not get over the bridge" and that she will miss her appointment at Tropicana, a tanning salon (3:05-3:12). In calling attention to the absurdity of the conflict and highlighting the banality of these characters' lives amidst the crossfire, these scenes undercut the grave, politically-charged nature of the Troubles and belittle the destructive ideologies sustaining it and lingering in its wake. And although *Derry Girls* is a television series, I want to suggest that other post-conflict works of fiction dealing with the Troubles share its subversive outlook and sarcastic take on the conflict and its aftermath. I want to explore, in short, the ways in which recent novels by northern Irish writers approach the conflict and its ongoing relevance in the region with the same essential objective as the series, an objective clearly laid-out by the sceptical and derisive Katya, a Ukrainian student from Chernobyl visiting Derry to escape the radiation:

CLARE: When you think about it, we've actually got a lot in common, 'cause we understand what it's like to be a young person from a troubled place.

KATYA: It is not the same. Chernobyl was terrible nuclear accident. You people like to fight each other, and, to be honest, no person really understands why.

ERIN: Well, there's actually a political element to it, Katya, and there's a religious element.

KATYA: But you're not two religions here; you're different flavours of same religion, no?

ERIN: Well . . . yes. But . . . it's a little bit more complicated than that, Katya!

KATYA: To me, it's stupid. ("Episode Four" 4:38-5:11)<sup>105</sup>

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Although many lauded the official "end" of the Troubles in 1998 as a triumph, the years following the ceasefires and the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement have been marked by an uneasiness stemming from what Sluka has called a "situation [of] 'not-war-not-peace'" (279).<sup>106</sup> Despite concerted attempts at bringing together the North's two

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<sup>105</sup> Although the Troubles are often described as a conflict between the North's Protestant and Catholic communities, the basis of the conflict is rooted far more in the British loyalist (or unionist) and Irish republican (or nationalist) ideologies of these respective communities. Though these religious differences are tied to the ethno-political identities and ideologies of each group, they do not form the basis of the conflict. However, given that the scholarship on the conflict as well as the popular discourse of the Troubles often conflates these designations and uses this binary to demarcate the North's major communities, any reference I make here to the Protestant and Catholic communities implies unionist and nationalist sympathies, respectively.

<sup>106</sup> Though the peace process has helped reduce sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, it has by no means eliminated it. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), for instance, has been a regular target of dissident paramilitaries (McAleese, Breen, Moore and Young). Likewise, riots have broken out over Belfast City Council's decision to curtail the number of days the Union Jack flies at City Hall (Melaugh). Perhaps most

main communities and at establishing a devolved power-sharing government (Long 16), widespread social espousals of “self-congratulatory expressions of successfully negotiated peace” (F. McCann 82)—narratives that “problematically . . . disengage from interrogating evident simmering tensions” and their basis in the region’s colonial history (F. McCann 82)<sup>107</sup>—have meant that sectarianism and “social and political polarization” remain (Fadem 15). Despite its “radical rebuilding and rebranding” since the GFA (Long 16), northern Irish society has, in short, fundamentally failed in cultivating a productive, peaceful, post-conflict modernity.<sup>108</sup> Where the major failures of the post-conflict North lie, however, is in the context of identity, and, specifically, in northern subjects’ inabilities to conceive of categories of identity rooted less in disparate allegiances to Britain or Ireland and instead in shared northern Irish experiences—forms of regional, even “postnationalist,” identity clearly marked by a complex history of ethno-political competition, but also rooted in what John Hume describes as “a unity in diversity” (“Europe” 48).<sup>109</sup> Certainly, the difficulties in generating such “alternate” subjectivities

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notably, the annual celebrations of the Twelfth of July have continued to foment unrest in the country.

<sup>107</sup> As Fadem claims, the (post)colonial tension at the core of northern Irish society’s post-conflict antipathies are unsurprising given that the “colonial discourse came to be enunciated and reified” through the conflict itself (17). The divisions that “play out with great intensity in the lives of most residents,” she claims, are due to the fact that “the region was excluded from the achievement of decolonization and stands estranged” (4).

<sup>108</sup> Although it has not proved an unmitigated success, the end of the conflict has not been uniformly negative for Northern Ireland. One of the most notable positive developments of the post-conflict era is the increase in tourism to Ireland’s north. For more on the connection between the conflict and tourism in Northern Ireland (and the problems therein), see articles by Simone-Charteris and Boyd, Dowler, McDowell.

<sup>109</sup> According to Hume, it is the comprehensive and intrinsic valuing of “regional and cultural diversity” that, in both the European and Irish contexts, might eliminate “one of the major causes of human conflict[:] the non-recognition, undervaluing, neglect and even elimination of the identity of the peoples” (“Europe” 48). In his articulation of the value of this kind of shared regional identity in the North specifically, he explains that

are unsurprising given both the significance, during the Troubles, of shared communal identities or values—those predicated, say, on loyalist siege mentalities or republican ideals of a united Ireland—and what McAlister, Scraton, and Haydon describe as the peace process’s neutralization or prohibition of these “strong cultural identities” and “previously accepted behaviours and/or responses” (306). As those most aligned with sectarian violence and, thus, those “most often [imagined] as representative[s] of Northern Ireland” during the conflict (Magennis 7), men have suffered a particularly strong “collective sense of loss” in the post-conflict era, according to these critics (McAlister, Scraton, and Haydon 306). The erasure of men’s roles as “protectors [and] defenders of space” in the wake of the peace process has, for example, been linked with the North’s rising rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide (306).<sup>110</sup> Nonetheless, since the end of the conflict, northern communities, broadly, have remained fixed to these sectarian identities, and their inability to imagine or adopt alternative modes of identification, such as those Hume and Kearney endorse, has meant that the contemporary idea of “reconciliation tends to be filtered through an ideological prism” and “reflects and reinforces existing structural social divisions” (Little 85).

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“notions of absolute and indivisible national sovereignty are now so inadequate that their promotion is destructive” (*New* 134-5), but suggests that overcoming these notions will take the “creation of multiple layers of identities” in which “there are no incompatibilities between identities [and] no superiority of one identity over another” (*New* 155). Richard Kearney shares this view in his work on “postnationalist Ireland.” He claims that “the beginnings of a solution” to the sociopolitical impasse created by the Troubles “may reside . . . in, first, a mutual acceptance of [the] historical misfortune” of the violent clash between rival Irish and British national identities, and “second, a mutual commitment to rethink the ‘totality of relations’ between these islands” (11).

<sup>110</sup> As Tomlinson argues, conflict-related suicides in the post-Troubles era are inevitable given that “in the period of peace, externalized expressions of the cultures of violence and authoritarianism have gradually subsided and to some extent violence has become internalized” (476).

In that it requires what Cash describes as “a concerted effort by internal actors and institutions within Northern Ireland . . . to shift away from the friend-enemy ideologies that dominated the colonial past,” the peace process and Northern society’s need to imagine alternative forms of identification are closely tied to “postcolonising” processes (388). They reflect, in other words, a confrontation with what During characterizes as a postcolonial “crisis of emptiness,” that is, “the urgent need for self-definition not only against [identities established by the] colonial past but also against international postmodernism” (371). Although the peace process and the task of formulating new forms of northern Irish subjectivity are largely tied to the delegitimization of sectarianism, as attempts to overcome, on the nationalist side, “the destruction of . . . modes of production, the de-privileging of [a] language and the mutilation of [a] culture,” and, on the unionist side, the loss of “strong ethical and ideological support” that occurs to “agents of [a] colonialism” that “has lost its legitimacy” (370), they bear the marks of the North’s colonial experiences. I am not suggesting that the conditions of Northern Ireland’s “urgent need to define” its identity are identical to those in decolonizing nations—in the post-conflict North, they result, again, from the proscription of violent ethnopolitical ideologies. Rather, I raise the parallels between them simply to emphasize the ways the North’s colonial history is clearly encoded within the social divisions that the region must grapple with as well as the ways in which the post-conflict North’s formulation of alternative identities necessarily reflects what Lloyd describes as the “transformation of a counter-hegemonic concept within an oppositional [framework] into a hegemonic concept” fitting a new national context (AS 3).

Within Northern Ireland's post-conflict (or postcolonial) appraisal of identity is a gendered undercurrent. As Magennis explains, not only are both "the intransigent political rhetoric of nations" and "the rhetoric of sectarian conflict . . . unashamedly masculine" (7-9); in the case of Northern Ireland, specifically, "the figureheads of the main political parties are [with few exceptions] men and those engaged in violence appear to be almost exclusively male" (9). With respect to the issue of sectarianism, Parsons similarly states that, in the North, "the competing ideologies of Republicanism and Loyalism reinforce specific representations of hegemonic masculinity" that "draw upon . . . honor, duty and bravery [and] stress the characteristics of courage, strength and . . . self-sacrifice" in order to "rationalize the use of violence [and] achieve ideological aims" (104-6). In the political context of the peace process and Northern Ireland's post-conflict present, Ward, likewise, claims that, despite a moderate rise in "female political participation" in the devolved government and increasing numbers of "grassroots women's organizations in the North [that] bring together . . . women" from across the region's different communities (264, 269), official "talks on the political future [are] all-male and confined to the [male-dominated] major parties" (264). This idea of the past and present Troubles-inflected North as an "armed patriarchy" (Harkin qtd. in Ward 280) that largely sustains the initial "exclusion of women" on which "Northern Ireland was founded" means, in other words, that the broader renegotiation of post-conflict identities largely plays-out, or fails to, in a notably masculine social realm (Sales 4). Though the novels I discuss below subtly allude to the ways women (and thus, communities broadly) are either directly or indirectly implicated in the "masculine" discourse of the Troubles, the fact remains that the post-conflict imperative of overcoming sectarian identifications

and consolidating forms of identity predicated on shared regional experiences, histories, and values is enacted, albeit inadequately (Ward 262), within a male-centred sociopolitical field mostly, but not always, by those most clearly aligned with the rigid narratives of aggression, violence, pride, and strength: men.<sup>111</sup>

Questions about what kinds of identities might fit the North's post-conflict present and, more importantly, how they might be distilled from the country's violent history dominate much of its contemporary cultural output, suggesting that the Troubles and its legacies are still top of mind.<sup>112</sup> Contemporary artworks such as Willie Doherty's *Unseen* (2013) or Paul Seawright's *Conflicting Account* (2009), and novels including Jason Johnson's *Woundlicker* (2005), Adrian McKinty's *In the Morning I'll be Gone* (2014), and Glenn Patterson's *That Which Was* (2004) and *Gull* (2016) remain popular and relevant in Northern Ireland, according to Fiona McCann, because they provide an arena in which society might develop "adequate modes of expression to deal with both the well-known and the untold stories of the Troubles and their rhizomatic consequences" (3). Likewise, she suggests that these contemporary texts are important in and for northern society because they do the work that "politicians and policy-makers" have

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<sup>111</sup> For a more comprehensive examination of the issue of violent masculinity in Northern Irish fiction and culture, see Bairner's "Masculinity, Violence and the Irish Peace Process;" Cahalan's *Double Visions: Women and Men in Modern and Contemporary Irish Fiction*; Farley's "In the Name of the Family: Masculinity and Fatherhood in Contemporary Northern Irish Film;" Hughes's "'How I Achieved This Trick': Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Irish Fiction;" Lysaght's "Dangerous Friends and Deadly Foes: Performances of Masculinity in the Divided City;" Magennis's *Sons of Ulster*.

<sup>112</sup> Of writers' interest in the conflict, Kennedy-Andrews holds, "such has been the impact of the political violence on society, culture and the imagination that it would be hard to think of another regional literature with such a widely shared focus or thematic interest" (7).

failed to complete: they actively engage “with history” and offer a “sustained questioning of the ideologies underpinning and propping up a Unionist state or those underpinning resistance to it” (4). And although McCann is right to note the importance of the “work” these texts do, what is especially notable about the recent northern Irish fiction I consider below is the way it goes about questioning these ideologies and the ways it attempts to wrest from the problematic residues of the conflict (i.e. sectarianism, eruptions of violence, political stalemates, etc.) an alternative northern Irish identity befitting the post-conflict era. In its representation of the realities and legacies of the Troubles, this fiction explores versions of identity tied to the specific sociocultural experience and history of the north, but versions that are untethered from the divisive political categories that instigated a civil conflict, identities, in short, rooted in “a sense of the region [that] could function as an underpass between religious and political divisions and subvert their effects” (J.W. Foster 1).

Although contemporary critics have certainly not ignored questions of identity in Northern Ireland—as early as 1993, Lloyd claimed that “the theme of identity saturates the discursive field” and that it has played a big role in “attempts to contain and interpret the Northern Irish conflict outside of colonial and class paradigms” (*AS* 3)—their work has varied in its ability to successfully account for recent cultural depictions of forms of identity reflecting what Lloyd, again, calls “more radical, if less predictable, political and cultural possibilities emerging in Ireland” (*AS* 3). Many works, though tacitly concerned with post-conflict questions or representations of identity, sidestep them, whether in their selection of “texts” or their approaches to them, and they favour analyses of the ways northern Irish culture navigates longstanding narratives of political retribution, injustice,

or emancipation.<sup>113</sup> As such, they overlook the ways certain works of fiction attempt to navigate the post-conflict crisis of identity by articulating forms of subjectivity which have subtly broken away from the fixed ethnopolitical divisions of the Troubles and yet, by virtue of being shaped by and responding to the specific sociopolitical terrain of the North, have retained a distinctive “northern” (i.e. regional) dimension. The works of Peter Mahon and Caroline Magennis, however, are exceptions to this. Though both make use of texts that pre-date the post-conflict period, these critics seek to more explicitly consider cultural depictions of the country’s crisis of identity without rooting their analyses to specific ethnopolitical categories or defaulting to what Mahon calls “the rhetoric of sameness,” a discourse “borne of a well-meaning desire . . . to find what the two conflicting communities in Northern Ireland have in common” that ignores the historical political differences between the North’s two main communities (3). Again, though both critics analyze older texts that are concerned with issues of northern identity,

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<sup>113</sup> In a recent book on the “particular tropes and styles” of contemporary northern works, Fadem emphasizes the importance of “spectre and scrim” and the “aesthetics of abstraction, difficulty, interruption, and fragmentation” to the “imaginative work” of the North’s novelists (1). Her focus remains primarily with the ways in which “the losses associated with partition and wider colonial history continue to haunt citizens of the North” (18), as well as how northern Irish texts make use of Beckettian tropes—a “peculiarly ghostly disposition of metaphor, figure, and image, along with provocative deployments of border areas and concomitant situations of incarceration or exile” (19)—to explore the “spectral embodiments of the split nation” (23). Long shares this concern with the ways the Troubles “haunt” contemporary art from the North, and he examines contemporary visual art that explores “those stray images, issues or stories that are now incompatible with official visions of the post-conflict society” but that “persist in *the shadows* of the new post-conflict landscapes” (5 ital. in original). Unlike Fadem and Long, Fiona McCann reads northern Irish writing using Rancière’s theories on politics and aesthetics as a way of showing their “potential to create dissensus or reinforce consensus” (5). She privileges a kind of radical dissensus which she sees as the antithesis of narratives that “short-circuit any purposeful engagement with recent history” in that it relies on “the open circulation of even those voices which are regularly silenced and which might be unpalatable” (214).

broadly, rather than post-conflict identity specifically, Mahon's work, for example, points to the ways "Troubles texts . . . put stale political positions, identities and labels into question by opening them up to dislocation and reinscription" (10-11). Likewise, Magennis's work goes some way in addressing "questions about what the novel can tell us about hegemonic and non-hegemonic discourses of Northern Ireland in the late twentieth century" (18), and, in particular, the ways in which "Northern Ireland's pluralistic identity [was] rendered in fiction," during a period in which the North's communities "were subject to radical change" (141). Moreover, Magennis helpfully ties her readings to the issue of gender, examining, specifically, how novels help "disrupt notions of a hegemonic Northern Irish masculinity, based on violent conflict and hyper-masculine sectarian rhetoric, as the only option available to Northern Irish men" (143). Although, in what follows, the issue of gender is more important to the discourses informing the post-conflict reassessment of identities than it is to the particular "versions" of northern Irish identity that the texts offer, I take up this point about fiction's ability to disrupt or question hegemonic identity in my discussion of two recent northern Irish novels. This issue comes into play, in particular, in my discussion of the texts' respective portrayals of forms of identity that are imbued with sociopolitical and ideological baggage and yet find expression beyond these restrictive categories.

In this chapter, I look at Paul McVeigh's *The Good Son* (2015) and Garbhan Downey's *Across the Line* (2012) and consider how they take up the unresolved issue of post-conflict subjectivity by critiquing the Troubles and undercutting the latent tribal narratives of pride and confidence that undergird the conflict to this day. I suggest that both novels use loser characters to mock the ethnopolitical basis of the conflict, and,

more importantly, to foreground the absurdity of the fact that sectarianism remains in the North, calcified by the geographical and ideological segregation of its communities. Unlike those I discussed in earlier chapters, McVeigh and Downey's losers are not simply representatives of society's failures. Rather, they are losers by virtue of the fact that they display a degree of humility or vulnerability, an openness to failure, and a willingness to cope with the humiliations and losses occasioned by this vulnerability.

The losers in these novels, I argue, have very specific aims: they trivialize the nature of the conflict and thus deride a society that continues to abide by historically divisive ideologies. Moreover, these losers offer the foundations for potential alternative identities to the politically-charged, typically masculine-inflected, subjectivities that have persisted in the North since before the onset of Troubles. After showing how, in *The Good Son*, McVeigh juxtaposes his young loser protagonist with characters more clearly defined along ethnopolitical lines and uses this juxtaposition to undermine the political narratives of pride and confidence that undergird the North's communal identities, I turn to Downey's *Across the Line* and show how the author subverts the residual sectarianism of the contemporary North by depicting the loserdom of former paramilitaries and by tying their humiliations to their preservation of tribal ideals. However, I argue that more than providing an acerbic commentary on the conflict and on society's struggle to define itself without resorting to sectarian categories, the losers of both texts provide a model for alternative post-conflict northern Irish identity that retains a regional specificity in that it is conditioned by the "northern" experience of ethnopolitical conflict but that begins to break free from what John Hewitt called the North's "whole sad stubborn conglomeration of nations" and disparate "national allegiances" (Hewitt). In portraying loserdom as a

subversive, if submissive, quality, both novelists position their losers outside the dominant political discourse of the Troubles and depict them as figures increasingly at odds with the destructive ideologies that contemporary society continues to uphold. And though both texts' interrogations of northern Irish identities are generally enacted by male characters and largely through the male-dominated conflict discourses of communal pride, strength, and defensiveness, the alternative foundations for northern Irish identity that both texts offer through their loser characters transcend strictly "masculine" categories. Instead they primarily emphasize the repudiation of sectarian divisions that shape northern society broadly and endorse an adjacent form of what Kearney describes as the regional transition "to a [postnationalist form of identity] which preserves what is valuable in the respective cultural memories of nationalism (Irish and British) while superseding them" (59). The alternatives these writers offer in their depictions of loserdom are not simply stand-ins for ideals of femininity or womanhood, despite the fact that the "weakness" or "submissiveness" that underpins these alternatives might be read as part of essentialist definitions of femininity. These texts are not, for instance, examples of how sectarian men become "house trained," to use David Trimble's infamous metaphor ("Dogged"). As we will see, both texts depict female characters not only adopting the same ideological hostilities that characterize notions of hegemonic masculinity in the North, but also carrying out literal and symbolic acts of violence in the name of these ideologies. As such, these texts use losers as embodiments of political apathy, submission, and vulnerability to comment on the past and present effects of sectarian ideologies and identifications on northern Irish society broadly, and to offer the

foundations for a reimagined post-conflict identity which, in its departure from these ideologies, applies to the North's politically rigid communities writ-large.

## 5.2. Subversive Difference and Submissive Power in Paul McVeigh's *The Good Son*

Discussing the role of humour in his debut novel, a *bildungsroman* set during the height of the Troubles, comedian-turned-novelist Paul McVeigh suggests that “humour is what carries the novel” because “Northern Irish humour is very harsh, it's very sharp and very well-developed” (J. Harvey).<sup>114</sup> “Humour was a weapon [in Northern Ireland],” he claims, and is, thus, well-suited to a novel about the “awful” realities of its conflict (J. Harvey). *The Good Son* is, indeed, a very funny work, and it uses humour to explore inherently serious subject-matter. However, what is most interesting about McVeigh's depiction of the conflict in *The Good Son* is the way in which he deploys this humour by way of his protagonist and narrator, 10-year-old Mickey Donnelly and the boy's “unique way of looking at the world” (J. Harvey). McVeigh's focus on both using his protagonist's humorous innocence as a way of countering the severity of Northern Ireland's political situation and highlighting the “absurdities” of the conflict is crucial to

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<sup>114</sup> In an influential essay, Eve Patten has argued that part of the “dramatic” change that occurred in the context of late-twentieth-century northern fiction was the emergence of writers “whose reconstructions of childhood experience effectively undercut the moral baggage and creative paralysis of their predecessors” (129). She explains that this literary turn towards the *bildungsroman* and “strategies such as perspectivism” are indicative of a “sustained constitutional and psychological identity crisis germane to any representations of a contemporary Northern Irish self-image” (129-30). Though Patten's essay pertains to novels dealing with the period before the GFA, her ideas about the value of the *bildungsroman* and of “perspectivist” techniques to issues of identity formation in the North are helpful in thinking not only about how difference and loserdom might work in terms of the North's renegotiation of post-conflict subjectivities, but also about how this difference as loserdom might work to expose what she sees as “redundant or pernicious aspects of [Northern] society's cultural conventions” (142).

the critique of *The Good Son*. However, equally important to the novel's commentary on the Troubles are the ways in which these insights on the absurdity of the conflict are bound up with McVeigh's exploration of his protagonist's fundamental difference within the complex terrain of identities and identifications in late-twentieth-century Belfast. In other words, McVeigh's comment on the absurdity of the conflict and the insufficiencies of sectarian ideals as the basis for contemporary conceptions of identity is rooted in his depiction of Mickey as a character essentially at odds with his community—his depiction, that is, of a loser in Ardoyne. Sarah Gilmartin and Lucy Caldwell have noted the significance of Mickey's difference “in such a closed and tight and suspicious community that doesn't tolerate any kind of presumed ‘deviance’ from the norm” (Caldwell), and of its danger in the context of “the sectarian world of . . . Belfast” in which “the notion of the ‘other’ as a threat or an evil is ingrained in the political sphere” and, of course, in tribal ideologies (Gilmartin). However, they fail to articulate the degree to which it is Mickey's difference—his loserdom—that props-up McVeigh's caustic evaluation of the Troubles and its legacies as well as his exploration of alternative modes of being in the post-conflict North. It is this “deviance” and “loserdom” that enable McVeigh to minimize the historically significant ideologies underpinning the North's sociopolitical situation and to “distil” from this situation a story “about humanity rather than Catholics hating Protestants or vice versa” (J. Harvey).

After briefly demonstrating the ways he portrays Mickey Donnelly's loserdom as part and parcel of his difference within the fictionalized community of Ardoyne in North Belfast, I show how McVeigh uses the boy's loserdom and difference to both critique the political ideologies of the conflict and to offer a vision of northern Irish identity that is

born out of the boy's specific experiences of the Troubles but unencumbered by sectarian hostilities and gratuitous violence. I want to suggest, more specifically, that in exploring the conflict from the perspective of a character who, though in the process of formulating his identity within a social context marked by the conflict discourses of pride and aggressiveness, remains a loser at odds with these discourses, a character who, through his loserdom, occupies a more depoliticized position in a hyper-political North, McVeigh is able to trivialize the Troubles and explore the region's historical animosities and destructive ideologies without validating them. By juxtaposing the loser Mickey and those characters, both men and women, who embody the North's tribal ideologies, *The Good Son* redirects and subverts the country's highly politicized rhetoric and critiques individual and communal subjectivities generated by sectarian politics. In this way, I ultimately argue, *The Good Son* positions Mickey's loserdom as an identity fitting the post-conflict era: though the novel's plot is limited to a nine-week period in the late-1970s, it engages with contemporary questions of post-conflict identity by explicitly challenging the value of sectarian ideologies within a politically unstable social setting and by positioning loserdom as a subjectivity which, though shaped by the northern experience of the conflict, exemplifies a productive alternative to those subjectivities conditioned by sectarianism.

Given the extent to which Mickey's loserdom in *The Good Son* is expressed as part of his difference from his family and those who populate Ardoyne, I want to quickly examine McVeigh's portrayal of Mickey's loserdom as difference before turning to the ways in which the author uses this loserdom as difference to critique the Troubles. Mickey's difference is manifest in two key ways in the text, one arguably more

superficial than the other, but both nonetheless emphasize the boy's loserdom in the community and establish the degree to which he is fundamentally at odds with those around him.

The first way in which Mickey is different is that he demonstrates a kind of aspiration or ambition that is incompatible with the stifling social realities of life in Ardoyne. Throughout the novel, for instance, Mickey describes his dreams of going to the United States. He claims early on that "I can't wait to get to America," and that "I'm learning the [American] names [of objects] from the telly so I don't look like a *dork* when I go" (16). The boy repeatedly points to his American clothing (e.g. his shirt which is "so cracker . . . cuz it has the American flag on it," or his "brill, super-duper, cool, Americano, baseball boots" [16]) and his familiarity with American cinema (e.g. he claims to be the "only person I've ever heard of who watches documentaries" and describes a particular fondness for "*Star Wars*, *Grease*, *The Sound of Music* . . . *Herbie Goes to Monte Carlo* [and] *The Wizard of Oz*" [31]) as examples of his uniqueness in Ardoyne, and of his desire to get to America where he will finally "find my people" (31).<sup>115</sup> However, as a mark of distinctiveness, Mickey's American aspirations are tied to his loserdom in Ardoyne. As he struts down the street in his American boots, for

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<sup>115</sup> On the issue of Mickey's aspirations to get to America, and, more importantly, his conflation of this desire with material objects (e.g. his t-shirt, boots, films, etc.), the novel, I think, makes a subtle point about the economic undercurrent of the peace process. As McLaughlin and Baker explain, those who championed peace in conflict-era Northern Ireland emphasized the inevitability of the so-called "peace dividend" and of a long-awaited "integration into the global free-market after years of . . . economic stagnation" (93). Though *The Good Son* does not offer any detailed exploration of the economic facet of the Troubles and peace process, Mickey's allusions to the novelty of his clothes, his TV, and his favourite American films reflect, I would suggest, northern society's desire during and after the Troubles for the "economic prosperity and [the] consumer nirvana" epitomized by countries like the United States (12).

example, a classmate named Ma's-a-Whore snidely tells him to "wise the bap . . . nobody plays baseball in Ireland" (28). When Mickey replies that "I'm goin' to America on my holidays and everybody plays it there," Ma's-a-Whore scoffs, "aye, right, America? I believe ye, thousands wouldn't" (28). Ma's-a-Whore is not the only character to mock Mickey's ambitions to go to America. Although he initially responds to his son's dreams to go to America by encouraging him to "think big" and to "do whatever it takes to get out of this . . . Hell," Mickey's own Da undermines these dreams by emphasizing their implausibility: he dismissively asks "how [Mickey is] going to get the money" to leave (72). The idea here is clearly that, to those around him, Mickey's are effectively pipe dreams, and his childish insistence on their feasibility is, or ought to be, embarrassing. In the narrative itself, these aspirations are depicted as being as real and as likely as the humorous, hyper-fantastic stories the boy tells himself, stories about being able to telepathically communicate with his young sister who, he claims, is actually his twin born "years [later] in some CIA super-genetic-test-tube experiment" (2), or about having the power of invisibility which enables him to "destroy the forces of Evil Fathers and Big Brothers" (80).<sup>116</sup> Although the innocent Mickey believes wholeheartedly in his ability to

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<sup>116</sup> *The Good Son's* recurring depictions of the significance of science-fiction, comic books, and other pulp genres to Mickey's sense of himself call to mind Patrick McCabe's use of comic book, gothic, science-fiction, and horror tropes in *The Butcher Boy*, a novel which, though not set in Northern Ireland, takes place in a border region, County Monaghan. Though both McVeigh and McCabe's novels have much in common, their shared allusions to pulp fiction and popular entertainment speaks not only to the "position of Ireland between English and American influences" in the 1960s and 1970s or to the difficulty in finding forms of expression that "can bear the weight of the serious social and cultural issues" they both raise (Cotti-Lowell 108), but also to the crisis of self-definition that their young Irish protagonists deal with. In both novels, pulp enables each character to situate himself in a "real-world environment [that] fails him" and cope with failed (or failing) Irish social institutions that leave "the young boy floundering within an incoherent, inadequate family and social life in which he has no hope of thriving" (96).

escape Belfast and go to America—just as he does in the fact that “I came here from . . . another planet” and “landed on Earth, in the River Lagan, where I was found [as a baby] and taken in by a poor family from Ardoyne” (183)—and although cultivating these aspirations is part of his self-fashioned identity, the apparent *naïveté* of the boy’s desire for a life beyond the confines of violent Ardoyne makes him a loser both in the novel and in the eyes of his community.

The second and more politically-significant way in which Mickey expresses his difference in Ardoyne is through his capacity for empathy, an ability that the majority of McVeigh’s other characters do not share. That is, Mickey differs from his community in that he shows glimpses of an ability to be humble and empathetic despite recognizing the political implications of such displays of “weakness” in a context defined by the “macho” sectarian ideologies of pride and strength. Whether in response to trivial, albeit hurtful, comments, more serious political injustices, or acts of insensitivity, Mickey consistently reveals a capacity for compassion that not only seems unavailable to the other characters, but is fundamentally at odds, again, with the aggressive, broadly masculine, discourses shaping life during the Troubles. When, for instance, Fartin’ Martin attempts to make Mickey laugh by describing a crude greeting—as he “pisses himself laughin’,” he claims that “ye walk up to somebody and say *you’re lookin’ well*, and when they smile, you say, *Who shat on you?*” (17)—the young narrator suggests that “I think that’s horrible, bein’ nasty to somebody” (17). And although this is a minor example of Mickey’s willingness to imagine the “horrible” effects of “bein’ nasty” to his neighbours (17), it is a notable one given that it represents a kind of violation of Mickey’s relationship with Fartin’ as well as a violation of the discourses of violence which, though destructive, enable a kind

of social cohesion in a divided society, especially between boys/men like Mickey and Fartin'. Only a few pages earlier, Mickey explicitly claims that he does not "want to fall out with Fartin' cuz he's my best friend . . . my only friend" (10), yet he subtly challenges the insensitivity, viciousness, and violence of his friend's remark and, by extension, the "hegemonic categories [of] aggression, violence and [even] militarization" that undergird their bond in a violent, divided North (Lehner 65). It is this kind of challenge that emphasizes the underlying empathy of Mickey's narrative and that begins to reveal the ways the character, as a loser, might offer an alternative to the destructive ideologies of the conflict.

In a much more serious scene depicting a girl being tarred and feathered, Mickey again reveals his ability to perceive cruelty where his neighbours cannot. Shortly after watching "a crowd of girls [gathered] at a lamppost" chanting "dir-ty bitch! . . . Brit-lovin' bitch! Dir-ty whore!" as they stand around "an older girl tied to the lamppost . . . covered in black stuff, like tarmac, with feathers stuck on her" treating her like "she's a traitor" (29), Mickey wonders how the girl will "get the tar out of her hair" and imagines that "she'll get put out of the district" (31). More importantly, he claims that, on his way home, he will go past the same area "to see if she's still there" and vows that "if there's no-one around I'll rescue her" (31). Rather than simply consenting that this "Brit-lover" ought to be punished for her political trespasses and her "collaboration" with what the nationalist community of Ardoyne views as an army of occupation, Mickey explains that "I don't think it's right . . . you can't help who you fall in love with" (31). Though he does not actually "rescue" the girl, the boy's empathy for her and his awareness of the excessive violence and indignity of this punishment conflicts with the communal view

that the girl ought to be humiliated for her politically-tinged improprieties. His intentions contradict narratives of territoriality and sociocultural segregation which, though typically enacted by men as “protectors [and] defenders of space” (McAlister, Scraton, and Haydon 306), are here enacted by a group of girls, demonstrating the communal nature of these problematic conflict discourses.<sup>117</sup> Though Mickey admits that he lives in a Catholic-nationalist area and flippantly claims that he “hates those bloody Prods” (17), this scene with the girls emphasizes that empathy remains possible even within this clearly hostile sectarian context and, arguably, that it is a quality that is not rigidly gendered even within the conflict-era society’s matrix of masculinity-as-violence.

Compared with Mickey’s sense of ambition, it is much easier to imagine how the boy’s empathetic tendencies are aligned with his loserdom. Given Ardoyne’s highly fraught sociopolitical context and the ways it is largely governed by the aforementioned discourses of strength, pride, territoriality, and violence, the novel shows that empathy is largely equated with weakness which is, in turn, a sign of failure and defeat. Though Mickey’s sense of empathy is not always aroused by explicitly political situations, it is, nonetheless, always suggestive of a weakness or vulnerability at odds with the conflict-era narratives of strength and power, and their associations with virility. For instance, after Ma’s-a-Whore calls him a “fruity boy” who should “run to [his] Mammy”—a term evocative of the generally homophobic views (epitomized by Ian Paisley’s 1977 “Save Ulster from Sodomy” campaign) of the Troubles-era North (Magennis 81), and

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<sup>117</sup> Without belabouring the point, this depiction of how women were involved in “all levels of the conflict” and not just in the context of “peace-making and non-violence” demonstrates the novel’s broader view of the “gendering” of sectarianism and signals that the alternative form of northern identity Mickey later demonstrates is not limited to notions of masculinity (Ashe 303).

indicative, again, of the strongly masculine cultural discourse of the conflict—the boy replies that “at least I *can* get my Mammy . . . cuz she’s not a whore that hangs round the Albert Clock” (34 ital. in original). In the scene, Mickey notes that his “worsen” response is provoked by the fact that “*fruity* is the worst thing you can say to a boy” and that any attack on one’s (heteronormative) strength demands that “you have to say the worst thing back. You have to win” (34-5). Though Mickey concedes that “I shouldn’t have said that” and, thus, betrays a degree of solicitude even for Ma’s-a-Whore (34), his rationale for choosing to respond in this way clearly harks to the ostensible powerlessness, weakness, and loss—typical characteristics of loserdom—that such empathy represents. The boy’s empathy, whether prompted directly by the Troubles or not, is intertwined with his loserdom by virtue of the discourse of competition and civil conflict that defines his community and the interactions that take place within it. The boy claims, again, that, in Ardoyne, “you have to win” (35), and if winning requires an aggressive, antagonising demeanour, then empathy, sensitivity, and vulnerability denote losing and, by extension, a kind of loserdom.

More than foregrounding Mickey’s innate difference from the other Ardoyne characters of *The Good Son*, McVeigh’s depiction of Mickey’s loserdom as difference serves to trivialize and critique the Troubles’ underlying ideological narratives and the perpetuation of civil conflict. That is, by depicting Mickey as a loser at the heart of a warring community, an anomaly within a politically rigid social context, McVeigh locates his protagonist largely outside of the discourse of conflict that defines life in this community and therefore both depoliticizes him and gives him a more objective view on this conflict. This is not to say that Mickey is not shaped by the ideologies of the conflict;

I have already alluded to a few ways the character is affected by the Ardoyne's sectarian dynamics. However, one of Mickey's distinctive traits in the text is that, as a result of his loserdom and difference, he remains comparatively unassimilated by the ideologies driving, for instance, the girls' tarring and feathering of the "Brit-lover," and is thus able to assess and, crucially, undermine them by highlighting their absurdity.

Throughout the novel, McVeigh explicitly addresses the realities of living during the Troubles, but, using Mickey's naïve and empathetic disposition, he consistently subverts the seriousness of these realities. Moreover, McVeigh uses these subversions to reveal the novel's unambiguous condemnation of the violence in Northern Ireland. For instance, when Mickey passingly alludes to the way his new dog Killer's box is "made out of wood from the burnt-out houses in Havana Street" (14), he offers no details about when or why the houses were destroyed, and therefore shows how he has normalized the destruction that occurs around him. More importantly, this comment shows how Mickey's childish fixation with his new dog enables him to empty acts of political violence—or its artefacts—of their power. Given his naïve captivation with his new pet, Mickey is far less focused on the fact that Catholic homes in his neighbourhood are threatened, even destroyed, by the loyalist community, and far more interested in the ways in which the rubble left from these burnt-out homes can be repurposed to house his dog.<sup>118</sup> His childish fixation with Killer is such that he entirely disregards the politicized provenance of the materials he uses as a dog house, which is to say nothing of the

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<sup>118</sup> Though Mickey claims the wood for Killer's box comes from Havana Street, the more famous instance of loyalists destroying Catholic homes occurred on Bombay Street and Kashmir Road in 1969. The Bombay Street Memorial is now a popular destination on political tours of Belfast.

underlying danger of living in Ardoyne. Likewise, when he claims that he does not frequently “knock about” with his best friend Fartin’ because the boy “lives at the other end of Ardoyne near the Prods and I’m not allowed up there cuz of the riots” (10), Mickey again flippantly alludes to a notable social effect of the Troubles—the segregation of Belfast’s ethnopolitical communities along geographic lines. However, rather than offering any explanation or assessment of the underlying causes of this divide, Mickey simply casts it as an inconvenience or annoyance. I have already mentioned that Mickey claims to “hate those bloody Prods,” but it is worth noting that he does so because “it means I’m not allowed up to play with Fartin’” (17). The region’s political divisions are a source of frustration for Mickey, nothing more. The boy’s strong affinity for his friend overshadows any innate sense of hatred of Protestants and enables him to de-politicize the basis for their separation and emphasize, instead, the weariness of the conflict. Using Mickey’s innocence and inability to understand the sociopolitical intricacies at work in North Belfast, McVeigh addresses, in these scenes, the complex social realities of the Troubles-era North without dignifying the sectarian ideologies shaping these realities and, by extension, the North’s hegemonic communal identities. The protagonist’s innocent, limited, and seemingly external view of the Troubles enables McVeigh, in short, to attend to the effects of the conflict without legitimizing their social power.

Using Mickey’s innocence, empathy, and ambition—again, those qualities which characterize the boy’s difference and loserdom—McVeigh also explicitly tackles and undermines the sectarian discourses of republicanism and loyalism. His novel is peppered with references to paramilitary rhetoric and propaganda, and, in most cases, these

references are humorously subverted by his protagonist. When, for instance, Mickey sees a PIRA poster of “a man’s face. Eyes starin’ at you, frownin’. A bodyless hand covers his mouth. *Loose Talk Costs Lives*, it says,” he describes the importance of “keep[ing] your mouth shut” in Ardoyne (17). However, the boy also suggests that, insofar as the soldier on the poster follows Mickey with his eyes, the image is like “the 3D Jesus picture [hanging] in Aunt Kathleen’s” (17). Though the poster’s message is stern, and though he understands its seriousness, Mickey undercuts its subject matter by comparing it to a tacky version of the Sacred Heart of Jesus hanging in his aunt’s home. The politically-weighty image becomes mundane, if not entirely ridiculous. The boy’s innocence and consequent inability to differentiate the sociopolitical fields in which these two images operate mean that the PIRA’s propaganda effectively becomes another Irish icon whose symbolism may be significant, but whose power is essentially nil.

Similar deflations of sectarianism occur in the scenes in which Mickey invokes loyalist and republican slogans. For instance, when he confronts the fact that he might be bullied at his new school because he is different and because others often perceive him as a loser, he asserts that “Mickey Donnelly will never be defeated. *No surrender!*” before quickly realizing his mistake (26 ital. in original). “Shit,” he claims, “that’s the Protestant saying” (26). Again here, McVeigh parodies the loyalist slogan, “no surrender,” by having his loser protagonist redirect it towards his insignificant anxieties about school. The loser not only severs the phrase from its loyalist context, but he empties it of its ideological value. In deploying the phrase to emphasize Mickey’s refusal to have his head put in a toilet simply because he is “different” from the other boys (26)—and, therefore, in having the reader laugh at it—McVeigh undermines its sectarian militancy, its political

weight, and its function as a vehicle of (sectarian) social cohesion. The phrase becomes absurd in this context, and its political leverage in the novel's fictional North becomes inconsequential. Though the character is a Catholic living in a fictionalized nationalist area of Belfast, Mickey also takes aim at republican slogans. After he is tricked into relinquishing a bag of candy to a neighbourhood bully, Briege McNally, the boy deploys a republican slogan to vent his frustration and highlight this injustice: he proclaims, "just you wait, Briege McNally. Just like it says on the gable wall—*Tiocfaidh ár lá. Our Day Will Come. Me and Wee Maggie's*" (99). And although Mickey's use of the phrase retains the sense of retribution and of triumph at the root of the political slogan, by using *tiocfaidh ár lá* in reference to Briege's petty intimidation, Mickey again subverts the republican sense of pride and assertiveness undergirding the phrase. His difference from the more politicized characters—characters such as Briege, whose father's affiliation with the PIRA and whose role as an aggressive bully align her, more than any other child in the text, with sectarian belligerence—as well as his loserdom within his hyper-politicized community lead Mickey to bastardize the phrase. This bastardization, in turn, exemplifies an unwitting defiance of republican ideologies. Together, these scenes epitomize the novel's bathetic representations of the incendiary and intransigent ideologies defining Troubles-era Northern Ireland. However, they also show that this bathos is contingent on the protagonist's loserdom given that it is a mark of difference from the more "normative" politicized characters who, in the context of conflict-era Belfast, are fully interpellated by these ideologies. These scenes, in short, encapsulate the novel's deflationary approach to the conflict, and, more importantly, signal the ease with which

robust sectarian ideologies succumb to even the slightest trivialization by losers who, by virtue of their deviation from sociopolitical norms, remain uninterpellated by them.

In his many allusions to the conflict and the North's competing communities, McVeigh eschews any exploration of the atrocities committed on one side by the other or the bleakness of living in such a segregated community. Instead, he uses these allusions as evidence of the fragility of sectarian identities and of the absurdity of society's continued embrace of ideologies that enable sociopolitical violence. And though these allusions contribute to the novel's humorous depiction of life in Belfast in the late-1970s, they also show the relevance of its critique to the contemporary era. By exploring the conflict from the perspective of a loser, who, by virtue of his loserdom, is never fully interpellated by the dominant sectarian ideologies of the period—who exists, again, at the fringes of the communities of the text's fictional Belfast—McVeigh is able to address the North's fraught history, but also the complex identity crisis of the post-conflict era. Obviously, McVeigh's representation of the conflict never explicitly harks to Northern Ireland's contemporary sociopolitical situation, but, by exploring the Troubles from the perspective of a character who is both touched by the conflict and yet remains largely independent of the "war," McVeigh hints at the degree to which the conflict continues to affect a society twenty years removed from the GFA and the height of the violence. Using a character who is both a part of and apart from the conflict, McVeigh points, in short, to the way the conflict remains relevant in the contemporary era. I want to turn now to my final point about *The Good Son*, which is that Mickey's loserdom, in that it serves to trivialize sectarian discourses and highlight the relevance of these discourses to a contemporary society that imagines itself divorced from its violent past, not only

exemplifies an alternative identity in the world of the novel but, in doing so, also lays the groundwork for a truly post-conflict northern Irish identity.

One of the main ways in which McVeigh uses Mickey's loserdom to critique the violent political subjectivities of most other characters—again, male and female characters—is by depicting it as a response to the “hardness” of Ardoyne. And though McVeigh's juxtaposition of Mickey's loserdom and the community's “hardness” is clearly an offshoot of his earlier exploration of the boy's difference in conflict-era Ardoyne, it also enables the author to point to the contemporary relevance of this juxtaposition and critique, and to the degree to which the “alternative” subjectivity offered by loserdom applies to more than just “hard men;” it applies to a “hard” society, broadly. McVeigh's comparison of loserdom and “hardness” engages with the idea that the contemporary North requires what Lehner calls “a switch from the formerly hegemonic retributive model of the ‘hard-man’ to a more sensible, restorative male subjectivity” (67). Though it should neither be interpreted as a kind of pacifism nor as a kind of “pseudo-feminine” identity given that the novel's female characters share the qualities of the problematic “male subjectivities” Lehner describes, Mickey's loserdom exists alongside the other characters' violent or “retributive” identities. As such, it is a kind of antithesis or antidote to these identities and to the toughness and obduracy of tribal ideologies past and present.

Although the notion of the “hard man” does not refer to a specific person and rather functions as a way of describing figures who exhibit certain qualities, McVeigh makes clear in the novel that Mickey's loserdom is inherently at odds with this “hardness.” For instance, he shows that unlike the “hard men” in Mickey's class—those

who “do bad at school and beat the shite out of everybody that’s got a brain cell” and who shoot “pure hatred” at Mickey while drinking milk that they “must’ve nicked . . . that’s the kind of bad thing [they do]” (6-7)—Mickey is both willing to take risks at school and open to the humiliation that arises from taking such risks. In an early scene, Mickey claims that “I’m gonna write something” for an informal, in-class competition that involves “singin’ and stories” and things “everybody hates” (5). However, he claims that “I’ll have to hide [this participation] from the Hard Men who would love to kill me cuz I’m smart and not hard” (5). Though it is subtle, McVeigh’s point here is that being “hard” and being a loser are antithetical because of the way in which the power of “hardness” lies in its imperviousness to failure, weakness, and humiliation. An exercise, such as the in-class writing contest, that demands a readiness to “get too excited about things” or, in this case, to write poetry about “mountains and the sea and somethin’ about *beauty*” is at odds with hardness, which is aligned with stupidity, pride, and strength (6 ital. in original). Mickey explains that weakness or fragility—exemplified here by an appreciation for beauty—is something “to hide from the Hard Men” (6); these are potentially humiliating qualities and are things that can get you “murdered” by the hard men (5).

Although Mickey does not connect the hard men’s behaviour with the political realities of the Troubles in this rather inconsequential early scene, the “hardness” they embody is indeed emblematic of the politically-charged subjectivities produced by life in Troubles-era Ardoyne. Insofar as it is indicative of characters’ “pure hatred” and their tendencies to resort to violence (7), this “hardness” can be read as a form of sectarian (masculine) identity: as Magennis, again, explains, “Republicanism and Loyalism

mutually reinforce a hyper-masculine identity despite their ideological differences,” but this identity is always “suitable . . . for violent conflict” (57-8). When Mickey encounters hard men as he wanders through Ardoyne later in the novel, he explicitly aligns “hardness” with sectarianism. As the young boy hears a group of hard men “gettin’ closer” (*GS* 73), he notes, “you’re supposed to say *Right* and nod up . . . If you don’t, you could be a Prod, so they’ll beat you up” (73). The boys’ “hardness” is equated here with republican protectiveness: to be “hard” is to be suspicious of strangers and hostile towards Protestant interlopers. And although Mickey articulates his difference from the hard men when he claims that “I don’t sound like them. And my nod feels wrong. And boys always notice and hate me” (73), what is especially notable about the scene is that it highlights the way McVeigh uses loserdom to critique this political “hardness” and its sectarian undertones while offering loserdom as an alternative to it. In the scene, Mickey responds to this distinctive Ardoyne hardness by resorting to the qualities that make him a loser and, in doing so, undercuts the value of “hardness.” Rather than embracing the community’s violent ideologies and facing the hard men by feigning “hardness” himself, Mickey responds to the threat of violence in the streets of Belfast by doubling-down and playing-up his weakness. He “put[s] on a limp” in front of the hard men because, he claims, “who would beat up a cripple” (73). This pathetic and cowardly gesture succeeds in helping Mickey avoid a “boot up the arse” (73), but it does so by accentuating the boy’s weakness and vulnerability. The boy’s response fits explicitly with what Magennis describes as an “adoption of self-conscious . . . role-playing” and recourse to “demonstrable vulnerability” that helps mark characters “out against traditional modes of male identity in Northern Ireland” (58). Moreover, given the way Mickey avoids violence

here, his weakness, vulnerability, or diffidence can be read as inherently productive, as “an ‘opting out’ of traditional Northern Irish identity based on [violent] sectarian values” (Magennis 58). The text offers loserdom in this scene as both a response and challenge to what Patten describes as the “redundant or pernicious aspects” of a society at war (142). The boy’s submissiveness and his embrace of defeat, humiliation, or “loss” of face effectively remove him from the (masculine) narrative of sectarian antipathy that looms over this encounter with the hard men and that defines life in Ardoyne. Put simply, Mickey’s embrace of loserdom not only prevents violence, but, as such, pushes against the sectarianism at the core of Northern society. That loserdom is a viable alternative to sectarian ideologies or identities, the novel shows, is due both to the fact that it is antithetical to them, and to the fact that it proves a productive response to the distinct concerns and experiences of sectarian conflict.

The scene from *The Good Son* that most clearly illustrates the way Mickey embodies a kind of alternative to subjectivities shaped by tribalism and ethnic pride occurs near the end when the boy actually faces a PIRA soldier. In this scene, Mickey epitomizes this alternative precisely by responding to this conflict-situation by welcoming his humiliation and his shame, by opening himself up to a “loss” at the hands of a representative of radical sectarianism. McVeigh reiterates, here, not only how Mickey’s ability to cope with humiliation define him, but, more importantly, how the boy’s readiness to accept his loserdom runs counter to both (masculine) ideals of paramilitary strength, and broader ethnopolitical identities born out of the conflict.

As an unidentified PIRA soldier, Briege McNally’s mother, and Briege herself corner Mickey in a garage and reprimand him for “talkin’ out of turn” about Briege’s

father, “a man who has fought hard for his country and who’s sittin’ in jail for it” (196-7), Mickey initially attempts to avoid the situation by playing-up his weakness—the same strategy he uses with the hard men in the streets. As the soldier demands that the boy tell him his name, Mickey claims, “I could faint . . . I’d be good at it” (195), and, as such, indicates that submission is the answer to the hard man’s threat of violence. Submission is, the novel shows elsewhere, the antithesis of the pride and strength at the heart of the soldier’s role. And though the soldier’s constant pressure forces Mickey to concede that there will be no “acting” the loser in this scene, and that the only way of getting through the situation is to “look down at my feet [and] wait for this to be over” (196), the boy’s very acceptance of his humiliating punishment has the same disarming function. That is, in simply enduring the soldier’s scolding and agreeing to “keep [his] mouth shut in the future” (197), Mickey avoids “a community beatin’” (197). By submitting, the boy negates the need for violence and, thus, undercuts the value of violence as a means of political and communal power, the very thing that undergirds the man’s role as a PIRA soldier.

In a subtle way, Mickey’s submissiveness and weakness enable him to defuse the situation and maintain a subversive form of power within it. Though he is on the receiving end of the soldier’s anger, his earlier claim that “I always thought I’d be brilliant if I was ever interrogated. That I could be a hero” proves to be somewhat accurate (197). His loser-responses to the tense confrontation and his ability to “survive” the humiliating experience enable him to be this hero. Although he is chastised for “actin’ the big lad” (196), and although he feels that Briega has “won me. Forever” (200), by accepting his humiliation and conceding defeat, Mickey not only avoids “anymore

trouble” but also emerges relatively unscathed, something that cannot be said for the vindictive Mrs. McNally, who, like her daughter, is closely aligned in the novel with paramilitary subjectivity by virtue of her uncritical aggression and hostility. As a result of her unfulfilled desire for violent retribution against Mickey, his family, and those who speak against her husband and his paramilitary duties—the man “is in jail for robbin’ that factory cuz *he was sent there by the Irish Republican Army*” (197 emphasis mine)—leaves the scene irate, “ragin’ [and] stab[bing] her finger at Mickey” (197). By reaffirming his loserdom, embracing his humiliation, and forgoing any kind of active resistance to the soldier’s questions or provocations, Mickey effectively responds to a situation stemming from the North’s political conflict while resisting integration into its hegemonic discourses—those of violent sectarianism, paramilitary vigilantism, etc. Though he refuses “to question a male figurehead” and, therefore, “to question an ideology of struggle or resistance” (Magnnis10-1), Mickey nonetheless disengages entirely from the heated politicized exchange by simply conceding to the humiliation. Put another way, Mickey’s loserdom enables him to maintain a subjectivity that exists amidst the North’s political realities and discourses but remains excluded from them. In the scene, Mickey is “hailed” by Briege, her mother, and the republican soldier, but resists interpellation into their sectarian ideology and authority: “Do you hear me talkin’ to you?” the soldier yells at Mickey, a question to which the meek boy “say[s] nothing,” resulting in “a long silence” (197). His weakness, vulnerability, and loserdom render him incompatible with the sectarian ideologies and identities based in pride and resoluteness that this group of characters represents, and his unassertive responses to these ideologies effectively empty them of their power.

Ultimately, the “different” subject position Mickey holds in both the scene and the novel is disruptive: it delegitimizes the effects of paramilitary authority and the violent expression of sectarian ideologies. Mickey’s response to the pressure exerted by the soldier and the underlying ideologies sanctioning the sectarian administration of Ardoyne shows the instability of this authority. However, this response also enables the boy to maintain a form of subversive, if submissive, agency within this sociopolitical context and amidst these tribal ideologies. In that it is conditioned by and yet resistant to the political realities of Ardoyne, it is this subversive subjectivity that the text offers as a viable alternative to those based in typically-masculine but in fact communal ideologies of political violence and intransigence—those of the soldier, Briege, Briege’s Ma, the hard men, the girls at the lamppost, and Ardoyne broadly. And though the novel ends well before the Troubles do, the fact that Mickey carves out such an identity from both his experience of the northern conflict, and of the political ideologies, identities, and allegiances around him precisely by recognizing their puerility and futility suggests that this kind of identity might also be developed in the post-conflict period.

### **5.3. Sectarian Soccer and Disputing Divisions in Garbhan Downey’s *Across the Line***

Obviously, as my discussion of the “hard men,” power, pride, and aggression in *The Good Son* shows, the issue of violence is closely aligned with ideas of hegemonic masculinity but extends beyond the “male” social realm. It applies, in other words, to the North’s sectarian communities broadly, and it illustrates the degree to which, in the context of the Troubles and the post-conflict era, those communities at the heart of the conflict must, in their attempts to formulate productive post-conflict identities, confront

their responsibility for and participation in ethno-political violence. The novel points, that is, to the ways that *communities*, not just the ostensibly courageous and patriotic freedom fighters who constituted the paramilitaries, were involved in the conflict and responsible for its ongoing sociocultural ramifications.

However, as I have already mentioned, despite this broader communal relevance of often “masculine” discourses of sectarianism, much recent fiction dealing with the legacies of the Troubles indeed uses men to critique society’s ethno-political divisions and the sectarian identities stemming from them given that men have typically had “more visible roles in paramilitary violence” and are perhaps the most potent symbol of the Troubles (Ashe 303). Fiction’s conflation of masculinity and unhelpfully anachronistic violent sectarian identities is, again, in line with social and cultural criticism dealing, in particular, with the changing roles of paramilitary masculinity in Northern Ireland. Bairner, for instance, describes an important post-conflict social concern about how, “without the paramilitaries as proxy warriors, it is likely that the violence of those who previously lived their lives vicariously in the semi-detached company of political violence will be forced to look for other outlets for their macho kicks,” and how “inevitably they will be joined in this pursuit by men who have been more actively involved in the political conflict” (“Masculinity” 132). Likewise, Magennis claims that “after the [GFA] there was much consternation over what would become of Northern Ireland once those who were incarcerated were released” (67). Though these comments clearly fit into my remarks about the delegitimization of sectarian identities in the post-conflict era, they call attention to significant post-conflict anxieties about how violent sectarian identities, especially those of former members of the North’s paramilitaries and

their supporters, might be overcome, and how the North's (formerly) warring communities might go about reconfiguring the ideals that shape their identities in the post-conflict era.

It is precisely these questions about the place of former paramilitaries and their antagonistic relationships in the post-conflict North that Garbhan Downey's *Across the Line* explores. The humorous pseudo-action-thriller deals with the consequences of a soccer wager by two former paramilitary leaders in and around Derry—or Londonderry—in the post-conflict era. And though it does not directly engage with the height of the Troubles, Downey's novel explores its sociopolitical legacies and mocks the belligerents of the conflict, their political aims, and the means by which they achieved them. In its depiction of a volatile contest between former republican gang leader, Harry Hurley, and of his loyalist counterpart, Vic McCormick—a contest over the outcome of the All-Ireland Soccer Cup which leads to the involvement of British and Irish governments, to murdered civilians, and to attempts to re-draw the North's border—*Across the Line* parodies the conflict and ridicules the region's enduring ethnopolitical tensions.

Given that it deploys several of “the usual ingredients of the popular thriller: rollercoaster action, labyrinthine plotting, car chases, gun battles, throbbing menace . . . cliff-hanging . . . bloody murder, abduction, blackmail” (Kennedy-Andrews 184), *Across the Line* can easily be read within the framework of what J. Bowyer Bell has termed “Troubles trash” (Bell 22).<sup>119</sup> As a form of popular fiction, “Troubles trash” has,

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<sup>119</sup> Bell defines “Troubles trash” as modern thrillers “composed to entertain rather than enlighten,” which selectively portray “gunmen” and the “Irish troubles” as a means of

according to Kennedy-Andrews, “had a much greater influence than ‘serious’ literature in shaping public perceptions . . . of the Northern Irish conflict,” but has, as a result of “its tendency towards cliché and stereotype,” also “shaped, reinforced and given wide circulation to unhelpfully simplified ideas and images of the . . . conflict” (41). In spite of, or perhaps as a result of, its popularity, this genre’s preference for simplification and stereotypes, as McGuire puts it, has effectively “served to disable and obscure readers’ attempts to grapple with the complexity of the Northern Irish situation,” and, as such, stands in stark contrast to other, more “serious” forms of literature, namely poetry, which seek “to look at the Troubles square in the eye” (2). Since the end of the conflict though, “Troubles trash” has remained an important part of Northern Ireland’s literary output, at least in part, McGuire states, because of this work’s interest in “imaginatively reconstructing the past in order to realise a sense of moral justice and social restoration in the present,” or, more specifically, because of its ability to show “the ways in which fantasies of competence and control . . . remain a crucial part of the social, political and cultural DNA of Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the Troubles” (3). And although *Across the Line* might be read as an example of this post-conflict “trash,” it is, like thrillers by Adrian McKinty and, most notably, Colin Bateman, open to “new discursive spaces in which [the North] is reconceptualised” (McGuire 9). There is, in short, more to Downey’s novel than to those examples of Troubles trash Bell describes.<sup>120</sup>

Downey’s novel, which makes considerable use of dark humour in its dialogue-heavy narrative, mirrors, for example, what Kennedy-Andrews calls Bateman’s

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arriving at the conventional moral that “violence corrupts both the cause and the man” and never “pay[s] decent wages in the coins of political power” (22).

<sup>120</sup> For a more thorough examination of such “trashy” novels, see Magee.

“carnivalistic overthrow of dominant Troubles language and discourse” (184), through its “comic-strip naming . . . grotesque caricature and wild-eyed action, its blurring of the line between the comic and the macabre, its sudden switchings of languages and voices” and its decentering of “authoritative systems of thought” (188). Like Bateman’s novels, *Across the Line* “undermine[s] any notion that the Troubles are a staging ground for a grandiose confrontation between the forces of good and evil, or the competing ideologies of republicanism and loyalism,” and it accomplishes this subversion by depicting terrorists as “the very opposite of the patriotic freedom fighters enthroned within the discourse of physical-force nationalism” (McGuire 10). In other words, like Bateman’s, many of Downey’s “men of violence” are “far from a disciplined and elite force,” and, rather, constitute “a collection of ‘potatoes,’” losers engaged in “a series of half-planned and poorly executed acts of barbarity” (McGuire 10). Put simply, though *Across the Line* is not the same kind of “crime novel” as, say, *Fire and Brimstone* (2013) or *The Dead Pass* (2014), it treats the Troubles in a similar way: Downey shares with Bateman both an interest in the subversive potential of “Troubles trash” and a focus on deploying losers to both mock the conflict and its lingering sociopolitical effects and to imagine “the inauguration of a new, more rational, tolerant, less atavistic society” (Kennedy-Andrews 188).

I want to turn here to the ways in which *Across the Line* mocks the preservation of politicized identities in Northern Ireland as well as the ways in which sectarian rivalries continue to define life in the North years after the ceasefires. More specifically, I want to argue that in his depiction of the All-Ireland Soccer Cup as a parody of the Troubles, Downey not only shows how sectarianism continues to shape identities and communal

dynamics in the North, but also demonstrates how absurd the perpetuation of these ideologies and identities is in the post-conflict period. After showing how the soccer tournament acts as a sort of stand-in for the conflict in that it not only enables the loser characters—especially those men associated with paramilitary groups—to indulge their former tribal antipathies but also wreaks havoc across the British Isles, I suggest that the humiliations that ultimately follow from the losers’ antics surrounding the tournament enable Downey to subvert narratives of personal or communal resoluteness and of sectarian competition that define his fictional Northern characters. I show, that is, the ways in which Downey uses the tournament and the events surrounding it to expose the connections between sectarian hostility and loserdom and, in turn, uses this connection to undermine sectarian ideologies and their violent manifestations. However, in addition to using the intersections between certain characters’ failures and their violent sectarian tendencies to deflate Northern Ireland’s lingering tribalism, Downey also offers certain loser characters as models of a productive post-conflict identity. I ultimately want to show that in his depiction of his two protagonists’ increasing willingness to put aside their personal feuds and to acknowledge their vulnerability and express a degree of humility—to be losers in a similar way as McVeigh’s Mickey—Downey positions loserdom as a kind of redemptive identity. In highlighting the degree to which concession and submission prove productive for figures defined by their paramilitary pasts, Downey offers the basis for a form of northern Irish identity that is derived from but free of the region’s atavistic divisions.

From the outset, Downey foregrounds the political undertones of the All-Ireland Soccer Cup (AISC) and he shows how sectarianism characterizes life in his present-day

fictionalized North by tying the novel's main narrative trajectory to the tournament. In the prologue, for example, Downey introduces the AISC as an issue of significant concern for the British Prime Minister. When the PM first learns from his Home Secretary, a man who "served as an intelligence officer with the army in the North" during the Troubles (*AL* 9), about the fact that two "former paramilitaries [are] thinking of entering teams" in the otherwise innocuous tournament (8), he instantly recognizes the threat the contest poses to the stability of the entire region. He notes, "we've spent eight hundred years trying to escape their lunacy, I'm damned if they're going to drag us into messes that they can't legitimately pin on us," and he expresses a deep dismay about the fact that "the Irish would . . . find a way to make [the tournament] his business. They were masters at it" (9). Likewise, in a footnote about soccer leagues' odd nomenclature and the complex ways in which professional soccer is organized on the island of Ireland, Downey again draws an explicit connection between the sport and politics—in this case, legislative configurations. The narrator suggests that "the structures for competitive soccer in Ireland are only marginally less confusing than the parliamentary ones" (15). Though it is subtle, this note, like the prologue, foregrounds the political weight of the AISC before any matches are played, and it hints at the inevitable national allegiances undergirding a contest set up by a "group of bridge-builders" (15). Like the PM's words in the prologue, this comparison shows the ways the AISC is an arena of political uncertainty and confusion, and as an event that clearly jeopardizes the island's geopolitical stability. Though they simply frame the plot, these early moments establish the stakes of the tournament and, more generally, foreground the ways the AISC functions in the narrative as a parodic stand-in for the Troubles writ-large.

In addition to these subtle allusions to the connections between the AISC and both British and Irish politics, Downey explicitly parodies the conflict depicting the AISC as an event with significant political implications. Indeed, the action of Downey's novel and its critique of sectarian identifications and political divisions in the post-conflict North both hinge on the political pantomime played out through the tournament itself. There is no better example of the novel's scathing depiction of the legacies of the Troubles than in its portrayal of the absurd campaign for re-drawing the North's border with the Republic, a campaign stemming directly from Harry Hurley's participation in the AISC. Although, as I will later show, Downey uses the AISC to mock the country's sectarian ideologies, it is in his portrayal of the renewed border dispute that he uses the AISC to satirize the Troubles and trivialize the North's unresolved sectarian tensions.

Facing disqualification from the AISC after mistakenly registering his soccer club, whose headquarters are located in Muff, Co. Donegal, using a form pertaining to Northern Ireland, former republican paramilitary, Harry Hurley, is forced to renounce his republican ideals and "demand that Muff village . . . be returned to its rightful jurisdiction: that is, within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" so that his team can remain in the tournament (82). Though he expects the legal proceedings relating to this demand to stall and anticipates winning the AISC before the small border town is "returned" to Britain—something his nephew claims needs to happen lest Harry become "the first republican to hand back land since Michael Collins" (83)—Harry's demands provoke a diplomatic crisis that enables Downey to humorously deride the emancipatory zeal of Irish nationalism and the patriotic myopia of British unionism. Indeed, Downey depicts the entire dispute over whether to redraw the Irish border or,

more precisely, who should be responsible for its renegotiation, not as some heroic clash between brave Irish revolutionaries and representatives of the North's British colonial administrators, but as a way for British and Irish politicians, and republicans and loyalists to irritate their enemies. While debating the motion for a referendum on the border issue at the High Court, for instance, the leader of the UUP and Lord Justice "No Holds" Bard attempt to dictate the outcome of the issue by rendering "illegal the deferral of any decision on the border caused by procrastination on the parts of the London and Dublin parliaments" (AL 134), but do so primarily as a means of thwarting Harry's attempt "to redraw the country so he can win a football bet" (135). Likewise, during negotiations over the border, Harry and his lawyer, "Letemout" Lou Johnston, demand that Carricktober be given "back to the Republic in exchange for Muff" simply to aggravate the British PM and the Taoiseach, and to ensure that these government officials will "waste six weeks making sure Harry [wins] his football bet" (90). All in all, the AISC and the border issue it creates enable the characters to undermine each other's power and to publicly humiliate one another. And although Downey depicts this attempt to restore part of the Republic to Britain as farcical, and even portrays his characters as aware of its ridiculousness, this fictional renegotiation of the border and the power imbalance it creates serves to trivialize both the lingering tensions over the reunification of Ireland (especially between hardline or dissident republican and loyalist groups), and, more specifically, the sociocultural scars left by both the political and paramilitary campaigns aimed at redefining state boundaries. Certainly, Downey does not discount the gravity of these campaigns, but he does emphasize the absurdity of retaining sectarian aspirations in the post-conflict era. In showing the sociopolitical chaos precipitated by this border issue,

Downey points to the unresolved nature of the conflict while undermining the value of preserving the divisive ideologies and personal vendettas that led to thirty years of violence.

In addition to using the AISC and the border questions that it raises to mock the conflict and its sociopolitical legacies in the North, Downey also uses the tournament to parody the Troubles by depicting it as a vehicle through which former sectarian adversaries and their “gangs” can settle old scores and antagonize each other in an ostensibly socially-sanctioned, “non-sectarian” way. The AISC mirrors the Troubles insofar as it permits former adversaries to clash but do so in a way that is, on the surface, “de-politicized,” or at least not explicitly “sectarian,” and so, it re-inscribes ethnopolitical divisions within a distinctly post-conflict North. After the draw for the first round of the tournament, for instance, the loyalist “Switchblade” Vic McCormick learns that his team, Londonderry Legion, is slated to play the Carrick Rovers, a team from Carricktober, Co. Armagh (40). Though Vic is initially pleased with this draw, his daughter, Gigi, quickly reminds him that Carricktober is actually an “independent republican village” where Vic “tried to lynch [the] mayor” during the conflict (40). Similarly, when Harry learns that Vic has recruited his players from Celtic F.C., a real soccer club closely aligned with the Irish republican community, he tries to have the team disqualified given that “the rules clearly state . . . that ‘in the spirit of the new equality legislation, any team entered in the competition must be representative of the religious demographic of their area’” (50).<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Both located in Glasgow, Celtic F.C. and Rangers F.C. have had a long and bitter rivalry—together the clubs make up the “Old Firm.” Supporters of the two clubs are broadly divided along ethnopolitical lines. As Bradley explains, Celtic “provides the platform on which many Catholics relate to their ethnic-religious identity and the community to which they belong” (Bradley). For more on the link between ethnopolitical

As the Legion is located in “darkest Drumalley,” a Protestant stronghold, and Celtic is “fifty percent Catholic at least” (50), Harry claims the team should not be allowed to compete. In both scenes, sectarian hostilities and ethnic divisions enter into the otherwise “apolitical” soccer competition and re-frame it as a contest with strong ethno-political elements. The AISC proves an opportunity, again, for former paramilitary gangs to resume their campaigns, and, more simply, to antagonize the other side. As a police officer succinctly puts it following an investigation into Vic’s involvement in a robbery against the Carricktober Rovers, “the security services are extremely concerned that criminal gangs might use the All-Ireland Challenge Cup matches as a cover for further [crimes]” (74), and it is precisely this “cover” that the AISC represents in the text.

Although, as I will show, Harry and Vic are the text’s most obvious examples of sectarian adversaries intent on antagonizing each other, they are by no means the only ones who illustrate the sectarian tensions of life in the North. Indeed, in his portrayal of the decidedly more minor, though symbolically important, PSNI officers Audrey Grafton and “Violent Vi” Violet McCormick, for instance, Downey shows the ways sectarian loyalties inevitably filter through Northern society broadly, crossing gender lines and undermining the ostensibly “neutral” narratives or institutions created by the GFA. Although the characters are both part of the North’s reformed police force, Audrey and Vi betray obvious allegiances to the republican Harry and loyalist Vic, respectively, and they share many of the men’s overtly aggressive tendencies—qualities, again, that fit into

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identity and football in Scotland, see Bairner’s “‘Up to Their Knees’? Football, Sectarianism, Masculinity and Protestant Working-Class Identity.”

the “masculine-inflected” discourses of the conflict.<sup>122</sup> Though the novel emphasizes the “personal” nature of the women’s allegiances to the more overtly sectarian characters, Harry and Vic—Audrey is Harry’s fiancé, while Vi is Vic’s sister—it, nonetheless, also shows how they are aligned with, though not necessarily defined by, the same rigid sectarian ideologies as the men, and how the effects of the AISC’s pseudo-ethnopolitical competition exacerbate the innate antipathies they have for one another. It is, for instance, Vi’s idea to recruit Celtic F.C. not only as a way of provoking Harry by “corrupting” a soccer franchise associated with republicanism, but as a means of ensuring that her brother wins the bet and takes the republican’s money. Even more tellingly, after Vic is forced to flee Derry to avoid arrest and to ensure he is able to play in the AISC final, it is Vi who “hand[les] the unregistered side of things” (103)—that is, Vic’s formerly-loyalist criminal organization. Though she is not as directly linked with Harry’s political ideologies as Vi is with Vic’s, Audrey too is allied with a representative of the republican community, and, more importantly, with the innate aggressiveness and violent tendencies of her former-paramilitary “Mafioso boyfriend” (109). For instance, as she faces her counterpart Vi who is evocatively dressed “in full semi-riot regalia” as PSNI officers raid Harry’s office (108), Audrey thinks “about bouncing the 3lb cut-glass ashtray that was sitting on her desk off the back of [Vi’s] head” so that Vi will stop investigating Harry (109). The point in these scenes, as in those directly involving the AISC, is that though

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<sup>122</sup> Following the GFA and the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) replaced the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Part of the basis for this transformation was that during the conflict, the RUC was seen as a largely illegitimate force by Irish nationalist/republican community given that it was closely aligned with the unionist community and that its members were disproportionately Protestant.

they have been calmed in the post-conflict era, inter-communal tensions remain in the North. More importantly, they show how the violence that stems from sectarian ideologies is neither strictly “paramilitary” nor restricted to men. These are broader social issues within Downey’s fictional North, and, as I will suggest, it is in relation to the wider categories and effects of “sectarianism” that the text offers its vision of an alternative northern subjectivity rooted in loserdom.

Though *Across the Line* highlights the characters’ innate sectarian divisions and, as such, suggests that these ideologies have not been fully addressed in the post-conflict era, it also uses the AISC to undermine this sectarianism and the identities rooted in it. In other words, though the AISC, as I have shown, enables the characters to reassert their sectarian antagonisms, it also works to subvert them. The tournament enables Downey to show how the preservation of these prideful, violent ideals and identities inevitably leads to humiliation, albeit a kind of humiliation that, as I will later show, can prove redemptive.

As I have already implied, as former paramilitaries and those responsible for the “twenty-seven unexplained deaths, half-a-dozen bombings and countless shootings” that occur over the course of the AISC, Harry and Vic are the primary representatives of sectarianism in the text (166), and the novel points to their paramilitary pasts and their rivalry as evidence of their ethnopolitical identities early on. Of Harry, for example, the narrator notes:

Harold Hurley, for those who live in Ireland or Britain—or indeed anywhere with semi-decent anti-terrorism legislation—needs little explanation. The former chief executive of The Boys Inc, in his heyday Harry was reported to be responsible for

more bullets in the ear than Foot and Mouth. A burly, balding giant of a man, his immense physical presence disguised one of the sharpest minds in the country—a mind you'd never want to underestimate for all its tough-guy diction and flyaway grammar. Even today . . . the eldest Hurley child was still a man whose phone calls you did not duck. (10-1)

Likewise, we quickly learn that Vic is the “one time loyalist poster boy and latter day owner of the Sash and Drum pub in Derry’s Waterside [who] had been one of the panel who’d negotiated the bilateral truce . . . in the mid-1990s” (12). The narrator claims, however, that Vic’s role in the negotiations was “no mean feat given that he’d spent the previous twenty years trying to empty [the republican] Harry’s brains out of the side of his head” (12). Obviously, the sense, here, is that the characters are defined by their paramilitary pasts and represent the contemporary North’s calmed, albeit unresolved sectarian divisions. In their perpetual rekindling of their long-time rivalry, the two men clearly stand-in for the underlying tension between the North’s two main communities and the resultant tenuousness of the region’s peace. We clearly see this as the pair negotiates a wager over the AISC: attempting to entice Harry into taking his bet, Vic claims that the two “have been trying to knock each other off our perches for forty years. Ever since we were two little shits chucking stones over either side of the Free Derry barricades” (17). Again, though their days as paramilitary fighters are over, and though both are responsible for brokering a peace in the novel’s fictionalized North, the text emphasizes that they have overcome neither their ideological opposition, nor their inherent distrust of those on the other “side of the . . . barricade” (17). The relationship between Harry and Vic, like that of Audrey and Vi or of the North’s belligerent

communities broadly, is defined by a notable lack of meaningful engagement and a marked sense of suspicion. Though they are no longer directly at war, they are nevertheless at odds. As Harry tersely puts it to his counterpart as they both face imminent assassination, “I’m warning you [about a murder plot] . . . but I hope you don’t construe this in any way as me looking out for you, you treacherous fucker” (212).

In addition to being the text’s most obvious (though, again, not sole) embodiments of sectarian violence, these characters are also, crucially, losers, and Downey exposes this loserdom using the AISC. That is, though he emphasizes Harry and Vic’s respective sectarian “hardness”—their obduracy, pride, and unwillingness to concede, especially to their opponents—Downey uses the AISC to undermine this hardness by pointing out the ways in which the two men are susceptible, as a result of this hardness, to humiliation. In this way, not only does the novelist draw a connection between the characters’ sectarian identities and their loserdom, but he also uses this connection to undermine the divisive and violent ideologies propping up these identities. For instance, after Harry draws a first-round match against the first-place team despite having failed to sign players to play for him, Harry’s nephew Dee-Dee reminds him that the imminent humiliation for having failed to secure a team is Harry’s alone. Insofar as it potentially entails an embarrassing defeat in the AISC’s first round, this failure is, for Dee-Dee, a sign of his uncle’s apparent fecklessness: he caustically asks, “how the fuck . . . are we supposed to beat the best team in this cup when we’ve only two signed players? Me and a fat, middle-aged drunk, who, on his best day, couldn’t have kicked shit off the end of his shoe” (41). And though, in the same scene, Harry reassures Dee-Dee by laying out his plan, the novel nonetheless positions this description of Harry as a loser who

cannot kick “shit off of the end of his shoe” alongside a description of the apparent “paramilitary precision” of the man’s schemes (42). The text aligns these qualities and shows how, in the context of the AISC, the character’s sense of (sectarian) competition is constantly threatened or undermined by his humiliations. This same tension appears in the scenes involving Vic. For instance, after Vic is forced to leave Northern Ireland, having been framed for a robbery by one of his former henchmen and having blackmailed Harry into shutting down part of his business, Vi and Vic’s daughter, Gigi, discuss the ramifications of these setbacks for Vic’s wager against Harry. The pair alludes to the way Vic’s competition with Harry and other republicans during, or as a result of, the AISC has only revealed his pathetic state. Vi claims, specifically, that this ill-conceived campaign to assert dominance against Harry and other opponents is a sign that “sad though it is, [playing in the tournament is] his entire life [and] truth is, I’m starting to feel bad for him” (112). Likewise, as the narrator describes how Vic, training with the largely Catholic Celtic F.C., “collapse[s] after only a lap and a half,” forcing Gigi to stick “her finger into her father’s eye then [slap] him on the mouth” in front of “the Celtic players who . . . lapped it all up” (55), the emphasis lies on the otherwise “hard” man’s physical inadequacy and shame. The narrator explains that following the practice with his “republican” team, Vic is “so humiliated that he refused to travel to Carricktober, even as a spectator” (55). Overall, though the AISC enables Harry and Vic to preserve their rivalry, it also threatens to undermine the power and influence they imagine they have carried over from the height of the conflict. By foregrounding their personal inadequacies and inevitably leading to humiliating situations, the tournament subverts the strength and power both characters work to retain in the post-conflict North.

More than humiliating Harry and Vic, the AISC also highlights both characters' loserdom by generating situations in which the two are forced to relinquish their power. Specifically, as the AISC progresses and the fallout from the men's wager increases, the men are forced to recognize that they risk losing control over their competition. Preparing to petition to have Muff returned to the UK in a last-ditch effort to remain in the tournament, Harry admits, for instance, that this desperate attempt at gaining the upper-hand over tournament administrators and remaining in the contest might fail and that he might disgrace his entire team. After hearing that Judge Bard has expedited the proceedings regarding Muff's disqualification as a result of the border issue, Harry claims, "we're hammered . . . we probably won't even get to play . . . I blame myself" (81). Likewise, learning of the multiple assassination plots against him stemming from his participation in the AISC, his wager against Vic, and his disruption of the political stability of Northern Ireland, Harry explicitly acknowledges his vulnerability and lack of power. He tells Audrey, specifically, that "for the first time in my life . . . I'm sick at the thought of what I could lose" (214). His inability to control the situation compels him to entreat the Taoiseach to "make sure they don't screw Audrey" if "things go wrong" (220). After learning that he, too, is the target of a murder plot, Vic similarly recognizes his helplessness: he "hire[s] in six former paratroopers as security consultants" who attack "anyone who so much as breathed too hard in [Vic's] general direction" (218). Explaining his decision to hire the paratroopers, Vic, like Harry, notes that his wager has prompted former enemies to "settle a few scores," and claims that he can no longer control those who want "to put all the bold children in the quiet room" (219). In these scenes, Downey highlights both Harry and Vic's inability to maintain control over the

situation they have created precisely in order to re-assert their dominance over the other. He shows how their attempts to use the AISC to symbolically defeat the other leads only to their mutual loss of power and to their failures in asserting this dominance.

Though the novel depicts Harry and Vic's loserdom as arising from the humiliations and powerlessness they experience as a result of their participation in the tournament, a participation directly tied to their "former" sectarian rivalry, Downey goes to some length to characterize their loserdom as fundamentally unlike that of characters such as Geordie Hood and Bad Breath Bradley, the novel's "villains." As opposed to Harry and Vic's, the villains' loserdom serves to show the destructiveness and uselessness of returning to the violence of the conflict. Unlike Harry and Vic who repeatedly mention that they "know where the line is" and that they will not cross it (104), Hood and Bradley stress their indifference about using violence as a means of "help[ing] [them]selves" amidst the pseudo-turf war taking place in Derry (43). For example, attempting to profit from Harry and Vic's wager by double-crossing their former employers and goading them into violence, Hood and Bradley plant a bomb at Harry's house which almost kills Audrey (58), and later plant one at Vic's which decapitates his sister and injures his daughter (118). They also rob a lawyer while ensuring that "Vic was the only face [the guards] had in the frame for it" (102), and they attempt to assassinate Harry using "three kilos of Nitro-Semtex, the new mix favoured by state-sponsored guerrillas everywhere" (222). The rogue pair's aim is simply to wreak havoc in the North for their own selfish ends. They understand the damage they cause—they claim to be unconcerned about the fact that innocent people might get "shredded like shit in a blender" by their bombs (218)—but remain indifferent to the ramifications.

Though Bradley and Hood may not be politically-motivated, their indiscriminate attacks only create chaos and prompt more violence. Although these attacks recall the simple “moralizing” of “Troubles trash” and might be read as examples of the generic “wild-eyed action” typical of such novels (Kennedy-Andrews 188), this perpetuation of violence also echoes the violent campaigns of the North’s paramilitaries during the conflict. Hood and Bradley’s campaign against their former leaders shares with paramilitary operations a self-serving quality, and it consists, like the operations of the PIRA and UDA, of “a series of detestable actions” meant to provoke targets to “[respond] in kind” (Coogan 130). Hood and Bradley’s attacks leave “skidmarks across half of Ulster” but serve only to provoke Harry and Vic to retaliate (*AL* 184-5).

However, by depicting Hood and Bradley, the novel’s agents of chaos, as inept and cowardly, Downey mocks the characters and, crucially, dismisses the symbolic function of this kind of violence. In showing how the two beg for mercy from Harry and Vic following each of their violent acts (61, 124), Downey shows that this violence only increases the characters’ anxieties; it fails in every respect to advance their cause or to benefit them. Indeed, the text explicitly shows that the only benefit the violence produces for the pair is that it enables them to tell “other people how clever [they] are,” as “after all, there is no point in being brilliant if the great unwashed don’t appreciate you” (126). In this way, Hood and Bradley are like the “potatoes” of Bateman’s novels and other Troubles trash: they are the “very opposite of . . . patriotic freedom fighters,” and, for them, carnage is “half-planned and poorly executed” (McGuire 10). The novel suggests that theirs is a pointless violence produced by feckless individuals. Although destructive, it fails to produce any significant benefits and, moreover, results in their complete

powerlessness: after their attacks, they are left “looking over both shoulders at once. Paranoid” (*AL* 198). The fact that Hood and Bradley’s master plan to assassinate Harry ultimately leads to their deaths shows that it is a violence that, in its failure to produce the intended results, only betrays the perpetrators’ inadequacies and incompetence. Like the paramilitary violence that plagued the North for three decades, this violence causes destruction without empowering those responsible. In undermining their results, the novel suggests that these violent acts are destructive but their purposes trivial.

Despite using Harry and Vic’s loserdom and Geordie Hood and “Bad Breath” Bradley’s failures to trivialize and mock the post-conflict North’s latent ethnopolitical divisions and its communities’ lingering violent tendencies, Downey also depicts loserdom as a potentially fruitful quality in the contemporary North. Like Mickey’s, the kind of “conscious” or “intentional” loserdom that Harry and Vic show late in the novel—a loserdom partly rooted in an ability to concede that no other character, including Vi, Audrey, Hood, and Bradley demonstrate—offers a glimpse of a kind of alternative subjectivity that is derived from an acknowledgment of communal differences and a renunciation of sectarian divisions. Although Downey does not portray Harry and Vic as true embodiments of this “alternative” loserdom, his portrayal of both hints at the possible usefulness of this alternative “regionally-specific” identity. In revealing glimpses of the men’s willingness to submit to the other—their tendencies, that is, to reveal their weaknesses to former rivals—Downey shows how Harry and Vic provide the groundwork for a kind of positive post-conflict identity that recognizes their historical divisions but begins to emerge from them, that echoes, but does not simply mirror, an arguably useful “postnationalist” project that requires communities caught in the

“stranglehold of nation-state conflict” to “invent, or re-invent, new images of communal identities” and relations (Kearney 69).

Again, though neither Harry nor Vic explicitly demonstrates this kind of productive loserdom until late in the novel, both characters repeatedly allude to the possible value of “losing,” again, a quality, Downey shows, not shared by characters such as Vi, Audrey, Hood, and Bradley. For instance, in explaining why he thinks his nephew Dee Dee’s wife has left him, Harry suggests that “it’s not in [Dee Dee] to quit” or to “say sorry” (22). He decries “all [his nephew’s] real-man bullshit” and claims, “I hate to tell you this, kid, but sometimes it’s by far the greater thing to lose. To throw a game. To let someone else win. To apologize when you did nothing wrong” (22). Without necessarily demonstrating this submissive, “losing” approach, Harry explicitly acknowledges its value. He holds that “if you insist on winning all the time, no-one will ever want to play with you” (22), and, as such, foregrounds the communal, even conciliatory potential of “losing.” Vic similarly, albeit more subtly, acknowledges that “losing” or submitting can produce reconciliation. Once he learns that his son-in-law has left his daughter because he, Vic, has moved in with them, the man decides to again move out, but encourages his daughter to admit wrongdoing as a way of having her husband return. When Gigi refuses to listen to her father and submit, Vic claims that “we can only hope [Dee Dee is] not as thick-headed as you are” (97), that is, that he is more willing to concede. In these scenes, both characters show that resolution becomes not only possible but likely through submission, resignation, and de-escalation. Though it may imply weakness and defeat, this embrace of loserdom is inherently productive according to the men, and when read in the context of political reconciliation in the North, it might epitomize a means of

relinquishing divisive sectarianism. As part of the novel's political critique, the men's loserdom represents a kind of northern subjectivity that, though inflected by regional political tensions and clearly undervalued given the historical role of sectarianism in creating communal pride and social cohesion, might counter rigid sectarian ideals and challenge the value of segregation as the foundation of the region's "peace." Moreover, that it only emerges following their experiences of personal conflict and yet prevents the pointless exacerbation of hostilities, the men's loserdom epitomizes, in short, a subjectivity suited to people from a region marred by years of political violence and yet incapable of fully doing away with the ideologies undergirding it.

More than simply articulating the productive potential of loserdom, Harry and Vic demonstrate it. After Dee Dee threatens to quit his uncle's team thereby guaranteeing that Muff loses in the AISC and that Harry loses his wager, Harry, for instance, yields to his nephew's demands and, "raising his arms in supplication," begs him to stay (42). Harry's "twenty years [as leader of a gang] had left him nothing to learn about man-management," and so, the narrator claims, he knows it is "time now to allow his nephew a victory of his own" (41-2). The otherwise proud and powerful republican openly admits his errors and his short-sightedness when he affirms that "I get a little carried away . . . but I need you here" (42). And although it is a calculated gesture—Dee Dee presumes that "Harry was playing him" (42)—this admission of wrongdoing, this concession, enables the pair to acknowledge their differences and resolve them. Similarly, after Harry has scored first in the AISC final in Dublin and won his bet, Vic concedes defeat. Although Vic claims to be disappointed and acknowledges that "his game was over," he nevertheless agrees to "[limp] slowly back to the dugouts" with his nemesis (245). In

losing to Harry and, more importantly, in accepting this loss, Vic facilitates a kind of compromise and even establishes a kind of peace with his adversary: after Harry decides to ignore the wager and let his opponent “keep [his] five grand,” the two rivals come together and “allow the man from the *Irish Times* to get [a] picture” of them while “the entire crowd [rises] to its feet again to give the old gladiators one last standing ovation” (245-6). The idea is clearly that the mutual goodwill in this scene arises from Vic’s willingness to embrace his loss and Harry’s readiness to waive his rights to Vic’s money, and this depiction of the “old gladiators”’ concessions is what essentially generates the novel’s resolution (245).

By showing how his two protagonists’ willingness to embrace a kind of loserdom rooted in submission, humility, and concession proves not only unique in the text’s fictional Derry, but, more importantly, inherently productive for them, Downey illustrates the ways vulnerability and weakness might relate to the conflict and provide a model of valuable post-conflict subjectivity. That is, though Downey positions both Harry and Vic’s loserdom—their concessions, weaknesses, and symbolic “losses”—as a quality that enables them to resolve different conflicts, he also subtly connects their loserdom to their ability to transcend their former ethnopolitical hostilities and their ideological investments in the conflict, something the other characters largely fail to do. Downey shows, in simple terms, how the loserdom that Harry and Vic epitomize is precisely what enables the men to end their longstanding rivalry without abandoning their sense of difference and, even, their sense of competition. At several points, for instance, Harry and Vic acknowledge the toll that the violence, danger, and anxiety of being at war with the other has taken on their wellbeing. Moreover, in surprising displays of submission, both

men vow to give up the antagonism that has sustained their struggle for so long. In a moment of genuine vulnerability, Harry asserts that “I’m not enjoying this anymore . . . this whole business with Vic, I mean. I’m too old for it . . . I’m just not vicious enough for it anymore” (213-4). He articulates the cost of having battled Vic for so many years, but, significantly, does so by emphasizing his weakness and his weariness. The fact that a prominent republican paramilitary who has built his reputation on violence and a “life-long addiction to murder and mayhem” expresses a fragility and a resignation entirely at odds with this powerful persona hints at the ways this loserdom is effectively the antithesis of, if not the antidote to, identities built around the conflict (214). Again, Harry’s loserdom is depicted as the opposite of his “viciousness” (and that of characters like Vi and Hood) and it symbolizes his abandonment of the longstanding campaign against Vic. In a similar scene in which Vic assesses the fallout from his wager, the former loyalist thug claims that his contest with Harry has “got a little bit out of hand” and that “the truth is, I don’t need this hassle anymore” (219). He explains, more importantly, that he is ready to abandon his campaign against Harry because “you can’t spend your entire life choking back the fear in your gut. I’ve had enough. I’m too old to be waking up every morning and throwing up into the sink. If I get through this week, I’m going to retire” (219). Like his republican counterpart, Vic alludes to the personal cost of maintaining this pointless rivalry, but, again, does so by highlighting his weakness (he is “too old” to “choke back the fear in [his] gut”), and, thus, shows how loserdom might serve to defuse conflict.

These scenes show not only how weakness and loserdom compel Harry and Vic to give up the sense of pride they have as republican and loyalist authorities in a region

still defined by sectarianism, but also show the value of such a renunciation. More precisely, Downey portrays the characters' willingness to admit their weaknesses—to accept what are effectively loser qualities—as part of their mutual repudiation of the value of the North's historical divisions and the violence they engender. Though their embrace of loserdom is conditioned by their specific experiences of the Troubles—it is a “northern” loserdom in that it is tied to their participation in a local conflict—it proves productive as a way of working through the destructive ideologies of pride and divisiveness at the core of this conflict. Certainly, the novel suggests that the “productive” loserdom both characters reveal does not neutralize their past crimes. It does show, though, the characters' growing readiness to accept the damage of the North's lingering atavism. However, more than highlighting the men's recognition of the harm of sustaining rigid political ideologies, Downey's depiction of the characters' embrace of loserdom shows that the historical differences of the region's communities might endure in a productive way, that is, without provoking further divisions.

Before his wager with Harry deteriorates into “murder and mayhem” (214), Vic, for example, reveals a kind of admiration for his rival. He claims that renewing his opposition with Harry “is the most fun I've had in years [and] I guarantee if you ask Big Harry, he'd say exactly the same thing. Christ, I've missed the excitement. As has he” (104). Though he is forced, in this same scene to admit his helplessness by fleeing Derry to avoid arrest for a crime he has not committed, Vic claims to be happy because as a result of “doing all this”—that is, renewing his competition with Harry—he “can feel the blood starting to move” for “the first time since the good old days” of the conflict (104). Despite the fact that Harry and Vic's competition has obvious sectarian undertones—

again, it is a socially-sanctioned form of “chucking stones over . . . the Free Derry barricades” (17)—Vic implies that the excitement of this competition and the value of their opposition are entirely divorced from this sectarianism: he assures Gigi here that “we’re all big boys” and “we both know where the line is,” and he guarantees that “if anybody gets hurt . . . it won’t be my doing or Harry’s” (104). Again, these words are not meant to obscure Vic and Harry’s former sectarian violence, nor, would I suggest, do they conceal the fact that the characters’ competitiveness is rooted in their past ethnopolitical rivalry. Instead, Vic’s description of the “excitement” of the competition emphasizes, I argue, that it stems not from its political dimensions but in spite of them. When Harry admits to Vic that, although the two have “been sparring for forty years,” he does not “want to knock [Vic] out of the ring” (213), he, too, touches on the value of a depoliticized rivalry. He asserts that he does not mind when Vic “lands one on [him]” and claims that he “can handle a fair dig. Fuck, I’ve had to. I’ve taken more shots to my face than Johnny No Teeth” (213). But in suggesting that “what I don’t like is when punches start landing below the belt,” he alludes to his growing aversion to the vigilantism stemming from their competition, a vigilantism resembling the sectarian campaigns in which the two were formerly engaged (213). When Vic, bitter about his sister’s murder, justifies these “low blows” by reminding Harry that “you and I don’t subscribe to the Marquess of Sainsbury rules,” the latter informs him that “it’s Queensberry, Vic,” and reticently “sniff[s]” that “maybe it’s about time we started” (213). Harry’s admission that he wants to figuratively abide by the “Marquess of Queensberry rules” contradicts his earlier comment that “I prefer the Marquis de Sade” and seems to point to a desire for de-escalation (18). For Downey, this is, again, not a matter of ignoring the characters’

violent histories, but of recognizing the merit of severing their competition from this history and recognizing their shared responsibility for and victimization by it. In both scenes, the characters subtly endorse a kind of competition that has broken away from the violent sectarianism of the Troubles, but this endorsement is, in both cases, positioned alongside their either explicit or implicit acceptance of a weakened posture—recall that Vic is forced to abandon his home while Harry is forced to admit that he wants a “cleaner” contest. There is an endorsement of a kind of “post-sectarian” contest in which competition does not mean conflict and is, therefore, like postnationalist competition, “rendered non-violent, indeed becom[ing] a healthy feature of a pluralist and democratic society” (Kearney 89). And though neither Harry nor Vic explicitly rejects the sectarianism Downey critiques, the novel ultimately portrays them as weakened characters ready to subscribe to a form of difference and opposition that exist in the shadow of a regional conflict but remains detached from its brutality, a relationship, in short, that calls to mind what Hume sees as a “growing appreciation that interdependence can be achieved without sacrificing independence” (*New* 135).

*Across the Line* uses its characters’ loserdom to deflate the sectarian atavism carried over from the Troubles period and redeem those characters most connected with the region’s rigid ethnopolitical divisions. The various humiliations the protagonists suffer during the AISC enable Downey to undercut the purposes of the characters’ cross-communal animosities. However, they also set-up Downey’s broader point about how the weakness and vulnerability that these characters show in spite of their identities as powerful, authoritative paramilitary leaders serves as a way of working through or abandoning such destructive animosities. And though Downey does not offer this

loserdom as a fully-formed alternative to the violent, proud sectarian identities that define nearly all the characters of his fictional North, he presents it as a starting point for this kind of alternative. The loserdom Downey depicts is clearly shaped by northern Irish realities and the social conditions produced by years of communal conflict. In that it effectively uncovers an “ethos . . . which [is] not as psychologically constraining as the ethos of ‘winner takes all’” (Hume *New* 136), however, it is a loserdom from which productive post-sectarian northern Irish identities might be derived, identities on which the future of peaceful inter-communal relations clearly relies.

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

In 1979, at the height of the Troubles, Belfast band Stiff Little Fingers declared that “what we need is / An Alternative Ulster,” and they urged their neighbours to “grab it and change it, it’s yours . . . Alter your native Ulster / Alter your native land” (Stiff Little Fingers 0:45-1:06). Though sectarian violence and bloodshed would continue for nearly two decades following the release of “Alternative Ulster,” the post-conflict period in Northern Ireland has itself shown that to “alter” or “change” the North in light of its complicated and violent history has not been easy. Ethnopolitical divisions have remained steady in parts of the country and intercommunal resentment has periodically flared into violence. Moreover, the North’s communities have been tasked with reconfiguring their identities in the face of the official delegitimization of sectarianism. As I have shown, it is with an eye to this question of what an “alternative” north might look like that *The Good Son* and *Across the Line* explore the remarkable social significance of the Troubles and its legacies, and it is in an attempt to conceptualize such

an alternative northern Irishness that McVeigh and Downey deploy their respective loser characters.

Though neither novelist offers his version of loserdom as an ideal alternative subjectivity to the problematic one that has endured since the end of the Troubles, and though neither novel even attempts to address the political or diplomatic implications of adopting such an alternative, both undoubtedly show that the kind of trivialization of the powerful and putatively unshakeable ethnopolitical narratives that loserdom enables might prove useful in helping establish this alternative subjectivity. Put another way, though neither text offers any sustained exploration of how the adoption of a non-sectarian, regional sense of northern Irishness (which is to say nothing of the likelihood of a widespread acceptance of such an Irishness) might actually impact nationalists' political allegiances to and cultural identification with the Republic or unionists' siege mentalities and sense of British cultural heritage, both show how loserdom's advantages might outweigh such complications and give the North's (belligerent) communities a way forward. That loserdom can help subvert the ideals and identities that sustained the conflict and continue to undermine the country's peace makes it valuable as a means of working through them, of ensuring that "narratives on reconciliation" no longer remain a "way in which opposing forces come together to reify the existing [sociopolitical] order" (Little 95). In emphasizing the usefulness of their respective losers' vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and submissiveness, McVeigh and Downey offer a counterpoint to the hegemonic discourses of strength, confidence, and entitlement that prop-up nationalism/republicanism and unionism/loyalism. Loserdom represents, in this way, a means of perhaps fulfilling what Hayward and McManus describe as a growing, albeit

unrealized, “desire to move beyond the labels of Nationalism and Unionism, and, to an extent, of the politics associated with those labels” (152). It provides, at the very least, a basis for “articulat[ing] complex identities that are far more nuanced than the traditional understandings of the ‘two communities’” (Hayward and McManus 152). Ultimately, in exploring the ways loserdom serves as an instrument, as it were, for generating sociocultural conditions in which “peace” might come to mean more than “coexistence,” these novels endorse a view of contemporary Northern Ireland unencumbered by the serious and self-congratulatory social narrative of the GFA and the peace process. Loserdom enables these novelists to offer a view, in short, of northern Irish subjects—men, women, paramilitaries, civilians, adults, children—who, in their subversive irreverence in the face of this narrative, are necessarily more attuned to the reconciliatory work and national self-examination that still needs to be done.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

#### 6.1. Vivified by Failure

“My generation can’t afford houses. My generation can’t afford to have children. My generation are [sic] either leaving the country or jumping in rivers. That’s my generation, man.”  
(Late Late)

For Irish writers of the twentieth century, those tasked with capturing, if not creating, “the very expressions of a national idea,” Declan Kiberd explains, “a near-death experience had often led to new vitality: the sense of an ending helped to suggest that something else might be beginning” (*AI* 481). And though Kiberd points to Yeats as an example of an influential Irish writer whose texts are “heavy with a sense of loss” (*AI* 481), as one attuned to the ways in which disappointment seems always to accompany success in Ireland, he contends that Samuel Beckett is the paragon of those Irish writers attentive to the country’s inadequacies. For Kiberd, Beckett stands as the “model for [an Irish] culture that fed on abstinence” (*AI* 481); he epitomizes the writer “whose imagination was vivified by failure” (*AI* 482). “It was success,” the critic ultimately claims, “which [Beckett] found difficult” (*AI* 482).

In scrutinizing the variegated forms and functions of loserdom in contemporary fiction from both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, I have aimed to call attention to the ways in which the imaginations of contemporary Irish writers are, like those of their canonical predecessors, characterized by a “sense of loss” and “vivified by failure” rather than success (*AI* 481-2). Much recent Irish fiction, I have shown, is animated by the various crises and transformations—the figurative (yet occasionally

partial) “ending” of economic stasis, unchecked economic expansion, indiscriminate religious domination, and prolonged sectarian conflict, respectively—that have taken place on the island over the last thirty years. Guided by the premise that the prevalence of both loser characters and themes of inadequacy, fecklessness, and failure in this recent Irish fiction speaks to some general experience and perception of living and working in contemporary Ireland, I have attempted, more specifically, to make a case for the value of the figure of the loser as an instrument of critique in Irish writing. For Irish novelists grappling, however directly or indirectly, with Ireland’s recent social, cultural, and economic shifts, I have argued that the loser proves a versatile and compelling figure through which to both examine, conceptualize, and analyze issues of contemporary Irish identity—in particular, Irish masculinity—on both sides of the border. Whether in the context of the Republic’s drastic economic improvement during the Celtic Tiger years, the country’s equally precipitous economic collapse a decade ago, the ongoing efforts in the Republic to deal with the legacies of clerical abuse and the (often criminal) misconduct of Church officials, or the continuing quest for peace in the North, the figure of the loser proves useful in illuminating the ways in which a sense of inferiority, disappointment, and failure largely remains the order of the day on the island. I aimed to bring together divergent, though in no way comprehensive, readings of contemporary Irish novels as a means of showing, in short, how the country’s sociocultural fixation with the loser stands as evidence of the fact that, for all of Ireland’s radical metamorphoses in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, “the pall of failure that,” O’Toole claims, “had hung over the Irish state for most of its independent existence” has indeed not yet been “blown away” (*Ship* 14).

In the preceding chapters, I have intentionally selected and analyzed texts that, together, demonstrate the multifarious qualities of loserdom—from vulnerability and incompetence to submissiveness and recalcitrance. Moreover, I have offered evidence to show how these novelists treat what Halberstam calls “the unregulated territories of failure, loss, and unbecoming” that their fictional losers both occupy and engender as the prime loci for examining the conditions of contemporary Irish life (7). And although their portrayals of these loser characters are perhaps inconsistent, and despite the fact that the targets of their critiques clearly differ, these writers all insist on a vision of contemporary Ireland characterized by an ethos of failure. Put another way, for all of their thematic differences, these novels uniformly serve to trouble the narratives of “arrival” that proliferated in the late-1990s early-2000s—that is, Ireland’s arrival into an economic (neoliberal) modernity, into a period in which the Church’s power has started to erode, and into a time of fragile peace in the North in which the major paramilitary groups have officially disarmed. And, when read together, the texts actively challenge David McWilliams’s idea that “the hard part [was] over” once Ireland had achieved the symbolic “end” of its decades of economic stagnation, Catholic rule, and sectarian conflict (*Pope 3*).

In focusing on and problematizing questions of responsibility and accountability in their respective explorations of Ireland’s economic boom and subsequent bust, the novels I examined in Chapters Two and Three account for the sociocultural, if not moral, cost of contemporary Ireland’s large-scale adoption of neoliberal ideology as well as the nation’s celebration of a market-driven ethos. More specifically, these texts take issue with many Irish people’s indiscriminate (and continued) embrace of behaviours and

ideals that, though offering them the chance to both participate in and justify what many viewed as the nation's long-awaited economic destiny, were also obviously nefarious or, at the very least, deeply suspect. In the narrative trajectories of Johnsey Cunliffe from *The Thing About December* and the three male protagonists of *Capital Sins*, we saw the degree to which the overwhelming socioeconomic benefits promised by the Celtic Tiger obscured the inevitable reconfiguration of notions of desire, ambition, and success—especially for Irish men—and, therefore, concealed the structural pressures of neoliberalism on the Irish public. In these novels, loserdom—and, of course, the figurative and literal violence that attends it—serves as a means of exposing the structural pressures of neoliberal ideologies and challenging the value of financial success in Ireland. As the novels' respective depictions of the loser characters clearly indicate, the economic boom did not simply bring prosperity to Ireland; it reconfigured the paradigms governing how Irish people understood themselves and related to each other and to their socioeconomic milieu.

Assessing the aftermath of Ireland's economic crash and, more precisely, the consequences of the kinds of Irish neoliberalism Ryan and Cunningham denounce, Murray's *The Mark and the Void* and Kilroy's *The Devil I Know* likewise deploy loserdom to critique the "narratives of blame" (33), to use Meade's term, that circulated in an uneven and generally problematic fashion after the crash. In depicting their respective loser characters' inability to come to terms with their roles in the economic crisis, the novels both foreground and undermine those public, occasionally gendered, discourses that get used to simplify, if not defend, the actions and individuals that caused this crisis. In pointing to the ways in which accountability for the crash gets redirected,

they highlight, moreover, the degree to which responsibility for Ireland's economic catastrophe is spread throughout Irish society—certainly it belongs to Ireland's bankers, politicians, and builders, but it extends to the country's entrepreneurs and consumers as well. However, the texts also emphasize that the basis of the crash must necessarily be traced back to the very neoliberal ideologies driving the boom. In concert with the novels I examined in Chapter Two, Murray and Kilroy's respective works complicate the narratives of success and excess that characterize discussions of the Celtic Tiger and the economic crisis. Taken together, all four novels paint a picture of contemporary Ireland's economic trajectory that shows that the boom should be viewed as more than an economic blessing while the bust should really be remembered as more than what O'Toole calls a series of "misfortune[s] made a little worse by some minor misjudgments and bad timing" (*Ship* 216).

By sketching the sociopolitical legacies of both the clerical abuse crisis (CAC) and the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, the texts I examined in Chapters Four and Five force us, as readers, to confront the fact that these issues have not yet been adequately addressed on the island. I showed, overall, that the loser characters in *Smile*, *A History of Loneliness*, *The Good Son*, and *Across the Line* work to dispel the idea that Irish society can simply move past both the political domination of the Catholic Church and the longstanding ethnopolitical conflict in the North without first fully coming to grips with the various sociopolitical failures bound up with these issues. The failures these texts indict, of course, are those in protecting children and vulnerable people from serial abusers, in prosecuting those guilty of assaulting children, and, in the case of the Northern conflict, in finding modes of expressing ethnopolitical identities and celebrating

cultural heritage without also perpetuating atavistic feelings of hostility and suspicion. As embodiments of the ways in which the CAC and the Troubles continue to filter into contemporary Irish society, these novels' respective losers remind readers of the work that remains to be done by a society that, as Lloyd reminds us, is ostensibly willing to reject its "servile subordination to the conservative mores and dogmas of the Church," to renounce the "politics of the gun in the North," and generally to "[move] on and [leave] behind . . . all the symptoms of [Ireland's] uncured backwardness" (*IT* 2). These figures help show, in short, how any desire to work through and rectify the crimes and failures of the past necessarily requires an ongoing commitment from Irish and northern Irish societies.

In a broader sense, we have seen how the loser speaks to pressing questions of economics, gender, and nation on the island of Ireland. In the economic context, I have primarily shown how the prevalence of loser characters seems to be symptomatic of a kind of reaction against Irish society's problematic response to the neoliberal ideologies that attended the Celtic Tiger as well as the neoliberal policies of successive Irish governments. These losers essentially help illustrate the consequences for a society and an economy moving from what O'Toole describes as "the almost pre-modern to the post-modern" (*Ship* 100). In foregrounding the potential for, if not probability of, failure within a period of seemingly assured economic prosperity, these loser figures point to the effects of plunging a society and an economy that never experienced "a proper industrial revolution" and therefore "suffered . . . from underdevelopment and all its attendant ills" into "the bright, supercharged, ultra-connected future" (*Ship* 100). In short, these fictional depictions of loser characters' uneasy movements within an economic context in flux

speak to the anxieties of moving from poverty to affluence to austerity and of confronting the various ideological and, of course, “practical” pressures that attend each of these economic transformations.

With respect to gender, we have seen how Irish men, in particular, have been impacted by Ireland’s recent shifts. In the context of Ireland’s economic transformations, I have shown, for instance, how loserdom serves to expose the changing nature of masculinity. The difficulties of consistently succeeding—or succeeding in the right ways—have altered the traditionally masculine role of breadwinner. Likewise, the loser helps show how ideas of manliness and masculine success have become imbued with those of economic prowess. Many of the depictions of losers I examined point to Irish culture’s valuation of what Cormac O’Brien calls the “corporate warrior” and of notions of masculine control and power in the largely unregulated and yet (ostensibly) auspicious territories of the financial and property markets (133). With respect to the post-Troubles North, we have seen how fictional losers similarly help challenge and undermine forms of sectarian masculinity that exacerbated cross-communal tensions. In their openness to humiliation and, thus, their implicit devaluation of ideas of sectarian pride, these losers highlight the ongoing need for a renegotiation of the ways in which northern Irish identities—especially those at the nexus of gender and sectarianism—are embodied in the present day. In my examination of losers in the context of the CAC, I have even shown, albeit indirectly, how the largely male-dominated Catholic Church needs to find a way of bringing an end to what James Carroll calls its “maleness and misogyny,” qualities that are “inseparable from its structure” (“Abolish”). Should it truly want to remain if not powerful, then at least relevant in Irish society (and elsewhere), especially in the

aftermath of the CAC, the Church, contemporary fiction shows us, needs, at the very least, to say “no to male dominance; no to the sovereign authority of clerics; [and] no to double standards” (J. Carroll).

Finally, with regard to the question of nation, my explorations of contemporary Irish fiction and its losers have fundamentally served to uncover both the scope of the challenges Ireland faced in the final decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the new millennium as well as the ways in which the country gauged—or perhaps ought to have gauged—its ability to meet these challenges. Clearly, each of the aforementioned crises radically changed Ireland and forced the Irish to reimagine who they were. The economic boom brought with it not only prosperity and expectations of success, but, for the first time, international admiration. Following its bust, though, Ireland was forced to accept that it had become an example, a kind of cautionary tale even, about the consequences of excess and irresponsible, short-sighted governance. During the boom, Kiberd explains, many Irish people “had abandoned nationalist pieties and religious practice” believing that “they were getting something valuable in return: individual freedom and material well-being” (*AI* 491). The loser shows us, however, that the value of these “returns” for the nation was perhaps not so high and that replacing traditional nationalist and religious codes with modern capitalist ones would not be as simple or as easy as many Irish people had been led to believe (*AI* 491). The widespread problem of clerical abuse in Ireland, likewise, highlighted the pitfalls of fostering close relationships between Church and State. And, in the North, lingering ethnopolitical tensions proved that the signing of the GFA and the decommissioning of paramilitary arsenals would only be the first steps in overcoming years of sectarian violence and

hostility. Here too, the loser speaks to both Irish society's uncertainty about how best to confront these realities and the consequences of postponing these significant confrontations. In general, that all of the novelists I considered turn to the loser as a means of assessing the effects of these transformations on and for Ireland points to the sociocultural purchase of ideas of failure on the island as well as their prominence in the Irish imagination in the aftermath of these shifts. They crucially show the extent to which determining how the Irish ought to move forward in a positive and productive manner is a fundamentally different task than establishing how to come to terms with their roles—either explicit or implicit—in the island's recent socioeconomic troubles.

Although I have carefully considered how contemporary Irish novelists' portrayals of Ireland's ethos of failure not only function to critique recent shifts in Irish life, but also serve as a means of encouraging readers to reassess the sociocultural bases and legacies of these major social, political, and economic situations, my broader analysis of loserdom in recent Irish culture has necessarily been limited by its focus on novels. There is, in other words, more work to do in order to fully capture the variety of cultural modes and contexts in which the loser figure appears and, by implication, more to do in exploring the cultural reach of this figure in contemporary Ireland.

In focusing exclusively on Irish novels, I have not only had to largely ignore the treatment and function of loser characters in contemporary Irish films such as Darragh Byrne's *Parked* (2011), Lenny Abrahamson's *Garage* (2007) and recent Irish television series such as *Derry Girls* (2018-present) among others, but I have even had to disregard the prevalence of the figure of the loser in the context of Irish literary fiction more broadly. For example, the short stories of Kevin Barry (e.g. "The Fjord of Killary," "Deer

Season,” and “The Coast of Leitrim”) and Colin Barrett (e.g. “The Clancy Kid” and “Stand Your Skin”), to name but two, cry out for analysis in the context of loserdom. Though these writers do not necessarily explicitly engage with the sociocultural transformations I have dealt with here, their depictions of stunted, unambitious, and largely ineffectual men reluctantly navigating the social intricacies of small-town Ireland—characters such as Seamus Ferris from Barry’s recent “The Coast of Leitrim” and Bat from Barrett’s “Stand Your Skin”—warrant attention given that they clearly substantiate the idea that loserdom encapsulates contemporary Irish experiences, if only masculine ones. Arguments—such as the one I have tried to mount in this dissertation—about the pervasiveness of contemporary Ireland’s sense of inadequacy could be strengthened through readings of Barry and Barrett’s stories insofar as they portray Irish loserdom as a condition extending beyond the confines of the city, the setting in which all but one of the novels I have discussed are set. More generally though, in expanding such a study of loser characters—those, like Barry’s who “are not by [their] nature . . . finisher[s] of things” (K. Barry)—beyond the strict generic parameters of the novel, we would inevitably get a more comprehensive view of a nation that, as O’Toole has suggested, desperately needs to “complete the unfinished business of its past,” one that needs to “undertake some quite old-fashioned exercises in nation building” in order to arrive at a truly worthwhile “new Ireland” (*Ship* 215).

## **6.2. Beyond the Irish Loser**

In my introduction to this dissertation, I posited that losers and the idea of loserdom might prove useful in both considering the “failed execution” of Irish social and

economic modernization and examining Irish cultural perceptions of the crises produced by these failures. I want to end by briefly looking beyond the issue of failure and the figure of the loser while reiterating the critical value of notions and figures of social aberration, broadly speaking, in assessing the sociocultural challenges facing Ireland today.

Such is the critical potency of (both fictional and real) figures who deviate from contemporary Ireland's norms that Blindboy Boatclub and Mr. Chrome, the members of Limerick-based comedy-cum-performance-art duo The Rubberbandits, have become influential cultural commentators on the island. Indeed, the duo—which got its start releasing prank phone calls online before producing satirical music videos and mockumentaries for RTÉ—has, in recent years, come to be the voice of a generation faced with the sociocultural problems caused by the transformations I explored in each of my earlier chapters. Though they definitely do not fit the typical paradigm of loserdom, the Rubberbandits undeniably play off of similar notions of social ineptness, awkwardness, and recalcitrance in their art, albeit in an extreme and exaggerated way. Their most distinctive feature, for example, is that they always wear form-fitting masks made of plastic shopping bags. However, like those novelists who deploy loser characters to comment on Ireland's various crises, the Rubberbandits use the popularity they have garnered from their eccentric cultural output and their overt difference as a platform for tackling significant, often serious, social failures. “That’s our game,” Blindboy Boatclub explains in an interview with *The Guardian*'s Brian Logan, “you put something smart beside something stupid and see how it works” (“Rubberbandits”). Put another way, for all of their art's absurd, cynical, and often puerile appearance, the Rubberbandits have

also used this work to explore (often using humour and irony) Ireland's troubles with issues of sexism, neoliberalism, racism, xenophobia, mental health, the Irish suicide epidemic, addiction, toxic masculinity, and the legacies of Irish nationalism.<sup>123</sup>

Blindboy Boatclub, in particular, has shown a significant capacity for incisive cultural analysis. In addition to producing his own very popular podcast, Blindboy has been featured on such prominent television programmes as RTÉ's *The Late Late Show*, programmes on which he unfailingly dons his plastic-bag mask and plays-up his overt peculiarity and social ineptness. Using these popular forums, Blindboy has helped call attention, in particular, to the issue of mental health and suicide in modern Ireland. In a discussion about the celebrations of the centenary of the Easter Rising during one of his most notable appearances on *The Late Late*—an appearance in which he stood in marked contrast to the other, more typical guests including former Fine Gael politician Ivan Yates, writer Martina Devlin, and artist Robert Ballagh (Heneghan)—Blindboy insightfully articulated the problems facing young people in Ireland in the contemporary period. Denouncing Irish neoliberalism while drawing comparisons between the idealistic nationalists involved in the Easter Rising and his own disenfranchised generation, Blindboy described the Irish generation to which he belongs as one facing an uncertain, even hopeless future. He claimed on that appearance that “my generation can't afford houses. My generation can't afford to have children. My generation [is] either leaving the country or jumping in rivers” (*Late Late*). “That's my generation, man,” he concludes (*Late Late*). Despite Blindboy's fondness for headwear made from Tesco, Spar, or Centra

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<sup>123</sup> See, for example, songs such as “Sonny,” “Dad's Best Friend,” and “Up Da Ra,” video shorts such as “Rubberbandits Guide to Mental Health” or “Ireland's Favourite Ideology,” and programmes such as *Rubberbandits Guide to 1916*.

bags and his radical deviation from Irish social norms, these kinds of statements speak to Ireland's pressing social concerns and have made him, as Roisin Agnew suggests, "a central figure in a consciousness-raising moment for Ireland," a moment "characterized by anti-establishment feelings that surfaced during the recession and deepened with its much touted recovery" ("Blindboy"). And though Blindboy himself has expressed reservations about his ability to speak for contemporary Ireland, the fact remains that, as an embodiment of sociocultural divergence, Blindboy Boatclub serves a similar function as those fictional losers I considered in this dissertation. As "the man in the bag [who makes] sense," Blindboy, like Irish fiction's losers, has proven extremely valuable in encouraging Ireland to ask, "why is the man in the suit not making sense?" (Channel 4 News).

As I have aimed to show, the critiques of contemporary Irish literature and culture clearly benefit from being configured around figures, like the loser, who fail to abide by social norms and expectations, and who, therefore, helpfully identify the inadequacies and failures of modern Irish society. And given that contemporary Ireland continues to cope with significant sociocultural transformations and challenges—e.g. the legalization of both same-sex marriage and abortion in the Republic, the slow return of economic stability, the ongoing drug and suicide crises, and the continued campaigns of dissident republicans in the North—there remains an important place for the kind of cultural commentary enabled by the figure of the loser and others like him. In the immediate future, in particular, as the island faces the potentially major economic and geopolitical consequences stemming from Brexit—a sociopolitical reality that threatens to reinstate a "hard" border between the Republic and Northern Ireland, to complicate Irish people's

ability to move freely between countries, and, in a worst case scenario, to re-ignite the conflict in the North—Irish culture might benefit, more than ever, from the biting criticism of irreverent, recalcitrant figures like the ones I have discussed here. Whether these figures fit nicely within the context of loserdom (like the fictional characters I examined), or whether they function within an alternative paradigm of Irish sociocultural dissent (like the Rubberbandits), such figures are clearly capable of responding to Irish society's past and present failures, and, as such, stand to teach us what needs to be done in order to create an Irish future free from disappointment.

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